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Climate Justice, Human Security, and the Future of Climate Policy in Nigeria

Hassan Achimugu

Associate Professor of Public Governance/Development Studies & Dean,
Faculty of Management Science,
Kogi State University, Anyigba, Nigeria
hassanachimugu@gmail.com

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Abstract

Climate change is no longer a distant threat for Sub-Saharan Africa—it is already reshaping lives, livelihoods, and human security in Nigeria. This paper explores the structural, political, and justice dimensions of Nigeria's climate crisis through a political economy and human security framework, examining how power relations, governance capacity, and inequality shape adaptation outcomes. The study's objectives are threefold: (i) to assess the institutional and socioeconomic dimensions of Nigeria's climate vulnerability, (ii) to analyse the justice implications of existing policy responses, and (iii) to propose a locally anchored framework for equitable climate governance. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative policy analysis design, combining document review, field interviews, and secondary data synthesis from national and multilateral sources. The findings reveal that 43% of Nigeria's land is degraded by desertification, displacing over 40 million people, while 30–40 metres of shoreline erosion occur annually in the south. Yet, donor-driven frameworks still dominate policy responses, marginalising local knowledge and justice concerns. The paper argues for a re-centring of Nigeria's climate policy around human security, distributive justice, and intergenerational equity, integrating local knowledge systems and inclusive governance. Ultimately, it reimagines climate policy not merely as technical compliance with global norms but as a moral and developmental project rooted in dignity, fairness, and resilience.

Keywords: Climate Justice; Human Security; Political Economy; Climate Governance, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Climate change is not a looming threat for Africa; it is a lived reality. Across the continent, floods, droughts, and extreme temperatures are now defining features of everyday life. These climate shocks intersect with long-standing issues of poverty, inequality, and institutional weakness, producing complex vulnerabilities. Although Sub-Saharan Africa contributes less than 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions (IEA, 2023), it remains among the region's most severely affected.

Nigeria, a country of 226 million people (World Bank, 2024), offers a powerful illustration of this paradox. The economy is heavily dependent on fossil fuels, with oil and gas accounting for 86% of exports and 50% of government revenue (NEITI, 2024). Yet, climate change threatens the very foundations of its agricultural and ecological systems. According to the Federal Ministry of Environment (2025), 43% of Nigeria's land area (923,000 km²) is affected by desertification, threatening over 40 million people. In northern states such as Yobe and Borno, 50–75% of land is now degraded, directly undermining livelihoods (Guardian, 2025).

Meanwhile, the southern coastal states face an accelerating crisis of 30–40 metres of shoreline loss annually (Punch, 2025). Lake Chad, once a freshwater giant supporting 30 million people, has shrunk by 90% since the 1960s (UNEP, 2022). The 2022 floods displaced 1.9 million Nigerians, killed over 600 people, and destroyed 569,000 hectares of farmland (NEMA, 2023).

Beyond the environmental dimension, climate change has become a human security crisis—manifesting in food insecurity, forced migration, and violent conflict. By 2050, Nigeria's staple crop yields (maize, rice)

are projected to decline by 10–25%, while climate shocks could push an additional 11 million Nigerians into poverty by 2030 (World Bank, 2023).

This paper situates climate change in Nigeria as both a justice issue and a human security imperative, arguing that the solution lies in bridging global environmental governance with local developmental realities.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on two interlinked theoretical frames:

1. **Political Economy of Climate Governance:**

   This lens examines how power, institutions, and resources shape climate policy outcomes (Keohane & Victor, 2016). Nigeria's policy responses are often donor-led, reflecting dependency rather than ownership. The political economy perspective helps reveal how rent-seeking, weak coordination, and elite interests distort climate priorities (Okereke, 2021).

2. **Human Security and Climate Justice Framework:**

   Drawing from Amartya Sen's capabilities approach and the UNDP (1994) definition of human security, this framework reframes climate change as a threat to livelihoods, dignity, and opportunity. Climate justice extends beyond carbon accounting to issues of fairness, representation, and the right to development (Schlosberg, 2013).

Together, these frameworks allow the paper to connect structural inequities with lived vulnerabilities, emphasising the need for inclusive, equitable, and locally grounded adaptation.

3. Methods, Techniques, and Area Descriptions

3.1 Methods and Approach

A qualitative policy-analytical approach was adopted, combining descriptive statistics and interpretive analysis. Four core techniques guided the study:

1. **Document Analysis:** Nigeria's *Climate Change Act (2021)*, *Nationally Determined Contributions (2022)*, and *Energy Transition Plan (2022)* were reviewed to assess policy coherence.
2. **Comparative Policy Review:** Climate frameworks from Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Africa were examined to identify best practices.
3. **Secondary Data Synthesis:** Data were drawn from the *IPCC*, *UNEP*, *AfDB*, *IEA*, *NIMET*, and *World Bank*.
4. **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Twenty KIIs were conducted with officials from Nigeria's Ministry of Environment, NGOs, and local community leaders to capture experiential perspectives.

