

CLIMATE JUSTICE AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH: BUILDING CLIMATE-RESILIENT COMMONS

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Introduction: Participatory Research, Knowledge and Livelihood Commons Build Community-Based Climate Resilience

Patricia E. (Ellie) Perkins

The authors of this book live and work in many territories across Africa and the Americas, where settler colonialism over more than five hundred years has violently dispossessed original peoples, vastly enriched colonizers and fuelled capitalist globalization that externalizes environmental costs, feeds on inequities, and is now endangering the planet. When we acknowledge the original peoples, we recognize our responsibility to keep working for justice for those affected by colonial violence, including climate change. Canada (as it is now called) is the homeland of more than fifty First Nations; they include the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, and Abenaki in what are now called Ontario and Quebec, and the Niitsitapi, Nêhiyawêwin, Denesuline and other Dene peoples, Tsuut'ina, and Nakoda in what is now called Alberta. In coastal Brazil, the Tupi-Guarani. In north-central Chile, the Mapuche. In Africa too, many original peoples preserve their governance traditions, languages, and cultures. Colonial diasporas exacerbated by climate catastrophe continue to uproot and disperse Indigenous peoples. Climate justice centres their struggles, their cultures' wisdom, and their claims to land, water, and political agency.

This book brings together a variety of articulations of the What, Why, and How of climate justice, through the voices of motivated and energetic scholar-activists who are building alliances across Latin America, Africa, and Canada. Exemplifying socio-ecological transformation through equitable public engagement, each chapter describes processes that are underway in many settings to build the post-fossil-fuel energy transition and transform socio-economies from situations of vulnerability to collective well-being.

“Climate justice” names the vision of removing climate-related inequities, both within countries/regions and worldwide. The poorest and most marginalized, who are least responsible for the consumption and emissions that cause climate change, are the first and hardest impacted, and also those least able to protect themselves due to socially perpetuated inequities including racism, gender-based inequities and violence, poverty, and discrimination. Climate justice is simultaneously a movement, an academic field, an organizing principle, and a political demand. Climate catastrophe throws into stark relief the extreme inequities that colonialism creates and capitalism relies on, which are life-threatening for growing numbers of people worldwide: building climate justice is a matter of life and death for millions. Where to start, in untangling the many interrelated challenges posed by climate justice intentions? This book offers ideas and inspiration.

Grounded in our varied experiences as researchers, climate activists, community educators and teachers, we show how participatory research, knowledge and livelihood commons can help to build community-based climate resilience. “Commons” are resources vital for survival to which many people have access (such as farmland, water, aquifers, forests, fisheries, and other ecosystem-based productive areas).¹ Rights to use the resources, and responsibilities for caring for and maintaining them, are mediated by community-organized and enforced commons governance systems that prevent “open access” (the “tragedy of the commons” where outsiders, disregarding local needs and practices, swoop in to “enclose,” claim and seize what they opportunistically see as individually profitable). In times of ecological and social crisis such as those driven by climate chaos, war, or societal breakdown, the governance systems that maintain commons can be as protective of local well-being as the commonly held resources themselves (Fournier, 2013; Farooqui et al., 2021; Berkes, 2017; Bollier, 2014; Burger et al., 2001).

Collective action, commonly held assets, mutual aid, environmental protection by those who know the area best, and partnerships with allies

(including academics) from outside the area, are some of the themes that emerge from the first-person stories told in this book. Seventeen chapter authors from Canada and eight Latin American and African countries describe their research related to climate justice and commons, carried out in partnership with local communities and civil society organizations. Some of the stories show the negative effects of climate-related actions that run roughshod over local communities' interests and well-being—for example, REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) carbon-sequestration projects in Mozambique that further impoverish small farmers, or organic food initiatives in Brazil that cause producers to depend on niche upper-class markets in big cities rather than feeding the local community. Participatory research itself can present challenges, as when technologies are intimidating for community participants with less access or familiarity, or when long distances prevent easy communication.

To learn from such grassroots perspectives, you have to talk with the people directly affected. The authors share their diverse stories of commitment to participatory research as a means to further climate justice—what works and what doesn't.

Our focus on commons and collective resilience-building continues a long tradition of mutual aid, which has always been the source of protections for the most vulnerable in times of chaos and deprivation (Hossein& Kinyanjui, 2022). It extends “commons-building” to include “commons-reclamation” in its descriptions of how this works in specific Latin American and African contexts. The stories told here make current climate justice processes and activism richly understandable in relation to each other.

