

Extreme heat waves highlight climate injustice while western countries fail to act—how governments can help

July 3 2024, by Maria Pournara and Filippos Proedrou



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Average global air temperatures [breached 1.5°C](#) for the first time at the start of 2024—at least five years earlier than [predicted](#). So, while developing countries burn, global climate injustice persists.

[No high-emitting country](#) has complied with the 1.5°C target set by the Paris agreement. Governments in the [UK](#) and [Scotland](#) are exacerbating the crisis by reneging on their climate pledges to drastically cut [greenhouse gas emissions](#) by 2030, paving the way for net zero the latest by 2050.

The catastrophic effects of climate breakdown hit people in developing countries [the hardest](#), even though historically, the highest emitters of greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change are primarily [in the west](#)—[notably](#) the US, EU as well as Russia, with China and India joining these ranks most recently.

Hence, the spotlight must be turned to countries that are highly vulnerable to a warming planet by ensuring that the organization that acts as their advocate is given a platform to right this injustice. This organization is the [Climate Vulnerable Forum \(CVF\)](#), an international partnership of 58 countries highly vulnerable to a warming planet.

[Founded in 2009](#), it serves as a cooperation platform for participating governments to act together to deal with global climate change and advocate for the rights of people in developing countries. Based on our research, three practices stand out.

1. Debt relief

The CVF advocates for [debt-for-climate swaps](#). These involve [debt relief](#) in exchange for climate projects, such as [renewable energy](#) or conservation parks, that will either halt emissions or help these countries adapt to climate change, or both.

Costa Rica has signed two such deals with the US. Debt totaling US\$53 million (£42 million) has been swapped under the agreement for afforestation (planting of trees in areas where there were previously no

forests) and conversation projects, enabling Costa Rica to rise as a climate champion.

In [Barbados](#), a debt-for-climate swap worth US\$150 million unleashed US\$50 million in funding for marine conservation.

Such deals are not exclusive to CVF members, though. Other developing countries that are not members of the CVF have entered into similar agreements. Peru, for example, signed a deal with the US to channel more than US\$20 million of debt to the protection and conservation of three priority areas in the Peruvian Amazon, with positive effects for the [climate](#).

With the most vulnerable countries losing [20%](#) of their GDP over the first two decades of the century, and with their debt rocketing to unsustainable levels, [debt-for-climate-swaps](#) can help the weakest countries contribute to [climate action](#) and build resilience.

2. Climate prosperity

While developed countries view the energy transition as a new [growth strategy](#), CVF members approach it as an opportunity to rethink growth and transform their [social and economic systems](#). They prioritize well-being alongside economic growth and link climate action with other [social measures](#) such as universal basic income, participation, gender equality and inclusivity.

Developing countries' climate prosperity plans—that's their strategies to tackle environmental and socioeconomic problems—strike a [new balance](#) between support for business and human rights. The [Sri Lankan climate prosperity plan](#) focuses on universal protection of workers from heat and promoting nature-based solutions in the economy.

[In Sri Lanka's capital city Colombo](#), wetlands, including freshwater lakes and swamps, are being protected and restored to build a natural defense to flooding and reduce the risk of landslides in the monsoon season.

3. Support for ecocide law

Climate change has become an existential threat for CVF members. In 2019, two CVF members, Vanuatu and the Maldives, proposed adding [ecocide](#) to the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court as the fifth crime against humanity.

This law would hold wealthy countries accountable for acts and omissions that severely contribute to climate change and disproportionately adversely affect CVF states.

An ecocide law that highlights a critical breach of the most vulnerable states' [sovereignty](#) is considered by many activists, legal scholars and politicians as a last resort to prevent catastrophic change due to climate change. While the CVF does not stand behind this proposal collectively, several members support it.

With ecocide now firmly on the climate political agenda, especially since the EU recently passed a law of ecocide, the CVF has solid grounds to press further for the enshrining of a law of ecocide in international law as a tool that will protect the rights of present and future generations in the most [vulnerable countries](#).

Without concerted action, climate disasters will only proliferate. Climate-focused practices, like debt-for-climate swaps, nature-based well-being and support for a law of ecocide are steps in the right direction. These policies, and their advocates, should move closer to center stage in the upcoming climate summit, [COP29](#), taking place in Baku, Azerbaijan in November.

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