Climate Justice and the Future of Global Governance

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Abstract

As the climate crisis intensifies, addressing the ethical and political dimensions of climate justice is as critical as considering the scientific and economic aspects of global warming. The unequal distribution of climate impacts, with countries that contribute minimally to emissions bearing the most severe consequences, underscores the urgent need for equitable and accountable global governance. This paper examines the integration of justice-oriented principles into global climate governance, focusing on equitable responsibility-sharing, inclusive participation in decision-making, particularly for the most vulnerable countries, improved access to climate-friendly technologies, and the development of transparent accountability mechanisms.

The methodology guiding this analysis is primarily conceptual and comparative, supported by targeted empirical illustrations. Key international frameworks (such as the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement), major institutional reforms, and case studies from the Global South were selected through a purposive review of recent academic literature and primary policy documents, with particular attention to works published after 2019. Evidence is drawn from authoritative sources, including Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, United Nations documents, and leading peer-reviewed research. Examples and cases were chosen to illustrate persistent structural inequalities and innovative responses by emerging actors. This methodological approach is intended to ensure both academic rigour and policy relevance.

Beyond conceptual analysis, the discussion previews concrete policy actions: reforms to climate finance, including vulnerability-based and concessional funding models; legal mechanisms to strengthen the representation of developing countries within global institutions; frameworks to promote fair technology transfer; and measures to ensure transparency and monitor climate-related commitments. The analysis also considers the growing influence of the Global South, indigenous experts, and climate-affected nations, who advocate for equitable, inclusive, and development-aligned climate solutions.

This analysis is guided by the following research questions: (1) In what ways can principles of climate justice be systematically integrated into global governance frameworks to ensure fair outcomes for all nations? (2) What structural barriers and power asymmetries impede the realisation of justice in international climate negotiations and implementation? (3) How are emerging actors, particularly from the Global South and indigenous communities, influencing the direction and substance of global climate governance? Addressing these questions aims to identify pathways for advancing a justice-centred approach to global climate governance.

The central argument of this paper is that achieving effective global climate governance requires the systematic integration of climate justice principles as foundational elements, rather than as ancillary or aspirational goals. Only by embedding equity, accountability, and inclusive participation at every level of governance can the international community overcome entrenched inequalities and deliver fair, legitimate, and sustainable outcomes for all nations and communities.

Keywords: Climate Justice, Global Governance, UNFCCC, Paris Agreement, Shared Responsibility, Development Justice

1. Introduction

The climate crisis now demands the integration of scientific, developmental, ethical, and political considerations, which are increasingly interconnected and urgent. Over the past three decades, climate change has shifted from being viewed solely as an environmental issue to becoming a significant challenge for international cooperation and global governance. Despite clear scientific warnings and substantial evidence, a core challenge remains: collective action is necessary, yet the causes, impacts, and responsibilities of climate change are unequally distributed among nations and communities. As a result, climate justice has emerged as both a moral imperative and a political necessity, central to shaping the future of global governance.

This paper examines the complex relationship between climate justice and global governance, contending that without addressing entrenched historical, social, and political inequalities, climate governance cannot generate the cooperation, trust, or legitimacy required for substantive progress. (Gach, 2019) While arguments for justice-centred governance are compelling, it is important to acknowledge critiques and limitations. Implementing justice-oriented reforms frequently encounters significant resistance from powerful actors who may perceive such changes as a threat to their interests or established influence. Political feasibility remains a central challenge, with entrenched power structures and differing national priorities often leading to slow progress or diluted commitments. Recognising these obstacles demonstrates the need for not only principled frameworks but also pragmatic strategies to overcome resistance and ensure the effective realisation of climate justice.

