# **Climate Change, Human Rights and Political Stability in the Caribbean**

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**Introduction & Problem Statement**

As you know, climate change is one of the most urgent issues of our generation, especially for a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) such as Trinidad and Tobago and other Caribbean islands. Our geographical size, vulnerability to external shocks, and limited human resources make us particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. In a recent UN climate report described as a “code red for humanity” by the UN Secretary-General, scientists predict that while action is needed immediately, some effects of greenhouse gas emissions are irreversible.[[1]](#footnote-1) The report stated in August 2021 that as global temperatures rise to 1.5°C and 2°C, there will be continued sea level rise, and frequent coastal flooding from heavy precipitation events. The extreme warming would then affect agriculture, health and other fundamental human rights. We have already seen these effects in Trinidad and Tobago. The severe flash flooding in Port of Spain and environs on August 3rd, 2021, are a clear example. Scientists believe that climate change likely played a role in the extreme rainfall and flooding.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In addition to the existential and other well-known environmental threats, there are also socio-political effects of climate change. This includes negative impacts on human rights and political stability. It has been noted by the United Nations that climate change profoundly impacts human rights. These include the right to life, food, development, water and housing.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is alarming for any country but as a small island, this is especially so. Thus, an examination of these factors is necessary for future policy planning.

**Human Rights**

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Therefore, human rights must be fiercely protected. If climate-related changes are affecting these innate rights, this is another reason we must pay attention to the climate crisis. Additionally, it affects political development and the ability to govern.

**The Right to Development**

Development involves becoming more advanced economically, socially, culturally and politically. This is the right of every state. According to the Declaration on the Right to Development, “people must be the central subjects, active participants, and beneficiaries of development”.[[5]](#footnote-5) Without placing human rights at the forefront of policy decisions, this right to development can never truly be realised. Not only can the impacts of climate change hinder further development, but it can also reverse development. It has been said repeatedly that the most marginalised communities are those that are being affected by climate change the most. This includes the urban and rural poor, those doing undervalued work such as farmers, and indigenous peoples whose knowledge is important in dealing with environmental issues. These issues affect the right to equality and non-discrimination. It is clear that human rights are linked to climate change and need to be prioritised.

**The Right to Food**

The right to food is threatened because climate change threatens food security. Trinidad and Tobago already lacks food security and climate change will continue to affect our ability to produce our own food. In research done by the then Ministry of Planning and the Economy in 2012, it was discovered that the projected air temperature increase will cause an increase in soil aridity which reduces the yield of crops. It could also result in a greater number of new and existing diseases and pests.[[6]](#footnote-6) The IPCC report noted that the Caribbean region would have more severe droughts once the earth warms to 2°C and above.[[7]](#footnote-7) On the other extreme, droughts and increased temperature will affect crop yield as crops would not get the appropriate amount of water needed and may not even be able to grow at all beyond a certain temperature. Our agricultural, economic and food issues will only increase with time.

Additionally, the increased frequency of extreme weather events also destroys crops. For instance, the unprecedented floods in October 2018, have cost farmers millions of dollars in crops and equipment. One rice farmer from Caroni lost almost 200 acres of food production and approximately $3 million in equipment in the floods. This is after the damage done by floods one month earlier and even from 2017 flooding events.[[8]](#footnote-8) This has disastrous economic effects, not just for the farmer’s livelihood but also for the country’s rice supply and rice prices. This then affects the access to a basic food product like rice. No matter how much help the government tries to provide after destruction, farmers will soon turn to more stable jobs. This is how human rights will be affected.

**The Right to Health**

Climate change effects will also put further pressure on our healthcare system, as it violates the right to health. Increased temperatures mean increased instances of heat waves, dehydration and more. Increased flooding events mean the greater the spread of water-borne diseases. The current COVID-19 pandemic has taught us the value of preventative health care in order to ensure that hospitals are not overwhelmed, and health care workers are not overworked. It has also reiterated the importance of water availability and sanitation. This is another right undermined by climate change and goes hand in hand with health.

**The Right to Housing**

Frequent and intensified weather events can damage and destroy homes. Increased thunderstorms and rainfall in Trinidad is already linked to climate change.[[9]](#footnote-9) Frequent landslides show the consequences of continuing to build on hills. Houses along the coast will be affected as erosion, flooding and other uncommon weather events occur. There is no conclusive evidence that links tornadic events to climate change, but they have been increasing since 2019.[[10]](#footnote-10) On August 16, 2021, a tornado hit the community of Los Iros, damaging 22 homes, destroying seven as well as damaging cars and trees in the area.[[11]](#footnote-11) Additionally, drought can make areas uninhabitable, leading to displacement and internal and external migration. The climate crisis will exacerbate housing issues within the country.

