

## Anti-racist green practices & intersectional justice

People of colour, indigenous communities, and racialised groups are disproportionately affected by the impacts of plastic pollution and production. While these communities have long fought for solutions, they have been denied access to decision-making processes in green spaces. This paper zooms in on some of the intersections between plastic pollution, race, and class as a summary of key reflections raised during a forum organised by the [Break Free From Plastic](#) movement.

### **BLACK, INDIGENOUS, AND PEOPLE OF COLOUR ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED BY PLASTIC POLLUTION**

As a result of historic and ongoing systemic discrimination, communities of colour are more likely to live near landfills, waste incinerators, or plastic manufacturing facilities. This increases their exposure to the harmful effects of plastic pollution and production. Chronic exposure to toxins and pollutants released during waste management processes and the production of plastic can lead to many adverse health effects. Furthermore, as alternatives to single-use plastics may be more expensive, marginalised communities might be less likely to have access to them.

### **THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS, AND CAPITALISM AS A ROOT CAUSE OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE**

It is important to acknowledge the role that class plays in environmental racism. Racialised groups, particularly Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour (BIPOC), have been facing centuries of systemic discrimination, oppression, and exploitation, limiting their access to resources, opportunities, and wealth accumulation. Within environmental spaces, there are some pervasive, problematic narratives linking pollution and climate issues with the lifestyles of low-income communities.

Environmental movements need to acknowledge capitalism as the root cause of the triple planetary crisis as well as a perpetuator of racism and discrimination. The relentless extraction of natural resources, and the exploitation of labour fuels overproduction and overconsumption inherent in capitalist systems, and leads to environmental degradation and pollution. A class-informed lens is needed to address intersecting inequalities and to avoid a disconnect between rhetoric and reality. Intersectional justice involves centering marginalised voices, addressing historical injustices, and advocating for reparations, access to land, knowledge, and resources.



## THE CHALLENGES OF ENTERING WHITE-DOMINATED 'GREEN SPACES' AS A PERSON OF COLOUR

Even though environmental spaces often see themselves as inclusive to all, the reality is that too often they are not welcoming spaces for non-white people. BIPOC, who have tried to access these spaces in the past, report that their experiences were not taken seriously or that they felt excluded from the group. Many environmental spaces are dominated by white, middle or upper-class individuals, which influences the types of problems and solutions they focus on. Despite increased debates on race and climate, white people are often content with existing solutions that centre around their experiences, leading to the exclusion of marginalised voices.


## QUESTIONING THE POWER DYNAMICS

Hierarchies and priorities in environmental activism reflect the perspectives of those in power, perpetuating dominant narratives and marginalising issues of discrimination and racism. This may be due to a lack of awareness in some cases, but in other cases, it can be because white people are content with how things are as the solutions work for them. There is a lack of responsibility taken on by white, upper-middle-class people to approach the subject of environmental justice and race. Narratives are set through this hierarchy and influence how we see and understand the climate crisis and solutions.

Within environmental groups, issues linked to discrimination or racism are sometimes dismissed as low priority in the face of climate change. However, these issues are deeply intertwined and by focusing only on the environmental aspect, we look at the symptoms rather than the root causes. By placing hierarchies between environmental issues, gender, race, and class, there is a risk of reproducing the same issue repeatedly. This is why it is necessary to apply an intersectional lens from the outset.

## THE INTERSECTIONAL LENS, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN GREEN GROUPS

Intersectionality is not something to be achieved, but a lens through which conversations should be viewed from the outset. This can be done in numerous ways. It is important to consult and amplify intersectional content, meaning content produced by groups of colour. A key step towards a more intersectional lens is to create an inclusive space, in which people of colour feel welcome and are represented. This diverse composition of groups will naturally lead to a situation where the needs of non-white people are recognised and centred. However, it is very important to avoid tokenism by making sure people have power and control when involved in the conversation, in order to reach meaningful inclusion and to address systems of oppression.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF CENTERING MARGINALISED VOICES

Intersectional justice should start with conversations around reparations. It should be informed by people who are/were exploited by our systems. Initiatives like "Land In Our Name" demonstrate the potential for sharing resources and space to empower marginalised communities. Marginalised voices should be centred in the decision-making processes in environmental movements, particularly on policy and strategy development.

Within green spaces, it is important that group members reflect on their own privilege(s). Privilege should be leveraged to share resources, space, and opportunities with marginalised communities. Privilege also means having options and, when it is possible, those with privilege should consider "passing the mic" to historically disadvantaged groups. Handing over decision-making power to marginalised communities is a radical yet necessary step toward addressing systemic inequalities.

This paper is a summary of key messages and reflections shared by speakers at Break Free From Plastic Europe's Intersectionality Forum on Anti-racist Green practices & intersectional justice in December 2021, whom we thank for their contributions, namely:

Sarah Diedro Jordao, Communications strategist and DE&I consultant (Host)

Stéphanie Ngalula, decolonial & anti-racist activist

Francine Beya, circular economy practitioner and social justice activist

### **Additional resources**

[Decolonise the garden](#)

[A Growing Culture -](#)

[Land in Our Name \(UK\) - more than 90% of land in the UK not open to the public](#)

[Pollution is Colonialism](#)

[Alternative gardening: La newsletter Radicle](#)

[Instagram account @DecoloniseTheGarden](#)

[Instagram account @agrowingculture](#)