For example, in South Africa, collective land ownership systems dating back to pre-apartheid times provide a model for collective water rights and activism by smallholder farmers—including recourse to the courts—to reclaim the means to produce their livelihoods. In Brazil, quilombola community members in towns that began as refuges for self-liberated slaves still hold land and work together collectively, using mutual aid to minimize climate risks for all. In Chile, Indigenous fishers request official recognition of their expertise in marine conservation as a way of preserving wisdom about cross-species environmental protection in marine commons. And in Kenya, local community lawsuits against port and industry construction that destroys mangroves and fishers' livelihoods results in the project's funders pulling out: communities can successfully protect local commons.

The lead authors for all chapters in this book were part of an international project on Climate Justice, Commons Governance, and Ecological Economics (2018–2021) that helped to support their participatory climate-justice related research in their own countries, linking sixteen universities in Latin America, Africa and Canada.² It was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) through the Queen Elizabeth Scholars—Advanced Scholars (QES-AS) program. Despite the challenges of carrying out participatory research during the COVID-19 pandemic (which delayed some researchers’ projects and forced modifications to others), the scholars communicated virtually, established regional and special-interest sub-networks, and peer-reviewed each other’s chapters for this book. They are part of a growing global network of QES Scholars who share experience and commitment to participatory research approaches in their academic careers. Other contributors to the project and this book include Patricia Figueiredo Walker and Kathryn Wells, coordinators of the project who are also chapter authors; and Rhys Davies, who drew the maps and illustrations for this book. This book thus represents the hard work of a large group of much appreciated collaborators.

The book is organized into sections on “Knowledge Commons,” “Food, Land, and Agricultural Commons,” “Water and Fisheries Commons,” and “Collective Resilience for Climate Justice.” There are many overlaps and cross-connections across sections and chapters.

The first section focuses on knowledge commons: information and understandings about the world human beings inhabit, which includes knowledge produced in research processes as well as cultural and traditional knowledge collected and developed by humans over time in interactive relationships with territories and their other human and non-human inhabitants. Kathryn Wells discusses knowledge commons in the context of decolonization, ethics, and climate justice. Allan Iwama and co-authors focus on widening access to knowledge via citizen or community science, describing their experience with a Brazilian-Chilean example of knowledge-building and sharing. They identify both potentials and limitations of technological tools for geographic and ecosystem measurement.

In section two, on food, land, and agriculture, Ayansina Ayanlade and co-authors describe their community-based research with small farmers in two Nigerian ecological zones to assess climate impacts, farmers’ options and local resilience strategies. Guy Donald Abassombe recounts his extensive

knowledge exchange process with Cameroonian palm farmers in Ngwéi province. Kátia Carolino and Marcos Sorrentino discuss Brazilian land laws and how they constrain options for urban food production and community development, with particular reference to community gardens in São Paulo. Marcondes Coelho and co-authors describe their research on soils as a commons with *Quilombolo* community members in Brazil who have collective farming and commons traditions that predate the abolition of slavery. Aico Nogueira traces influences on Brazilian small farmers' agro-ecological choices as they juggle their proximity to conservation areas, changing government policies, urban food markets, and the energy transition.

Section three focuses on water and fisheries commons. Daniela Campolino and Lussandra Gianasi describe the chaotic, toxic impacts on watersheds when poorly maintained mine tailings dams collapse, and how information and education are key to building public capacity to respond—in Brazil, Canada, and elsewhere. Solomon Njenga discusses his work with a climate justice non-governmental organization (NGO) and local fisherfolk in Lamu, Kenya, where development of an oil export terminal is destroying mangroves and coral reefs. Camila Bañales-Seguel tells the story of her work with Mapuche community members to document climate impacts on the Queuco watershed in Chile while transmitting Indigenous knowledge via place-names (toponyms). Francisco Araos and co-authors show how they have built relationships with Indigenous partners to carry out community mapping that blends traditional knowledge and “scientific” understandings of ecosystem change. Patience Mukuyu and Mary Galvin show how water commons in South Africa's Inkomati watershed are being defended by Black farmers, relying on legal rights and pre-apartheid land governance frameworks. Ferrial Adam highlights women's leadership in democratizing water management in the Vaal watershed of South Africa, using community science approaches.

The last section includes examples of collective resilience for climate justice. Andries Motau's chapter explains how participatory engagement with community stakeholders (civil society organizations, unions, and workers) in the Mpumalanga coal mining region of South Africa is helping to develop a detailed and nuanced understanding of Just Transitions-related tensions in that coal-intensive region, from a community-based perspective. Chrislain Eric Kenfack describes his faith-based work with Indigenous environmental activists in Canada and Brazil. Natacha Bruna and Boaventura Monjane's

chapter details how climate change mitigation policies such as REDD+ are harming Mozambican farmers, while community-based interventions led by a climate justice NGO in another area are building collaborative agro-ecological futures. Patricia Walker overviews the strength and potential of youth movements for intergenerational climate justice that benefits everyone.

