# **“What you Mean to Me” – A Letter to Climate Change**

By Stacia Martindale

Hello! Help! My thin voice echoes getting lost in the abyss. No impact. No control. I feel myself tossed carelessly as I peer outside the glass bottle that holds me captive while strong gusts of wind attack. The tremble of the earth brings me to my knees while the heat...it becomes unbearable. I am trapped. It becomes harder to breathe. Stifled by a world in which I am nothing more than miniscule, insignificant, negligible, I grow frustrated.

Dear Climate Change,

I have heard so much about you and I felt inclined to write this letter to let you know what you mean to me. The above narrative piece written by yours truly simplifies the sentiments felt as a young person in the Caribbean living in a climate crisis. As your name suggests, climate change refers to a shift in climatic patterns caused largely by environmental degradation, indiscriminate deforestation and largely the excessive use of fossil fuels. From the mid-eighteenth century, European nations and later the United States experienced what became known as the Industrial Revolution. During this period, manufacturing processes developed rapidly as new inventions were birthed to facilitate easier and quicker trade and business. One may ask ‘How does the history of all things good and modern have negative effects on the Caribbean?’ While these advancements graced the world with conveniences such as electricity, the telephone and railway transportation, the achievement of these successes came at a cost. The Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre (CCCCC) explains that the use of fossil fuels at such an elevated rate to fuel vehicles, homes and machinery has contributed to excess levels of Carbon dioxide (CO) in the atmosphere. Consequently, global temperatures have elevated, spiking unpredictable climate changes which present challenges to all aspects of life. The marine environment is under threat from the warming and acidification of the ocean, which leads to the death of sea organisms. However, the most immediate and gut-wrenching effects have been the incidence of extreme weather conditions such as severe droughts and hurricanes. Therefore, as a young person living in this region, climate change means the augmentation of health issues and food insecurity, as well as widespread infrastructural and economic devastation due to global warming and the prevalence of natural disasters.

Firstly, Climate Change, you have incited a hotter, drier climate, which in turn has negative effects on health and water access. It was revealed in the Caribbean Science Series, published by CCCCC that the global temperature had risen by 1oC since pre-industrial years[[1]](#footnote-1). While this may seem minimal, one degree has resulted in longer dry periods and more intense heat waves. Both of these phenomena have serious health implications for the Caribbean by putting our populations at risk for heat strokes. The reality is that the human body cannot easily sustain itself if global temperature increases by even one more degree. Furthermore, wildfires are expected to become more common and more intense. Aside from the potential damage to crops and property, the smoke from such fires is extremely dangerous to human health, especially for those with cardiovascular diseases and asthma. It is pertinent to remember that non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension, and of course, cardiovascular disease are already prevalent. In fact, 70% of deaths in the Caribbean are linked to NCDs, making them the leading cause of mortality[[2]](#footnote-2). This means that the majority of our populations are more vulnerable to unbearable temperatures. The potential for reduced productivity and even earlier deaths is thus much higher as individuals succumb to heat strokes and heat-related health challenges.

To make matters worse, rising temperatures contribute to decreased water availability, as annual average rainfall declines and droughts occur more often and for longer periods. This was proven between 2013 and 2016 when the region faced a particularly severe sequence of droughts[[3]](#footnote-3). Consequently, sanitation, cooking, washing, and more importantly, food security are placed at risk. Irrigation of crops becomes difficult when rainfall and water levels are low, causing crop production to suffer. Haiti faced such an unfortunate scenario in 2015, when more than half of the crops were lost to drought. The outcome was devastating as more than 1 million people were at risk of food shortages and malnutrition[[4]](#footnote-4). While water woes impact the entire Caribbean, it is important to recognise that the most vulnerable, the poor, are more susceptible. Those living in poverty simply cannot afford to purchase cases of water monthly to support their needs. As such, they are also likely to suffer from water unavailability. This situation is likely to worsen by the end of the 21st century as a 2oC rise in temperatures will place further stress on freshwater by 25%[[5]](#footnote-5). Climate Change, you therefore threaten hunger! With growing difficulty to produce crops, countries will have to turn more and more to importing food. As global temperatures increase, so will the dependence on extra-regional countries. As one could imagine, this deepens our vulnerability if we are unable to meet the economic requirements to purchase imported food. The disparity between our small island economies and those in the global community therefore widens due to the lack of water access brought on by climate change.

