



## Climate change and inequality

As we move from autumn into winter, we can expect that the weather will get windier and wetter but temperatures may stay largely above freezing. Some of this is the consequence of climate change. As the climate warms, more energy is stored in the atmosphere and we have more extremes of weather. Evidence shows that the number and severity of storms that we get in the UK has hardly changed over many years but when storms do come, the amount of rainfall is much higher than in the past. In the UK and across Europe, it is expected that the overall number of storms will actually decrease. In Scotland, there will be a small increase in the number of storms, whilst in southern England there will be a small decrease. On the other hand, when storms do come, there is a greater chance of them being extreme, with higher, more damaging winds and heavier rain leading to flooding.

The United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change states that “Parties should, in all climate change-related actions, fully respect human rights.” It lists the main adverse effects of climate change as increases in:

- Temperature, as well as increased frequency and/or duration of heat waves
- Heavy precipitation events
- Intensity and/or duration of droughts
- Intense tropical cyclone activity
- Sea level

But it is also noted that glaciers will continue to shrink, chemical pollution will increase and biodiversity will decrease. Any or all of these can adversely impact our lives.

In our area, we aren't greatly affected by such severe weather. We may lose a few trees, some places may get flooded and a few fences or roof tiles blown away, lawns may become parched in the summer. Much of the worst damage will be covered by insurance, or if not, many people will pay for the repairs. We are fortunate that this is the case but in other parts of the country, the impact on individuals, families and communities will be far worse. The same applies across the whole world – there are places where impacts will be short-term and minimal but others where the effects will be devastating.



**Greenwich Park, London (Alisdair Hickson:  
Creative Commons Licence)**

Climate change is making social inequalities worse at the local, national and international levels. The poorest in society are hit hardest. The increased severity and frequency of storms, flooding and rising sea levels or drought affects farming and food supply. We have seen how our own farmers have struggled to cope with very wet conditions of last autumn and winter followed by an extremely dry spring and summer. In less developed countries the effects are far worse. Low income areas experience more flooding and more extreme heat waves. This partly because people with limited income can only afford to live in such

vulnerable places. When severe weather events happen, they cannot defend themselves and it takes much longer to recover.

Both here in the UK and around the world, the vulnerable tend to be marginalised by economic, social or geographic conditions. Incomes are stretched just to pay for day-to-day living without any possibility of considering how to prepare, or cope with disasters caused by extreme weather. Such people find that employment opportunities are limited and wages are low but the costs of food, rent, fuel rise relentlessly. Insurance against such risks is unaffordable. In Northeast England, people in rented properties have struggled to adopt new technologies such as electric cars and heat pumps and improve standards of insulation. People living in the most vulnerable areas of the world often have health problems. Those living in cities often suffer from asthma, bronchitis or other respiratory conditions due to the poor air quality caused by diesel and petrol engines. We see exactly this in our own big cities. In some countries, water supplies are already contaminated or can become contaminated when damaged by storms, which increases the risks of water-borne diseases. In the poorest countries health services cannot cope with the demand.

In many countries, women and girls are totally responsible for securing food, cooking it and managing the home. When there is drought, women in rural communities have to work harder and spend more time gathering resources for their families. When there are violent storms, women and children are 14 times more likely to die than men. So climate change impacts women disproportionately more than men. The UN estimates that 4 out of 5 people displaced by these disasters are women and girls. Since women are so directly affected by the climate crisis, they have a crucial role in finding ways of mitigating and adapting to global warming.



**Gathering fuel (Creative Commons Licence)**

It is noticeable that even in our own country, women have led the fight against climate change. They make 70 – 80 % of food purchasing decisions, are more likely to recycle than men, buy organic and local produce, cut waste and save energy. Women

are more often the leaders of 'greening' groups around the world and understand the urgency of the climate crisis better. It has been found that countries with a higher number of women in the parliament are more likely to have laws promoting action against climate change and those countries are more likely to ratify international agreements on the environment and climate. Unfortunately, in many countries women are under-represented in government or industry and are marginalised in decision-making. If we want a sustainable future, there has to be a fusion of social and environmental justice to create a fairer world. 'Climate justice' requires the inclusion of the female perspective that has so often been lacking in society.

Addressing climate change is a priority for human rights and for health. If we fail to act now, the costs will be much greater in the future. Some might argue that we cannot afford to spend or act now. This suggests that they place less value on future generations than the present one: “Is a life saved today worth more than one saved in the future?” Well-known economist Nicholas Stern thinks that we need to place more value on the next generations and spend more money now on protecting them. There are things that can be done to help protect communities from the adverse effects of climate change and some of these can be relatively cheap. In Vietnam, instead of building expensive sea walls to defend the coast line against sea level rise and storm surges, they have planted mangroves. These not only protect the coast but boost the marine food chains thus supporting local fishing. Such measures are cost-effective but in the medium- and long-term only serve to delay the impacts of climate change. However, they can buy time whilst the world takes action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

***Read more:***

UN Development Programme: “Climate change is a matter of justice – here’s why”

<https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/climate-change-matter-justice-heres-why>

News on Climate Change: “Why Women Are Leading the Fight Against Climate Change”

<https://www.newsonclimatechange.com/women-leading-the-fight-against-climate-change/#>

Integrating Pulse: Dr S Chatterjee “Climate Change and Social Justice: An In-Depth

Analysis” <https://integratingpulse.com/articles/climate-change-social-justice-analysis/>

## **Richard Marshall**

Subscribe to West Berkshire Green Exchange WhatsApp group – just search for it in WhatsApp. Join Cold Ash Parish Greening Group: contact our chair, Richard Marshall: [marshalr@btinternet.com](mailto:marshalr@btinternet.com)