

Toward Climate Justice in the Amazon

A systemic response to unequal impacts

Key messages

- The Amazon faces multidimensional and interconnected climate risks, including extreme heat, droughts, and biodiversity loss, requiring systemic governance.
- Climate injustice reveals a stark disparity. Those least responsible (Global South) suffer the most.
- The Global North is historically responsible for over 50% of CO₂ emissions, while the Global South faces disproportionate impacts, intensified by colonial legacies.
- Indigenous peoples and traditional communities are among the most affected in the Amazon.
- Climate justice demands equity, accountability, rights-based approaches, and inclusive governance.



Uneven gains, shared harm

Climate risk in the Amazon is multidimensional. The region is experiencing extreme, compound, and cascading climate impacts, including extreme heat, droughts, floods, biodiversity loss, and hydrological disturbances. Such processes are interconnected and reinforce one another, requiring a systemic approach to risk governance.¹ Together, these overlapping elements are reshaping the region's ecological stability, its ability to regulate the climate, and the safety and livelihoods of its populations, especially Indigenous peoples and traditional and local communities.

This dynamic is putting pressure on the Amazon ecosystem, affecting its stability and the security of its populations, as climate change and local disturbances act simultaneously and push it toward a tipping point. These forces are not isolated problems; they amplify one another.^{2,3,4}

Climate injustice highlights the stark disparity between those most responsible for climate change, primarily countries in the Global North, and those who bear its heaviest burdens, notably in the Global South.⁵ This imbalance, marked by unequal impacts, adaptation barriers, and funding gaps, underscores the urgent need for climate justice.

HISTORICAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Global North, primarily industrialized nations, is overwhelmingly responsible for historical greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that have driven climate change. The United States and Europe alone account for over 50% of historical CO₂ emissions, while entire regions such as Africa have contributed less than 10%.⁶ These emissions fueled economic development in the North while causing environmental degradation and social harm in the South.

This historical carbon footprint has allowed these nations to achieve high levels of economic development, often at the expense of environmental burdens. The economic prosperity of nations in the



Global North, including the United States and Europe, is fundamentally linked to their industrialization, a process powered by the burning of fossil fuels. This long-standing reliance on carbon-intensive energy sources has enabled a high standard of living, advanced infrastructure, and technological innovation.⁷

UNEQUAL CAPACITY FOR FUNDING, ADAPTATION AND MITIGATION

The Global South generally lacks the financial resources and technological capacity to effectively adapt to climate change impacts or implement large-scale mitigation strategies. Regarding mitigation, while some countries in the Global South are striving for just energy transitions and setting ambitious climate targets, they still lack sufficient finance, technology transfer, and capacity building (means of implementation) that has been recognized as an obligation of provision by developed countries in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Paris Agreement, to enable developing ones to achieve them.

A significant funding gap exists, as promised climate finance from developed nations often fails to materialize, even if mitigation receives the most part of climate finance—a study points out that only 33% of reported public climate finance was for adaptation, while 59% was for mitigation, the largest share of it circulates within developed countries.⁸

Many of the so-called “solutions” promoted by the Global North, such as certain carbon offsetting schemes, fail to address the root causes of the problem. In some cases, they even lead to further harm, including land grabbing from Indigenous communities. This is particularly concerning in the Amazon region, as in many Latin American countries these schemes tend to focus primarily on forests.

In essence, climate injustice highlights a critical ethical and practical dilemma: those who have contributed least to the climate crisis are suffering the most, while those most responsible often fail to adequately support their adaptation and mitigation efforts, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability and inequality.



Disproportionate Impacts

Despite contributing the least to the problem, the Global South (developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America) bears the brunt of climate change impacts. These nations are highly vulnerable to rising temperatures, extreme weather events (such as floods, droughts, and storms), sea-level rise, and other climate hazards.

