

Transcript

The view from Cape Town, South Africa

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

PHILILE MBATHA: Local and Indigenous knowledges have not been well integrated in climate change debate.

[BIRD SCREECHING]

I'm at the Cecil John Rhodes Memorial. Cecil John Rhodes was a British imperialist in the late 19th century. Nowadays, this memorial has come under a lot of contestation because the legacy that it represents also mirrors the legacy of apartheid. The city of Cape Town is laid out in a way that promotes segregation.

Where we are is in the Table Mountain National Park, and the closer you are to the mountain, the more affluent people that you're going to find, and it's also much greener and more leafy. However, as you move further away from the mountain and the ocean, you start to find lower income settlements as you move further out.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

The remnants of the apartheid and colonial era are still existent in the landscape of Cape Town. My name is Philile Mbatha. I'm a Senior Lecturer at the University of Cape Town's Environmental and Geographical Science Department, and I'm also the co-director of the One Ocean Hub group.

South Africa is a microcosm of the Global North means the Global South, and this is particularly true for the city of Cape Town. Cape Town is the oldest and also the second biggest city in South Africa. Some people say that it is the mother of the country of South Africa. I guess that's the case, but it is a melting pot of different kinds of people and different kinds of cultures as well.

The inequalities between the rich and the poor in Cape Town are very wide. You have neighbourhoods that are very affluent, almost look like as if you are in Europe or somewhere in the United States. But at the same time, you have some of the poorest people in the country. And most of those people reside in the townships and also in the informal settlements, which are on the urban fringes.

I do teach a lot of students about the geography of South Africa. And I usually get asked the question of, what is a township? So, townships were created by the apartheid government, which existed between 1948 and 1994. Even myself, I was born in a township and I grew up in a township in a different part of the country. The apartheid regime in South Africa was based on segregation, mostly according to race.

And in South Africa, we have the African Black population, which is approximately 80% of the population, and then you have 9% of the population who fall under the category called Coloured, and then you have 6% of the population, which falls under the White category. So, townships were created during apartheid to accommodate people that were part of the formal economy within the urban areas, but were not allowed to mix with white people, and those settlements still exist in present day South Africa.

MICHAEL MEADOWS: I'm Michael Meadows, and I'm a Professor at the University of Cape Town, and currently President of the International Geographical Union. Cape Town is so divided between the affluent areas and the poorer lower income areas of communities that are so much more vulnerable to climate change. Especially in the winter, the effects of extreme storm events are really felt very, very hard on those people. Much less so if you're living in the leafy suburbs and the slopes of the mountain.

So the passage of these westerly frontal systems, which come through in the winter months usually from around about June, July, August, typically be preceded by some fairly vicious north westerly winds, which can certainly blow the roofs off of houses, and that would definitely be the case for some properties in the informal settlements, especially.

And then that would be followed by over a day or two of 100 or so millimetres of rain. That would be dealt with by the stormwater systems on the slopes of the mountain, but all of that, of course, then runs off and goes down into the Cape Flats, which is where the majority of poorer people in Cape Town are living, and it just floods those areas.

We might well expect more extreme events than that in the future. It's a very big difference when these storms come through, depending on where you live.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

The townships are areas where people are living cheek by jowl often in informally built structures, which are easily set on fire. And given that these informal settlements often don't have access very easily for something like a fire tender to get down in between the shacks, one shack goes up in flames in a hot windy afternoon in January and all of a sudden 500 people no longer got anywhere to live. Now that will happen increasingly in the context of climate change as the summers get warmer and probably windier.

PHILILE MBATHA: The advent of climate change has become a topical issue in many groups in South Africa, not only in academic spaces, but also in social spaces as well. I find in my research that there is a bit of a disparity in terms of concern for climate change between people that reside in affluent areas in Cape Town versus people that reside in less affluent, or even rural settings, around the city.

This has to do with the kind of access to information that people have. So, because of the inequalities that exist in South Africa, people that reside in affluent areas usually have more access to knowledge and Western science. If I can just make an example, in 2021 during the COP26, I was able to visit my neighbourhood where I come from, which is in a township, and this was during a time when the South African government was participating in climate change debates.

And I remember a lot of people were saying, yes, it's good and great that our government is participating in global debates, but why is it that climate change is getting the centre stage when there are many issues that the country needs to address, such as unemployment and also a lot of poverty that people are experiencing, which is obviously the majority of the population in the country? So, what has become apparent to me is that the way people are concerned about climate change is much influenced by their worldviews and their backgrounds.

MICHAEL MEADOWS: I think people are much more concerned about day-to-day problems, such as flooding, but I think they see it much more as a service delivery problem. Why is it that their houses have got such terrible roofs? And why is it that the roads have got no-- or the tracks have got no drainage? Why are there not enough toilets?

These are issues which are much more front of mind than climate change, even though some of them might be manifestations of climate change. They're not necessarily seen that way.

PHILILE MBATHA: So, climate change policies can tend to be seen or perceived as elitist by people that come from less affluent or even rural backgrounds, just because it is not clear how their considerations, and their needs, and their views are actually incorporated in big climate debates. For instance, if you think of the word, climate change, it is an English word, and it's very difficult to translate it in the 10 other languages that you find in South Africa, which are official languages.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

A lot of people that reside in rural areas in South Africa, or even in the less affluent areas in South Africa, do not speak English. They only speak their vernacular languages. So, for them, understanding the discourse of climate change will be very difficult. And the other reason why climate change debates could be considered to be elitist is because local and Indigenous knowledges have not been well integrated in climate change debates. And there are ongoing debates about the need to integrate these with Western science in all decisions and policies around the environment.

MICHAEL MEADOWS: Policy is made at the global level, but I think the local context is how people experience climate change.

PHILILE MBATHA: In 2018, the city of Cape Town experienced one of the worst droughts in over a century, but there was this wide assumption by everybody that everyone was responsible in everybody being told to save water, but there was no sensitivity around the fact that people that live in affluent areas would normally have a swimming pool and other amenities in their households that require a lot of usage of water, whereas people in informal settlements and also in townships, many people have to collect water from a river or from a communal tap. We saw the inequalities within the city at play.

Local context is very important when one thinks about either climate change mitigation or adaptation because there's usually this assumption that Global North countries and Global South countries are homogeneous, which is definitely not true. Within one country, you can still find both the Global North and the Global South.

So, for instance, even though people within the city of Cape Town can live within 20 kilometres from each other, their experiences of climate change and their abilities to recover from stresses and shocks that come from climate change are not the same, and a lot of this has to do with inequality. So, each and every context in each country, in each city, and in each local area presents a series of other nuanced issues that need to be integrated in climate change efforts.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So, yes, climate change is a matter of the environment, it's a matter of atmospheric processes, but dealing with climate change from a more holistic angle is important as well, so that we can make sure that policy responses are actually suitable for the areas that they are implemented in.