

Poverty, Wealth and Ecological Justice Framework Concept

*“In and with God,
we can direct our lives toward right relationship
with each other and with God.
We can discover our place as one strand in the web of life.”—A Song of Faith*

Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit Goals 2008

1. *That the United Church of Canada, in its diverse manifestations, embraces justice-making as integral to faith and mission.*
2. *Congregations, courts and ministries of the UCC engage in education, theological reflection, social analysis, advocacy and action for a more just, peaceful and sustainable world.*
3. *The United Church of Canada and its partners share gifts, human, financial and other resources, in a just and equitable way, so that all may participate in God’s mission for fullness of life.*
4. *Deepen right relationships of mutual respect and accountability with ecumenical and interfaith partners, grassroots organizations, people’s movements and ecumenical, interfaith and multi-sectoral networks.*
5. *Engage with Canadian, First Nations and global partners in public witness and advocacy, addressing systemic injustice, critical needs and care of creation, for just, equitable and sustainable communities.*

Background

The United Church of Canada has a long history of seeking a theological and ecological policy base to address social, economic and ecological injustice, through its adoption of such policies as *One Earth Community—Principles for Environment and Development* (GC34); *Energy in the One Earth Community* (GC37); *The Earth Charter* (GC38); *Water: Life Before Profit* (GC39), among many others. It has consistently worked ecumenically and globally on issues of economic justice, ecological justiceⁱ, social justice, poverty, exclusion, corporate social responsibility, debt, ecological debt, human rights, extractive industries, water and climate change and has in recent years looked at many of the impacts of human activities through the lens of empire.

In policy documents such as *Mending the World* (GC 36); *To Seek Justice and Resist Evil: Towards a Global Economy for All God’s People* (GC 37); and *Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire* (GC 39) it has articulated a holistic, ecumenical, theologically grounded vision for just and sustainable economic and social systems. Within the Reformed family it has further linked the issues of economic, social and environmental justice in the context of empire as it adopted and upholds the *Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth* (WARC 2004).

Most recently the work of The United Church of Canada is implemented in the context of the priorities articulated by the General Council Executive (2007), particularly relevant to this area

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those of: living with respect in Creation; and working for systemic justice. Increasingly, the desire to articulate a framework that is inclusive of all of these separate foci and to integrate a more fulsome meaning of “Justice” has led to the decision to focus specifically on the theme of *Poverty, Wealth and Ecological Justice (PWEJ)*.

In this time of changing priorities and diminishing resources within the church, as well as within many ecumenical partners and social movements, and having experienced budget and staffing cuts in 2007, the current JGER justice work, including the ecological justice work, has been reorganized to more intentionally rely on other courts of the church and ecumenical partners to give leadership to Canadian social justice issues, like poverty, health, housing and homelessness, and community development, particularly at local and regional levels. The national level focus has been more directed toward policy development, public witness and advocacy of national and global issues, within our understanding and prioritization of partnership. Responding to the principles of partnership affirmed in the recent *Partnership Review* (2008), we uphold the notion that we are both enriched and challenged by partners, see them as primary sources for identification and analysis of issues, and act in conjunction with shared values and concerns. In many ways our networks are us and we are our partners, and we often act on each other’s behalf.

We live together with all created life on one small planet Earth. It is becoming well-understood that what happens in one place has an effect on the whole, and that issues that seem global are felt locally in many ways. The connections among many issues, previously viewed as disparate and distinct, are better understood as many facets of an ecological whole.

The rich world’s attempt to integrate many of the same themes has been to promote and impose “globalization” as the inevitable answer. Neo-liberal economic globalization has not reduced poverty, inequality and ecological destruction. On the contrary, it has led to the destruction of the environment and widened the gap between the rich and the poor, making societies less resilient. The most vulnerable affected groups are women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities. The major challenge for the church is to relate poverty, wealth and ecology as a concrete way of analyzing, reflecting and acting against economic and ecological injustice.

The integration of the concept of Poverty, Wealth and Ecological Justice comes from the continuation of the WCC AGAPE process (*Alternative Globalization Addressing People and the Earth*), which was described as *Poverty, Wealth and Ecology: the Impact of Economic Globalizationⁱⁱ*; and was preceded by previous ecumenical and theological reflections on social ethics around the *Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* process, and the programme of *Public Witness: Addressing Power and Affirming Peaceⁱⁱⁱ*, as well as other attempts to link economic, social and environmental issues into a holistic frame.

