

# Prioritise Justice in UK Climate Action

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**A**S A YOUNG climate-justice activist from The Gambia, West Africa and a daughter of a farmer, I have witnessed first-hand how our people continue to experience the devastating impacts of climate change. To me, climate justice means that our women will not have to walk kilometres to get water for their farmlands and daily living, and that our young women and girls will not be exposed to domestic and gender-based violence as a result of the impacts of climate change. To me, climate justice means that we will not wake up every day scared about what will happen to us and our families due to the uncertainties climate change brings even though we contribute the least to global emissions. Farmers in The Gambia are facing drought and poor yields, we are vulnerable to sea-level rise, inundation continues to affect our livelihoods – displacing the homes of vulnerable people – and our lands are at risk of being taken by corporations. Our flora and fauna are being destroyed, yet, there are so few actions to address the *climate* crises we face. This is why I demand climate justice – for the people in The Gambia, and other African countries, who are disproportionately vulnerable and impacted. Still, our participation in global climate decision-making processes continues to be unequal and our voices not effectively heard.

It is a deeply unfair situation that we should bear the burdens of the climate destruction carried out by older generations, destroying the lives of young people who have hopes for a better planet. There have been many new commitments from world leaders to reduce our global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but history tells us that promises often remain just words. This experience reinforces the need for all countries, including the UK, to adopt a climate-justice approach to climate change that addresses these inequalities and unequal impacts – an approach that focuses on inclusive global and national decision-making, and just and accessible funding. This is the only way that we can hope to tackle climate change globally and reduce inequality. We urgently need more proactiveness and dynamism in our global leadership to turn words into action.

## Climate Change Is Not an Abstract Threat – It Is Here Now

Climate change is humanity's biggest present-day threat. The latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a 'code red for humanity' as changes to weather systems wreak havoc around the world.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1950s, human activities have contributed to warming the planet to unprecedented levels, exacerbating the frequency and

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1. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 'Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis', Working Group I Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 7 August 2021.

severity of natural shocks and disasters. This has led to populations becoming more vulnerable to diseases such as malaria and dengue fever and reduced the availability of water and productive agricultural land,<sup>2</sup> particularly in the Global South.

Ongoing shifts in weather patterns are exacerbating food insecurity and undermining livelihoods,<sup>3</sup> thus contributing to greater displacement and – at times – conflict over resources. For example, in Nigeria, climate change has forced pastoral communities to leave their original settlements in search of green pastures. This internal displacement has triggered conflicts between farming and pastoral communities. Climate change has caused sea levels to rise, which is predicted to add to migration from coastal communities.<sup>4</sup> My country, The Gambia, is experiencing severe coastal erosion following repeated storms and flooding that continue to uproot communities and devastate livelihoods. Scientists predict that the capital city, Banjul, would disappear completely if the sea level rises by more than one metre.<sup>5</sup> These are just two examples: the World Bank has predicted that climate change could force over 140 million people to be displaced within their home countries by 2050 without concerted action to mitigate climate impacts.<sup>6</sup>

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Wildfires in Australia and North America and severe flooding across Western Europe have been a wake-up call for many living in the Global North that even they are ill-prepared for climate-induced extreme weather events and need to invest more in adaptation and disaster-risk reduction. Our leaders must respond to climate change as an immediate humanitarian challenge but also a long-term developmental issue. Countries have to work together against

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2. UN Climate Change News, ‘Climate Change Is an Increasing Threat to Africa’, 27 October 2020.
  3. Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN (FAO), *The Impact of Disasters and Crises on Agriculture and Food Security: 2021* (Rome: FAO, 2021).
  4. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, ‘Climate Change 2021: Summary for Policymakers’, Working Group I Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 7 August 2021.
  5. GRID Arendal, ‘Impact of Sea Level Rise in Banjul, Gambia’, Vital Climate Graphics Africa, 2005, <<https://www.grida.no/resources/7035>>, accessed 25 October 2021.
  6. World Bank, ‘Climate Change Could Force Over 140 Million to Migrate Within Countries by 2050: World Bank Report’, press release, 19 March 2018, <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/03/19/climate-change-could-force-over-140-million-to-migrate-within-countries-by-2050-world-bank-report>>, accessed 25 October 2021.

this common threat and build more adaptive, sustainable and resilient livelihoods, communities and societies.

