Policy Brief

Climate Change Preparedness in Black Communities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area: A Capacity Building Project

Background

Dr. Ingrid Waldron (Professor & HOPE Chair in Peace and Health, Global Peace and Social Justice Program, Faculty of Humanities, McMaster University) and project partners, the Toronto Environmental Alliance and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, are conducting a project through her Environmental Noxiousness, Racial Inequities and Community Health Project (The ENRICH Project), entitled **Climate Change Preparedness in Black Communities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area: A Capacity Building Project.** The project is centred around six workshops with Black communities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, including Scarborough (1), Brampton (1), North York (1), Central Toronto (1) and Hamilton (2). The aim of the workshops was to build on the expertise and lived experiences of Black peoples to increase their awareness about the impacts of climate change on Black communities and to develop their preparedness for climate change impacts and devastation in their communities. The project has several objectives:

- Support Black communities in developing relationships with climate policymakers and decision-makers in the GTHA and in participating in conversations on climate policy and decisions related to climate preparedness and resilience.
- Support capacity-building and collective resilience through hands-on workshops in five areas in the GTHA.
- Increase the involvement of Black peoples and Black communities in discussions around climate and environmental action.
- Identify and support specific community needs and priorities in facing climate crises.
- Connect community members with each other, Black community spaces, Black-led organizations, local environmental and climate justice organizations, and climate change experts to maintain community engagement and organization beyond the project.

This project aims to bring Black people into community-based conversations around climate change preparedness and strengthen the network of resources needed to support community-led actions to address and solve local climate change impacts. The project also seeks to strengthen collective resilience and create conditions for more inclusive, future-ready communities, in the GTHA, by supporting advocacy, capacity-building, climate change awareness, and engagement with climate and environmental policy. The project is being conducted using a Climate Justice Framework, which is premised on the following:

- Climate change has unequal impacts that can increase pre-existing inequities and injustices experienced by Black and other marginalized communities.
- The social, economic, and environmental inequalities that are disproportionately experienced by Black and other racialized communities often lead to their greater exposure and vulnerability to climate impacts and devastation.
- Social factors such as race, gender, income, socioeconomic status, age, disability and geographic location shape experiences of climate change.

The Problem

Black and other racialized communities in Canada are experiencing the worst of climate change in a country that is warming over twice the global rate (Canadian Medical Association, 2024). Black and other racialized peoples are more likely to live in areas with higher environmental and health risks, such as poor air quality and exposure to other forms of pollution. They are also more vulnerable to extreme weather events.

Despite being amongst the most affected by climate change, Black people in Canada face systemic barriers and challenges to participation in mainstream climate conversations, decision-making processes, and climate action to support climate change solutions that are equitable and responsive to the diverse needs of Black communities. City plans for climate resilience often do not prioritize meaningful engagement towards equity, thereby increasing vulnerabilities to climate devastation in Black communities in comparison to other identity-groups. A gap exists between Black communities and policymakers due to a lack of community engagement in policy decision-making. The underrepresentation of Black peoples in the climate change sector is connected to the exclusion of Black communities from mainstream conversations and policy solutions. Black residents in Hamilton, Scarborough, Brampton, North York and Central Toronto have significant concerns about the effects of climate change in their communities and their level of preparedness in dealing with and addressing these impacts.

Hamilton

- City planning has failed to adapt to the needs brought about by climate change. For example, there is a lack of forward-thinking in urban development that could integrate green spaces effectively within the community.
- Smog has become increasingly difficult to deal with.
- The detrimental effects of climate change on local flora and the challenge of maintaining traditional gardening practices is of concern in this community.
- Demographic factors significantly influence experiences of climate change, such as the need to address the challenges experienced by newcomers in adapting to sustainable practices in a new environment.
- Black newcomers are feeling scapegoated as green areas in Hamilton are developed to provide more housing for newcomers.
- Black peoples in Hamilton have an understanding that climate change is important but are not meaningfully included or engaged in conversations around climate change, leading to a dearth of knowledge and understanding in communities and families, thereby increasing climate vulnerability.
- Black peoples hold knowledge important to innovating the fight against climate change and the fight for climate justice, whether that comes from experiencing climate change in their countries of origin, organising around social justice issues, navigating complex realities that require resilience, or leaning on ancestral knowledges and spiritualities.