Asking: How does wealth creation result in the scandal of poverty today?

How far does exploitation of the Earth put the poor and marginalized closer to the edge?

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How can we transform this inequality into a shared wealth?

How can we prevent increased environmental degradation and repair the ecological damage wrought by “domination”?

How can we reverse the course, and more intentionally practice environmental, economic and social justice, which together make ecological justice?

How does consumption based on materialism and greed, and solely profit-driven corporate production practices create ecological debt?^{iv} And how can ecological debt be redressed?

How can we influence institutional and government policies to move toward a more sustainable global Earth Community?

With ecumenical and global partners we have the potential to develop a new paradigm that draws together the synergies between the different positions. Bringing together partner perspectives from across Canada and around the world this PWEJ focus will be used to analyze, reflect and act together on discovering new and creative ways that global, regional and local wealth can be used to eradicate poverty. Millennium Development Goal #8, which challenges countries to increase and share resources for meeting urgent goals will be addressed, as we monitor the lack of real progress in eradicating poverty. In the context of AGAPE the relationship between poverty, wealth and ecology will join hands to work with ecumenical partners and social movements to respond to just trade, ecological debt, decent work, etc. A “consumption and greed line” alongside the “poverty line” is proposed as a guideline for Christians. And a “green line” of sustainability will be another measure.

The creation of an integrated “Sustainable Communities” focus would combine work on ecology, economic justice, and human rights, wherein none of these would be subsumed by the other, but rather that each aspect would be treated as an essential dimension of the program. Such a program focus would enable integrated, synergetic work on matters such as the current financial crisis, climate change, the food crisis, as well as Indigenous rights, migrant and refugee rights, and Canadian social development, etc. At the same time, work on specific issues (i.e. migrant rights, resource extraction, trade, debt, corporate responsibility, etc.) may not be permanent: The content of work would evolve as issues evolve and needs change. As well, regional and thematic expertise would need to be integrated within this program area.

One example of where this integrating methodology is called for would be climate change. It is well-accepted that the continued greenhouse gas emissions from human production and consumption are leading to rapid human-induced global warming, creating the impacts of climate change that increasingly affect people around the world. Violent storms, droughts, floods, melting polar ice and rising sea levels have devastating consequences especially on poor and vulnerable livelihoods and communities. Climate change also aggravates the water crisis, and increasingly the food crisis that is experienced more and more in many places, including in Canada.

This PWEJ focus holds together these concerns, thereby emphasizing the links between environmental, social, economic and political dimensions, emergencies, and development,

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global threats and local experiences, local engagement and national and international advocacy. It focuses on justice and equity, with sustainability, while implementing mitigation and adaptation measures, always connected as faith-based concerns. The principles of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” “polluter pay” and “polluter changes” underlie the consideration of the emerging concept of climate change as ecological debt. Debt to the developing world, to future generations, and to the Earth itself.

The specific contribution from this PWEJ synthesis is in defining the moral, ethical and theological imperative for the churches’ engagement on the issues like globalization, international financial architecture, climate change and water, to name a few, as these issues are matters of faith.

Vision

The UCC as part of the global ecumenical community rejoices in the goodness of God’s Creation. It has a vision of a world where the well-being of humans and all other living creatures is cherished, supported and maintained in harmonious balance; where peoples and livelihoods prosper, peace and justice flourish, and the whole Earth Community is nurtured and sustained.