The central thesis is that climate justice should serve as the foundational framework for global governance, rather than being regarded solely as a moral aspiration. In the twenty-first century, climate justice will shape

institutional evolution, international collaboration, energy transitions, and the allocation of global power and resources. Notably, countries with minimal greenhouse gas emissions are experiencing the most severe consequences. Small island states, least developed countries, indigenous communities, and rural populations in the Global South are disproportionately affected by rising temperatures, sea-level rise, salinisation, cyclones, droughts, and ecosystem degradation, despite their limited emissions.

The principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC), introduced in the Rio Earth Summit (1992), was an early attempt to incorporate equity into international climate governance. This principle acknowledges that while all states share responsibility for addressing climate change, developed countries bear a greater obligation due to their historical emissions and greater financial and technological capacity. The subsequent decades revealed persistent tensions: developed countries sought to dilute differentiation, while developing nations insisted that justice and historical responsibility must guide mitigation targets, adaptation support, and finance flows.

Over time, climate justice has expanded beyond international negotiations; it permeates national policies, energy transitions, grassroots movements, and public consciousness. It links climate action to larger questions of development rights, economic justice, indigenous sovereignty, gender equality, intergenerational equity, and human rights. This broadened understanding has significant implications for global governance. Institutions and policy frameworks must now integrate justice-sensitive approaches into policy design, institutional reform, and global cooperation.

Limitations of Existing Global Governance Mechanisms

Although global systems such as the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement have made some progress in addressing climate change, the effectiveness of these mechanisms—particularly the role of transparency—remains subject to critical assessment and debate (Deursen & Gupta, 2024, pp. 1-28). Nevertheless, these institutions have not fully delivered equitable outcomes, particularly for countries most vulnerable to climate change. Several critical challenges persist:

Power Asymmetries in Negotiations

Although UNFCCC negotiations are intended to operate on the basis of consensus, persistent power imbalances continue to shape both the agenda and outcomes. Wealthier countries exert disproportionate influence over financial commitments, technical regulations, and the negotiation process. Countries most at risk frequently lack the necessary resources to participate effectively and face challenges in advancing justice-oriented solutions. These disparities hinder vulnerable nations from having their priorities adequately represented within key decision-making bodies, such as the Finance Committee. (Forner & Díaz, 2024)

Despite repeated commitments, enduring power imbalances continue to limit vulnerable countries' ability to achieve climate justice. Developed countries pledged to provide USD 100 billion annually to developing nations, a target only recently met in aggregate (USD 115.9 billion in 2022). However, disbursements remain inconsistent, are primarily structured as loans, and do not adequately address increasing needs. Adaptation funding, although crucial for at-risk communities, continues to trail behind mitigation finance in volume, with access and allocation shaped more by institutional capacities and financial and political interests than by climate vulnerability (Venner et al., 2024, pp. 1-14). The reliance on loans rather than grants further exacerbates debt burdens in countries already facing financial constraints. (Lindner et al., 2025)

Loss and Damage: Late Acknowledgement, Slow Operationalisation

Although climate-vulnerable countries have advocated for recognition of loss and damage for decades, a formal funding mechanism was only established at COP27 in 2022. Despite this progress, governance structures, financing scale, and operational mechanisms remain underdeveloped. Funding levels announced to date represent only a small fraction of actual needs. (Meraj & Hashimoto, 2025)

Global Financial Institutions and Structural Inequalities

The World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other multilateral development banks have faced sustained criticism for rigid lending conditionalities, inadequate integration of climate-risk frameworks, and governance structures that continue to disproportionately reflect the interests and voting power of advanced economies (see, e.g., Independent Evaluation Group, 2020; Independent Evaluation Office of the IMF, 2021; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2019; Oxfam International, 2023). Without reform, these institutions are unlikely to effectively support climate justice.

