

Who Gets to Decide What Justice Looks Like?

Living in the contradictions of climate justice

I want to start from a position that is uncomfortable for me.

I am from South Africa, from the Global South, from a place whose history and present are deeply shaped by colonialism, extraction and unequal global systems. I know what extraction looks and feels like, and I also know that much of the wealth and comfort experienced in parts of the world, did not happen in isolation from the exploitation of other places.

And yet, I live in Europe. I work, earn, and consume here, and I have also gained opportunities here - **I benefit from being here.**

So, I cannot stand outside the system and simply point at Europe and simply say, “*There is the problem,*” because *I* am part of it too, and I think that matters. Because climate justice requires us to be honest about where we are positioned within the systems we are talking about.

Climate breakdown did not suddenly create global inequality.

The climate crisis sits within much longer histories of colonialism, extraction, racial capitalism and unequal development. Some countries industrialised and accumulated enormous wealth while extracting labour, land and resources from elsewhere. So when we talk about climate responsibility, I get uncomfortable when we say: “**We are all responsible.**” Because who exactly is **we**?

- Are we all equally responsible?
- Do we all consume at the same level?
- Do we all have the same wealth?
- The same political power?
- The same ability to protect ourselves from the consequences?

Of course we don’t, and that matters because responsibility has never been equally distributed. So, why would we assume that justice can simply be about everyone doing their bit?

We have to talk about power.

- Who had/has the power to extract?
- Who benefited and continues to benefit?
- And who is now being asked to carry the greatest consequences?

That takes us to reparations - if climate justice is partly about repair, then we need to ask:

Who gets to decide what is owed?

- Who decides what repair looks like? Who decides how much is enough? Who decides where the money goes? And who decides what communities actually need?

And perhaps most importantly, **who gets to set the terms?** Because there is a danger that even our attempts at repair, reproduce the same relationship that created the harm.

The money moves, but the decision-making doesn't. The resources move, but the expertise is still assumed to sit somewhere else. The language changes, but the relationship doesn't.

We can call it partnership, development, climate finance, solidarity, yet if one side still controls the money, defines the priorities and decides what counts as success, how much has really changed? And this is where I think we need to interrogate the comfort of being *"good."*

We have become very good at the language of Justice.

Solidarity. Sustainability. Decolonisation. Participation. Inclusion. Climate justice - we know the words so well, yet knowing the language of justice is not the same thing as shifting power.

You can talk about decolonisation **and** still make all the decisions. You can talk about participation **and** still decide what people are allowed to participate in. You can talk about solidarity **and** still centre yourself, and you can genuinely want to help people while remaining firmly in control.

That is where white saviourism becomes more than an individual attitude for me - it is about relationships of power.

- Who gets positioned as the expert, or the beneficiary?
- Who gets to name the problem and who gets to design the solution?
- Who gets paid, and who gets listened to?
- And whose knowledge is treated as evidence?

Because people living with the consequences of climate breakdown are not waiting around for Europe to discover the problem.

They already have knowledge. They already have strategies. They already organise. They already resist. They already imagine alternatives, but what happens when their answer is not the answer we wanted to hear?

Do we actually listen? Or do we keep control and simply become better at calling it participation, and that is not a theoretical question, because it has consequences; it determines where money goes; it determines whose expertise counts; it determines which projects get funded, it determines whose knowledge enters policy, and ultimately, it determines whose future gets protected.

I think we also need to ask the same questions of our development work.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) give us a useful language for talking about poverty, inequality, gender, decent work and climate action, yet I don't think we can talk about the goals *without* talking about the systems that make those goals necessary.

We say: **Leave no one behind**, and I want to ask: **Behind what?** And behind whom?

If we want to address poverty, we have to talk about how wealth is produced and who owns it. If we want to address inequality, we **have** to talk about who has power and who doesn't. If we want decent work, we **have** to talk about exploitation, migration, wages and precarity, and if we want climate justice, we **have** to talk about extraction, consumption, profit and the economic systems that continue to reward them.

Otherwise we risk turning deeply political questions into technical ones, where:

We create programmes, we create targets, we create indicators, we measure impact, and while measurement matters, but we can become very good at measuring the consequences of injustice, without changing the structures producing it.

We can measure poverty without changing how wealth is distributed. We can measure emissions without challenging the interests that profit from extraction. We can measure inequality without redistributing power, and we can talk about decolonisation without actually giving up control.

So perhaps the harder question is not: **"Are we achieving the goals?"**

It is: **"Are we changing the conditions that keep making those goals necessary?"**

Because there is a difference between helping people survive an unjust system and changing the system itself, and this is where the idea of good intentions becomes important.

A colleague at Comhlámh speaks of: **"To hell with good intentions,"** because good intentions are not enough. You can care deeply about climate justice **and** still benefit from injustice; you can want to do good **and** still cause harm; you can believe you are helping, **and** still be taking up space that someone else should have...

And I don't think the answer is guilt, because guilt can still centre ourselves.

We feel bad, **we** feel uncomfortable, **we** talk about how terrible the system is, **we** ask what we can do, and suddenly the focus is back on us:

- Our feelings.
- Our intentions.
- Our discomfort.
- Our desire to be on the right side.

However, climate justice is not about helping us feel like good people, it is about changing relationships of power, and that requires something much harder than guilt. It requires honesty about what we benefit from, what power we have, and what we are prepared to change, because we often ask: “*What can we do?*”, when the harder questions might be:

- “What needs to stop?”
- “What needs to be redistributed?”
- “What needs to be given back?”
- “Who needs to be making the decisions?”

And perhaps most uncomfortable of all: “**What are we willing to give up?**” Because it is relatively easy to support justice when justice doesn’t cost us anything.

It is easy to support redistribution, when we are not the ones losing resources. It is easy to support decolonization when we are not being asked to give up control. It is easy to support climate action, when we are not being asked to change the things that make our own lives comfortable. It is easy to talk about reparations when we are not talking about redistribution.

So, the real test comes when justice asks something of us:

- When resources have to move.
- When decision-making has to move.
- When expertise has to move.
- When someone with less power says no.
- When a community says, “*That isn’t what we need.*”
- When we are asked to listen rather than lead.

And when changing the system means changing our own position within it.

I have to apply that to myself too - I benefit from living and working in Europe. I benefit from systems I am also asking us to interrogate - that doesn’t make me innocent, but it also doesn’t mean I have to pretend I have nothing to say about the systems I have experienced.

The point is not to establish who is good and who is bad. The point is to get honest about power, because justice cannot simply be something we agree with. It has to be something we are willing to make room for, and sometimes making room means giving something up.

So, standing here in the IFSC, in the middle of a financial district, talking about climate justice, I keep coming back to one question.

Who gets to decide?

- Who gets to decide what development looks like?
- Who gets to decide what repair looks like?
- Who gets to decide what a just transition looks like?
- Who gets to decide whose knowledge counts?
- Who gets to decide what communities need?

And ultimately: **Who gets to decide what justice looks like?**

Because if justice requires a redistribution of power, resources and decision-making, then supporting justice is not enough. We have to ask what that redistribution actually means.

- Who is going to lose power?
- Who is going to have to give something up?
- Who is going to have to listen?
- Who is going to have to step back?
- And who is finally going to get to decide?

Because perhaps the uncomfortable part of climate justice is not deciding whether we are good people - it is being honest about what our comfort is connected to, and what we are prepared to change.

What are we actually willing to give up?

Because that, for me, is where the contradiction becomes real, and perhaps that is where climate justice has to begin...

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