“Life is a gift from God and elicits our respect, awe and reverence. We are one Earth community, one human family and we share one destiny. We cherish and respect the rich diversity of life and celebrate the beauty of the Earth. For us, as members of one family, love and caring are the basis of our relationships with one another and with nature. The Earth community is a sacred trust. We recognize God’s call to live in harmony with this total community, to draw on the Earth’s sustenance responsibly, and to care for it that all may benefit equitably now and in the future.”—One Earth Community (GC34)

Theological Framework and Values

“In grateful response to God’s abundant love, we bear in mind our integral connection to the earth and one another; we participate in God’s work of healing and mending creation...”—A Song of Faith

Increasingly it is evident that life on this small planet is interdependent and interconnected to the entire planetary environment, and that the structures which humans have created for living within the realities and limits of the Earth’s ecosystems and its carrying capacity are becoming stretched and fragile. Seeking a “new Heaven and a new Earth,” we start by understanding and humbly acknowledging our conscious and unconscious participation in the systems of global empire that create ecological degradation, disposable societies, widening gaps between rich and poor, North and South, thus creating an enormous ecological debt to the planet and future generations.

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Justice and equity must be at the heart of any sustainable economic, social or environmental system supporting Earth Community. Air, water, land and energy sources are part of the necessary environment to sustain life. An ecological perspective concerns the Earth itself as an integral part of God's wondrous Creation.

An eco-spirituality and eco-feminist theology can help us discover a theology of place, of sanctuary and of the Earth, and break the vicious grip of a belief in the prevailing paradigm of "domination," growth at all cost, and unfettered economic globalization. We can learn to move into a new way of being Earth Community in this time and Earth-place, living out God's mission as those who follow the Way, the truth and the life, being the change we wish to see. We can teach and preach and proclaim to the world that poverty, exclusion, wealth concentration, financial crises, climate change, pollution and ecological destruction are moral, ethical and spiritual issues.

We are called to actively participate as co-creators, in the project of building sustainable Earth Communities, practicing whole world ecumenism, aided by the sustaining Spirit, repairing, restoring and redeeming this fragile Earth, our island home.

Working to implement the priorities of the General Council Executive, particularly of living with respect in Creation, and working for systemic justice, this area of JGER will uphold the principles articulated, among others, in the One Earth Community^v framework policy and The Earth Charter^{vi}. The research, education and advocacy related to the integrated Poverty, Wealth and Ecological Justice (PWEJ) focus is based upon a set of global ecumenical articulated values including: *solidarity, sustainability, sufficiency, equity, justice*.

Outcomes (What will be the intended results of moving into the PWEJ Framework)

- By reading the signs of the times, interpretation and implementation of long-standing policy in the current context is begun and PWEJ becomes a known and adopted framework for work of the UCC.
- The courts of the church at all levels have undertaken actions that demonstrate a renewed commitment to the One Earth Community framework and a new Covenant for Life in Creation.
- Building on new synergies, congregations and networks are strengthened and take active leadership in creating a more equitable, just and sustainable Earth Community.
- The paradigm shift toward understanding the linkages in the integrated framework of PWEJ, and directing actions and advocacy informed by it, is well underway.
- The public is more aware of the moral and ethical implications of issues related to PWEJ and identifies and references the church's stands, interpretations and leadership on justice issues.
- Programs are created that enhance our theological and practical understanding of the concepts and the concrete opportunities that can help to enliven them.
- Educational materials with a PWEJ focus are related to the Mission Study Theme of "Sustainable Communities" and are used across our church to push for change at all levels.

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- Advocacy strategies and campaigns help to bring about government actions and legislation that reduce and eventually eliminate poverty, stimulate appropriate sustainable economy, reduce pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, support sustainable renewable energy options, increase official aid, and create a more equitable, sustainable and just society.
- New UCC policies and strategies are developed to demonstrate “living with respect in Creation.”
- More youth involvement is measurable, particularly in ecological initiatives.
- Diverse voices and perspectives, including Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, those living in poverty or with disability, the excluded, displaced and marginalized, are engaged and honoured in the formulation of policy and programs.
- The UCC promotes and contributes leadership to a stronger ecumenical and civil society voice on the urgent issues of the day.

