

International law recognises that global warming will most affect those least responsible for it. Individually, nationally and globally how can global warming be effectively tackled in a way that recognises this injustice?

By Nuha Ahmed

The issue of global warming most affecting those least responsible for it is becoming recognised internationally. The United Nations Goal 1.5 of their 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to reduce the exposure of the poor and those in vulnerable situations to, ‘... climate related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters’¹. In Britain, those least responsible for climate change, such as children, those of lower socioeconomic status and ethnic minorities, inordinately suffer the consequences of global warming. Internationally, countries like Bangladesh and the Pacific Islands which produce the lowest carbon emissions are facing the most extreme weather conditions caused by climate change. This essay will consider how the British government can tackle the disproportionate effect of air pollution caused by the transport sector (the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the UK²) on certain groups. It will also propose solutions to population displacement due to extreme weather conditions caused by climate change globally.

In Britain, air pollution can unduly affect the health of children living in congested areas, despite their minimal responsibility for the pollution. Having attended a primary school situated on the North Circular with one of the worst pollution levels in London³, I can attest that the air quality exacerbated - if not caused - my asthma. Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah was a 9 year-old girl with severe asthma. She died in 2013. In the recent inquest into her death, the coroner concluded that she ‘died of asthma contributed to by exposure to excessive air pollution’⁴. She was exposed to high levels of nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter which exceeded World Health Organisation guidelines⁵.

On an individual level, changes can be made to reduce the effects of air pollution on children. My former primary school now has a ‘green wall’. This wall of ivy has reduced the levels of nitrogen dioxide pollution by 20 per cent⁶. A similar ‘green barrier’ has been introduced to a

¹ [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development web.pdf \(un.org\)](#)

² [Transport and Environment Statistics: 2021 Annual Report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

³ [London pollution 'cry for help' as school pupils 'walk home through cloud of black smoke' | London Evening Standard | Evening Standard](#)

⁴ [REGULATION 30: ACTION TO PREVENT FUTURE DEATHS \(judiciary.uk\)](#)

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ [Cutting the toxic air at Bowes Park Primary School | Enfield Independent](#)

primary school in Sheffield⁷. Such initiatives could reduce the likelihood of a respiratory illness caused by poor air quality.

A study found that the wealthiest 10 percent of Britons are responsible for 16 percent of carbon emissions whereas the poorest 10 percent are responsible for a mere 5 percent of emissions⁸. Despite this, in London the most socioeconomically disadvantaged suffer from an average of 25 percent greater air pollution than those in the most affluent areas⁹.

Being of a lower socioeconomic status and having ethnic minority heritage can simultaneously lead to disproportionate suffering from the effects of air pollution. For instance, Hackney is the third most deprived¹⁰ borough in London, 64% of its residents come from ethnic minority backgrounds¹¹ and it has the sixth highest death rate from poor air quality in the country¹². Moreover, Tower Hamlets is considered the most deprived London borough¹³, with 67% of its residents being from ethnic minorities¹⁴, and has the fifth worst air quality¹⁵ of any London borough.

During the height of the pandemic, there was a correlation between the high mortality rate of ethnic minority sufferers of COVID-19 and greater exposure to air pollution. Patients from ethnic minorities were found to be twice as likely to live in areas of environmental and housing deprivation, and people from these areas were twice as likely to suffer from severe coronavirus symptoms¹⁶.

Nationally, the government should invest more in education on the harmful effects of air pollution, particularly in deprived communities which suffer from it disproportionately. In order to improve awareness, basic information on pollutants must be introduced into primary school education. At secondary school, air pollution should be included in the Geography and Biology syllabi. In addition, local councils should: include information on their websites about air pollution, post leaflets on the issue to residents and encourage them to track air pollution using free apps such as IQAir. The more informed those inordinately affected by poor air quality become, the more likely they are to campaign for change or take an active role in decision making. For instance, Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah's mother Rosamund now campaigns for cleaner

⁷ [Green barrier to reduce air pollution for children • Grantham Centre for Sustainable Futures \(sheffield.ac.uk\)](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk)

⁸ [Climate change and social justice: an evidence review \(jrf.org.uk\)](https://www.jrf.org.uk)

⁹ [Poor most exposed to air pollution caused by rich, study finds - AirQualityNews](https://www.airqualitynews.com)

¹⁰ [Poverty rates by London borough | Trust for London](https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk)

¹¹ [Knowing our communities | Hackney Council](https://www.hackney.gov.uk)

¹² [How clean is the air where you live? – Eastlondonlines](https://www.eastlondonlines.com)

¹³ [Indices of Deprivation Low resolution.pdf \(towerhamlets.gov.uk\)](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk)

¹⁴ [RB-Census2011-Ethnicity-2013-01.pdf \(towerhamlets.gov.uk\)](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk)

¹⁵ [What we are monitoring and why \(towerhamlets.gov.uk\)](https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk)

¹⁶ [Covid-19 impact on ethnic minorities linked to housing and air pollution | Coronavirus | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com)

air. She educates communities about air pollution, representing the views of parents of asthmatic children to decision makers¹⁷.

