

CLIMATE JUSTICE: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Climate change is not only an environmental issue: it encompasses human rights, social justice and development. This report summarises the first of three ‘dialogues’ on climate justice, hosted by Glasgow Caledonian University and JRF with the participation of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice, held in May 2014.

Key points

- Climate justice expressly links climate change with social justice, highlighting that the poorest people suffer most from a changing climate, are adversely affected by some policy responses to climate change, and are often excluded from decision-making processes.
- Climate justice provides an important framework for considering issues of environmental challenges and equalities – but it has a low public and political profile.
- Discussion of climate justice is particularly timely because of the importance of the United Nations climate change negotiations in 2015 and the drafting of the post-2015 global sustainable development goals.
- Climate justice is a global issue, affecting the poorest communities in the UK as well as those in the global south.
- Scotland is leading the way within the UK in putting climate justice on the agenda.
- The evidence to inform the debate needs to be developed, and it needs to be better articulated. This demands both rigorous science and persuasive storytelling.

An emerging concept

Climate justice is a concept that embeds responses to climate change in ideas of social justice, equality and human rights.

It is an approach that has gained currency in recent years in environmental and activist circles, but has yet to influence political thinking significantly. Tara Shine, Head of Research and Development at the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice, said fewer than ten world leaders had spoken about climate change in these terms, and no private corporations had done so at the time of the international negotiations in Durban in 2011.

That small group of leaders includes some high-profile advocates, such as former United Nations General Secretary Kofi Annan and Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. In the UK, the Scottish Government is leading the way in putting climate justice on the political agenda.

What is climate justice?

The Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice says that “climate justice links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly”.

It sets out seven principles of its approach:

- respect and protect human rights;
- support the right to development;
- share benefits and burdens equitably;
- ensure that decisions on climate change are participatory, transparent and accountable;
- highlight gender equality and equity;
- harness the transformative power of education for climate stewardship;
- use effective partnerships to secure climate justice.

These principles place the Foundation firmly as an advocate for the poorest and most marginal members of society, who are disproportionately affected by a changing climate.

Tahseen Jafry, Director of Glasgow Caledonian University’s Centre for Climate Justice, said that outside non-governmental organisations and academia there is a lack of understanding and vision of why climate justice matters. “Is it just a rebranding of the sustainable development agenda or something very specific about equity and human rights and bringing that within the climate vocabulary, and how can we address this?” she asked.

Katharine Knox of JRF highlighted the importance of the climate justice agenda to JRF in the UK context. It is concerned that both the impacts of climate change and the costs and benefits associated with policy responses will be unequally distributed. This could exacerbate poverty and disadvantage and lead to new forms of social inequalities.

Why does it matter now?

Putting climate justice on the agenda is both a long-term mission and an urgent objective in the context of climate science, which suggests a diminishing window of opportunity to avert dangerous climate change. The international climate negotiations coming up in 2015 also provide impetus for considering justice issues.

The annual climate change conferences organised through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have become a focal point for campaigning organisations, but have frequently been bogged down by national and economic interests. The 2015 negotiations in Paris are viewed as particularly significant because they will seek to achieve a universally binding international agreement on reducing carbon emissions, a goal that has until now eluded international policy-makers.

The run-up to these negotiations coincides with the timetable for finalising the UN's sustainable development goals, a new set of objectives that will replace the Millennium Development Goals. Advocates of climate justice believe it is essential that these discussions take a common view of the social justice dimensions of climate change.

Evidence to support advocacy

A strong theme throughout the event was the importance of evidence-based advocacy. In framing its Principles of Climate Justice, the Mary Robinson Foundation states that climate justice is "informed by science and responds to science".

Pamela Gillies, Principal and Vice Chancellor of Glasgow Caledonian University, introduced the event by stressing the need for "a rigorous evidence base and critical analysis". The university's Centre for Climate Justice will continue to establish its online repository for the collection and collation of evidence and data in this vital area, she said.

JRF is also contributing to this body of evidence. A recent review for JRF by the Centre for Sustainable Energy with the Universities of Oxford and Manchester digested around 70 key studies to identify the nature and effects of climate justice in the UK.¹

Who is affected?

Speakers throughout the event stressed that in the UK as well as the global south, the poorest and most vulnerable members of society suffer most from climate change.