Ways of Working

Operational modes

- This PWEJ Framework will be implemented with many different structures and partners at many different levels.
- A holistic approach will be applied to each individual issue, emphasizing connectivity to other issues and across structures.
- Policy development and analysis is carried out by staff and elected members under the auspices of the JGER Unit, with advice from the PWEJ-PDAG.
- Research, advocacy and education are done in collaboration with Conferences, Presbyteries, Community Ministries, Congregations, and individuals, and with many civil society partner organizations, by linking, resourcing, responding, mobilizing and cross-fertilizing.
- Actively seeking to determine the appropriate level for activities, staff connect with various regional, national, international, and global links, through supporting, sharing resources, partnering, participating.
- Listening to and advocating for the needs and concerns expressed around the world, we intentionally build strong partnerships in Canada and globally for engaging, supporting, and participating with, and taking our cue from, ecumenical, inter-faith, social partners, and social movements.
- Communication is a priority, as is energy consciousness, so we endeavour to use the most innovative and effective methods available: networks, electronic communication, video conferencing, website.
- Relying on local expertise and leadership throughout is a priority, with a preference for community leadership.
- Our Partnership Principles include hearing directly from those most affected by social, economic and environmental policy decisions, and ensuring their inclusion by making space for them; with an intentional focus on gender and youth, and inclusion of those living in poverty, or with disabilities, aboriginal peoples, temporary and migrant workers, refugees, including environmental refugees, those who are displaced and those on the margins.

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- Research and analysis, and policy development requires good information and quality sources, and is aided by commissioning and lifting up case studies, as well as public polling.
- Above all, we rely on sharing stories, examples, alternatives, and inspirations for all to learn from and be encouraged by through signs of hope.

Structures

- The United Church of Canada, its courts, Conferences, presbyteries, congregations, & ministries
- Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit
- Poverty, Wealth and Ecological Justice Program Development and Advisory Group (PDAG)
- Ecumenical and civil society spaces:
 - Canada – KAIROS
 - CCC Commission on Justice and Peace
 - Canadian Food Grains Bank
 - Social movements, networks and coalitions related to PWEJ (* refer to the Public Witness and Advocacy Networks chart.)
 - Climate Action Network
 - Green Communities Canada
 - Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability
 - other coalitions and social partners
 - Globally – World Council of Churches Poverty, Wealth and Ecology Reference Group
 - World Council of Churches Climate Change Working Group
 - Ecumenical Water Network
 - WARC Covenanting for Justice North America and Caribbean group
 - OIKOTREE Network
 - Global partners
 - other global social movements, coalitions and networks

Framework for Work on Poverty, Wealth and Ecological Justice

Seek to find the intersection points of connected foci and the synergies and integrative opportunities provided to further develop and enhance the understanding and articulation of the organizing concept. By using cross-cutting lenses we will draw out particular issues and priorities and create action plans to move the vision forward.

Using the thematic lens of:

- **Empire**—we ask: How to live faithfully and sustainably in the midst of empire in times of financial and ecological crises? What can we learn from members and partners who are trying to create alternatives to the economic globalization systems that dominate? How do we recognize our own complicity with empire in our activities and dealings? How can we hold up a vision and advocate for transformative change and what are those changes that we demand?

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- **Global Commons**—we explore: How to learn from the experiences of, and analyze and develop alternatives to: economic globalization; privatization of water, land, energy; preserving the atmosphere as a global commons.
- **Ecological Debt**—we will undertake work on the concept of ecological debt^{vii} and prepare the path to a global campaign in the next few years, through reflection on the WCC Draft Statement on Ecological Debt, and will draft a possible policy for GC on ecological debt.
- **Climate Change**—with the rapid onset of climate change there is need for intensified mitigation and adaptation measures. This has economic, social and environmental dimensions, and is the greatest ecological challenge we are likely to face in this period. How can we better engage our members, partners and the public on strategies and alternatives, as we move toward a greener church and a greener economy? We will advocate for the urgent need to negotiate a binding International Agreement on climate change beyond 2012, through the UNFCCC, in Copenhagen, 2009. Also advocate for domestic policy and critique Canadian and regional/provincial initiatives.
- **Energy Policy**—we will focus in particular, with KAIROS, on the complicated situation of the Oil Sands. We ask: How to better understand the challenges of articulating an ethical/moral stance on the ecologically destructive project and the unsustainable economy that many Canadians rely on for livelihoods. What is an acceptable balance?
- **Nuclear issues**, including nuclear waste—nuclear energy is being promoted as an alternative to fossil fuels, but with the risks and waste created is not a sustainable renewable energy. UCC policy is strong here, but should be discussed in the context of the challenge of climate change.
- **Indigenous Justice**—focussing particularly on Water Rights, especially downstream issues from major developments like oil sands; and Northern Issues, especially related to climate change and Arctic melting.
- **Sustainable Economy**—we search with global and ecumenical partners: How to articulate and develop policy options for just and sustainable economic strategies at a time of crisis? through such things as: development of a “Greed Line” alongside the “Poverty Line,” and also consider a “Green Line.” We call for poverty reduction strategies in Canada, in light of the Canadian Council of Churches’ Commission on Justice and Peace program on Faith and a Sustainable Economy; lobby for meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); advocate for the reform of international financial architecture, the Bretton Woods Institutions; policies on Corporate Social Responsibility and Accountability; and ethical investment. We challenge the paradigm of unbridled economic growth, as it dominates lifestyles and economic institutions, and try to articulate what a truly sustainable economy would look like.
- **Sustainable Communities**—Living with respect in Creation and adopting the *Covenant for Life in Creation* requires finding new and creative alternatives to the status quo. What can we offer as ideas and practices, both in Canada and from partners globally, to encourage the UCC and the Canadian public to create new norms for sustainable community? E.g. viable community development—integrating economic and environmental concerns; cooperative and local initiatives; addressing energy poverty; greening the church; reducing our human footprint; renewable energy sources; water and food issues.