Scarborough

- There is a lack of a prepared plan around climate change has aroused fear in the community as well as the disconnect between city planning and actual community safety needs. As one community member in the workshop shared: "So the City of Toronto had

the city people there, including the fire department chief. And we asked what your plan for emergency with all these high-rises is?... And his answer was, “We don’t."

- Better preparedness and an urgent need for coherent emergency plans are needed, which has been highlighted by multiple emergency situations like the Rogers blackout and the pandemic.
- There are unsustainable city planning practices in Scarborough. The city has demonstrated an inadequacy in handling emergencies.
- There is a broader concern over the city’s emergency infrastructure, which is perceived as ill-prepared to deal with the demands posed by urban density and climate change pressures.

Brampton

- The changing climate has notably affected local farming. In Brampton, the effects of climate change are seen not just in agriculture but in the overall quality of life, affecting health and community dynamics.
- The intersectionality of climate impacts refers to how climate change impacts are experienced due to the intersections and overlapping dynamics of social factors such as race, income, and housing.
- There are concerns about accessibility and affordability of sustainable options.
- Solutions to climate change include reducing community members’ carbon footprint and building homes that are sustainable.
- Critiques of current urban planning practices revealed a consensus on the unsustainability of rapid urbanization without adequate green spaces or community resources.

North York

- There are concerns about how climate change is altering agricultural practices. Smaller farms face disproportionate challenges due to resource constraints.
- Access to affordable, nutritious food remains a significant challenge.
- Current urban planning and development practices fail to consider the increased environmental stresses that are occurring alongside increasing population density. The lack of foresight in infrastructure planning leads to frequent breakdowns and inefficiencies.
- Extreme weather events, such as thunderstorms and flooding, have become more intense and frequent, directly impacting infrastructure and safety.

Central Toronto

- There are visual and sensory impacts of climate change. For example, climate change has led to the alteration of the night sky due to greenhouse gases. The sky often turns purple at night because of dense greenhouse gases from the massive greenhouses along the highway, which impacts the whole environment.
- Climate change is intricately linked with social life and community well-being, particularly affecting mental health. The lack of interaction or the ability to interact with the community is greatly putting Black people at a greater risk for mental health problems.
- The relationship between economic and racial inequalities and climate change can be illustrated by the disproportionate impact on affordable nutrition in the Black community,

making it difficult for many Black people to afford the increasingly high cost of nutritious food.
- There are concerns about ongoing construction in Toronto and its effects on local businesses, such as the mom-and-pop shops that are being torn down.

What Do We Want to See?

The following recommendations emerged from workshop discussions with Black residents in Hamilton, Scarborough, Brampton, North York and Central Toronto. Therefore, we wolds like to see the following actions take place as they related to supporting Black communities in preparing for climate devastation:

- Reliable and affordable public transportation in Brampton to reduce carbon emissions.
- Sustainable housing practices in Hamilton that support an increase in green spaces (e.g. rooftop gardens, mini municipal parks etc.) while providing affordable housing
- Approaches to housing and the building of new homes in ways that don't frame newcomers and/or racialized peoples as the proverbial enemy.
- Community-based strategies that support seniors and promote youth involvement in neighbourhood clean up initiatives in Hamilton and that use environment and environmental issues as a way of bringing people together and building a sense of camaraderie and community.
- Community-based strategies that create space for learning and for asking what could be perceived as "dumb" questions, such as "what is climate change?"
- Inclusive outreach to Black communities about climate change impacts and solutions that pay Black people for their time (which not only provides an incentive to attend but allows these conversations to be prioritised) and includes a *two-way* knowledge exchange where the goal isn't simply to teach Black peoples, but to learn from them as well.
- Holistic engagement of Black communities, aligning climate efforts with City strategies.
- Meaningful engagement with Black, African and Afro-Caribbean knowledges as a way of challenging Eurocentric decision-making models typically used in Canada, interrogating the role of race in disasters and disaster-relief, and building policies and directives for the benefit of all.
- Educational initiatives that raise awareness about climate change and equip Black communities with practical tools for action.
- The design of initiatives that bridge Black communities to broader City climate efforts, including the City's plans for extreme weather emergencies, including enhancing emergency response reach and impact and climate mitigation plans.
- Green solutions that prioritize affordability, accessibility, and economic empowerment for Black communities.
- Feedback on a City-wide green jobs strategy that includes Black communities in planning and shaping this strategy and that brings Black communities into a green economy by providing them with training opportunities for green jobs, mentorship with Black people who work in green jobs so that young Black people can see these as career options, and orienting newcomers who are looking for meaningful employment towards green jpbs.
- Food security and economic opportunities promoted for Black communities through empowerment, not charity (i.e. not more food banks) and that teaches urban Black people

how to grow food in apartments, linking Black people to local farmers to be able to get cheaper farm-fresh food, and providing home-gardening kits,

