



**POLICY BRIEF 2022**

## **Untold Stories:**

Addressing Environmental Racism in Canada

*Lucero Gonzalez Ruiz*

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the *xʷməθkʷəjəm* (Musqueam), *Sḵwx̱wú7mesh* (Squamish) & *səlilwətaɣ* (Tseil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

#### GRAPHIC DESIGN

And Also Too

#### COVER ILLUSTRATION

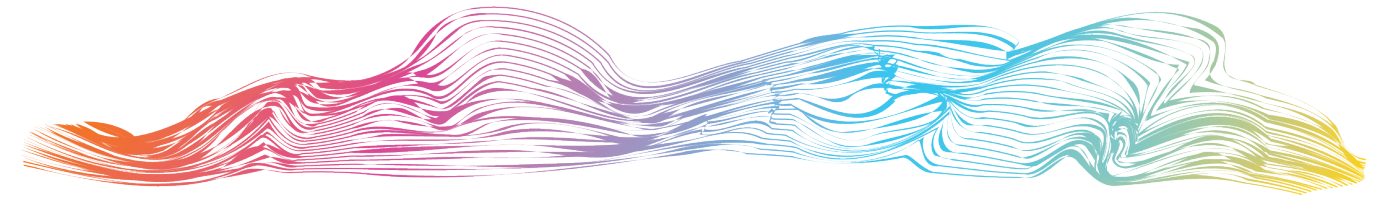
Jessica Joseph

#### HEADSHOT PHOTOGRAPHY

Mike Wells

## Contents

3	About the LEVEL Initiative
4	Biography
5	Executive Summary
8	Background
16	Recommendations
18	Conclusion
20	Bibliography
21	Acknowledgements



# About the LEVEL Initiative

LEVEL is a youth engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth populations in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

### LEVEL consists of three pillars of work to advance racial equity

1. LEVEL Youth Policy Program
2. LEVEL Youth Organizing
3. LEVEL BIPOC Granting

### About the LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP)

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized Newcomer youth are dispropor-

tionately impacted by certain public policies but are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.<sup>1</sup> As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the *həŋq 'əmin 'əŋ*-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the Halkomelem-speaking Tseil-Waututh peoples, and of the *sníchim*-speaking *Sḵwx̱wú7mesh* (Squamish) peoples.

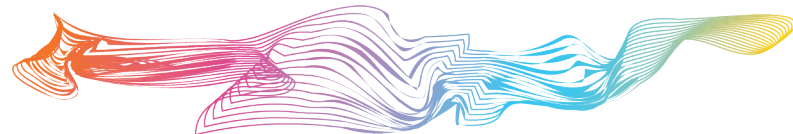
1. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>

# Biography

Lucero Gonzalez Ruiz



Lucero moved to Vancouver from Mexico City in 2015 to study Biological Sciences, Conservation, and Evolution at SFU. During that time, Lucero served as president of the Association of Latin American Students at SFU, where she raised awareness of social issues in Latin America. Lucero is passionate about climate change, as well as social and environmental justice, which are challenges that can only be solved with the inclusion of local communities. Before moving to Canada, Lucero was part of many student led social movement in Mexico City. She currently holds a position as the Biodiversity Campaigner for Georgia Strait Alliance, a local non-profit environmental organization. She hopes to combine her love for conservation biology and social justice to create a positive change in communities that are often overlooked by the western environmental movement. Lucero lives as an uninvited guest and settler in the unceded territories of the ᑕᓴ ᓴᑦ ᓂᓴ (Katzie) and q'w'a:n̓ λ'əᓃ (Kwantlen) people.



# Executive Summary

*Environmental racism has been present and harming communities for decades, however, for a long time Canada's federal government had done little to advance solutions to this problem, or even acknowledge its existence.*

Now there is a proposed federal bill that aims to understand and tackle environmental racism in Canada. However, I believe that for it to be effective and truly center on racialized communities and individuals in it, it needs to be approached from an intersectional perspective that prioritizes the healing and unique experiences of these communities and individuals.

Environmental racism, a form of systemic racism, happens when environmental policies and practices intentionally, or unintentionally result in increased harm to Indigenous, Black, or other racialized communities in the form of increased pollution, health risks, diseases, violence, substance abuse, etc.

There have been, and still are, multiple cases of environmental racism in Canada, including the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion happening in BC that has disregarded the concern of communities affected along its route, and that have publicly opposed its development. Additionally, Indigenous people across Canada still face water-boil advisories that have made their communities sick for decades, something that is unacceptable and does not happen to the rest of the country.

To truly understand and address a systemic problem such as environmental racism, we need to look at it with an intersectional lens. Environmental racism and systemic racism in general, are not one-size-fits-all types of problems. Different communities, groups, and

individuals experience the issues in different ways. For example, even though both Indigenous and Black people face racism and are victims of environmental racism in Canada, Indigenous people are targeted differently because, through colonialism, their connection to the land has been specifically used to inflict violence upon them and their territories.

Additionally, environmental racism in Canada also needs to be seen as a gender equality issue because women, girls, and intersex People of Colour are targeted not only for their race, ethnicity, or skin colour, but also for their gender. Their intersectional identities put them in greater danger of experiencing both racial violence as well as gender-based violence.