On the other side of the coin, Climate Change, you also pose a threat to food security as a result of extreme natural disasters. National Geographic confirms that climatic change has been linked to “more frequent and more intense hurricanes, floods, downpours, and winter storms”[[6]](#footnote-6). Floods, in particular, wreaked havoc in Jamaica when heavy rainfall occurred between October 24 and 28, 2020 prompting deadly landslides. Agriculture too fell victim to these torrential floods. Member of Parliament, Floyd Green, confirmed the tragedy by revealing that agriculture was heavily hit due to the loss of over 14,000 hectares of crops and $30.4 million in livestock[[7]](#footnote-7). The outcome: more than 11,000 farmers saw their livelihood affected! These farmers no doubt felt the financial burden of losing their means of income as they could no longer sell their goods to internal and external markets. More importantly, one must take into consideration the nutritional value of the lost produce. Legumes, vegetables, bananas, sweet potatoes, pigs and poultry were only some of the highlighted food crops. This undeniably contributed to unforeseeable food shortages in the Caribbean nation. Coupled with the economic loss felt by the agricultural industry, flash flooding therefore threatens the ability of our small nations to feed our populations. So again, Climate Change, I emphasize! You signify hunger because of the widespread loss of agricultural produce for domestic and market purposes caused by severe floods.

Moreover, the augmented frequency of hurricanes induced by you, Climate Change, has negative impacts on the economies of the region. The last decade has witnessed a more aggressive Atlantic hurricane season between June and November, with the passage of weather systems within close succession of each other. These included Category 5 hurricanes such as Maria and Irma in 2017 and Dorian in 2019. The economic impacts of such events are severe, as seen in Dominica in 2017 whereby Hurricane Maria caused damages and losses of a combined US$1,313 million. To contextualise this financial burden, this figure equated to “226 percent of the 2016 gross domestic product”, which suggests that the island was thrown into deep debt in a matter of hours[[8]](#footnote-8). Such debt, as well as the destruction of facilities, makes it difficult, even impossible to provide the essential social services such as education and healthcare. Furthermore, the devastation no doubt hindered productivity, as businesses and operations had to be halted in the aftermath, which further limited overall economic growth.

However, it is important to remember the gravity of these intense weather systems for the average Caribbean citizen. Imagine the local fisherman who depends on his sole small boat to provide for his family of 6 but now cannot even recognise his vessel amongst the debris. This was the reality for many in Dominica. 128 fishing vessels were identified as having been lost during Maria, which had direct impacts on at least 2,200 individuals[[9]](#footnote-9). To make matters worse, the fisheries industry was still recovering from the effects of Tropical Storm Erika just two years prior. The potential for repeat attacks by storms and hurricanes reflects the uncertainty brought about by climate change. Our vulnerability is therefore undeniable as the recovery process seems ever ongoing and increasingly difficult.

September 2017 brought such a circumstance to the forefront when Hurricane Irma hit a slew of Caribbean territories including Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Puerto Rico and Saint Kitts and Nevis. Barbuda, however, only 62 square miles in area, received the worst of the onslaught. A news article headline posted by The Guardian Newspaper painted the sombre picture perfectly: “The night Barbuda died”. While dramatic, it was precise. Terrorized by winds of up to 185 mph, 90% of the buildings on the island were demolished by one of the most powerful hurricanes in the history of the Atlantic. As to be expected, life on Barbuda ceased as the residents were forced to evacuate to their sister island Antigua, leaving behind a veritable “ghost town”[[10]](#footnote-10).

