# **The Social Cost of Climate Change**

***A Report to the Prime Minister by their Chief Advisor***

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**Introduction**

The climate change conversation typically centres around the seemingly inexhaustible list of physical indicators of the phenomenon. These include, inter alia, increasingly erratic weather conditions, rising sea levels and threats to agricultural activities. However, though these are vital factors, they fail to paint a holistic picture of the far-reaching threats of climate change. The disastrous impacts of climate change on our natural environment cannot be divorced from the equally detrimental effects it will have on those who inhabit this natural environment—human beings. Though the human rights perspective on climate change is an unorthodox and unconsidered one, the link between changing climate patterns and the preservation of human rights is both inherent and deserving of further discussion. On a basic level, the grave impact that climate change has and will continue to have on the standard and quality of human life represents a flagrant contravention of our universally recognized human rights. This spells dire consequences for the social climate of many Caribbean islands, inevitably leading to social unrest and political incertitude.

**Findings**

Firstly, several sources of Caribbean human rights provide for fundamental freedoms that the events of climate change naturally infringe. For instance, Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides for rights to an adequate level of food security, among other privileges

[[1]](#footnote-1). A variety of Commonwealth Caribbean constitutions mirror this sentiment, with section 4 of the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago enshrining “a right of the individual to life, liberty, security of the person and enjoyment of property”[[2]](#footnote-2). These rights, which are widely held in high regard, are imperilled by the various incidents of climate change. One clear example lies in the heightened occurrence of tropical storms and hurricanes in the region. Among many other disastrous effects, these events often give rise to extreme flooding which has the power to incur tremendous amounts of economic loss due to factors such as crop destruction. Low-lying islands such as Barbados are particularly susceptible to flood-related losses, which pose a veritable threat to the enjoyment of security of food and dwelling by the region’s people. In these situations, the scarcity of food supplies and diminished crop yields invariably lead to increased food prices, further denying people the access to food that is protected by their fundamental rights. This simple example is but a microcosm of the plethora of human rights violations that the climate crisis encourages throughout the region.

Furthermore, the implications for the future also merit some attention in this matter. The impacts of climate change are not contained to the immediate and obvious consequences such as food insecurity and the loss of property. The magnitude of climate change is such that it has an enormous power to affect other indicators such as literacy levels and employment opportunities. It is also important to note that Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights expressly enshrines education as a fundamental freedom.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Adaptation Fund reports that the increased instances of hurricane activity pose a significant risk of destruction of school buildings and the telecommunications infrastructure necessary to facilitate effective learning in Antigua and Barbuda[[4]](#footnote-4). This outcome can be extrapolated to the wider region where, in recent times, extraordinary weather events, such as the recent eruption of the La Soufriere volcano in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, are becoming more frequent. In addition to the aforementioned physical and instant consequences of these events, it is also crucial to recognize that climate change and its related incidents pose a serious long-term threat to educational and vocational outcomes, and therefore threatens to directly infringe one’s Article 26 rights. This has a significant bearing on the futures of not only the present Caribbean youth population but those to follow, affecting their standard of living, quality of life and opportunities for advancement.

Commensurate with the hindrances to the enjoyment of an acceptable standard of living posed by the by-products of climate change is political unrest. A common source of contention throughout the Caribbean is the pronounced socioeconomic and class divisions. In the words of IDB chief economist, Eric Parrado, “...our schools and cities are segregated by income at a level that is unseen in other regions.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Indeed, the ever-increasing gap in opportunities, resources and funding received by the rich and those received by the impoverished in Caribbean societies has left the latter group feeling neglected and forgotten by their respective governments. Climate change has only sought to bring to the fore the existent social inequalities. For example, in Trinidad, the residents of several traditionally low-income communities have spoken out against improper drainage, poor infrastructure and a lack of resources to treat with large volumes of floodwater that often leads to loss of life and property after heavy rain showers.[[6]](#footnote-6) This constant threat of displacement disproportionately affects lower income communities and as previously mentioned, constitutes an abrogation of their recognized fundamental human rights. This disparity has great potential to foster discontent and disunity among these groups in Caribbean society, as certain groups in society have long felt marginalized and neglected by their governments. Coupled with the racial diversity of the region, and ties between race and socio-economic status, it is clear to see that the situation is rife with possibilities for political and social unrest.

