

Climate Justice

Thinking globally, acting locally

The climate crisis demands urgent action. There is a growing global movement calling for climate justice. Climate justice involves the Global North taking greater responsibility for deep emission reductions and supporting solutions to the climate crisis that advance equity. The Global North needs to respond to root causes of the crisis including unsustainable and inequitable production, consumption and trade patterns.

There is much to be done on national and international levels to advance climate justice. We need to be vigilant in our demands for this as we are nearing the time when actions could be too little and too late.

In this context, people coming together in their communities to generate change from the bottom up can play a vital role in advancing climate justice. There are many actions that you can take part in to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

But what does a local climate justice action look like?

These actions are transformative and contribute to building the “better world” we all want one small step at a time. They help raise awareness about climate justice issues including the unequal burdens created by climate change, and patterns that contribute to climate change and injustice. While there are no set criteria for climate justice actions, here are some useful questions to keep in mind:

- Does the action challenge or respond to root causes of the climate crisis such as unsustainable production, consumption and inequitable trade?
- In choosing an action, have you considered other potential environmental impacts outside of GHG emissions? Have you considered whether the action improves or worsens existing social inequities?
- Does the action provide the space to talk about climate justice with other members of your community? Is the action informed by community priorities?
- If there is an impacted community (this could include examples such as people living near a local polluter, workers, or people adversely affected by rising energy costs), are they being engaged in the campaign; do they have leadership in shaping the campaign?

Examples of local climate justice actions:

Transition towns

Transition towns are undertaking system change (not climate change), helping to advance climate justice, one project and one community at a time. As of January 2010, there are 275 communities worldwide recognized as official Transition Towns in Canada including Cowichan, B.C., Guelph and London, Ontario, and Woodstock, New Brunswick.

The transition town movement (or transition initiative) is a community-led response to the pressures of climate change and fossil fuel depletion. The aim is to educate, raise awareness and take action, equipping communities to make the transition to sustainable living by building local ecological resilience and energy independence.

In addition to prioritizing local projects that contribute to a transition off of fossil fuels, buying local, sustainable and fair trade goods and economic localization are also recognized as important transition measures. Recognizing that infinite growth (regarding the world economy and consumptive patterns) within a finite system (the planet Earth) is simply impossible and is an important underlying awareness of the transition model. This informs actions that challenge the inequitable global trade model, a cause of climate injustice. Examples of transition town projects include developing community energy decent plans (plans to reduce communities' reliance on fossil fuels), creating local currencies, local food guides and community garden programs. Emphasis is placed on policies and actions that will make communities more resilient and vibrant and the people who live in them healthier and happier.



Public and community power – a real solution to the climate crisis

Without a doubt, advancing climate justice requires significant emission reductions in Canada. Vastly improving energy efficiency and conservation measures alongside renewable energy expansion will play a vital role. These real solutions to the climate crisis can also generate new “green” jobs – jobs that help reduce emissions, or “green” our economy and society.

In improving energy efficiency, conservation and expanding renewable energy production, there are measures local climate justice campaigns can encourage that will help improve equity, decent green job creation and accountability to the public interest.

For example, targeted programs improving energy efficiency in low income housing can help reduce emissions, generate green jobs and relieve the pressure of rising energy costs.

When renewable energy projects are in public hands (public and community ownership), revenues earned can be used for public good and redistributed to help fund social priorities. Public agencies are also easier to regulate in the public interest and can ensure equitable hiring. Locally-owned projects also have a better track record in being accountable to local community interests.

The Good Jobs for All Coalition’s Toronto Hydro campaign is an example of a local campaign that aims to reduce emissions and improve equity. The campaign calls on Toronto Hydro to install solar panels on public buildings across the city, prioritize local procurement, and support the equitable hiring of youth, people of colour, and newcomers into a new green economy. Why not take action and form a local coalition for decent green jobs in your community?

Challenging local polluters

Climate justice demands leaving fossil fuels in the ground. You can link this global demand to local action by supporting a campaign challenging a local polluter. Examples of local polluters could include a new highway project, coal mine or plant, tar sands infrastructure expansion or hydro-fracking project (also known as hydraulic fracturing, a process used to extract unconventional natural gas imbedded in rock). From a climate justice perspective, does the project stand to significantly contribute to local GHG emissions, pollution and related injustices? Are there directly impacted communities? If so, are they engaged and taking leadership in the campaign?

In an awareness-raising action, the Council of Canadians Windsor-Essex chapter joined Windsor on Watch and sponsored a “Toxic Tour” of the city’s west end. Riding a hybrid bus provided by Transit Windsor, a group of about 30 local people visited a number of pollution sites in their community and talked about ways to turn awareness into action.

Council of Canadians Lower Mainland chapters in B.C. have joined with gatewaysucks.org to challenge the proposed South Fraser Freeway. In October, close to 250 people came together and used sand from part of a freeway construction site in Surrey to fill sandbags. These sandbags were used to build a dike protecting the low-lying community of Bridgeview from the flooding climate change will cause if projects like these don’t stop. Transportation is the largest source of GHGs in Canada. Government priorities to spend money on urban freeways and airport expansions contribute heavily to climate change. With the age of cheap oil over, public transit and walkable communities are important for social justice.

