

# **Pan-Africanism and Climate Justice: Achieving Integrated Environmental Governance for Sustainability**

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**Kariuki Muigua**

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## **Pan-Africanism and Climate Justice: Achieving Integrated Environmental Governance for Sustainability**

**Kariuki Muigua\***

### **Abstract**

*This paper critically examines how the ideal of climate justice can be attained in Africa. It argues that fostering climate justice in Africa is an urgent and necessary ideal in light of the disproportionate impacts of climate change on people and communities in the continent. The paper discusses how climate change adversely affects Africa. Consequently, it argues that sound climate action in Africa is vital in the quest for Sustainable Development. The paper examines how climate justice can be achieved in Africa through the lens of Pan-Africanism towards strengthening environmental governance for sustainability.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

The concept of climate justice recognises the disproportionate impacts and inequalities caused by the climate crisis. For example, it has been observed that the poor, marginalized and disadvantaged populations including indigenous peoples, local communities, women and girls and the youth are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change such as extreme flooding, severe droughts, warmer temperatures, rising sea levels, declining biodiversity and resource scarcity<sup>1</sup>. Further, due to geographic and economic vulnerability, people and communities in the Global South are extremely vulnerable to climate change and its impacts<sup>2</sup>. Climate change therefore causes injustices since it has adverse impacts on vulnerable groups and communities including women, the youth, the elderly, people of colour, persons with disabilities and people developing

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<sup>1</sup> Climate Justice Global Alliance., Available at <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/climate-justice-global-alliance> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>2</sup> Giles. M., 'The Principles of Climate Justice at CoP27.' Available at <https://earth.org/principles-of-climate-justice/#:~:text=That%20response%20should%20be%20based,the%20consequences%20of%20climate%20change> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

countries<sup>3</sup>. As a result, it has been argued that effective climate action involves addressing the disproportionate impacts of climate change for justice, equity and human rights<sup>4</sup>.

Climate justice is an idea that acknowledges that although climate change is a global crisis, its effects are not evenly felt around the world<sup>5</sup>. It has been argued that by recognising the disproportionate impacts of climate change, the concept of climate justice seeks solutions that address the root causes of climate change and in doing so, simultaneously address a broad range of social, racial, and environmental injustices caused by the climate crisis<sup>6</sup>. Climate justice involves addressing structural inequalities, socioeconomic inequalities and intergenerational inequities caused by climate change<sup>7</sup>. It entails fostering equity, fairness, justice and human rights for effective climate action for the benefit of present and future generations<sup>8</sup>.

Securing climate justice is particularly important for Africa. Despite having contributed the least to climate change, Africa stands out unfairly as the most vulnerable region in the world to climate change and its impacts<sup>9</sup>. Fostering climate justice in Africa is

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<sup>3</sup> Center for Climate Justice., 'What is Climate Justice?' Available at <https://centerclimatejustice.universityofcalifornia.edu/what-is-climate-justice/> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> What is Climate Justice?., Available at [https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/what-climate-justice/?gad\\_source=1&gad\\_campaignid=13050085427&gbraid=0AAAAADm6LOBCAWyvG1rV8P9t7a-3ITtgC&gclid=Cj0KCQiAo4TKBhDRARIsAGW29beo0CN5gLtHcdqr42LaywMKxO5VVBWiMDiOOaj-Bj3eLN4oXC55Ah0aAkN1EALw\\_wcB](https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/what-climate-justice/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=13050085427&gbraid=0AAAAADm6LOBCAWyvG1rV8P9t7a-3ITtgC&gclid=Cj0KCQiAo4TKBhDRARIsAGW29beo0CN5gLtHcdqr42LaywMKxO5VVBWiMDiOOaj-Bj3eLN4oXC55Ah0aAkN1EALw_wcB) (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>6</sup> Center for Climate Justice., 'What is Climate Justice?' Available at <https://centerclimatejustice.universityofcalifornia.edu/what-is-climate-justice/> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Development Programme., 'Climate change is a matter of justice – here's why' Available at <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/climate-change-matter-justice-heres-why> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Responding to Climate Change' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/regional-initiatives/responding-climate-change> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

therefore key in protecting vulnerable people and communities for equity, fairness and human rights<sup>10</sup>.

This paper critically examines how the ideal of climate justice can be attained in Africa. It argues that fostering climate justice in Africa is an urgent and necessary ideal in light of the disproportionate impacts of climate change on people and communities in the continent. The paper discusses how climate change adversely affects Africa. Consequently, it argues that sound climate action in Africa is vital in the quest for Sustainable Development. The paper examines how climate justice can be achieved in Africa through the lens of Pan-Africanism towards strengthening environmental governance for sustainability.

