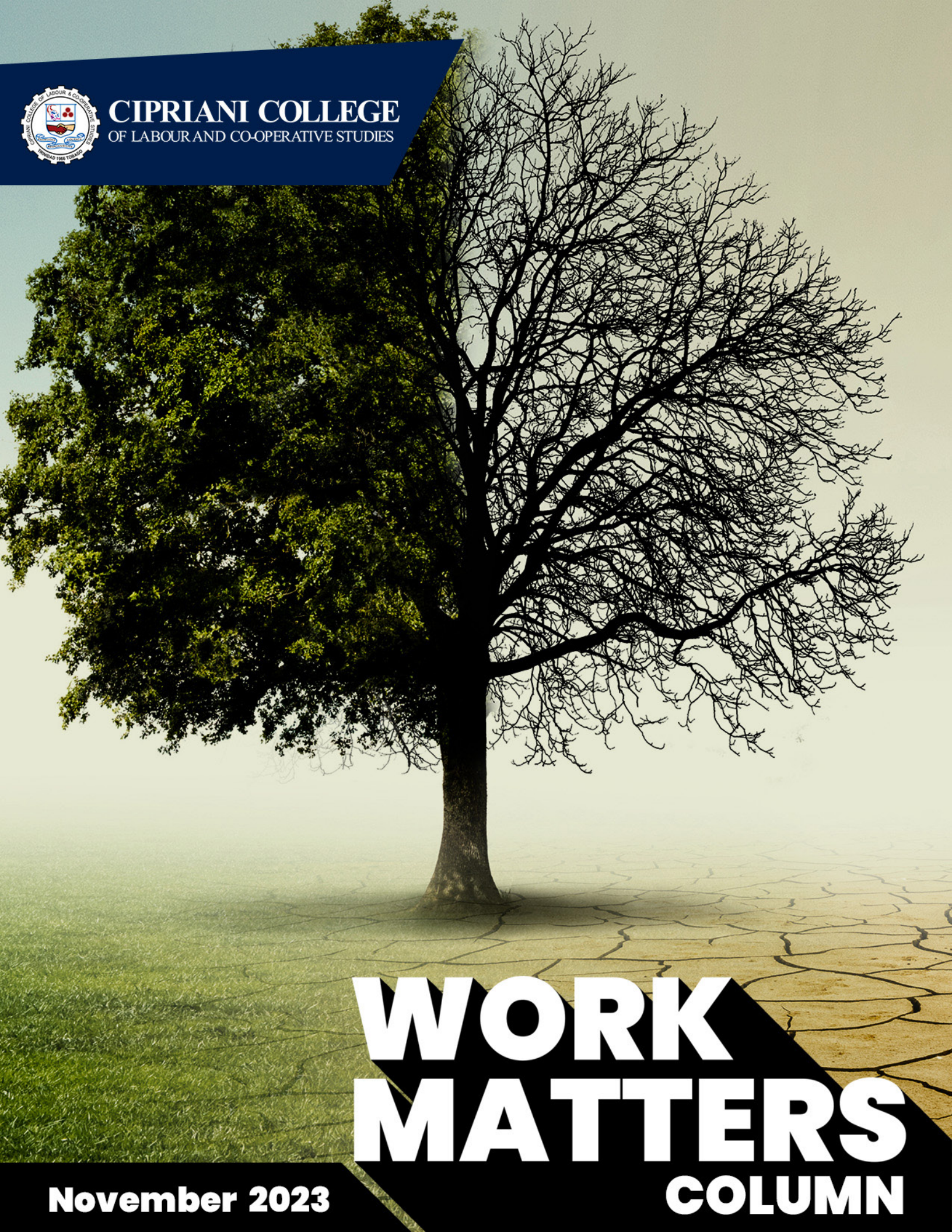




CIPRIANI COLLEGE
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The Relationship Between Climate Change Heat Events and Socio-economic Status

It is important for us in Trinidad and Tobago to ‘wake up and smell the coffee’. There are many tragedies which force us to realize that the natural and social environments impact health and are doing so with increasing frequency and severity. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated global deaths at 160,000 people every year due to illnesses induced by global warming, and we need to be cognizant that this figure is predicted to rise in the future.

Gone are the days when we experience two seasons: wet and dry. Temperatures may have been rising over the last few decades, but we never paid heed to the writing on the wall. The consequences of temperature rises are forecasted to increase in severity as the temperature warms on our planet. I am not a soothsayer but I have a gut feeling there is a symbiotic relationship between climate change and air pollution illnesses, temperature-related illnesses, vector-borne diseases, water-borne and food-borne diseases. These changes have been gradual in some cases but have been argued to be abrupt in some cases and account for catastrophes and public health problems which affect all peoples of the planet.

With an increase in global warming, we are for the first time experiencing extreme heat events which are forecasted to increase in the future. Heat events affect groups differently based on their race, gender, age, medical and socioeconomic status, and the last few years have highlighted this fact as many nations, unprepared for the heat waves have suffered the inevitable consequence. Some working-class communities are more impacted by heat events than those who can mitigate the effects. They often lack air conditioning at home or access to cooling facilities in their communities. Commentators seem to suggest that many of the poor increasingly migrate to government housing communities in the newly created urban areas where they have little or no access to green spaces.

Unfortunately, the elderly in these working-class communities are particularly vulnerable to temperature rises and global warming, in addition to other social and man-made phenomena. Due to their lack of sophistication, current information, and high levels of social isolation, they tend to lack social networks and the ability to gauge how hot they are so that they can prevent illnesses. Some studies have shown that elderly women have worse outcomes than elderly males, and the reasons are varied. This raises the question of health inequalities which occur when working-class people are disproportionately

impacted by a particular disease or illness, often because they are poor, and have less access to health care, or are subject to climate changes for which they are ill-prepared.

Heat events impact working-class people in urban areas more than other groups and environmental justice groups have raised a public outcry about the health impact of climate change. Climate Justice Declaration brings together principles from environmental justice and climate activism to emphasize how climate change would result in adverse health outcomes. Heat is the leading cause of weather-related mortality in the world and is a hazard with which much of the population has direct experience. Research suggests that individuals in areas of greater social vulnerability more often perceive heat events as health risks, holding constant political attitudes and beliefs about climate change. Heat is a health hazard that is expected to increase in frequency and intensity as the climate continues to warm.

In Trinidad and Tobago we are being warned about water shortages based on the lack of rainfall being trapped in our catchment areas (dams) as well as our ‘unpreparedness’ for this gradual and constant increase in heat. While the temperature rises affect us as human beings, it also affects our natural environment on which we depend for survival and food. The plants are confused by the changing environment, and we notice that they bear fruit inconsistently, and erratically, thus affecting our ability to plan for our crops, and ultimately, for our food security.

We are faced today with persistent challenges, to identify the effects that physical changes are having on the weather, flora and fauna, pollution, and geographically based social vulnerability is having on their cognitions and perceptions of climate change and its consequences.

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