Because environmental racism endangers peoples' lives, safety, culture, and identity and puts them at greater risk of violence and discrimination, the issue is not only an environmental rights issue but a human rights one. Therefore, Canada needs to take responsibility and respect the international rights that it is violating by allowing environmental racism to happen.



***Because environmental racism endangers peoples' lives, safety, culture, and identity and puts them at greater risk of violence and discrimination, the issue is not only an environmental rights issue but a human rights one.***



**Fortunately, after years of advocacy by community groups [...] environmental racism finally made it to the agendas of the federal government.**

Now there is a proposed federal bill that aims to understand and tackle environmental racism in Canada. However, I believe that for it to be effective and truly center on racialized communities and individuals in it, it needs to be approached from an intersectional perspective that prioritizes the healing and unique experiences of these communities and individuals.

Environmental racism, a form of systemic racism, happens when environmental policies and practices intentionally, or unintentionally result in increased harm to Indigenous, Black, or other racialized communities in the form of increased pollution, health risks, diseases, violence, substance abuse, etc.

There have been, and still are, multiple cases of environmental racism in Canada, including the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion happening in BC, that has disregarded the concern of communities affected along its route, and that have publicly opposed its development. Additionally, Indigenous people across Canada still face water-boil advisories that have made their communities sick for decades, something that is unacceptable and that does not happen to the rest of the country.

To truly understand and address a systemic problem such as environmental racism, we need to look at it with an intersectional lens. Environmental racism and systemic racism

in general, are not one-size-fits-all types of problems. Different communities, groups, and individuals experience the issues in different ways. For example, even though both Indigenous and Black people face racism and are victims of environmental racism in Canada, Indigenous people are targeted differently because, through colonialism, their connection to the land has been specifically used to inflict violence upon them and their territories.

Additionally, environmental racism in Canada also needs to be seen as a gender-equality issue because women, girls, and intersex People of Colour are targeted not only for their race, ethnicity, or skin colour, but also for their gender. Their intersectional identities put them in greater danger of experiencing both racial violence as well as gender-based violence.

Because environmental racism endangers peoples' lives, safety, culture, and identity and puts them at greater risk of violence and discrimination, the issue is not only an environmental rights issue but a human rights one. Therefore, Canada needs to take responsibility and respect the international rights that it is violating by allowing environmental racism to happen.

Fortunately, after years of advocacy by community groups, such as the ENRICH project, environmental racism finally made it to the agendas of the federal government. Currently, Member of Parliament Elizabeth May is attempting to pass a federal law that will examine and eliminate environmental racism. Bill C-226, "An Act respecting the development of a national strategy to assess, prevent and address environmental racism and to advance environmental justice," focuses on requiring the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada, in consultation or cooperation with interested parties, to develop a national strategy to address environmental racism and

the harm caused by it. The Bill is a positive start to addressing environmental racism in Canada and if passed, will be a real opportunity to tackle it.

However, in order for the Bill to have a positive impact and avoid harming racialized communities, groups, and individuals in the process, it needs to take several factors into consideration.

For the purpose of this policy brief, I focus on the implementation of Section 3 (b)(iv): The collection of information and statistics relating to health outcomes in communities located in proximity to environmental hazards.

I argue that the collection, analysis, and consecutive use of data from communities, groups, and individuals affected by environmental racism, needs to take a decolonized approach and consider different factors such as:

- The proper use of disaggregated data by following and building on the recommendations from the work that several Black, Indigenous, and other racialized groups have done to advance the use of that type of data to tackle issues affecting their communities.
- Ensuring that the information and data being collected are only used for the purpose of resolving environmental racism in Canada.
- Allowing communities to tell their stories on the matter they decide will truly represent them and prioritizing this story sharing over just numbers or fixed parameters.
- Centering the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP).
- Allowing multiple and diverse definitions of "health outcomes" that will reflect the unique experiences of the surveyed peoples.

Along with other recommendations, I aim to clearly outline the need to decolonize data collection and the policy changes that are eventually made with that data in a way that centers on the healing and unique stories of communities, groups, and individuals affected by environmental racism.



**Additionally, environmental racism in Canada also needs to be seen as a gender-equality issue because women, girls, and intersex People of Colour are targeted not only for their race, ethnicity, or skin colour, but also for their gender.**

# Background

*Without unique personal stories and experiences of those affected the most by an issue, terms such as “environmental racism” are just that: academic terms that cannot be used for finding meaningful solutions rooted in healing.*

That is why, when discussing environmental racism in Canada for the next couple of pages, I need to first tell my own story, in hopes of bringing meaningful and healing solutions to this policy brief.

Flooding was not a rare sight in the little neighborhood where I grew up, “Ya se vienen las lluvias,” or “The rainy season is coming,” my mom would say. “Ojalá que el río aguante” or “We better hope the river can take it.” She was referring to “El Río de los Remedios,” a vast ecosystem-rich river that once flowed from the top of the mountains that surround Mexico City, but is now nothing more than a series of grey and black water canals that pass through middle- and lower-class neighborhoods. The river water was not treated, and the infrastructure around it was, until recently, very outdated, making it difficult for the river banks around it to hold the river in during the rainy season. Sometimes we would get lucky and the river water would not reach us but other times, we were not.