**Political Stability**

Political instability is usually understood as the propensity of the collapse of government usually due to conflict, unrest or party competition.[[12]](#footnote-12) The Caribbean is a relatively stable democratic region. In Trinidad and Tobago in particular, there has usually been a peaceful transition of power and free and fair elections since Independence, with the exception of the attempted 1990 coup. Climate change, however, increases the propensity for political instability. Climate change is set to intensify every problem in our society and even create new ones. As human rights are threatened, serious political unrest will occur. The fallout from water shortages, lack of access to food, housing and other basic rights will culminate in social unrest.

One projection by experts is the increase in migration due to the climate crisis. Caribbean people have a history of emigration[[13]](#footnote-13) and can be found in every corner of the planet. While the government of Trinidad and Tobago invests heavily in education, it is widely known that brain drain is a huge problem, as the young and educated leave for places that are believed to have more opportunities. Soon, brain drain would not be the region’s largest cause of emigration. As the consequences of climate change erode our coasts, destroy homes, and threaten our overall lives and livelihood, many will go to countries that are deemed to be safer from climate threats. Immigrants to our country from other islands that have faced catastrophic events may continue to place pressure on public services, while xenophobic reactions from the population will increase. This will be compounded by the issues already being caused by Venezuelan refugees. While refugees should be treated with compassion, we cannot ignore the issues that arise with immigration. We must deal with the assimilation of immigrants, while supporting the persistence of island social structures and culture.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**The Way Forward**

This is not meant to be a document of doom and gloom. It just paints a gloomy picture of what will happen without proper environmental policy that places human rights at the forefront. Therefore, here are some solutions to consider:

* **Greater involvement of indigenous peoples in decision-making** – Although Trinidad and Tobago’s National Environmental Policy states otherwise, there is currently very little effort to include indigenous people in policymaking and governance.[[15]](#footnote-15) Indigenous knowledge can be very useful in protecting our environment. There is a need to ensure the meaningful and informed participation of all citizens to ensure that human rights are protected.
* **Formulate policy with a greater emphasis on human rights and sustainability** - Human rights can be integrated into climate-change policies by analysing inequalities, vulnerabilities of certain groups and power relations in society.[[16]](#footnote-16)
* **Updated immigration policies** - Our immigration policies are outdated and should be updated to ensure that there are legal frameworks to deal with refugees, including climate refugees and asylum seekers. Since climate migration is inevitable, we need to be prepared. The UNEP suggests the mitigation of environmental degradation, coastal protection, drought planning, and land restoration to reduce climate migration**.[[17]](#footnote-17)**

**Conclusion**

Essentially, climate change is a human rights issue that undermines political stability. Therefore, for the sake of the stability of Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean region, human rights need to be integrated into not just environmental policy but all aspects of governance.

1. # *IPCC. Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis: Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 28.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kalain Hosein, “Major floods hit Northwest Trinidad.” *The Trinidad & Tobago Guardian*, August 3, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. UN OHCHR. *Understanding Human Rights and Climate Change:* *Submission of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to the 21st Conference of the parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (New York: United Nations, 2015), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: United Nations, 1948). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. United Nations. *Declaration on the Right to Development* (New York: United Nations, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Shaniece Rivers, “Climate Change: A Silent Killer of Trinidad and Tobago’s Economy.” *IDB Blogs*, August 7, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. IPCC, *Sixth Assessment Report*, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bobie-Lee Dixon, “Floods cripple agriculture.” *The Trinidad & Tobago Guardian*, November 4, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “The 2021 Los Iros Tornado.” *Trinidad & Tobago Weather Centre*, August 16, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “The 2021 Los Iros Tornado”, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kalain Hosein, “Tornado in Los Iros causes damage 22 homes.” *The Trinidad & Tobago Guardian,* August 16, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Zahid Hussain, “Can political stability hurt economic growth?” *World Bank Blogs*, June 1, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. UNEP. *Emerging Issues for Small Island Developing States: Results of the UNEP Foresight Process*. (United Nations Environment Programme, 2014), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. UNEP. *Emerging Issues for Small Island Developing States,* 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Shauneé Richards, “Building Sustainable Future by Looking at Foundational Knowledge: The Participation of the Indigenous in Caribbean Governance” (*The Parliamentarian*, Volume 102, no. 2 (2021)), 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. UNEP. *Emerging Issues for Small Island Developing States,* 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. UNEP. *Emerging Issues for Small Island Developing States,* 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)