The methodologies, conclusions, and climate justice implications of all these chapters are diverse, situation-specific, and best explained by the authors themselves. Together, in conversation with each other, they provide important inspiration, motivation and guidance about how academic-community alliances can be developed, and the promise of such alliances to advance equitable socio-ecological transformation in the face of climate chaos. The authors demonstrate the potentials and importance of participatory engagement to address climate-related inequities, laying the foundation for a fairer post-fossil fuel future.

Figure 0.1 represents the multi-directional interactions and reinforcing feedbacks that the stories in this book describe in relation to knowledge production and sharing across the boundaries of academia, class, race, gender, and the global geographic divides that are heightened by capitalism and colonialism such as rich and poor, Global North and South (Minority and Majority Worlds). When participatory research and action-oriented research are based in partnerships leading to ongoing relationships of trust between academics and community groups, published research more knowledgeably reflects community worldviews and priorities, which then become available and may enter policy discourse, while also increasing the voice, agency, confidence and organization of traditionally marginalized climate justice experts with lived experience of climate emergencies and priorities regarding what should be addressed first.

At the same time, local communities may gain access to academic information sources, broader-scale allies, and political networking opportunities that help strengthen their demands for land, water, and livelihood security. This also increases political pressure for equity across society, since climate change (and pandemics) demonstrate that human and ecosystem futures are closely interrelated. Skills for successful commons governance and reclamation may be highlighted and resuscitated. Indigenous experts may be recognized and sought out. Movements for food sovereignty, inclusive watersheds and water access, just energy transitions, citizen science/community science

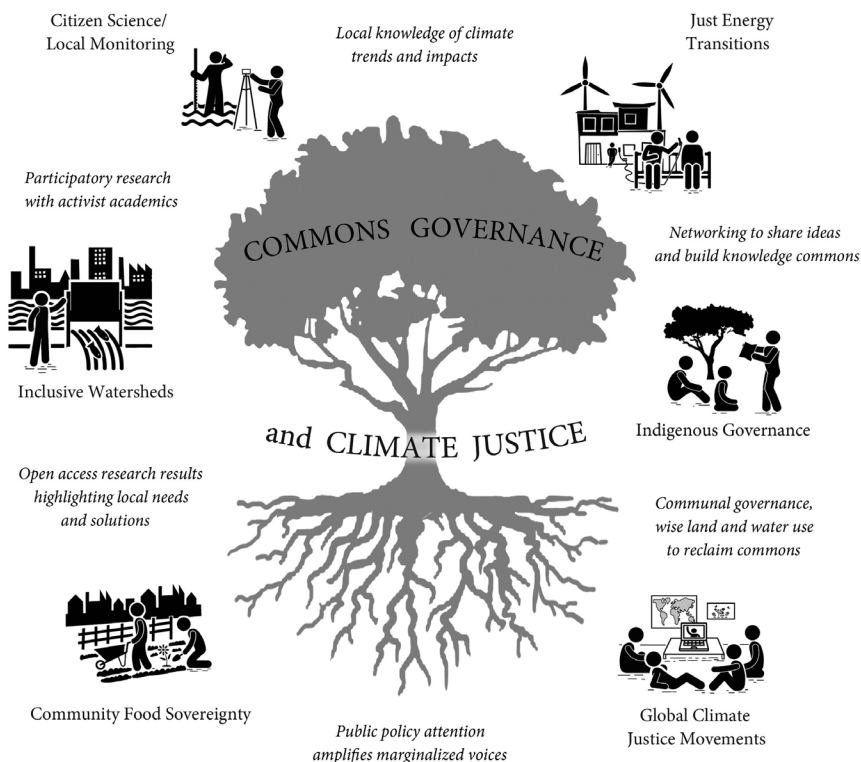


Fig. 01 Synergistic aspects of community agency for climate justice are shown in this diagram.
Credit: Rhys Davies.

and local environmental monitoring and care may become seen as interrelated, synergistic means of mitigating climate catastrophe.

These processes are not new ideas; they are receiving growing attention worldwide. What the chapters in this book contribute are specific, detailed accounts of how these processes emerge in action.

NOTES

- 1 Human cultures, languages, and shared knowledge are also commons: available to all (subject to protective rules) and necessary for survival.
- 2 The universities represented in this project included: York University, Toronto, Canada; University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa; University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa; University of KwaZulu-Natal, Centre for Civil Society, Durban, South Africa; Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, Mozambique; Technical University of Mozambique, Maputo, Mozambique; University of Nairobi, Institute for Climate Change and Adaptation, Nairobi, Kenya; University of Yaoundé I, Yaoundé, Cameroon; Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria; University of Concepción, Concepción, Chile; University of Los Lagos, Osorno, Chile; University of São Paulo, Luis de Queiroz College of Agriculture, Piracicaba, Brazil; Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro, Seropédica, RJ, Brazil; Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; McGill University, Montreal, Canada; and the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

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