I was in elementary school when the river flooded my neighborhood worse than ever before. The water covered the entire first floor of our house, but thankfully, it stopped before reaching the second floor. My mom

and brother were in the house when the water started coming in. My sister, dad, and I were out. I was at a friend’s house in the neighborhood next to ours, not more than five minutes away by car. They were lucky. They never got flooded. The water was so high that there was no way we could make it to our place without having to swim in grey water and risking getting an infection so we stayed with our friends.

I do not quite remember how many days the flooding lasted, maybe two or three. My mom would call us every day to let us know how she and my brother were getting by. Concerned neighbors on the street to the back of our house would pass food and water to the flooded houses via cables.

After a day or two, the local government finally started pumping the water out. I was able to come home, my mom and my brother were physically healthy, but emotionally we were all crumbling. Our little dog did not make it. Our family photos were destroyed. Our house had extreme damage and we now had an extra family trauma to carry with us.

We were given a couple hundred pesos to recover some of the lost appliances and food, but we were not given real solutions that would prevent this from happening again. We knew nobody was listening to us because nobody cared, because we were living on the “wrong” side of the city.



***In Canada, environmental racism has [...] has benefited the country’s development and has been a crucial method of displacement, and attempted erasure and genocide of Indigenous and Black peoples.***

My community was only one of many others around the world that have long known the danger that comes with not being white and wealthy. Long before the term was defined in academia, we were already suffering from “environmental racism.” Black Civil Rights leader Benjamin Chavis first coined the term in 1982, defining it as “racial discrimination in environmental policy-making, the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of colour for toxic-waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding People of Colour from the leadership of the ecology movements” (MacDonald, 2022).

Environmental racism can also be characterized by other factors such as, but not limited to, a lack of political power within communities to resist or negotiate with industries that settle in their communities, disproportionate access to green spaces or environmental services, being left in the sidelines of climate mitigation strategies, and even the inability to practice cultural significant traditions due to the degradation of their local environment (Waldron, 2018).

Additionally, it is important to emphasize that environmental racism is a type of systemic racism, which means that it is embedded in institutionalized policies and practices, rather than individual actions or ways of thinking. Therefore to combat it, systems of power and decision-making need to change and not only individual actions in and around those communities.

Environmental racism also builds on other forms of oppression and social inequalities that Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities



face. Where there is environmental racism, there will also be other types of violence that need to be addressed for communities and groups to finally be free from systemic violence.

In Canada, environmental racism has not only been happening and affecting Indigenous, Black, and marginalized communities since colonization but it has benefited the country’s development and has been a crucial method of displacement, and attempted erasure and genocide of Indigenous and Black peoples in Canada (Waldron, 2018). Environmental racism is violence at its core. It is a form of state violence that has been perpetuated on the lands, bodies, traditions, spirituality, and minds of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized groups through the policy and decision-making process of a colonial government (Waldron, 2018).

From oil and gas industries that have fractured and destroyed entire ecosystems, to pipelines that are intentionally built in territories where communities have actively opposed their development, environmental racism is still happening in Canada. However, this type of systemic racism affects different groups in

***El Río de los Remedios is now nothing more than a series of grey and black water canals that pass through middle- and lower-class neighborhoods. Photo by anonymous on Wikimedia Commons.***

unique ways (Waldron, 2018). For example, while environmental racism is affecting both Black and Indigenous communities, Indigenous people have also fought for their land rights, title and sovereignty for decades and their connection to the land has strategically been targeted throughout colonization.

Here are some examples of environmental racism in Canada, taking into account that environmental racism takes many forms and this is by no means an exhaustive list:

- The construction of a third major hydroelectric dam in Peace River, BC threatens to destroy one of the few remaining ecosystems available to First Nations in the area who have also greatly opposed the project (Amnesty International, 2016).
- “Chemical Valley” is a cluster of petrochemical, petroleum, and energy facilities in and around Sarnia, Ontario. More than three dozen of these are located within a 25 km radius of the Aamjiwnaag First Nations reserve. Chemical Valley accounts for about 40% of the entire chemical industry in Canada (O’Toole & Kestler-D’Amours, 2021).
- The long history of boil-water advisories across Indigenous reserves in Canada that do not happen in white, middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. As of 2022, there are at least 27 communities across Canada that are still under that advisory (Government of Canada; Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2022).

As mentioned earlier, environmental racism is an intersectional issue that reflects multiple systems of oppression such as white supremacy, racial capitalism, neoliberalism, etc., and as such, it is not only an environmental issue but also a human rights one.

According to International Law, everyone has, “The right to live in dignity and safety and maintain and practice their identity and culture” (Amnesty International, 2016). Additionally, it outlines the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment for all (United Nations General Assembly, 2022). However, in Canadian policy there is no such thing as the right to a clean, healthy, or sustainable environment. Many universal rights have not been directly incorporated into national law and policies, which means that even though Canada has endorsed many international laws, including the outlined above, their national implementation falls into the interpretation of federal departments and agencies that have the job to respect and implement Canada’s international obligations (Amnesty International, 2016).