In 2022, Pakistan was hit by catastrophic floods that submerged a third of the country, affecting over 33 million people. The floods, linked to extreme rainfall intensified by climate change, caused immense damage to homes, infrastructure, and agricultural land. The country's limited capacity to manage large-scale disasters and its high population density in vulnerable areas amplified the devastation. This event highlighted how a developing nation's economic and social systems are highly vulnerable to climate-related shocks.⁹

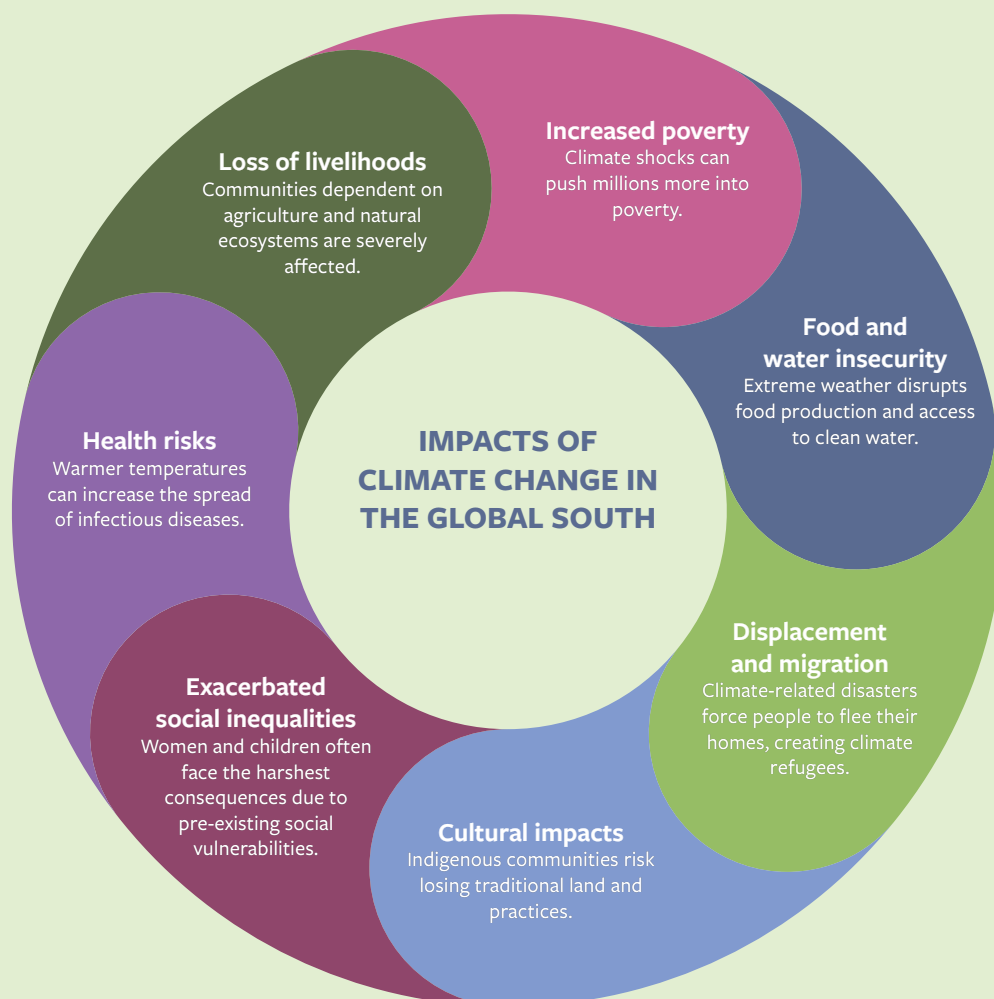
Furthermore, as global temperatures rise, the geographical range of disease-carrying vectors like mosquitoes expands. This has led to an increase in diseases like malaria and dengue fever in regions that were

previously too cold for them. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, a 2–3°C warming could result in more than 150 million additional cases of malaria worldwide. Developing nations with fragile healthcare systems are less equipped to handle such a surge in disease burden, leading to higher mortality rates.¹⁰

This vulnerability is further intensified by longstanding socioeconomic inequalities, many of which are rooted in colonial histories that left countries with fragile infrastructure, under-resourced healthcare systems, and economies heavily dependent on climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture and fishing.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The Amazon's ecological degradation and social injustices are driven by a combination of economic, political, and climatic forces, many of which originate outside the region.^{11,12,13} These systemic drivers not only accelerate environmental harm but disproportionately impact Indigenous peoples and traditional communities who depend on the forest for survival and cultural continuity.





IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Frontline Defenders

Indigenous peoples and local communities are the traditional guardians of the Amazon and have historically protected the forest. Their traditional knowledge and sustainable practices are vital for conservation.

Loss of Livelihoods and Culture

Climate change and deforestation directly threaten their traditional ways of life, access to food and water, medicinal plants, and spiritual connection to the land. Droughts, for instance, isolate communities dependent on rivers for transport and lead to food and water scarcity.

Health Impacts

Increased fires lead to respiratory problems, and changes in climate patterns can alter the epidemiology of diseases. Some indigenous communities report health issues, including the reappearance of previously controlled diseases.

Violence and Human Rights Abuses

Those who speak out against illegal deforestation, mining, and other destructive activities often face threats, violence, and even murder. This is a severe human rights crisis deeply intertwined with environmental injustice.

Socioeconomic Vulnerability

In many Amazonian territories, limited state presence, institutional fragility, and corruption enable illegal activities such as land grabbing, logging, mining, and wildlife trafficking. Environmental laws are often poorly enforced, and accountability mechanisms are weak, leaving Indigenous and local communities without adequate protection or legal recourse. Environmental defenders who challenge these forces frequently face threats, criminalization, and violence.

ACTO's initiatives related to climate injustice

The Belém Declaration, mandate of ACTO, includes various strategies and actions aimed at promoting climate justice. A key focus is on protecting the rights of indigenous peoples, local, and traditional communities, and ensuring their active participation in climate decision-making processes. For example, the declaration emphasizes strengthening the role of women, indigenous peoples, and youth in climate adaptation and mitigation forums.¹⁵

Additionally, it advocates for respecting social and environmental safeguards, monitoring and reporting on the rights of indigenous peoples and communities, and seeking opportunities for equitable and sustainable solutions in climate policies. The declaration also

highlights the importance of integrating an Amazonian perspective into international platforms like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and safeguarding the social and environmental rights of indigenous and local populations according to their national laws.

Moreover, it underscores the need to address social and gender inequalities and to include vulnerable groups in climate actions, which aligns with the principles of climate justice. In summary, the Belém Declaration undertakes multiple actions and strategies to promote climate justice, primarily through enhancing participation, protecting indigenous and local rights, and addressing social and ecological inequalities within climate policies.¹⁵





Recommendations

EQUITY

Those most affected should be prioritized in adaptation efforts.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Major emitters must lead in emissions reductions and fund climate action.

PARTICIPATION

Include Indigenous peoples, women, and youth in decision-making.

RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Ensure policies uphold human rights and recognize Nature as a rights-bearing entity.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR HISTORICAL EMISSIONS

Developed nations, which have benefited most from historical emissions, must provide significant financial and technological support to Amazonian countries and communities for conservation, sustainable development, and climate adaptation and mitigation. This includes funding for “loss and damage.”

ENDING HARMFUL ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Global efforts are needed to pressure corporations and governments to cease investments and activities that drive deforestation and exploitation in the Amazon (e.g., the expansion of high-carbon industries, unsustainable agriculture). This action is critical for the reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions.

ADVANCING EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Climate justice is inseparable from development justice. Public policies and international cooperation must promote inclusive, forest-compatible economic alternatives that prioritize the well-being of local populations. This includes support for community-based bioeconomies, Indigenous-led enterprises, and circular, low-carbon rural development models.

STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Addressing deforestation and environmental crime requires robust public institutions, transparent land governance, and protection of environmental defenders. Justice also demands an end to the criminalization of Indigenous leaders and civil society actors who challenge destructive practices.

FAIR CLIMATE FINANCE

Ensuring that climate finance from the Global North reaches frontline communities directly and is not tied to conditions that perpetuate injustice.

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ARO is ACTO's reference center that integrates data, tests innovations, and disseminates information to support member countries in cooperation and decision-making.

AMAZON COOPERATION TREATY ORGANIZATION (ACTO)

ACTO is an intergovernmental organization formed by eight Amazon countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela, which signed the Amazon Cooperation Treaty, making it the only socio-environmental bloc in Latin America.

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