To further confirm this sentiment, UNICEF documented the story of a young expectant mother who affirmed “I’m leaving nothing behind. No house, nothing… everything that I ever owned in my life, everything is gone”[[11]](#footnote-11). This anecdote reveals a sense of loss and hopelessness which is quite understandable, as such devastation seems impossible to recover from. In fact, two years after the nightmare of September 6, the 1,300 Barbudans who did return were living in poor housing, with no routine services, including an interrupted banking system[[12]](#footnote-12). Moreover, the experiences faced by Dominica and Barbuda emphasize the fact that even the most meticulous preparation was futile against the forces of nature. The goal to create infrastructure resilient against fierce weather systems feels almost absurd in the Caribbean, with our limited economies and repeated destruction by such events. Therefore, it is evident Climate Change that you signify hopelessness as the region remains stuck in a cycle of devastation and financial loss caused by strong natural disasters.

Finally, Climate Change, you evoke a sense of frustration for this young person living in the Caribbean. Seeing your impacts on my regional neighbours weighs heavily on my psyche. This is due to the understanding that we as small states contribute very little to the crisis that you are causing. While larger industrialised nations should hold responsibility for the environmental degradation and the abusive use of fossil fuels, we feel the brunt of the breakdown. We, not them! We lose our homes and struggle to rebuild. They lose their homes and in a few weeks, life returns to normal. I would apologize for getting so personal but this is a personal issue for me. Climate Change, your harsh temperatures do not simply mean applying an extra coat of sunscreen. You do not simply threaten my ability to go to the local seller the morning after a hurricane for some fishcakes and a “bread-and-two”. You are not simply making it likely that I might not be able to hear the hawkers on the highway shouting “Two mangoes for you, young girl”. It goes beyond that. Climate Change you threaten my rich culture, and the way of life of my people. You bring food insecurity, a deepening financial disparity between the Caribbean and the global community, destruction and despair. You rob my people of control. You are slowly rendering me powerless. However, Climate Change, you mean one more thing: a reason for me to fight, to throw my small voice into the world and demand change at a global level. Climate Change, THIS is what you mean to me.

Sincerely,

A young person living in the Caribbean

1. Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre. “Climate Science Series Vol 1,”, (2018): 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. World Bank. “Non-Communicable Diseases in The Caribbean: The New Challenge For

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3. Herrera et al., “Exacerbation of the 2013–2016 Pan‐Caribbean Drought by Anthropogenic

   Warming,” (Geophysical Research Letters, Volume 45, no. 19. (2018)): 10,619. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Herrera et al., “Exacerbation of the 2013–2016 Pan‐Caribbean Drought by Anthropogenic

   Warming,” 10,619. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Herrera et al., “Exacerbation of the 2013–2016 Pan‐Caribbean Drought by Anthropogenic

   Warming,” 10,620. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. National Geographic Society. “Climate change,”, March 27, 2019

   https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/climate-change/. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jamaica Gleaner. “Loss to agriculture sector due to rain over $1 billion,”, October 28, 2020.

   <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20201028/loss-agriculture-sector-due-rain-over-1-b>illion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Government of Dominica. “Post-Disaster Needs Assessment Hurricane Maria,” (2017). <https://resilientcaribbean.caricom.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/DOMINICA-EXECUTI>VE-SUMMARY.pdf: 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Government of Dominica. “Post-Disaster Needs Assessment Hurricane Maria.” 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Guardian. “The night Barbuda died: How Hurricane Irma created a Caribbean ghost town”. 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/nov/20/the-night-barbuda-died-how-hurricane-irma-created-a-caribbean-ghost-town> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. UNICEF. “In the wake of Hurricane Irma, families flee the ravaged island of Barbuda ahead of the next

    Storm,”, September 8, 2017, https://www.unicef.org/stories/families-flee-ravaged-island-barbuda [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gemma Sou. “Barbudans are resisting 'disaster capitalism', two years after

    Hurricane Irma.” The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/barbudans-are-resisting-disaster-capitalism-two-years-after-hurr>icane-irma-119368 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)