Environmental racism violates many international human rights, including the ones outlined above. By strategically placing harmful industries in and around Indigenous, Black, and communities of colour, the Canadian government is not only clearly violating the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, but it also endangers people’s safety and exposes them to violence and discrimination.

Additionally, environmental racism and the environmental degradation that comes with it also put at risk the ability of Indigenous people to practice and maintain their cultural traditions, such as harvesting or hunting, which further violates international human rights, including the rights of children to grow up within their cultures (Amnesty International, 2016).



**Environmental racism is an intersectional issue that reflects multiple systems of oppression such as white supremacy, racial capitalism, neoliberalism, etc., and as such, it is not only an environmental issue but also a human rights one.**

It is Canada’s responsibility to implement those basic human rights into policy and, in cases where those rights have been violated—which we clearly see in environmental racism cases around the country—ensure justice that includes the victim’s recovery and reparation of the harm caused (Amnesty International, 2026).

Additionally, even though these universal rights are meant to apply to everyone, as we have discussed above, racialized communities need special attention as they have historically been disproportionately affected by oppressive systems. Therefore, while applying universal rights, countries need to consider using different frameworks that complement those general responsibilities, such as the United Declaration of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), which outlines the minimum standards for “the survival, dignity and wellbeing” of Indigenous people globally (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). It was not until 2016 that the Government of Canada officially endorsed UNDRIP, but little work has been done since then to fully implement it into national laws and policies. However, recently passed Bill C-15, “An Act Respecting the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous People”, promises to advance on this issue.

UNDRIP outlines several rights relevant to environmental racism in Canada, however, for policies regarding environmental racism to be fully coordinated with UNDRIP, it has to be seen and used as a whole. Under UNDRIP, states and provinces are required to not only consult, cooperate, and collaborate with Indigenous people but requires the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous people for legislative or administrative decisions affecting their rights (Article 19), including those that affect their lands, territories and resources, such as developments and industries (Article 32; Amnesty International, 2016)

It is essential that when talking about and tackling environmental racism or any other type of racial oppression in unceded and treaty lands such as Canada, the government fully implements UNDRIP in any related policies and decisions.

Additionally, environmental racism is also a gender-equality issue. While we know that environmental racism fundamentally affects racialized groups, individuals within those groups experience, and are affected by, the problem differently. Gender inequality in the context of environmental racism can be seen not only in the small amount of Indigenous, Black, women, and intersex People of Colour who are involved in environmental policy-making, but in the way environmental policies do not take their unique perspectives and struggles into consideration. The intersectionality of their identities, that is, being women or intersex and also being Indigenous, Black, or a person of colour, makes them more vulnerable to both race-based violence and gender-based violence.

Several environmental justice movements have tried to give attention to this intersectional problem. Ecofeminism, for example, is a movement and philosophy that exposes the oppression of both the earth and women, and it argues that “the treatment of women in society is a likely indicator of the treatment of the earth and vice versa; and that because we live in a capitalist and patriarchal society, the oppression of women and the destruction of nature are a natural consequence” (Thomas, 2022).



**While applying universal rights, countries need to consider using different frameworks that complement those general responsibilities.**

Unfortunately, we do not need to go far to see this currently happening.

According to Amnesty International (2016), in Canada, women and girls, especially Indigenous women and girls, who live in communities near energy development projects and polluting industries face sexual, economic, and psychological gendered-based violence that they otherwise would not face in their communities without those industries.

As outlined before, environmental racism is not a new issue and neither is the fight against it. Racialized individuals have not only known about the issue for a long time, but have also fought to tackle it and draw public attention to it. However, it was not until after Lenore Zann, a former member of parliament, proposed the private members' bill: "A National Strategy to Redress Environmental Racism" Bill C-230 to the House of Commons in 2020, that environmental racism finally reached the ears of federal decision-makers. This, of course, happened after years of advocacy from community projects, including the ENRICH project, which was pivotal to the creation of that Bill. After having passed through its second reading, the Bill died on the order of paper when the snap election was called in August 2021.

Fortunately, the Bill is being reintroduced to the house by MP Elizabeth May. It is now C-226: An Act respecting the development of a national strategy to assess, prevent and address environmental racism and to advance environmental justice." In summary, the Bill focuses on requiring the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada, in consultation or cooperation with interested parties, to develop a national strategy to address environmental racism and the harm caused by it.

As part of the Bill, the Minister's strategy must include:

- (a) a study that includes
  - (i) an examination of the link between race, socio-economic status and environmental risk, and
  - (ii) information and statistics relating to the location of environmental hazards; and
- (b) measures that can be taken to advance environmental justice and assess, prevent and address environmental racism and that may include
  - (i) possible amendments to federal laws, policies, and programs,
  - (ii) the involvement of community groups in environmental policy-making,
  - (iii) compensation for individuals or communities, and
  - (iv) the collection of information and statistics relating to health outcomes in communities located in proximity to environmental hazards.

In a chat with Member of Parliament Elizabeth May, she expressed her hopes that this Bill will "remedy and respond to environmental racism with the goal of eliminating environmental racism and racism in general while healing our relationship with Mother Earth and affected communities."

