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When I look at Extinction Rebellion, all I see is white faces. That has to change

Tuesday 22 October 2019, by [AKEC Athian](#) (Date first published: 19 October 2019).

XR must realise its lack of diversity, middle-class image and glamorisation of arrest puts young black and brown people off

Some Extinction Rebellion activists present climate warming as a disaster waiting to happen. But for my cousins in the global south, the dystopian future has already arrived. A staggering [12 million people](#) in Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia are facing hunger caused by low rainfall. Deadly tropical diseases are spreading more easily as the climate warms, and [780,000 people a year](#) are dying in Africa because of air pollution. But for many black inner-city teenagers like me, the climate change movement conjures up nothing but apathy. Last week, beneath the cloudy skies of north-west London, I asked some of my comprehensive school classmates what they thought about [Extinction Rebellion](#). One answered flatly: “What’s that?”

“Without the involvement of black voices, the movement may slip into being a vehicle for climate colonialism”

Watching the media coverage of the school climate strikes, all I saw was white faces – definitely not a reflection of my friends, my community, or the broader diversity of British society. Despite climate warming hitting the global south hardest, why are so few people willing to engage with this fact? What can groups like [Extinction Rebellion](#) actually do to change this, and why should they change it anyway?

The short, frank answer is that the tactics of Extinction Rebellion are designed by and for middle-class, white Britain. Their central rhetoric about a dystopian future fails to cut through for those of us already faced with a nightmarish present, surrounded by poverty and austerity .

Meanwhile, the tactic of being purposely arrested strikes an uncomfortable note for many people of colour, given the adverse experiences people in my community have had with the police. The climate movement’s failure to stand in solidarity with our political struggles adds to this sense of disconnect.

My friends and I aren’t politically switched off. But what we engage with is the here and now. The luxury of thinking far into the future is not one afforded to us. We are still the punchbag of the 2008 financial crisis, and have borne the brunt of a decade of austerity, neoliberal economics and the gradual erosion of social security. In addition to all of this, with seemingly monthly Snapchat eulogies to peers lost to knife crime, it’s easy to see how the Extinction Rebellion protests are merely white noise for us.

No movement can be truly progressive if the voices of ethnic minorities are excluded – and the flashes of ignorance and xenophobia we see from environmentalists are a reflection of this. Rupert Read, a spokesperson for Extinction Rebellion who recently appeared on Question Time, has argued that the “net environmental footprint” [is increased by migrants.](#), and that resisting large-scale

immigration is central to fighting climate warming. If the movement continues to ignore diverse voices, these regressive views may shift into mainstream climate discourse.

The economic systems central to different forms of oppression across the globe, neoliberalism in the global north and neocolonialism in the global south, are key parts of the destruction of the climate. Neocolonialism is driving resource extraction and climate destruction in Asia, Africa and South America. Without the involvement of black voices, the climate crisis movement may slip into being a vehicle for climate colonialism: with the resources of the global south increasingly exploited, while western economies are decarbonised. The west may save itself at the cost of others.

One friend of mine was stop-and-searched by the police 12 times last year. When I told him that the Extinction Rebellion protesters were purposefully getting themselves arrested, he rolled his eyes in sheer irritation. "That's not an option for black people," he said, adding that if he was arrested, the police would undoubtedly treat him differently, and his future career prospects might also be destroyed. The tactic of deliberately seeking arrest has further alienated disenfranchised communities like mine who, across generations, have had bad experiences with the police.

For people like my friends and me to safely protest, Extinction Rebellion needs to reform its tactics by actively reaching out to young black and brown people and showing it truly understands the grave challenges we face. There needs to be a radical change in messaging: less glamorisation of arrest and emphasis on blind disruption, [as seen](#) on the tube in London this week.

Extinction Rebellion urgently needs to draw attention to the ways in which climate crisis is affecting people in the global south right now. And it should also show us what a future worth saving would look like: decarbonising the economy isn't enough - they must show that if they succeed, the green future would be one without zero-hour contracts, homelessness, poverty or knife crime. By framing itself as wanting to radically transform the injustices of capitalism, it might win the support it needs beyond the white middle classes. To tackle this crisis in any meaningful way, it's crucial activists acknowledge that the groups who are currently underrepresented are perhaps the ones who have the most at stake.

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- This article was amended on 21 October 2019 to clarify Rupert Read's position on the impact of migration on climate warming.

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The Guardian

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