

Climate Justice and Built Environment in Europe

By Emilia Oscilowicz, Lisa Hannuschke, Melissa Garcia-Lamarca, Isabelle Anguelovski, Amilia Calderon-Argelich, and James J.T. Connolly

Purpose

This report, developed through a partnership between the Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance (CNCA) and the Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability (BCNUEJ), is designed to help local governments, civic organizations, and community partners better understand how **structural inequalities** shape climate outcomes in European cities.



The report has three main goals:

- To explain how long-standing systems of inequality — operating at national, regional, and city levels — continue to shape housing, infrastructure, public space, and access to resources in ways that disadvantage certain groups.
- To show how these inequalities are experienced in everyday life in European cities, with a particular focus on Barcelona (Spain), Glasgow (UK), and Nantes (France), and to highlight how local governments and community organizations are responding.
- To provide practical tools and approaches that can help municipalities align climate action with social justice.

At its core, the report argues that climate policy cannot succeed unless it addresses the underlying inequalities that make some communities more vulnerable than others. Building climate-resilient cities requires not only environmental action to address climate impacts, but also fair access to housing, transportation, public services, and decision-making.

Ultimately, this report aims to provide a framework that connects structural analysis with actionable pathways that enable CNCA cities and their partners to dismantle systemic barriers and advance climate justice for all urban residents.

What Are Structural Inequalities?

Structural inequalities are the long-term social, economic, legal, and spatial systems that advantage some groups while excluding or disadvantaging others. These inequalities are reinforced through institutions, housing markets, uneven urban development, and unequal access to environmental and economic resources.

In Europe, these patterns are shaped by several historical and political forces, including colonialism, migration policies, welfare state restructuring, and decades of market-oriented urban development. Together, these factors influence who is most exposed to climate risks, who has access to safe and affordable housing, who benefits from urban investment, and who is pushed to the margins of cities due to climate change or to climate action.

Climate change does not affect all residents equally. Heat waves, flooding, poor air quality, and rising energy costs often have the greatest impact on people already facing economic or social disadvantage. At the same time, climate policies themselves can unintentionally deepen inequality if they increase housing costs, displace vulnerable communities, or prioritize already affluent areas.

Although many European countries are often seen as having strong welfare systems and public infrastructure, important forms of exclusion and insecurity persist within cities. Housing insecurity, energy poverty, limited access to social benefits, and unequal exposure to environmental risks continue to affect migrants, racialized communities, low-income households, and other marginalized groups.

Over recent decades, deregulation, privatization, austerity policies, restrictive immigration statutes, and the financialization of urban development have weakened many public protections and determined unequal access to housing and welfare support, creating layered forms of vulnerability that disproportionately affect marginalized residents.

How Was This Report Developed?

With support from CNCA, the report was developed through a multi-method research process led by BCNUEJ in collaboration with practitioners from Barcelona, Glasgow, and Nantes. The research combines:

- Reviews of national housing and planning policies;
- Academic and scientific literature on structural inequality and urban climate justice in Europe;
- Semi-structured interviews with residents, community leaders, municipal staff, and practitioners in 2019-2020 and 2025

This combination of policy analysis and lived experience allows the report to connect broader structural trends with the everyday realities facing residents in different cities.

Key Findings: Structural Inequalities in Three Cities

Barcelona

Overall, Barcelona has undergone major urban transformation over the last several decades, especially following the 2008 financial crisis. Investment, tourism, and redevelopment have reshaped the city, but the benefits have not been shared equally. Many low-income and marginalized residents remain excluded from the gains associated with green and climate-resilient urban development.

Housing Inequalities

Barcelona's housing market is highly speculative, and only a small share of housing is socially protected. Tenants — especially migrants and racialized residents — often face discrimination, rising rents, and “renovictions,” where tenants are displaced through building renovations or redevelopment. Increasing tourism and the growing attractiveness of greener neighborhoods have added new pressure to the housing market. In response, tenant unions and housing activists have mobilized to challenge evictions and abusive rental practices.

Environmental and Climate Inequalities

Working-class neighborhoods, both in central districts such as Raval and peripheral areas such as La Prosperitat, are particularly vulnerable to extreme heat due to dense housing, poor ventilation, and limited access to green public space. While Barcelona has invested in climate and greening initiatives, some of these projects have also increased the risk of “green gentrification,” where environmental improvements contribute to rising costs and displacement.

Economic Inequalities

Barcelona's economy is increasingly polarized and heavily dependent on tourism and service-sector work. Many of these jobs offer limited labor protections, involve higher exposure to environmental conditions, and require expensive commutes. Migrants and workers in seasonal or construction jobs are especially unlikely to benefit from green economic development.

Glasgow

Overall, Glasgow's transition following decades of industrial decline has created both opportunities and new forms of inequality. Regeneration strategies aimed at attracting tourism, creative industries, and higher-income residents have often concentrated investment in already advantaged areas, while many communities continue to face deep economic and social challenges.