This Bill is looking to center racialized and marginalized communities in addressing environmental racism; however, it is lacking much detail on how the communities will be centered and how much decision and policy making power these groups will possess in the process.

That being said, if passed, it will be a positive step towards combating and understanding environmental racism in Canada. However, for the Bill to be effective, the strategy needs to be made and implemented in a way that it will not re-traumatize and further damage Indigenous, Black, and racialized groups. It needs to be done right.

Therefore, with this policy ask, my objective is to propose some aspects of how the national strategy being proposed by the Bill needs to be implemented and what it should contain. Specifically, I will focus on **section 3 (b)(iv): The collection of information and statistics relating to health outcomes in communities located in proximity to environmental hazards.**

Section 3(b)(iv) is an important part of this Bill because it outlines the responsibility and commitment of the federal government to not only create an initial study that includes environmental racism information as outlined in section 3(a)(ii), but to continue that collection of information in the future.

However, neither section 3(b)(iv) or section 3(a)(ii) outline how the information and statistics must be collected, what the purpose of the collected information might be, and what type of information must be collected.

These questions and parameters are extremely important to take into consideration when dealing with any type of systemic problem that has been around for this long, and that has harmed racialized groups and individuals in immeasurable ways.

Since environmental racism is an intersectional problem in which individuals and groups are harmed in very specific and different ways, traditional data collection and usage can not only be harmful but also extremely ineffective.

Missing data in cases of oppression such as this one can cause a problem to look insignificant and even result in further loss and endangerment of human lives (British Columbia Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, 2020).

In their report, *Disaggregated demographic data collection in British Columbia: The grandmother perspective*, the British Columbia's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, outlines the benefits and dangers that can come with the use of disaggregated data in understanding social problems such as systemic racism.

Disaggregated data offers the opportunity to analyze social determinants for inequalities and show relationships between intersecting categories and/or identities such as gender, ethnic group, socioeconomic status, place of residency, etc. This type of data collection can also advance the use of stories and numbers to create a more holistic view of the problem. But numbers and data, without context, are meaningless (British Columbia Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, 2020).

The report also outlines the need to create meaningful relationships at the time of the data collection. Following the grandmother's perspective of using and collecting data, "We need to know because we care" (British Columbia Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, 2020), instead of a big brother mentality in which data has historically been used to control and further marginalize groups of people.



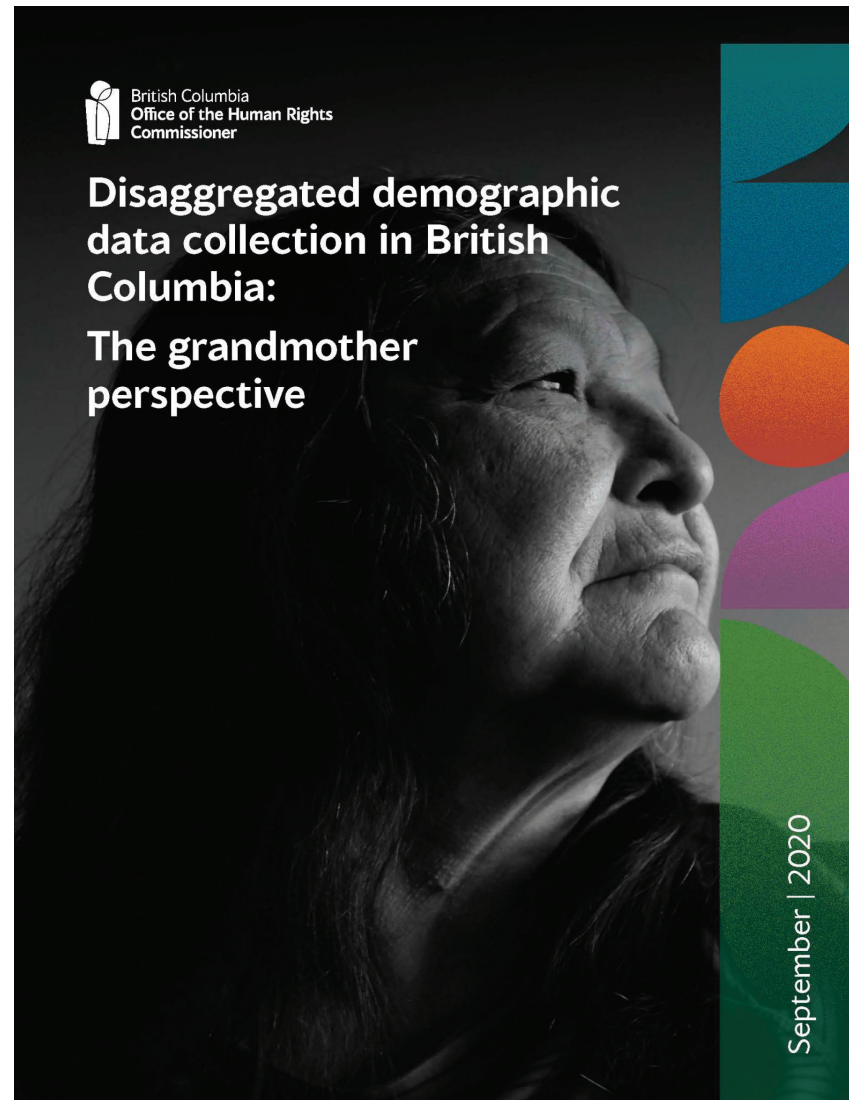
**Disaggregated data offers the opportunity to analyze social determinants for inequalities and show relationships between intersecting categories and/or identities such as gender, ethnic group, socioeconomic status, place of residency, etc.**