## **2.0 The Need for Climate Justice in Africa**

It has been argued that achieving climate justice is a pertinent ideal in Africa towards addressing the continent's disproportionate impacts from climate change<sup>11</sup>. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) observes that despite Africa's negligible contribution to the climate crisis, it stands out unfairly as the most vulnerable region in the world to climate change and its impacts<sup>12</sup>. When compared to other continents, Africa has the lowest amount of greenhouse gas emissions responsible for climate change, yet it remains the most affected continent by adverse climatic events<sup>13</sup>. The United Nations notes that Africa is not a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions since the continent accounts for only 2–3 per cent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions from energy and industrial sources<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Reframing climate Justice for Africa's future., Available at <https://acts-net.org/reframing-climate-justice-for-africas-future/#:~:text=Africa's%20climate%20justice%20fight%20must,just%2C%20climate%2Dresilient%20future.> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Responding to Climate Change' Op Cit

<sup>13</sup> African Development Bank Group., 'Climate Change in Africa' Available at <https://www.afdb.org/en/cop25/climate-change-africa> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Climate Change., 'Africa is particularly vulnerable to the expected impacts of global warming' Available at

Despite having contributed least to the climate crisis, Africa is facing numerous and worsening adverse climatic events which affect the continent's development agenda. For example, it has been observed that climate change related weather events and patterns including rising temperatures, droughts and floods are worsening in Africa with severe consequences for the continent's population especially the vulnerable<sup>15</sup>. These events have adverse impacts on food security, water availability, energy, education, infrastructure and public health<sup>16</sup>. They also fuel humanitarian crises including displacement of populations and the growth of climate refugees threatening peace and security in Africa<sup>17</sup>. Climate change also has adverse environmental impacts in Africa including desertification, biodiversity loss and changes in natural ecosystems<sup>18</sup>.

Climate change is therefore a major threat to Sustainable Development in Africa. Climate change affects Africa's infrastructure investments, water and food systems, public health, agriculture, environment and livelihoods undermining the continent's development efforts<sup>19</sup>. In light of the foregoing, securing climate justice is vital for Africa's development. Fostering climate justice in Africa is necessary since Sustainable Development cannot be realised in the continent without addressing the impacts of climate change on food security, livelihoods, water resources, conflicts and disease patterns, all of which have particular impact on the poor and vulnerable<sup>20</sup>. Climate change causes environmental injustices in Africa with its extreme impacts including drought, water scarcity, food insecurity, severe flooding and resource depletion

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[https://unfccc.int/files/press/backgrounders/application/pdf/factsheet\\_africa.pdf](https://unfccc.int/files/press/backgrounders/application/pdf/factsheet_africa.pdf) (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> World Meteorological Organization., 'Africa faces disproportionate burden from climate change and adaptation costs' Available at <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/africa-faces-disproportionate-burden-from-climate-change-and-adaptation-costs> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Climate Change., 'Africa is particularly vulnerable to the expected impacts of global warming' Op Cit

<sup>19</sup> African Development Bank Group., 'Climate Change in Africa' Op Cit

<sup>20</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations., 'Climate change impacts, adaptation and links to sustainable development in Africa' Available at <https://www.fao.org/4/i0670e/i0670e03.htm> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

disproportionately affecting the poor and vulnerable populations including indigenous peoples, women and local communities despite the continent's negligible contribution to the climate crisis<sup>21</sup>.

Climate change raises several forms of injustices in Africa. For example, it has been argued that climate change fuels *procedural injustices* in Africa since African countries and vulnerable communities continue to be sidelined in global climate governance and decision-making processes<sup>22</sup>. Further, climate change raises *distributive injustices* since climate finance do not flow fairly and equitably to affected populations in the continent who need it the most<sup>23</sup>. In addition, there are *retributive injustices* flowing from climate change with big polluters in the Global North evading responsibility while foreign Multinational Corporations (MNCs) continue to worsen climate change and environmental degradation in Africa without accountability<sup>24</sup>.

Due to climate change vulnerable people and communities in Africa are losing their homes, harvests, livelihoods, histories, and lives<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand, corporations and governments in the Global North continue to profit from polluting industries with the poor and vulnerable in the Global South left to bear the costs<sup>26</sup>. In light of the foregoing, achieving climate justice is key for Africa's development.

### **3.0 Achieving Integrated Environmental Governance in Africa through Pan-Africanism for Climate Justice**

The adverse impacts of climate change are undermining the quest for sustainability in Africa. It has been argued that climate change represents a major challenge in the pursuit

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<sup>21</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Responding to Climate Change' Op Cit

<sup>22</sup> Reframing climate Justice for Africa's future., Op Cit

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Climate Justice and Reparations., Available at <https://www.afalab.org/research-and-impact/our-programs/climate-justice-and-reparations-1/#:~:text=Climate%20change%2C%20fueled%20by%20a,%2C%20debt%20traps%2C%20and%20greenwashing.> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

of Sustainable Development in Africa<sup>27</sup>. The extreme impacts of climate change are affecting every aspect of socioeconomic development in Africa by worsening food insecurity, hunger, water scarcity, infrastructural damage, insecurity and displacement of populations<sup>28</sup>. Further, climate change impacts the environment through sea-level rise, destruction and degradation of ecosystems, biodiversity loss, land degradation and desertification<sup>29</sup>. Fostering climate justice in Africa is therefore important in protecting the poor and vulnerable populations including women, the youth, indigenous peoples and local communities who are adversely impacted by the climate crisis<sup>30</sup>. It also involves fostering sound environmental governance in order to protect natural resources and critical ecosystems that are vital for the well-being of vulnerable populations. For example, it has been argued that the impacts of climate change such as biodiversity loss, water scarcity and degradation and depletion of natural resources such as forests adversely impact rural women, local communities and indigenous peoples who depend on healthy ecosystems for their livelihoods<sup>31</sup>.