In the U.K and U.S., climate justice activists have protested new coal-fired power plants and coal mines, demanding that the coal “stay in the hole.” James Hansen, a well known NASA climate scientist, has been arrested on numerous occasions in non-violent actions protesting the coal industry. As reported by the Environment News Service, “Politicians may have to advocate for halfway measures if they choose. But it is our responsibility to make sure our representatives feel the full force of citizens who speak for what is right, not what is politically expedient,” said Hansen to a crowd of about 350 people at a protest outside of Goals Coal plant owned by coal giant Massey Energy. “Mountaintop removal [a particularly polluting method of extracting coal], providing only a small fraction of our energy, should be abolished.”

Local sustainable agriculture – a real solution to the climate crisis

Intensive industrial livestock operations, freight transport used to transport food far distances, and the fossil fuels used to manufacture and apply pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers are all significant sources of GHGs.

Agriculture is the fourth largest source of global GHG emissions (IPCC report, 2004) Meanwhile, more and more people are hungry and malnourished worldwide, small scale farmers in the Global South are facing significant pressures from agribusiness, and family farms in Canada are in crisis. The World Trade Organization (WTO), international trade agreements and corporations all have influence in maintaining this unsustainable and inequitable system.

Sustainable, low-impact food production, eating seasonably and locally and dietary choices can all lead to significant emission reductions. These actions also support local farmers, sustainable food production globally, and contribute to changing the export-oriented industrial agriculture model. Local actions can include municipal resolutions, prioritizing locally sourced products and local content rules, supporting a local farmers market, and community gardening programs. In October 2010, the Council of Canadians South Shore, Nova Scotia chapter joined others in the community to plant a bed of garlic at a local community garden to demonstrate how this can contribute to both reducing carbon emissions (most grocery store garlic is imported from China) and community sustainability.

Building awareness – building the climate justice movement

What does climate justice mean globally? What does it mean locally? Why does the Global North owe the Global South “climate debt?” How is the climate crisis interlinked with other ecological crises, the economic crisis and the equity crisis of increasing poverty and growing race and class divisions? What are real and false solutions to the climate crisis? What are the Rights of Nature? What is the significance of the People’s Agreement that emerged from the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and Mother Earth Rights (April 2010)?

Events that provide the opportunity to have a dialogue about these topics are a fundamental first step in building our Canadian climate justice movement.

For example, in the lead up to the G20 in Toronto (June 2010), the Council of Canadians worked with KAIROS and the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition on a cross-Canada tour of climate justice town hall meetings featuring individuals from the Global South and the Arctic to share their climate justice stories.

People’s Assemblies on Climate Justice will be held across the country during the Cancun UN climate negotiations (November 29 to December 10, 2010) in order to engage in this discussion and identify local climate justice action opportunities.

Thinking globally and acting locally

With a Canadian government that continues to prioritize an export-oriented energy strategy allowing this to trump needed action on climate change and energy security, local climate justice actions are increasingly important. These are just a few examples of the many ways that people can take action in communities across Canada to advance climate justice, and in doing so, join a growing and vibrant global movement for climate justice.

Sources

Transition towns

- Rob Hopkins, co-founder of Transition Town Totnes and of the Transition Network, Devon, U.K pre-recorded video presentation shown at the Council of Canadians' AGM (October 23 2010) <http://canadians.org/energy/issues/climatejustice/resources.html>
- Transition Network: <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/>

Public and Community power – a real solution to the climate crisis!

- Find out more about the advantages of public and community ownership with the Council of Canadians and Canadian Labour Congress' report, Green Decent and Public (December 2009). There is a section on recommendations for municipal, provincial and federal actions that can be used to inform campaign demands for decent, green jobs.

<http://www.canadians.org/energy/publications/GDPreport.html>

- Good Jobs for All Coalition: <http://goodjobsforall.ca/>

Challenging local polluters

- "Join Windsor's Toxic Tour," The Windsor Star (October 7, 2010) <http://www.windsorstar.com/technology/Join+Windsor+Toxic+Tour/3635032/story.html>
- Dig in for Climate Justice, <http://canadians.org/events/dig.html>
- "Climate Scientist James Hansen Arrested in Mountaintop Removal Protest," Environment News Service (June 23, 2009), <http://www.ens-newswire.com/ens/jun2009/2009-06-23-01.asp>

Sustainable agriculture

- "Change Trade not our Climate," Our World is Not for Sale, (October, 2009) <http://www.ourworldisnotforsale.org/en/report/change-trade-not-our-climate>
- "National Farmers Union Policy on Sustainable Agriculture," National Farmers Union, <http://www.nfu.ca/sustag.htm>
- "La Via Campesina, International Peasants Movement," <http://viacampesina.org/en/>

Building awareness – building the climate justice movement

- Council of Canadians Statement on Climate Justice, <http://canadians.org/energy/documents/climatejustice/statement-0310.pdf>
- Council of Canadians, Climate Justice, www.canadians.org/climatejustice
- "Bali Principles on Climate Justice," <http://www.ienearth.org/ien-old/docs-up/cj-16-bali.pdf>
- "Four Principles for Climate Justice," Indigenous Environmental Network, http://www.ienearth.org/docs/IEN_4_Principles_of_Climate_Justice.pdf
- KAIROS G20 Climate Justice Tour, <http://www.kairoscanada.org/en/ecojustice/climate-change-the-g20/>
- Canadian Youth Climate Coalition, <http://www.ourclimate.ca/wordpress/>
- Mobilization for Climate Justice West, <http://west.actforclimatejustice.org/>
- "Carbon Offsets: Closing Pandora's Box," Presentation by Daphne Wysham at the Council of Canadians 2010 Annual General Meeting, <http://canadians.org/energy/documents/climatejustice/IPSpt-AGM10.pdf>