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- **Whole World Ecumenism**—Understanding that faith moves us beyond religious structures, we reach out and develop an active interfaith movement on eco-justice issues and engage and promote opportunities like the Canadian G8 2010 Interfaith Partnership as ways to demonstrate solidarity in belief and advocacy.
- **Earth Community**—we ask: How to articulate and promote the concept of “Earth Community” more broadly, and link it to living our faith in a new understanding of being Co-creator with God?: living with respect in Creation; worship and liturgy and bible studies; innovative communication strategies; environmental assessment of CIDA co-funded partnerships; implementing *One Earth Community* and *Earth Charter* as policy and model; and others.
- **Live faithfully in the midst of empire**, with gratitude and humility.

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ **Definition of Ecology / EcoJustice** – from *oikos, oikoumene, oikonomia, oikologia*

Interconnectedness and interdependency of the whole creation. Ecology includes economic, social, and environmental factors in a wholistic framework.

Ecological Justice is that which respects, seeks to preserve, and advocates for just relationships among all living things. It concerns the future of all life upon this planet, the condition of the natural world and our human impact or footprint upon it.

Ecological sustainability implies a more wholistic way of seeing the world as inter-connected and inter-dependent, across time, where human societies are understood as not distinct and superior to the rest of nature, but part of it. Indeed, the future of generations to come, and even human survival as a species, depends on a thriving natural world.

Sustainable communities are those which support and nurture equitable relationships both within the human family and also between humans and the rest of the ecological community. They require a just and moral economy where people are empowered to participate in decisions affecting their lives, where public and private institutions are held accountable for the social and environmental consequences of their activities, and where the Earth is honoured rather than exploited or degraded.

This perspective about ecological justice is that it is the intersection, interplay and interconnectedness of economy, social issues, human rights, non-human rights, the environment, and justice broadly. (Note that the environment is a very important piece of that – but looking at the systemic wellbeing of the planet starts from a much broader perspective.)

ⁱⁱ WCC (2006), *Alternative to Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE): A Background Document*; World Council of Churches, Geneva

ⁱⁱⁱ WCC (2008), *Poverty, Wealth and Ecology: The Impact of Economic Globalization*, A Background to the Study Process, Rogate M. Mshana; World Council of Churches, Geneva

^{iv} WCC (Sept. 2008), *Ecological Debt (draft statement)*: Statement on Eco-Justice and Ecological Debt, Public Issues committee proposed to the World Council of Churches Central Committee, Geneva

^v UCC (1992) *One Earth Community: A Statement of Ethical Principles for Environment and Development*. (GC 34)

^{vi} UCC (2000), *The Earth Charter*, adopted by UCC GC38 – www.earthcharter.org

^{vii} Peralta, Athena K., (2007) –*Ecological Debt: The Peoples of the South are the Creditors (Cases from Ecuador, Mozambique, Brazil and India)*; World Council of Churches, Geneva