## Climate Change Is Not Felt Equally

A key part of climate injustice is that the impacts of climate change are not felt equally. Some countries are geographically more vulnerable to climate crises, and some – particularly low-income countries and countries affected by conflict and fragility – are less able to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change. Of the 10 countries identified as being most vulnerable to climate change and other global challenges, seven are classified as fragile or conflict-affected.<sup>7</sup> This is why countries such as Sudan and Somalia, already experiencing conflicts, face challenges in adapting to climate change. Furthermore, the gap in climate resilience between crisis-affected countries and the rest of the world is growing.

The impact of climate change is not only felt unequally between countries, but also within countries. Women and girls, as well as indigenous peoples, continue to be disproportionately affected by the impacts of crises, including climate change. Gender inequality creates additional burdens and barriers for women and girls during times of conflict and climate-related crisis, which increases their risks of hunger, food insecurity and violence. Their mobility and economic adaptation capacity are limited by unequal social norms and laws. In many of the countries most affected by climate change, women's livelihoods depend on small-scale farming and natural resources, increasing their vulnerability to climate-related shocks and hunger. For instance, women farmers in Nigeria constitute 70–80% of the agricultural workforce, yet, they are faced with inadequate access to basic agricultural resources, land, inputs and credit,<sup>8</sup> which growing degradation of productive resources will further exacerbate.

As women tend to be the main caregivers and have multiple dependants, their inability to access food, agricultural resources and inputs, and other lifesaving services has a cascading and increasing impact on families and communities. I have seen first-hand how climate change is contributing to women's unequal share of unpaid care and domestic work. In The Gambia, women have to wake up as early as 5 am to work on their farms and then go to the local markets to sell their products to support family needs, including school fees. Then, they come back from the local markets and have to cook meals for their families. Even when they lose their livelihoods due to extreme weather conditions, the cultural expectations on women to care for their families do not reduce. Impacts of climate change on livelihoods mean women and girls must travel further in search of food or income, or are displaced, which exacerbates

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7. ND-Gain, 'Rankings', <<https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/>>, accessed 25 October 2021.

8. CIRDDOC Nigeria, 'Strengthening [*sic.*] Existing And Emerging Women Mobilisation Platforms And Small Holder Women Farmers' Association [*sic.*] In Nigeria (Women Lead Agric in Nigeria)', <<https://cirddoc.org/women-lead-agriculture-in-nigeria/>>, accessed 25 October 2021.

their risk of rape and sexual assault,<sup>9</sup> while often having limited access to relief resources and support services.

## ‘What Do We Want? Climate Justice Now!’

Climate change is not just an environmental issue but also an ethical and political one. A climate-justice approach acknowledges that the social, economic and health impacts of climate change affect population groups differently. We know that underprivileged communities, particularly women, indigenous peoples and those living in fragile states, experience the most devastating consequences of climate change, despite contributing the least to this crisis. Climate justice is therefore about societal justice and gender justice. Climate justice is about developed countries accepting common but differentiated responsibilities. It is about developed countries that pollute the most investing in those countries that are unfairly impacted to remedy the loss and damage that they have experienced. Climate justice also means ensuring countries disproportionately affected have the opportunities and resources to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change, as well as ensuring that these groups are heard and have a voice in political negotiations and responses. For us to achieve climate justice, we need to improve the impacts of investments and partnerships between the Global North and the Global South, because providing funding to climate-affected countries is not enough. We need to build a stronger partnership between governments, civil society organisations and corporations to not only drastically reduce their global emissions but compensate for the damage they have done to the planet.

## Global Britain

The UK says it wants to be a ‘force for good’ in the world and has prioritised action on climate change. To launch meaningful action that tackles climate change and empowers those at the sharp end of the crisis, the world will need to build strong coalitions of countries, between rich and poor. Having just hosted the UN Climate Change Conference (COP), the UK is well placed to develop and nurture these partnerships. However, the UK’s decision to reduce its aid budget has tarnished its reputation with developing countries. The UK needs to rebuild trust and demonstrate a key intent to work with countries in a more equitable way that recognises their priorities for green growth and climate resilience. A climate-justice lens will help the UK achieve this.

This will involve generous climate finance, not only for mitigation efforts but also for adaptation and to support countries to build resilience in the face of climate threats. Central to this is supporting the tireless work of civil society, particularly women and youth groups, to build resilience to climate shocks, and to ensure economies and societies can develop inclusively as well as sustainably.

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9. Anik Gevers, Tina Musuya and Paul Bukuluki, ‘Why Climate Change Fuels Violence Against Women’, UNDP Blog, 28 January 2020.