Housing Inequalities

Housing privatization policies, including right-to-buy and the 2002 housing stock transfer, significantly reduced public housing capacity. At the same time, new housing development has not adequately met social needs or affordability goals. Rising rents and housing insecurity have led tenant unions and advocacy groups to push for stronger tenant protections.

Environmental and Climate Inequalities

Working-class residents, migrants, and refugees continue to experience fuel poverty, poor housing quality, and related health impacts. Climate and sustainability projects are often concentrated in areas already considered attractive for investment, while vulnerable communities remain exposed to environmental burdens.

Economic Inequalities

Glasgow continues to experience the long-term effects of deindustrialization, including unemployment, low-quality jobs, and widening economic inequality. Since the early 2000s, the city's regeneration strategy has increasingly connected culture-led redevelopment with green transition goals, particularly following the COP26 climate summit in 2021. However, the benefits of these initiatives have not been evenly distributed.

Nantes

Overall, Nantes has pursued an ambitious strategy focused on urban livability, public transportation, greening, and post-industrial redevelopment. Compared to the other case-study cities, its stronger commitment to social housing has helped protect lower-income residents. However, these protections are increasingly under pressure due to wider national housing challenges.

Housing Inequalities

Nantes benefits from a long-standing tradition of social housing provision, which has helped shield many residents from severe housing insecurity. However, urban renewal policies, social-mixing strategies, and national budget cuts threaten to slow new social housing production and displace lower-income residents, in turn affecting social cohesion and sense of community.

Environmental and Climate Inequalities

Significant public investment in transportation and green spaces has improved access to environmental amenities across the city. Nevertheless, some green development projects remain oriented toward leisure and middle-income users, creating the risk that working-class and racialized communities — particularly Roma residents — may continue to face exclusion.

Key Cross-Cutting Themes

1. Housing Is the Central Driver of Social and Climate Inequality

Across all three cities, housing emerged as the foundation of broader social and climate inequality. Housing affordability, quality, location, and climate resilience shape access to employment, transportation, services, and environmental safety. Secure and affordable housing is therefore essential to building climate resilience.

2. Deregulation and Uneven Urban Development Deepen Vulnerability

Decades of privatization, deregulation, and reduced public investment have weakened many systems designed to protect residents, including public housing, transit, social services, and municipal workforces. Interviewees across all three cities emphasized that even well-intentioned climate and social policies are often undermined by market pressures and policy loopholes that prevent vulnerable populations from fully benefiting.

3. Historically Marginalized Communities Are Frequently Left Behind

Low-income residents, migrants, women, disabled people, and racialized communities continue to face barriers to affordable housing, economic opportunity, political participation, and climate protection. Their needs are often overlooked in planning and policymaking processes, while their ability to influence decision-making remains limited.

4. Access to Green Space and Public Transportation Remains Unequal

Although all three cities have invested in greener infrastructure and more sustainable transportation, access remains uneven. Working-class communities, migrants, disabled residents, and women or non-binary people often face greater mobility barriers and reduced access to parks, transit, and other public amenities. Climate-friendly transportation systems can also unintentionally exclude residents whose commutes are shaped by caregiving responsibilities, disability, spatial isolation, or housing affordability.

Policy Directions and Recommendations

Climate Justice Tools and Strategies

Recommended actions include:

- Designing energy-efficiency and retrofit programs that are accessible to both renters and homeowners and do not displace low-income residents;
- Creating outreach and educational campaigns about climate action that reach and benefit marginalized communities;

- Involving migrants, youth, caregivers, and other underrepresented groups in climate adaptation and green infrastructure planning; and
- Expanding participatory planning processes so residents can shape local climate policies.

Housing-Focused Climate Action

The report also recommends:

- Supporting partnerships between housing cooperatives and ethical cooperative banks to finance non-profit housing development and renovation;
- Expanding tenant protections and rent stabilization policies to reduce displacement pressures;
- Strengthening public, mixed and social housing systems in ways that address the defunding of those programs and that simplify financing and administrative process; and
- Ensuring climate-related housing improvements do not increase exclusion or housing insecurity.

Building a More Inclusive Urban Economy

Recommendations include:

- Reclaiming municipal control over public transportation through franchising or public ownership models;
- Supporting civic networks, unions, and community organizations working across housing, transportation, energy, and labor issues; and
- Ensuring that green economic development creates secure, accessible, and fairly paid jobs.

In short, the report concludes that climate action and social justice must be addressed together. European cities cannot become truly climate resilient if existing inequalities continue to shape who benefits from investment, who faces environmental risks, and who is excluded from urban transformation.

[Download the full report](#)



CNCA
CARBON NEUTRAL CITIES ALLIANCE

BCNUEJ

Barcelona
Laboratory for Urban
Environmental Justice
and Sustainability