British environmental policy should address the social inequalities that global warming worsens. On the government factsheet about Air Quality (2021)¹⁸ there is a small section on reducing the effects of air pollution on the health of vulnerable populations which mentions children. However, there is no mention of the disproportionate effect of pollution on those of lower socioeconomic status and ethnic minorities. Although the Environment Act (2021)¹⁹ details countless measures that will be introduced to address global warming, there is no mention of disadvantaged groups suffering the consequences of climate change disproportionately or how to tackle this. If the government continues to overlook the social injustice of the climate crisis in policy, the issue will proliferate. The provisions of Section 1 of the Equality Act²⁰ which recognise socio-economic duty²¹ should be enforced, and situations of environmental injustice - such as illegal pollution levels unduly affecting those in poverty and ethnic minorities - should be recognised as 'indirect discrimination' under the Act.

Globally, the countries which suffer the most from deadly weather conditions caused by climate change tend to be those least responsible for it.

Extreme weather events caused by climate change have provoked internal displacement in some of these countries. For instance, Bangladesh produces a miniscule 0.56% of carbon emissions, yet is the seventh most vulnerable country to climate change in the world²². Cyclones and flooding destroyed three homes of a young Bangladeshi man called Golam Sarder, who was forced to move to the capital city, Dhaka, and work at a brick factory²³. The number of Bangladeshis internally displaced due to global warming is expected to reach 19.9 million by 2050²⁴.

Climate-induced internal displacement can be used as an opportunity for economic development. Professor Saleemul Huq conceptualised 'transformative adaptation'. This entails alleviating pressure on overpopulated cities like Dhaka, by directing displaced people towards growing urban centres in need of a workforce to accelerate development²⁵. The Bangladeshi city of Mongla is the first to adopt his recommendations, but already industry is booming and the

¹⁷ [Ella Roberta Family Foundation with Rosamund Kissi-Debrah](#)

¹⁸ [September 2021: Air quality factsheet \(part 4\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁹ [Environment Act 2021 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

²⁰ [Equality Act 2010 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

²¹ [The socio-economic duty: A powerful idea hidden in plain sight in the Equality Act | OHRH \(ox.ac.uk\)](#)

²² [How the Climate Crisis Is Impacting Bangladesh | Climate Reality \(climaterealityproject.org\)](#)

²³ [Climate change creates a new migration crisis for Bangladesh \(nationalgeographic.com\)](#)

²⁴ [Groundswell Report \(worldbank.org\)](#)

²⁵ [Port in a storm: the trailblazing town welcoming climate refugees in Bangladesh | Global development | The Guardian](#)

population has tripled. Mohammed Hussain (a displaced resident) affirmed: 'Because of salinity and flooding, there's not much opportunity in my village. But here [in Mongla] I can make good money'²⁶. Such innovative solutions to the poverty caused by climate change are needed on an international scale.

Global warming can force communities to flee not only their homes but their countries, becoming what some term 'climate refugees'. The Pacific island nation of Kiribati is the country with the fifth smallest carbon footprint in the world²⁷ and yet is suffering some of the worst effects of climate change seen in any country. Rising sea levels threaten to obliterate it²⁸. In 2015, the Teitiota family of Kiribati applied for refugee status in New Zealand. Although their case reached the High Court of New Zealand, it was ultimately dismissed. Nonetheless, Ioane Teitiota took his case to the UN Human Rights Committee, who in 2020 ruled that governments must consider human rights violations caused by global warming when deciding whether to deport asylum seekers²⁹. This sets a significant global precedent for states to recognise their human rights obligations in climate related asylum cases.

In order to recognise the rights of those displaced due to environmental factors, it is imperative that international legislation is amended. A refugee as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention is a person who flees their country 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted'³⁰. Those fleeing the severe repercussions of global warming are not included, therefore they cannot claim refugee status³¹, depriving them of the right to legally stay in their country of asylum³². The 1951 definition of a refugee needs to be updated to include people displaced by climate change, lest they remain in the 'legal void'³³ that United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described them as being in.

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: 'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family'³⁴. This should include every human being's entitlement to equal protection against the devastating impacts of global warming. In Britain, individual, small-scale solutions to air pollution such as green barriers can make a notable difference. Nationally, the government should invest more in education on the dangers of climate change caused by air pollution. Legislation should reflect how global warming can exacerbate socioeconomic and racial disadvantage. In the countries worst affected by climate change, internally displaced people can be recruited as a workforce to

²⁶ [Climate change creates a new migration crisis for Bangladesh \(nationalgeographic.com\)](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/climate-change/article/climate-change-creates-a-new-migration-crisis-for-bangladesh/)

²⁷ [Carbon Footprint by Country 2022 \(worldpopulationreview.com\)](https://www.worldpopulationreview.com/carbon-footprint-by-country/)

²⁸ [Rising Sea Level in the Republic of Kiribati | Global Warming Effects \(climatehotmap.org\)](https://www.climatehotmap.org/rising-sea-level-in-the-republic-of-kiribati)

²⁹ [UN landmark case for people displaced by climate change - Amnesty International](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/un-landmark-case-for-people-displaced-by-climate-change/)

³⁰ [UNHCR - What is a refugee?](https://www.unhcr.org/refugees/what-is-a-refugee/)

³¹ [UNHCR - Climate change and disaster displacement](https://www.unhcr.org/refugees/climate-change-and-disaster-displacement/)

³² [The Refugee Convention: who are refugees and asylum seekers? - Free Movement](https://www.free-movement.org/refugees-who-are-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/)

³³ [The Problem — Climate Refugees \(climate-refugees.org\)](https://www.climate-refugees.org/the-problem/)

³⁴ [udhr booklet en web.pdf \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/udhr/booklet_en_web.pdf)



aid development, as seen in the Bangladeshi city of Mongla. Finally, international law must recognise those externally displaced by climate change as refugees, therefore affording them the right to stay in their country of asylum.

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