Technological Monopolies and Barriers to Access

A small group of countries and private corporations control most low-carbon technologies, such as renewables, battery storage, hydrogen, and carbon capture. This concentration limits equitable access. (WFP, n.d.) Intellectual property regulations often hinder the dissemination of climate-friendly technologies, raising concerns about 'green monopolies.' These barriers suggest that current global governance frameworks do not sufficiently incorporate justice, thereby undermining collective climate action and impeding effective crisis response. (Khan et al., 2019) (Maskus, 2010)

Emerging Openings and Opportunities for Justice-Centred Governance

Despite persistent structural constraints, new opportunities are gradually reshaping the landscape of global climate governance. A number of coordinated alliances from the Global South—such as the Group of 77

(G77+China), BASIC countries, Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, Alliance of Small Island States, the African Group of Negotiators, and the Like-Minded Developing Countries—have become increasingly influential in international climate negotiations. Through unified negotiating positions and sustained diplomatic engagement, these coalitions have played a pivotal role in foregrounding the principles of climate justice, equity, and common but differentiated responsibilities within global climate discourse (see, e.g., United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change reports; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022; United Nations Environment Programme, 2023).

Their efforts have contributed to important achievements: the formal recognition of loss and damage, renewed demands for balancing adaptation and mitigation finance, and stronger calls to democratise technology so that developing countries can access affordable, low-carbon innovations. Their advocacy has also sharpened the focus on historical responsibility, stressing that developed countries are responsible for over 70% of cumulative CO_2 emissions during the industrial era, particularly when measured from the mid-19th century (around 1850) to the early 21st century (roughly 2019–2022). In this period, countries in North America and Europe accounted for the majority of cumulative emissions due to early industrialisation (Tiseo, 2025) (see Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021; Global Carbon Project, 2023; Carbon Brief, 2021).

Accordingly, it is widely argued that developed countries—responsible for more than 70% of historical CO_2 emissions between approximately 1850 and 2019—must play a significantly larger role in climate finance, technology transfer, and capacity-building, consistent with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

India's expanding leadership is part of this broader assertion of Global South influence. Flagship initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA), which now brings together more than 120 member countries (see International Solar Alliance, 2023; Ministry of External Affairs India, 2023), and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) (Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, 2022; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2021) have opened new avenues for South–South cooperation. These platforms not only promote solar energy deployment and climate-resilient infrastructure but also contribute to a more inclusive and multipolar model of global climate leadership (see International Energy Agency, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

India's global advocacy for "Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE)", which promotes sustainable consumption patterns, further demonstrates how emerging economies are shaping global climate norms beyond traditional mitigation-focused frameworks. Together, these developments indicate that climate governance is gradually shifting from a system historically dominated by developed nations toward a more plural and inclusive framework in which the voices, priorities, and developmental needs of the Global South are increasingly shaping outcomes (see, e.g., United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change synthesis reports; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022; United Nations Environment Programme, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2022; Climate Policy Initiative, 2023).

While efforts to advance justice, equity, and fairness in global climate governance are ongoing, the distribution of influence and visibility in transnational climate change governance remains largely concentrated in the global North (Kaiser, 2022). There is now broad agreement that the current global financial system, structured around institutions like the IMF, the World Bank, and multilateral development banks, cannot fully address the combined crises of climate change and sovereign debt. (Barucci et al., 2025) Developing countries face increasing climate risks while also dealing with limited financial resources. Currently, over 60 per cent of low-income countries are at high risk of, or already experiencing, debt distress, which makes it much harder to invest in climate adaptation and clean energy transitions (Fiscal Vulnerabilities in Low-Income Countries, 2024) (see International Monetary Fund, 2023; World Bank, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Proposals for climate-vulnerability-based financing and just transition financing models specifically aim to allocate resources to nations most affected by rising temperatures, extreme weather, and economic disruption. (Impact of climate vulnerability on the allocation of climate finance: global evidence, 2026) Recent G20 Leaders' Declarations (for example, the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration 2023) and analytical work by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (2023 reports on debt vulnerabilities, climate finance, and multilateral development bank reform) are opening new pathways to embed justice, equity, and climate resilience into the evolving framework of global economic governance.