But climate justice will also touch on other aspects of foreign policy: diplomatic outreach (ensuring that countries threatened the most by climate change are heard clearly at the negotiating table); trade partnerships (ensuring that deals with countries respect the Paris agreement and build climate resilience); and sharing of research and development (pooling the resources and technologies we develop in pursuit of change in lower-income countries).

The climate-justice approach provides a set of principles that can guide the UK's approach to partnerships with governments, civil society and the private sector at home and internationally. Not only is this an effective way of launching global action on climate change – by addressing the barriers to climate resilience at different levels of society – it also bolsters the UK's reputation abroad. A focus on climate justice would show the world that the UK has recommitted to being a 'force for good'. These partnerships will ultimately extend far beyond action on climate change, building strategic alliances to tackle other global challenges such as pandemic preparedness and peacebuilding.

## Just and Inclusive Decision-Making

It is pivotal for those most affected by climate change to be represented and involved in high-level negotiations and in programmatic planning, implementation and evaluation. As a youth climate negotiator who has been a part of my country's party delegation since COP23 (albeit unfunded), I have seen the lack of diverse local voices in national and global climate decision-making processes. Despite their experience of climate adaptation initiatives and intimate knowledge of community needs, the voices of climate-justice activists from the most affected countries are not being heard. Moreover, women from Africa have been unequally represented in climate policy and decision-making processes, most especially in the inclusion of their local knowledge on climate adaptation. This creates a major challenge for their voices and interests to be significantly represented. Since 2008, women delegates have made up on average around one third of party delegations. Due to sustained lobbying from climate activists, 2019 finally saw an improvement, with 43% of delegates being women.<sup>10</sup> Reaching a balanced and equal gender representation during climate-negotiation processes at all levels – including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), as well as the regional, national and grassroots levels – is crucial for the attainment of climate justice.

In addition to equal gender representation, young people should also be at the centre of negotiating and responding to the climate crisis. The wave of youth activism has shown the urgency that young people bring to the debate. It is young people who will return to their countries to make the change and continue to ensure that climate is at the top of the world's agenda. Young climate activists such as myself have led community initiatives to contribute to addressing the climate crises by planting thousands of trees across the country, building the capacities of and educating young people and women about climate change, supporting

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10. WeDo, 'What Do the Statistics on UNFCCC Women's Participation Tell Us?', News, 12 May 2019, <<https://wedo.org/what-do-the-statistics-on-womens-participation-tell-us/>>, accessed 25 October 2021.

women farmers and building partnerships with local partners to synergise our efforts in the fight for a better planet. As such, our leaders should stop ‘youth-washing’ and tokenising youth participation in global climate events. Due to our significant role as community mobilisers and frontline climate defenders working directly with vulnerable communities, countries should have young people in their party delegations who will contribute to negotiation items and share the voices of underrepresented people in climate processes.

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The UK has fallen short in its lack of inclusion of women in the COP26 leadership. Given that women are disproportionately affected by the climate crises, but underrepresented in climate policy processes, the UK could have served an exemplary role by including women in the senior leadership of COP26. It is not too late for the UK to redress this by increasing the participation of women, youth and other most-affected populations in all climate delegations and decision-making processes.

A climate-justice approach provides a vision for the UK to deploy other tools alongside aid to strengthen climate resilience: for example, using UK aid to support locally driven climate adaptation strategies, while working through diplomatic channels to increase access to land rights for women and inclusion in national and global decision-making. This includes incentivising and encouraging governments such as my own to work in partnership with civil society to deliver national climate action plans, as engagement between governments and civil society tends to be ad hoc and piecemeal. Inclusion of women and youth groups delivers tangible results that address the barriers to climate adaptation, by supporting women farmers with better agricultural services, such as better land-tenure systems, access to climate information, technology, aid, early warning systems and climate finance mechanisms, and facilitating their active engagement in policy formulations.

## Just Funding

At present, climate financing is not reaching the countries that need it most. Just 14% of climate finance went to Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in 2016–18,<sup>11</sup> of which 66% was in the form of loans. Moreover, funding for adaptation – which is vital for responding to the challenges faced by communities today – lags behind what is required. In 2018, only US\$16 billion (representing

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11. Oxfam, ‘Oxfam Reaction to OECD Report on Climate Finance’, ReliefWeb, news and press release, 6 November 2020, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/oxfam-reaction-oecd-report-climate-finance>>, accessed 25 October 2021.