Strengthening environmental governance in Africa is therefore necessary in achieving climate justice for sustainability. For example, through the meaningful involvement of rural women, indigenous peoples and local communities in environmental decision-making processes, it is possible to harness indigenous and local knowledge for sound environmental governance<sup>32</sup>. This can ensure effective protection of natural resources and ecosystems such as water, land and forests thus supporting livelihoods while ensuring the resilience of ecosystems to climate change<sup>33</sup>. It has been observed that

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<sup>27</sup> African Development Bank Group., 'Climate Change in Africa' Op Cit

<sup>28</sup> United Nations., 'Climate change takes increasingly extreme toll on African countries' Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/05/1163126> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>29</sup> United Nations Climate Change., 'Africa is particularly vulnerable to the expected impacts of global warming' Op Cit

<sup>30</sup> Reframing climate Justice for Africa's future., Op Cit

<sup>31</sup> United Nations., 'Why women are key to climate action' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/women> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

indigenous peoples and local communities in Africa and all over the world have utilised their knowledge and practices to protect key ecosystems that act as carbon sinks while also conserving biodiversity<sup>34</sup>. Putting them at the core of decision-making processes is therefore important in strengthening environmental governance while also fostering climate justice<sup>35</sup>.

Embracing the lens of Pan-Africanism can foster climate justice and sound environmental governance in Africa for sustainability. The concept of Pan Africanism seeks to advocate for the rights and freedoms of people of African descent globally<sup>36</sup>. It acknowledges the inequalities that Africans and people of African descent face in economic, social and political spheres and seeks to advance a common African voice for equity, fairness and human rights<sup>37</sup>. A Pan-Africanist approach is therefore relevant in the climate justice and environmental governance discourses. For example, by strengthening Pan-Africanism, it is possible to ensure that Africa's natural resources are sustainably harnessed with the free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples and local communities with the benefits being shared equitably among all stakeholders<sup>38</sup>. This is vital in combating unsustainable extraction of resources in Africa which causes pollution, climate change, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss<sup>39</sup>. Further, fostering Pan-Africanism is vital in amplifying Africa's voice in the global environmental governance discourse for climate justice<sup>40</sup>. Through Pan Africanism, it is possible to embrace a coordinated

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<sup>34</sup> United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous knowledge is crucial in the fight against climate change - here's why' Available at <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/indigenous-knowledge-crucial-fight-against-climate-change-heres-why> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Pan-Africanism., Available at <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/pan-africanism> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>37</sup> Pan-Africanism and Its Contemporary Challenges: Reclaiming Africa's Political Project., Available at <https://amaniafrica-et.org/pan-africanism-and-its-contemporary-challenges-reclaiming-africas-political-project/> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>38</sup> Africa's struggle for environmental justice in an age of death., Available at <https://africanarguments.org/2023/06/africa-struggle-for-environmental-justice-in-an-age-of-death/> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> AUDA-NEPAD., 'Climate Diplomacy in Africa' Available at <https://www.nepad.org/climate/publication/climate->

common African position that can strengthen the continent's role in international climate change negotiations and further help African countries to design robust policy approaches for a collective effort in confronting complex climate change challenges<sup>41</sup>. Through Pan-Africanism, it is possible to understand the unique challenges and opportunities faced by communities across the continent as a result of climate change<sup>42</sup>. This is key in advancing solutions that can foster climate justice for Africa such as ensuring climate finance flows to vulnerable populations and designing climate targets and commitments that take into account Africa's unique needs and vulnerabilities to climate change.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

Achieving climate justice in Africa is an urgent priority due to the continent's extreme vulnerability to climate change. By embracing Pan-Africanism, it is possible to achieve climate justice and sound environmental governance including through amplifying Africa's voice in global environmental and climate governance, ensuring that the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities are upheld, and fostering equitable extraction of Africa's natural resources<sup>43</sup>. Pursuing Pan-Africanism is an ideal approach towards realising climate justice and integrated environmental governance in Africa for sustainability.

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[diplomacyafrica#:~:text=Climate%20Diplomacy%20is%20the%20interface,finds%20the%20space%20for%20agreement](#) (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Afrobarometer., 'Afrobarometer at COP 28: Elevating, Adding African Voices to the Climate Conversation' Available at <https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/afrobarometer-at-cop28-elevating-adding-african-voices-to-the-climate-conversation/> (Accessed on 17/12/2025)

<sup>43</sup> Africa's struggle for environmental justice in an age of death., Op Cit

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