However, if not done right, disaggregated data, its interpretation and distribution, such as any other type of data collection, can harm, re-victimize and create harmful stereotypes about the communities, individuals or groups of people that participate in it. The interpretation of desegregated data needs to focus on looking at how the system is failing these groups, rather than the individual failures and actions. Therefore, being extremely clear on what the data collected is measuring is a crucial part of the process. The data needs to be measuring the negative impacts of historical systemic racism, environmental racism, and other intersecting systems of oppression in communities and their health (British Columbia Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, 2020).

Moreover, the purpose of data collecting needs to be clearly pre-determined and outlined, such as the purpose of addressing and preventing environmental racism. This will ensure that the focus of the data is to advance that specific issue and will also create government accountability on the specific uses of the data.

Additionally, data collected from marginalized and racialized communities needs to stay in the communities. Their knowledge, stories, and experiences are theirs, even if shared for data collecting purposes. Therefore, these groups need to have the opportunity to decide what is done with that data and how it is distributed or shared.

Data collected for addressing and preventing environmental racism also needs to be fully intersectional. As we saw before, multiple intersecting variables and identities affect the manifestation of environmental racism, such as gender, sexual identity, race, ethnicity, geographic place, power dynamics, experiences, etc. Data collection needs to display and reflect that.



Another important fact is that while data collection is an important tool to understand a problem and how to address it, communities that have been and continue to be harmed by environmental racism need immediate action. There are groups taking action right now against environmental racism and, while the federal government researches the issues, it needs to simultaneously support those initiatives in order to provide immediate relief to a problem that they know exists.

On the other hand, data collection, analysis, and interpretation also need to be followed

*Disaggregated demographic data collection in British Columbia: The grandmother perspective. Report by the British Columbia Office of the Human Rights Commissioner.*

by concrete action to dismantle that systemic oppression. Too much research with little action can lead to communities and individuals feeling drained, used, and harmed (British Columbia Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, 2020).

Lastly, it is important that with the objective of collecting data relating to health outcomes caused by environmental racism in affected communities, that the government consider what health means for each group of people and individuals they work with. Communities, individuals and groups should be given the freedom to define what health means at the individual and the community level for their specific cases.



**Since environmental racism is an intersectional problem in which individuals and groups are harmed in very specific and different ways, traditional data collection and usage can not only be harmful but also extremely ineffective.**

For example, on the individual level, Indigenous people who have been harmed by environmental racism might experience physical effects to their health such as respiratory infections or rare cases of cancer. Additionally, they might feel the effects on their spiritual and cultural health because of their traditional territory being degraded to the level of not being able to practice their spiritual ceremo-

nies or access culturally important species. On the other hand, they could add that the health of their community has also been affected due to an increase in alcohol or drug abuse as a result of settler industries on their territory, which affects the mental and cultural health of whole communities and individuals.

Going into communities with a predefined meaning of health could prove detrimental to not only the community, but to the story that researchers pretend to tell with the data and it would risk giving an incomplete story on the effects of environmental racism.

Data can tell stories, and stories should be essential to data collection and interpretation. The government needs to fully listen and care about the groups affected by environmental racism before it even starts collecting data or proposing solutions. We have been suffering and surviving environmental racism for far too long; now it is time to listen to our stories and decolonize the way policy is made by fully including affected groups in the process. Our stories have always mattered, but they have not always been listened to.



# Recommendations

*I believe that federal [Bill C-226](#) will provide a strong foundation for tackling environmental racism in Canada. However, for it to really make an impact and center racialized communities in the process, there are some important elements that need to be taken into consideration when implementing it.*

My recommendations are specific to **section 3 (b)(iv) of the Bill: The collection of information and statistics relating to health outcomes in communities located in proximity to environmental hazards.**

Nonetheless, I would also want to stress that these recommendations are also relevant when implementing **sections 3(a)(i) and (ii) of the Bill: a study that includes (i) an examination of the link between race, socio-economic status and environmental risk, and (ii) information and statistics relating to the location of environmental hazards.**

## 1 In looking and collecting information relating to health outcomes as outlined, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada, should follow an intersectional approach and decolonize the data collection process by:

- a) Building on the recommendations of Indigenous, Black, People of Colour, and racialized groups who have advanced the use of disaggregated data and have experience using it with marginalized communities; as well as using the “Disaggregated demographic data collection in British Columbia: The grandmother perspective” from British Columbia’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, and the experience gained from the recently passed Bill 24 “Anti-Racism Act” by the Province of British Columbia as a base for this data collection work.
- b) Ensuring that the information and data being collected is only used for the purpose of resolving environmental racism in Canada, and clearly explains its purpose to the communities, individuals, and groups being surveyed to increase accountability and provide individuals with the information they need to give their free, prior and informed consent for their data to be used.
- c) Ensuring that the data being collected and analyzed remains in the communities’ authorship and control by 1) getting free, prior and informed consent for the collection, analysis, and specific distribution of the data, 2) returning the analyzed data to the communities for their own interpretation and use, and 3) not distributing the data further than what individuals, communities, and groups have agreed upon.