21%) of climate finance was for adaptation.<sup>12</sup> This is far from the US\$70 billion needed by low-income countries,<sup>13</sup> let alone the US\$140–300 billion in adaptation financing that will be required by 2030.<sup>14</sup> In addition, countries such as Kiribati are already experiencing rising sea levels leading to the loss of livelihoods, but with little support from developed countries to facilitate adaptation. As such, countries such as Kiribati should be supported for the loss and damage they have incurred but have not contributed to as low-emitting countries. This shows once again how climate change disproportionately impacts countries that contribute the least to causing this threat.

A climate-justice approach should therefore increase financing for climate adaptation in line with the UN secretary-general's call for 50% of global climate finance to be focused on adaptation.<sup>15</sup> The UK should not allow a false tradeoff between tackling climate change and tackling inequality and poverty. It should ensure all funding contributes to poverty reduction and seeks to balance humanitarian responses to extreme weather events and slow-onset events, and long-term investments in climate change mitigation and adaptation.

UK climate financing should be gender-just and accessible to national and local women-led organisations to put funding in the hands of those working on the frontlines of the humanitarian response to climate-induced crises. Currently, less than 10% of adaptation finance provided by G7 countries considers gender equality as a key objective,<sup>16</sup> and only a tiny proportion of gender-responsive climate bilateral official development assistance goes to civil society organisations in the Global South.<sup>17</sup> This undermines opportunities for women in vulnerable communities to drive effective climate change adaptation and mitigation approaches that meet their needs.

Moreover, although local climate-justice activists play a very significant role in advancing climate justice in their societies, they receive very limited financial support. Grassroots organisations and climate-justice activists such as myself are central to the response to climate change, serving as the link between the government and the community. We play a vital role in delivering climate change mitigation and response services and in holding decision-makers to account. Through the actions of community-based eco-feminist groups, populations affected by climate change have benefited from capacity-building trainings on climate change education and adaptation. Women farmers have been supported to continue their agricultural activities and build resilience by being connected and sharing challenges with other women and vulnerable groups. Current and future

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12. *Ibid.*

13. UN, 'Developing Countries Could Face Annual Adaptation Costs of \$300 Billion by 2030, Secretary-General Warns in Message to Climate Vulnerable Finance Summit', press release, SG/SM/20816, 8 July 2021.

14. Daniel Puig et al., *The Adaptation Finance Gap Report* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2016).

15. UN Climate Change News, 'António Guterres: 50% of All Climate Finance Needed for Adaptation', 25 January 2021.

16. CARE, 'Evicted By Climate Change: Confronting the Gendered Impacts of Climate-Induced Displacement', July 2020.

17. OECD DAC Network on Gender Equality (Gendernet), 'Making Climate Finance Work for Women: Overview of Bilateral ODA to Gender and Climate Change', October 2016, <<https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/Making%20Climate%20Finance%20Work%20for%20Women%20-%20Copy.pdf>>, accessed 25 October 2021.



generations of climate-justice activists must be fully resourced to fulfil their essential role in delivering a greener and more just world.

Investments from countries such as the UK in my own need to go beyond aid. Adopting a climate-justice lens would help the UK to ensure its trading partnerships and business interests adhere to the principles of environmental sustainability and poverty reduction. The UK has many opportunities to use its trading partnerships to increase investments in 'green technologies' in emerging economies.

## Conclusion

If the UK is to succeed in its ambition to be a global leader in the fight against climate change, and to ensure a successful legacy from COP26, it must prioritise climate justice for all. It is only by supporting those countries most vulnerable to climate change that the UK can build trust and show solidarity with the rest of the world. By adopting a climate-justice approach, the UK can be a powerful and reliable partner in the fight against climate change. This will also be an important part of ensuring an enduring legacy of COP26, by driving increased investments in climate adaptation in line with climate-justice principles.

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We are in a climate emergency, with global warming affecting humans in ways not previously imagined. Now more than ever, we need leadership and action from our politicians, especially those from the highest CO<sub>2</sub>-emitting countries in the Global North. Leading the fight against climate change is personal for Prime Minister Boris Johnson – if COP26 drives real change it will be the legacy of his government. The fight cannot be won through one-off programmes or snappy press releases. It requires a strategic, systematic approach that builds alliances of the willing and drives catalytic change. A climate-justice approach is the single best hope the world has.

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