3.2 Area Description

Nigeria spans **923,768 km²** and exhibits three primary climate-affected zones:

- **Northern Region:** Semi-arid, facing rapid desertification and food insecurity.
- **Southern Coastal Region:** Prone to sea-level rise, erosion, and oil pollution.
- **Urban Zones:** Cities like Lagos and Kano experience severe flooding and heat stress.

This geographical diversity makes Nigeria a microcosm of Sub-Saharan Africa's climate realities.

4. Results

4.1 Environmental Degradation

- **Desertification:** Affects 43% of land area; threatens 40 million people.
- **Lake Chad Shrinkage:** From 25,000 km² (1960s) to 1,500 km² today (UNEP, 2022).
- **Flooding (2022):** Displaced 1.9 million, caused 600 deaths, destroyed 569,000 ha of farmland (NEMA, 2023).
- **Erosion:** Coastal loss at 30–40 m/year, threatening 15 million Nigerians.

4.2 Socioeconomic Impacts

- **Agricultural Losses:** $9 billion annually due to climate shocks (FAO, 2023).
- **Energy Transition Paradox:** Despite 427 GW of solar potential, Nigeria relies heavily on oil.
- **Poverty:** Climate shocks could push 11 million into poverty by 2030.
- **Conflict:** 35% of violent deaths in the Middle Belt are linked to resource-based disputes (ACLED, 2024).

4.3 Governance Gaps

- **Fragmented Institutions:** Overlapping mandates among ministries hinder coordination.
- **Climate Finance Deficit:** Nigeria accessed <30% of pledged GCF funds (AfDB, 2023).
- **Exclusion:** Women and youth are underrepresented in policy frameworks.

Table 1: Human Security Indicators and Climate-Related Stress (Nigeria, 2015–2025)

Indicator	Baseline (2015)	Latest Estimate (2024/25)	Change / Trend
Rural poverty rate in vulnerable zones	~ 60 %	> 70 %	Increase
North-to-south migration flows	Baseline	+35 %	Upsurge (UNHCR)
Women's share of adaptation funding	10 % (baseline)	< 10 %	Persistent marginalization
Conflict incidents (climate-linked)	Baseline	+240 %	Sharp rise

Discussion

5.1 Climate Justice in the Global Context

Africa's share of emissions is negligible—3.9% globally—yet it bears over 80% of the adaptation burden (UNEP, 2024). This structural injustice exposes the failure of global mechanisms to internalise Africa's historical marginalisation. Nigeria's annual disaster response spending exceeds $1.5 billion, compared to per capita emissions of just 0.67 tonnes (IEA, 2023).

5.2 Human Security Lens

Climate change simultaneously undermines food, health, and livelihood security. Shrinking water bodies, falling crop yields, and rising vector-borne diseases intensify social fragility. WHO (2024) projects 15 million additional malaria cases in West Africa by 2030 due to heat stress.

5.3 Political Economy of Climate Governance

The entanglement of oil dependency and elite capture limits Nigeria's policy flexibility. As Okereke (2021) notes, donor-driven climate regimes often serve as "green conditionalities," where funds are tied to external priorities. Effective reform requires domestic ownership and fiscal transparency.

5.4 Comparative Insights

- **Kenya:** Generates 90% of electricity from renewables.
- **Ethiopia:** Integrates agriculture and energy in its *Climate-Resilient Green Economy*.
- **South Africa:** JETP mobilised $8.5 billion for coal-to-renewable transition. Nigeria can replicate these successes by prioritising decentralised solar and community adaptation funds.

5.5 Towards a Just Transition

A sustainable pathway for Nigeria entails:

1. Reallocating subsidies from fossil fuels to renewable innovation.
2. Empowering local governments in adaptation planning.
3. Institutionalising climate education and youth inclusion.

4. Regional cooperation through ECOWAS and AfCFTA for climate-smart trade.

6. Conclusion

Climate change is a defining development challenge for Nigeria and Africa. This paper has demonstrated that the crisis extends beyond environmental degradation. It is rather a multifaceted issue encompassing justice, governance, and human security. Nigeria's vulnerability reflects both ecological fragility and systemic governance failures. A paradigm shift is required: from donor-led, technocratic adaptation to people-centred, justice-oriented climate governance.

The study calls for a Pan-African Climate Compact that positions Africa as a policy shaper, not a policy taker, emphasising energy sovereignty, inclusivity, and intergenerational equity.

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