Additionally, the partisan divide is also a relevant consideration in the discussion of the social impact of climate change on the region. One would be hard-pressed to find a social issue that is more divisive than climate change. The spectrum of views on the matter ranges from those who wholly reject its existence to those who gravely worry about its implications. This has practically created two polarizing realities, with staunch defenders for either viewpoint. What is even more concerning is the tendency for climate change to become politicized. The United States provides an appropriate example of this, where the issue has been described as a “political football”[[7]](#footnote-7) with Democrats and Republicans possessing seemingly irreconcilable views on the matter, consequently dividing their respective bases. In the Caribbean region, many islands possess a contentious government-opposition dichotomy and a system of tribal politics, and as such there is substantial potential for the issue to divide the populace along party lines and identity politics. This could, therefore, give rise to a sense of disunity on both the level of the everyday citizen and even within the governmental structure, because of the conflicting views on the gravity of the problem and how to treat with its disastrous consequences. This polarity only serves to exacerbate the impact of climate change related occurrences on the safety and comfort of the Caribbean citizen, which has repeatedly been established as an outright contravention of human rights.

**Conclusion**

In summation, it is clear to see that as a region, the Caribbean needs to rethink the way it views climate change and its mitigation strategies. While the focus has rightfully been placed on the natural environment and the manner in which it manifests changing climate conditions, the element of humanity cannot be removed from the debate. Although the measures proposed to combat the effects of climate change, such as curbing emissions on a national and regional level, are vital implementations, the effective execution of these solutions undoubtedly lies in an understanding that climate change is just as much a human rights issue as it is an environmental issue. Additionally, it would be in the best interest of the government of Trinidad and Tobago to consider this issue in the context of the current political climate of divisiveness and race-based politics. The dire implications of climate change on our society create the perfect conditions for social tensions, political unrest and an overall lack of confidence in the government’s abilities to provide the citizenry with a stable and sustainable natural environment.

**Recommendations**

In my capacity as Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, I have taken the liberty of composing the following recommendations with respect to integrating human rights and the current political climate into the approaches that will be adopted by this administration to combat climate change. They are as follows:

1. Education campaigns must centre around the importance of the fight against climate change, from both an environmental and human rights perspective. Many citizens are unaware that climate change does not only jeopardize their standard of living and means of survival, but that in a number of ways, it infringes their sacred and fundamental human rights. It is possible that this new perspective may compel those who do not see it as a genuine concern, to do so.
2. The equitability of climate change mitigation strategies must be at the forefront of the response. Flooding is a recurring problem for the local population, and as such both short-term and long-term approaches to bolstering infrastructure and drainage systems in impoverished, flood-prone and marginalized communities should be thoroughly explored. This aids in bridging the socioeconomic gap insofar as climate change is concerned.
3. Discussions in the judicial and legislative capacity must take place, in order to provide legal safeguards against contraventions of one’s fundamental rights at the hands of climate change and persons or institutions whose activities perpetuate climate change and its hazardous effects.

1. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, art. 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago*, sec. 4(a) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Adaptation Fund. Request For Project Funding From The Adaptation Fund (Bonn, Germany: The Adaptation Fund, 2020),3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Inter-American Development Bank. “Deep inequalities worsen Latin America and Caribbean vulnerabilities to crises: IDB report”. September 11,2020, https://www.iadb.org/en/news/deep-inequalities-worsen-latin-america-and-caribbean-vulnerabilities-crises-idb-report [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Angelo Marcelle. “Once-hopeful Cashew Gardens residents greeted by damaged homes, flooding,” Newsday, August 18,2021, https://newsday.co.tt/2021/08/18/once-hopeful-cashew-gardens-residents-greeted-by-damaged-homes-flooding/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Christina Couch. “Taking Politics Out of Climate Change,” PBS, May 17,2017, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/depoliticizing-climate-change/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)