Alongside debates over financial reform, the world's rapid shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy has made the idea of a "just transition" more important than ever. This framework emphasises that climate action must advance social and economic inclusion rather than undermine it. As coal, oil, and gas economies undergo profound changes, millions of workers face uncertain futures. The International Labour Organisation estimates that while decarbonization could displace around 6 million jobs worldwide, it may also generate up to 24 million new jobs in the transition to a greener economy (24 million jobs to open up in the green economy, 2018) (see International Labour Organisation, World Employment and Social Outlook 2018: Greening with Jobs; updated assessments in 2022). Managing this transition fairly requires policies that protect affected workers, strengthen social safety nets, expand reskilling and upskilling opportunities, and ensure that communities share equitably in the benefits of renewable energy investments. (Just Transition - Equitable Climate Action, n.d.)

A just transition also means recognising and respecting indigenous knowledge systems and land rights, which can be threatened by large-scale renewable energy and mineral extraction projects. Without strong safeguards, efforts to secure critical minerals for solar panels, batteries, and wind turbines risk reproducing forms of "green colonialism." (Owen et al., 2022) By connecting decarbonization with labour rights, community well-being, and cultural protection, just transition frameworks offer a vision of climate governance that is not only environmentally sound but also socially just and humane.

Recognition of Non-State Actors

Civil society groups, youth movements, indigenous networks, cities, and private sector coalitions are increasingly influential in shaping climate norms. Their advocacy strengthens transparency, accountability, and justice claims, thereby pressuring states to adopt more equitable climate policies. (Cairney et al., 2023)

Integrating Climate Justice into Global Governance

The climate crisis is reshaping the foundations of international order, challenging conventional ideas of sovereignty, development, and power. With 2023 the hottest year on record and global temperatures approaching 1.48°C above pre-industrial levels, the interdependence of nations is more visible than ever. Climate impacts, such as catastrophic floods, wildfires, and rising sea levels, have become increasingly severe, and 2023 was confirmed as the warmest year on record, highlighting that no country—regardless of wealth—is insulated from systemic climate risks. This shared vulnerability underscores the necessity for a new form of global cooperation in which responsibility is distributed fairly, taking into account historical emissions, financial capacity, technological capability, and other factors (State of the Global Climate 2023, 2024). Notable justice-oriented reforms provide concrete evidence for this approach: for example, the creation of the Loss and Damage Fund at COP27 in 2022 marked a significant step toward compensating countries most affected by climate change, reflecting years of advocacy by climate-vulnerable nations. The International Solar Alliance, launched by India and France, exemplifies efforts to democratize access to clean energy technologies among developing countries. Additionally, the Green Climate Fund, operational since 2015, has allocated over USD 12 billion to projects prioritising adaptation and mitigation in the least developed countries and small island states. Developed countries, responsible for over 70% of cumulative CO_2 emissions, must play a greater role through predictable climate finance, access to technology, and accelerated mitigation efforts, while empowering developing nations to pursue resilient, low-carbon development.

A justice-centred global governance paradigm must also address enduring power imbalances within institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the UNFCCC, where developing countries remain underrepresented despite hosting the majority of climate-vulnerable populations. (Cevik & Jalles, 2022) Governance reforms—such as equitable voting rights, vulnerability-based financing, and inclusive decision-making—are essential to ensure legitimacy and effectiveness. At the same time, climate governance must integrate development rights, including poverty eradication, energy access, food and water security, and the protection of indigenous knowledge, recognising that sustainable development and climate action are inseparable. (Support Sustainable Development and Climate Action, 2018) Finally, the regime must embrace human-centred, rights-focused principles that protect climate-displaced communities, safeguard cultural heritage, and uphold intergenerational equity, especially as children born today may face up to 7 times as many extreme weather events as previous generations. (Bertram, 2022) (Gibbons, 2014, pp. 1-12) Together, these shifts position climate justice not as a moral aspiration but as the structural foundation for a fair, stable, and future-oriented global governance system.