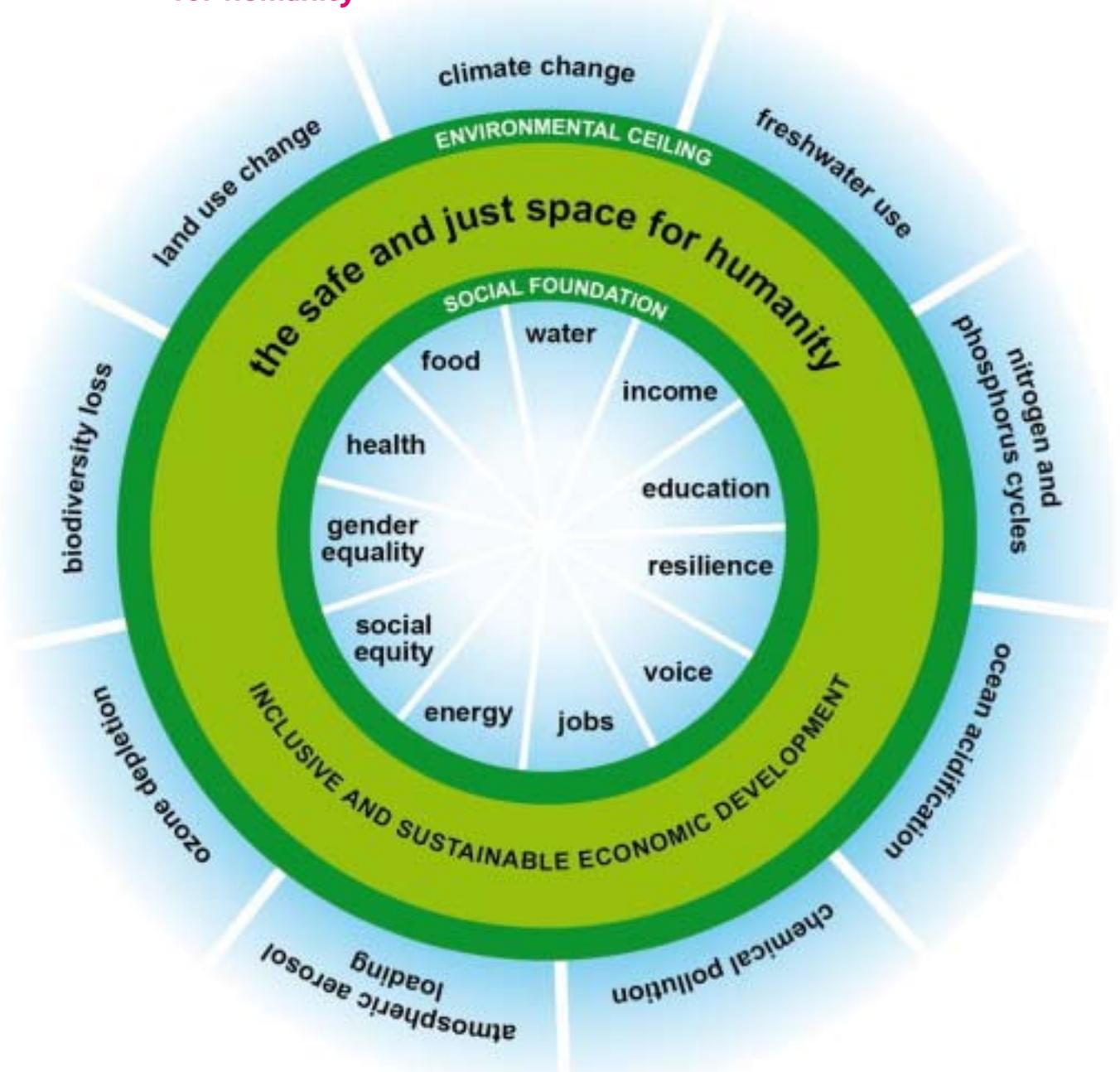
They are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of extreme weather events (such as homelessness or loss of livelihood as a result of flooding); less able to recover from those impacts; and disproportionately burdened with the costs of adapting to climate change and mitigating its effects. They also tend to be excluded from decision-making on climate-related issues.

Tahseen Jafry highlighted gender differences in climate injustice internationally. Women and girls who own little land and have few property rights, and who are frequently disadvantaged in terms of education, are less able to recover from environmental shocks and setbacks.

John O'Neill, Professor of Political Economy at Manchester University, observed that the wealthiest 10 per cent of people in the UK are responsible for three times as many carbon emissions as the poorest 10 per cent. The poorest people in society are more vulnerable to the immediate impacts of climate change and pay proportionately more of their income towards emerging policy responses, particularly for mitigation.

Simply increasing the price of carbon would hit the poorest people most, forcing them to reduce their energy use more than wealthier people, he said. At the same time, higher earners

Figure 1: Oxfam’s ‘doughnut’ diagram showing ‘the safe and just space for humanity’



Source: Raworth, K. (2012) 'A Safe and Just Space for Humanity', Oxfam: Oxford (page 15).

enjoy greater access to energy saving incentives such as the feed-in tariff for solar energy, which are currently paid for through all households' energy bills.