- d) Focusing the interpretations and research questions on systems changes and failures rather than individual ones to prevent re-victimization and the creation of harmful stereotypes of communities.
- e) Focusing any data collection on the healing and recovery of affected communities and apply the grandmother’s perspective to every aspect of it: “We need to know because we care.”
- f) Centering data on individual and collective stories and decolonizing data collection by prioritizing stories over only numbers or parameters.
- g) Collecting intersectional data and defining the parameters of data points with communities because they know what affects them more, where and how. Some of these parameters might include gender, socio-economic status, gender and sexual identity, race, ethnicity, geography, etc.
- h) Following data collection by concrete action in the communities that data is taken from. Additionally, supporting initiatives that are already providing relief for racialized communities being affected by environmental racism while the Bill’s study is being completed.
- i) Allowing communities to dictate any other aspect of data collection that should be taken into consideration to best fit and represent their unique experiences and perspectives.

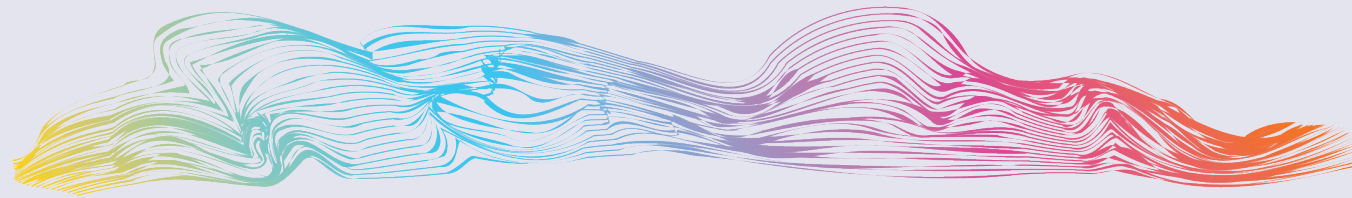
## 2 Consider different parameters and definitions of health that are important for and will benefit the specific individual, group, or community being surveyed.

These different definitions of health could include but are not limited to: physical, emotional, spiritual, social, economic, mental, cultural, community, and environmental health.

## 3 Make the implementation of this section of the Bill to be fully in coordination with the United Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous People by:

Following Article 19 by requiring the free, prior and informed consent of the Indigenous communities, individuals, and groups during the collection of information and any other administrative and policy process that is part of Bill C-226.

# Conclusion



Communities and individuals who have faced environmental racism for a long time are long overdue to be heard, acknowledged, and prioritized. Our stories have been silenced for decades, meanwhile our families and communities are getting sick and suffering from multiple types of systemic violence caused by the systems of oppression that the Canadian government has not only allowed to continue, but has benefited from.

Bill C-266 was long overdue, and so it needs to be done right. I believe that by analyzing systemic environmental racism with an intersectional lens and taking into consideration the unique perspectives and stories of the communities, groups, or individuals being surveyed, the results of any study the Bill proposes will be better formulated to specifically address environmental racism and bring forward solutions better suited to eliminating it.

Additionally, decolonizing data collection is crucial to not only holistically understand environmental racism, but at the same time, tackle other systems of oppression that make environmental racism possible, such as white supremacy and colonialism. This decolonized process will also allow the Government of Canada to advance the implementation of UNDRIP in federal laws, policies, and processes. Decolonized data collection can look like giving leadership during the process to the groups being worked with, and creating genuine relationships with the purpose of

***Our stories have been silenced for decades, meanwhile our families and communities are getting sick and suffering from multiple types of systemic violence caused by the systems of oppression that the Canadian government has not only allowed to continue, but has benefited from.***

collecting data out of genuine care for the surveyed individuals.

Moreover, decolonized data collection, for the purpose of section 3 (b)(iv) of the Bill, needs to include the analysis of different meanings of “health outcomes” that are uniquely important and relevant to the communities, individuals, or groups being surveyed. This will allow the federal government to obtain a more holistic view of how environmental racism is truly affecting marginalized people.

In general, my recommendations are motivated by concerns that data collection on racialized communities can very easily re-traumatize and create harmful stereotypes of communities, groups, or individuals that are already facing the impacts of a system that has failed and harmed them for a long time. Additionally, it is my vision that in tackling systems of oppression, our stories are listened to, and the policy change process is centered on our healing and the healing of those affected by it. Therefore, the data collection process of Bill C-226, needs

to center on racialized communities and let them co-lead the processes of data collection, analysis, and implementation.

I believe that by truly listening and translating personal experiences and stories into data, the federal government will be better suited to understand and tackle environmental racism and other systems of oppression in the country. Additionally, by implementing and properly using UNDRIP in this and any other policy process, Canada will advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in the country.