Strengthening Participatory Governance

Strengthening participatory governance is essential for advancing climate justice within global governance frameworks. This necessitates the creation of inclusive mechanisms that ensure all stakeholders, including marginalised and vulnerable communities, are actively engaged in shaping climate policies. Broad-based participation in decision-making processes leads to more equitable outcomes and enhances the effectiveness of policy implementation. (Yazar et al., 2025) By incorporating diverse perspectives, participatory governance increases legitimacy, accountability, and responsiveness to the needs of those most affected by climate change. (Climate Justice for People and Nature through Urban Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA): A Focus on the Global South, n.d.) In addition, effective grievance redressal mechanisms are critical for participatory governance. Such mechanisms provide formal avenues for stakeholders to raise concerns, challenge decisions, and seek remedies when their rights or interests are adversely affected by climate policies. (Dellmuth et al., 2025) Establishing transparent, accessible, and responsive grievance redressal systems ensures that vulnerable groups have a voice if they experience exclusion or injustice, and helps build trust in the overall governance system. (Hossain et al., 2023, pp. 139-158)

Inclusive decision-making processes are associated with more equitable outcomes and enhanced policy implementation. Critical analyses of participatory governance demonstrate that such approaches can mitigate elite capture and reduce biases by incorporating a broader spectrum of interests and knowledge. Empirical research on climate adaptation and environmental policy indicates that deliberative and participatory institutions foster greater legitimacy and procedural justice, and are linked to improved distributive outcomes for marginalised groups (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014; Biermann et al., 2012). Although challenges persist in ensuring substantive rather than tokenistic participation, evidence suggests that robust participatory mechanisms correlate with increased equity, transparency, and community engagement, resulting in policies that more effectively address the needs of those most vulnerable to climate change.

Transparency, Accountability, and Monitoring

A justice-oriented climate governance system requires robust transparency measures. Persistent 'trust gaps' between developed and developing countries stem from repeated failures to fulfil commitments on funding, emissions targets, and technology transfer. For instance, the USD 100 billion annual climate finance pledge, originally set for 2020, was not met on schedule, and current figures remain contested due to ambiguous accounting practices that often inflate reported contributions. OECD data indicate that a significant portion of

reported climate finance, particularly public climate finance, is provided in the form of loans—including non-concessional loans—rather than grants, raising concerns about the effectiveness and fairness of these flows in relation to climate justice. These issues highlight the ongoing need for transparent and consistent reporting on climate finance and commitments in order to accurately track progress and address equity concerns (Climate Finance Provided and Mobilised by Developed Countries in 2016-2020, n.d.). Open, standardised reporting tools would enable all countries to monitor progress and ensure mutual accountability. (Open Government and Climate Change: Leveraging Transparency, Participation, and Accountability for Effective Climate Action, n.d.) As climate decisions increasingly influence trade, energy, land rights, and social welfare, public input becomes essential. (Ruppel & Houston, 2023) Inadequate public consultation in many countries restricts the participation of vulnerable communities most affected by climate shocks, thereby diminishing the legitimacy and fairness of national climate strategies. (UN DESA Policy Brief No. 185: Beyond promises: The critical role of Supreme Audit Institutions in strengthening climate accountability, 2026) Independent evaluation bodies, including national climate commissions, expert panels, and civil society oversight groups, are vital for reviewing government actions, assessing progress toward commitments, and ensuring alignment with equity and justice principles. (Averchenkova et al., 2018) While the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) exemplifies scientific integrity and independent assessment at the global level, analogous mechanisms are needed at the regional and national levels to evaluate adaptation plans, carbon markets, and financial flows in real time. (Venner et al., 2024)