- Integration of job opportunities into environmental initiatives for Black communities. For example, providing residents with part-time or full-time jobs with responsibilities to maintain the greenbelt would help to address job and income insecurity in Black communities.
- A model for community-centred urban development.
- Innovative thinking in city planning and community involvement.
- Urban planning that supports access to critical services, amenities, and economic opportunities close to home.
- More integrated community planning that includes accessible green spaces and promotes environmental sustainability.
- A revised planning approach that integrates sustainability and resilience into city development strategies.
- Integration of cooling capacities such as shade, splash pads, and pools into urban planning.
- Enhanced walkability and transit in urban planning to create a more livable city.
- Prioritization of pedestrians in street design to encourage gentle density.
- Integration of childcare facilities into new developments to prevent a massive daycare crisis.
- Targeted support to help vulnerable farmers adapt to climatic shifts.
- Food sovereignty and security initiatives like community gardens.
- Educational initiatives on sustainable practices, such as education on using Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) instead of charcoal because it is cheaper and less harmful to the environment.
- Improvement of green spaces to increase cooling capacity and reduce flooding impacts.
- Investment in long-term community capacity and resilience-building by funding local climate action and preparedness initiatives.
- Allocation of disaster relief funds towards infrastructure designed to address future climate disasters and promote community resilience, including investing in clean and renewable energy, enhancing rain and wastewater infrastructure and developing housing and flooding control measures.
- Investment in affordable, accessible, and locally controlled climate-resilient infrastructure, specifically for clean/renewable energy, water and public transportation, housing, and food/agriculture to address food insecurity and species die-off caused by climate change.
- Establishment and funding of resiliency hubs within trusted community entities like schools, libraries, clinics, youth centers, or places of worship. These hubs should serve as central locations for support and assistance during natural disasters and include solar panels, storage units, microgrids, cooling centers, rainwater storage tanks and filtration systems, efficient refrigeration units, electric vehicle charging stations, and communication hardware. The hubs should also provide support for soft infrastructure such as workforce training and development, youth services, health and mental health services, legal services, housing support, and space for community meetings and organizing.

- Resources that provide emergency aide to areas impacted by disasters, particularly for land and watersheds, by supporting collaborative efforts to restore lands over longer periods and managing medium- to long-term projects to repair disaster damage and prevent future issues, such as sedimentation to water bodies due to lack of vegetation.
- Involvement of communities in planning and decision-making processes, ensuring that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged are included, as climate crisis impacts are often most severe on these groups and governments and all levels of society must partner to provide resources and remain vigilant in addressing the impacts of climate change
- Integrating anti-racism into emergency relief and disaster management - essentially trying to prevent acts of individual or institutional racism during a moment of crisis e.g. if a fire happens and someone loses their home, that they are not evacuated to an area where they will experience anti-Black discrimination or forced conversion (we see this quite a bit when churches provide disaster relief)
- Culturally-sensitive disaster plans, such as not telling people to stock up on sandwiches in an emergency but focus instead on what components emergency food should prioritise – like the recommendation being "stock food high in protein" instead of "stock chicken-pesto sandwiches".
- Engagement in Black community-building to create a sense of community among Black people.
- Encouraging Black people's sense of belonging to their city in the GTHA, which will build the kind of social currency that studies indicate increases resilience in the face of disaster.
- Multilingual disaster plans that reflect the diversity of languages spoken in the GTHA and that ensure those who speak French and other languages will receive the support they need in the language of their choice.
- Encouraging conversations, policies and directives about policing since the more surveyed Black people are outside their homes, the less inclined they feel to leave their homes, thereby depriving them of connections with nature and the environment and their positive impacts on human health. In addition, in climate emergencies, the police and army are often called to help, so it is important that Black people feel safe in these situations and that Black people trust the police in times of crisis and vulnerability.
- Recognizing that ecoanxiety may look different in Black communities than other communities and that there is a need to address the mental health impacts of climate change in Black communities, especially in cases where people feel too depressed to leave their home because of lack of work, the weather (winter), and the challenges they experience adapting to a new home.