The proposal of Bill C-226 is moving Canada in the right direction by acknowledging that environmental racism exists in this country and proposing solutions for it. However, there is still a long way to go, starting with the passing of the Bill into federal law, and then the correct implementation of its proposed strategies and solutions. I hope that my policy ask will aid that process and make an impact on the communities, groups, and individuals that have been harmed by environmental racism in Canada and all over the world.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amnesty International Canada. (2016). *Out of sight, out of mind*. Retrieved August 11, 2022, from <https://www.amnesty.ca/sites/amnesty/files/Out%20of%20Sight%20Out%20of%20Mind%20EN%20FINAL%20web.pdf>

British Columbia Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. (2020, September). *Disaggregated Demographic Data Collection in British Columbia: The Grandmother Perspective*. Retrieved August 11, 2022, from [https://bchumanrights.ca/wp-content/uploads/BCOHR Sep2020\\_Disaggregated-Data-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://bchumanrights.ca/wp-content/uploads/BCOHR Sep2020_Disaggregated-Data-Report_FINAL.pdf)

Government of Canada; Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. (2022, July 22). *Ending long-term drinking water advisories*. Government of Canada; Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. Retrieved August 11, 2022, from <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/1533317130660>

MacDonald, E. (2022, May 18). *Environmental racism in Canada: What is it and what can we do about it?* Ecojustice. Retrieved August 10, 2022, from <https://ecojustice.ca/environmental-racism-in-canada/#:~:text=In%201982%2C%20Benjamin%20Chavis%2C%20a,racism%2C%20rather%20than%20individual%20racism.>

O'Toole, M., & Kestler-D'Amours, J. (2021, December 8). *Toxic legacy: The fight to end environmental racism in Canada*. The fight to end environmental racism in Canada | Climate | Al Jazeera. Retrieved August 11, 2022, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/longform/2021/12/8/toxic-legacy-the-fight-to-end-environmental-racism-in-canada>

United Nations (General Assembly). (2007). *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People*.

Thomas, L. (2022). *The intersectional environmentalist: How to dismantle systems of oppression to protect people + planet*. Souvenir Press.

Waldron, I. (2018). *There's something in the water: Environmental racism in indigenous and Black communities*. Fernwood Publishing.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

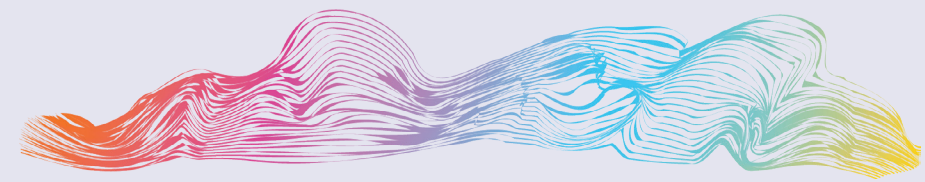
I want to acknowledge that this policy brief was written on the unceded and continuously occupied territories of the ᑭᑭᑭᑭ (Katzie) and ᑭᑭᑭᑭ (Kwantlen) First Nations. I also want to acknowledge the territories that were a part of my journey on this program, the unceded and continuously occupied territories of the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations. I thank and raise my hands to these Nations for giving me the opportunity to live, work, and play on their territories, even if I am an uninvited guest. I hope this policy ask can help to advance reconciliation and justice for Indigenous peoples across Canada and the world. As a recent immigrant to these lands, I feel it is my responsibility to be part of the solution and fight alongside Indigenous peoples here to move towards the right direction.

I also want to thank the lands that raised me and made me who I am today, Mexico City, which is the traditional territory of various Indigenous Nations, including the Otomi people, who are my Ancestors.

I also want to thank everyone that contributed and helped throughout the process of dreaming, thinking, and writing this policy brief. To my matriarchs, family, and partner, who made me who I am today and support me every step of the way with their infinite love.

To my fellow cohort participants, thank you for holding my hand and giving me hope for the future. To the Vancouver Foundation's LEVEL YPP team, thank you for believing in me and empowering me to make the change I want to see in the world. To my mentor, Eugene Kung, thank you for making this process so much easier and encouraging me to share my story. To the people who shared their knowledge, MP Elizabeth May, Milan Singh, and all of the faculty that participated in the course, thank you for giving young people the building blocks we need to keep the work going. To Elder Deb, thank you from the bottom of my heart for the wisdom, knowledge, and words of empathy you shared with me, I will honour your teachings forever. To Georgia Strait Alliance, thank you for allowing me to take this opportunity and find my voice.

To everyone else involved in my journey...  
Gracias!





*We have been suffering  
and surviving environmental racism  
for far too long; now it is time to listen  
to our stories and decolonize the  
way policy is made by fully including  
affected groups in the process.*

Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.

200-475 W. Georgia Street  
Vancouver, BC, V6B 4M9

[level@vancouverfoundation.ca](mailto:level@vancouverfoundation.ca)   [www.levelvf.ca](http://www.levelvf.ca)   604.688.2204

[f @LEVELVF](#)   [t @LEVEL\\_VF](#)   [@LEVEL\\_VF](#)



AN INITIATIVE OF

vancouver  
foundation