

Communities for Climate, Gender, Racial, and Income Equity: Seizing our Interrelated Opportunities

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Abstract

The devastating effects of climate change are being felt most profoundly by those who least contributed to the problem and who are already impacted by poverty, colonization, and racism. There's a lot of talk about addressing poverty in a way that has positive environmental impacts. This article offers examples of how communities are taking holistic approaches to tackle interrelated challenges and supports, with the leadership of Indigenous Peoples and those committed to mitigating climate change's economic and human impacts.

This article supports communities - and the philanthropic, government, and other systems that support them - in taking a holistic approach to tackling these interrelated challenges.

Introduction

We have yet to come across even one person who hasn't felt the impacts of climate change. Rising temperatures and sea levels, more acidic oceans, and new precipitation patterns mean we can expect extreme climate events more often and severely.

Climate change affects where we can live and access to what humans need to survive, including clean water and culturally appropriate and nutritious food. It affects our access to medical facilities and schools. Climate change destroys local food sources and drives up the cost of non-local alternatives, thus contributing to food insecurity and poor health conditions. It can lead to depression and anxiety – a phenomenon [our collaborators have been exploring](#) known as ecoanxiety.ⁱ

Moreover, the impacts of climate change are not experienced evenly. A recent [report from the Canadian Climate Institute](#) finds that costs to respond to a decade of climate change could total \$25 billion by 2025.ⁱⁱ People impacted by poverty stand to lose a quarter of their incomes as a result of losses to climate change. And people living in rural and remote communities, including many Indigenous communities, are more likely to live in places that experience drought, flooding, extreme heat or cold, hurricanes, tsunamis, and other extreme weather events. They are less likely to have the required infrastructure, access to relief support, or personal wealth to

prepare for these events or to rebuild after. These events may destroy or drive them from their homes, workplaces, and communities. Many people who are displaced struggle to find work and regain their stability.

In British Columbia, for example, the 2021 heat dome, which took the lives of 619 people, led to disproportionate deaths among populations that were already facing challenges. Specifically, a multi-disciplinary panel [reported that](#) heat-related deaths were highest among those with chronic diseases, seniors, those living in socially or materially deprived neighbourhoods.ⁱⁱⁱ Nearly all the deaths (98%) occurred indoors in a residence. While people with more wealth typically had access to adequate cooling systems at home, those living in poor quality housing, experiencing homelessness and impacted by low income were at higher risk for mortality.^{iv} Moreover, lives could have been saved if more people had knocked on their [neighbours' doors](#); climate change highlights the importance of community connectedness and cohesion.^v

It's a pattern. Extreme weather rips through communities and deepens income inequalities. And because poverty is likely to negatively impact women, Indigenous, or racialized peoples (with additional adversity experienced if you belong to one or more of these demographics), climate justice is a gender equity issue. It is at the heart of reconciliation. It is a racial equity issue.

The Assembly of First Nations' 2020 Climate Gathering Report recognized that solutions must be multidimensional, interrelated, interconnected, and grounded in law, knowledge, language, and governance practices of the peoples who have provided stewardship over the land since time immemorial.^{vi}

With the leadership of Indigenous Peoples and those committed to mitigating the economic and human impacts of climate change, communities are adapting. Across Canada, people are working across sectors and institutions to get at the root causes of climate change and poverty – root causes that are often the same. As one of us [described](#), they are engaging strategies with economic equity and climate equity at the center – strategies that are deeply informed by those with lived experience of climate change and poverty.^{vii}

Nature shows us that everything is connected. We must act with urgency and imagination and in an integrated and inclusive way to ensure an equitable and just climate transition.

There are countless examples of organizations and communities across Canada that are [‘multisolving’](#) by taking action to address interrelated inequities in a holistic way.^{viii}

In Victoria, British Columbia, the Community Social Planning Council (CSPS) has several [climate equity programs and initiatives](#). For example, through its Transportation, Access, Climate and Economic Security (TACES) initiative, CSPS has been bringing together diverse individuals and organizations to develop ideas for climate action in transportation while advancing equity. Transportation is the region's biggest source of climate pollution and the second largest household cost after shelter, impacting affordability. One of the TACES projects

underway makes e-bike ownership more accessible to all, with an emphasis on those who can least afford it, through tiered rebates based on household income. Another project seeks to close the cycling gender gap (women make up only 29% of adult cyclists using regional trails) by working with women and non-binary residents to explore barriers and co-design solutions prioritizing safety and accessibility. Engaging residents with lived and living experiences across their program areas has been crucial to CSPS's success in taking climate action that centers equity and justice.^{ix}

[Indigenous Clean Energy](#) (ICE) is another powerful example of how climate action and inclusion can and must be pursued in tandem. As a pan-Canadian not-for-profit, ICE promotes Indigenous inclusion in Canada's clean energy future. Its mission is to advance Indigenous leadership in an energy transition and foster stronger collaboration between Indigenous Peoples and energy companies, utilities, governments, development firms, cleantech innovators, the academic sector, and capital markets. This is key to a community-driven energy future that respects the rights of Indigenous Peoples and leaves no one behind.^x

On the adaptation and resilience side, [Partners for Action](#) (P4A) is a research initiative based at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, that "seeks to empower Canadians to become flood resilient by promoting awareness and preparedness actions that are inclusive and evidence-based."^{xi} Through the [Inclusive Resilience project](#), P4A, and the Canadian Red Cross researched the most effective means to increase awareness of floods, wildfires, and earthquakes while improving emergency preparedness for five most at-risk demographics: women, seniors, people impacted by poverty, Indigenous Peoples, and newcomers to Canada.^{xii}

Addressing human contributions to climate change is urgent. By working together across sectors, generations, nations, and party lines to implement strategies at the root causes of climate and economic inequity, communities can build social fabric and solutions to food insecurity, transportation, energy, housing, and land use that benefit everyone. We leave you with questions to consider as you do the work of climate and economic justice in your spheres of influence:

- What opportunities do you see in the areas of food security, transportation, energy poverty, and housing to address both climate change and poverty?
- In which other areas might there be opportunities to multi-solve poverty and climate change?
- What obstacles or barriers do you foresee when taking a holistic approach to these interrelated issues?
- How might you engage people with lived and living experiences, community organizations and non-profits, government, Indigenous Peoples, businesses, and groups of residents to co-create solutions in your community?

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