How should we respond?

Katherine Trebeck, Policy and Research Adviser with Oxfam GB's global research team, highlighted the need to decouple human aspirations from consumption. She described the 'doughnut' of the 'safe and just space' where humans could enjoy a decent standard of living without exceeding planetary limits (see Figure 1).

Oxfam's work in Malawi has increased that nation's level of food security, she said. In areas where traditional crops are now affected by drought, new locally-sourced crops are being planted. Co-operative models are creating more equitable markets.

Humza Yousaf MSP, Minister for External Affairs and International Development in the Scottish Government, stressed the importance of telling stories of positive action as well as campaigning against injustice.

The Scottish Government's £6m Climate Justice Fund is financing projects in Malawi and Zambia to improve access to clean water. "When you see people whose lives have been changed it blows your mind," he said. "This is about human stories. Businesses should be sharing those stories with staff and using their expertise to help."

Mr Yousaf stressed the need to think creatively about transitions to a low-carbon economy. The skills employed in servicing North Sea oil rigs could be used in the supply chain for renewable energy, he suggested.

Scotland's leading role

Scotland already has carbon reduction targets that are more ambitious than those of the Westminster Government and an explicit ambition to link climate issues with social justice. It has passed legislation to reduce emissions by 42 per cent by 2020, and its climate justice fund helps developing nations adapt to climate change.

"The Scottish Government recognises that it's a justice issue: there's a moral imperative to ensure the rest of the world doesn't suffer because of our excesses," Mr Yousaf said.

Scotland is uniquely placed to lead by example through its schools, participants in one of the event's breakout groups suggested. Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence and Global Citizenship initiatives offer an opportunity to put climate justice at the heart of the educational agenda.

Raising the profile

There was much discussion in the four breakout groups of the need to raise the profile of climate justice. There was particular concern about the role of the media and the need to communicate messages about climate justice more effectively.

There was some frustration with the BBC's notion of 'balance' on climate change issues. In Bangladesh training for journalists and broadcasters had proved effective.

Climate justice needs to be communicated in new ways to new audiences – especially young people, participants said. Several stressed the importance of storytelling and narrative alongside academic and statistical evidence.

Zarina Ahmed, Climate Change and Environment Officer at CEMVO Scotland, said that for many ethnic minority communities, concepts of moral obligation and faith are important motivators and people are more likely to engage with ideas of climate justice within an ethical framework.

Questions and challenges

Unsurprisingly, the event raised many questions and challenges both about how climate justice should be understood, and about how it can gain traction among UK and international leaders.

The role of business and corporations is particularly challenging. For many participants, climate justice involves countering current economic paradigms and the activities of corporations are seen as part of the problem.

Some argued that climate justice should be 'restorative and retributive', taking action against

corporations to encourage them to change their practices. Katherine Trebeck said that if the top 100 companies in the world fully accounted for their environmental impacts, none of them would be profitable.

There was debate too about the value of the concept of 'natural capital', which seeks to express the economic value of the natural environment. On one side is a concern that putting a price on nature reduces it to a factor in a cost-benefit analysis that undervalues its importance. The other side of the argument is that valuing natural capital creates an important lever for change, recognising the costs of what have previously been treated as free goods.

On a practical level, participants recognised that there is limited experience of fair and equitable transitions to a low-carbon society and a lack of political will to test new approaches. One of the struggles in putting climate justice on the agenda is that few can picture what a transition to a climate-just world might look like.

In government, too, there is a long way to go to put climate justice on the agenda in Westminster as well as in United Nations forums. The Scottish Government's thinking has so far had relatively little impact in wider UK politics and government.

Some attendees argued that arts and culture should play a central role in change. To encourage people to see climate justice as something personally meaningful, the idea should engage 'head, hand and heart'. Intellectual and emotional persuasion should be combined with practical action: by growing their own food, for example, people can address the disconnect between humans and the land.

Moving the debate on

The second dialogue, at Glasgow Caledonian University on 18 June 2014, examines 'the science and the evidence' for climate justice. It aims to draw together the findings from literature and studies over the last decade now available in the university's new resource hub, alongside evidence reviewed for JRF, and to examine where there are gaps in knowledge and research that need to be filled.

Notes

- 1 Climate change and social justice: an evidence review, by Ian Preston, Nick Banks, Katy Hargreaves, Aleksandra Kazmierczak, Karen Lucas, Ruth Mayne, Clare Downing and Roger Street, is available at www.jrf.org.uk

Find out more about JRF's work on climate change at
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/topic/climate-change-and-communities>