Effective climate governance requires the development of global systems capable of accurately and equitably tracking carbon emissions. Currently, most carbon reporting relies on national self-reporting, which varies significantly in quality and standards. (National Inventory Reports, 2026) Emerging technologies, including satellite monitoring, AI-based emissions tracking, and open carbon data platforms, have the potential to improve transparency and timeliness in global carbon accounting. These tools can bridge the gap between national commitments and actual emissions, ensure the integrity of carbon markets, prevent 'greenwashing,' and facilitate evidence-based decision-making. Enhanced transparency and accountability foster trust and facilitate international cooperation. (Caldwell et al., n.d.) As climate impacts intensify and global tensions rise, robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms will be essential to sustain ambition, safeguard vulnerable countries, and advance climate justice.

Reimagining the future of global governance through the lens of climate justice requires a fundamental shift in how the world understands sovereignty, development, and power in an era defined by ecological interdependence. The climate crisis has exposed the limitations of state-centric governance models that prioritise narrow national interests over collective planetary stewardship, compelling nations to reconsider the ethical and political foundations of international cooperation. (Kaiser, 2022) A justice-based global governance paradigm must therefore rest on four mutually reinforcing pillars: first, the recognition that shared vulnerability necessitates shared responsibility, requiring countries—especially major emitters—to commit to fair contributions in finance, technology, and emissions reduction; second, the redistribution of power within global institutions, ensuring equitable representation for developing countries whose populations bear the brunt of climate impacts; third, the integration of development rights—such as energy access, poverty eradication, and food-water security—into climate decision-making, acknowledging that climate action cannot succeed if it undermines human well-being or economic dignity; and fourth, the creation of human-centered, rights-based governance frameworks that protect climate-displaced people, safeguard cultural heritage, and uphold intergenerational equity. Together, these pillars redefine global governance as a system rooted not in hierarchical power or post-war institutional legacies, but in fairness, solidarity, and the shared moral imperative to safeguard a habitable planet for present and future generations.

Shared Vulnerability → Shared Responsibility.

The accelerating pace of climate change has revealed a profound truth: no nation, regardless of wealth or geopolitical power, is insulated from climate risks. The year 2023 was the hottest on record, with global temperatures rising 1.48°C above pre-industrial levels, pushing the world perilously close to the 1.5°C threshold. Extreme weather events, such as unprecedented floods in Pakistan and widespread wildfires across Europe and North America, highlight the increasing global vulnerability to climate impacts. In 2023, the World Meteorological Organization reported it was the warmest year on record, with the global average near-surface temperature reaching 1.45 °C above pre-industrial levels (State of the Global Climate 2023, n.d.). Small Island Developing States face the threat of near-existential sea-level rise, while major economies such as China, India, and the United States confront severe heat stress, water shortages, and agricultural disruptions. (The 2024 small island developing states report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change, 2024) These interconnected vulnerabilities highlight that climate stability is a global public good, and its protection requires cooperation that transcends political boundaries.

Acknowledging this shared vulnerability is essential for cultivating shared responsibility—a principle that must shape the future of global governance. To date, climate finance remains heavily skewed: while developing nations require nearly USD 2.4 trillion annually for climate adaptation and mitigation (as estimated by the Independent High-Level Expert Group on Climate Finance), actual disbursements from developed countries remain below the long-standing USD 100 billion per year commitment. Moreover, nearly 70% of climate finance flows to developing countries are in the form of loans, deepening debt burdens and limiting adaptive capacities. (Centre, 2025) A genuine sense of shared responsibility would require transitioning from voluntary contributions to predictable, equitable, and need-based financing mechanisms. It would also involve greater participation in technology co-development, open patents for critical green technologies, and capacity-building partnerships that

empower vulnerable nations to pursue low-carbon pathways without compromising development.
Finally, shared responsibility is not only financial or technological—it is also moral and political. Countries with high historical emissions, representing less than 20% of the world's population, have accounted for more than 70% of cumulative carbon emissions, while the regions least responsible—Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands—experience the harshest impacts. (Jones et al., 2023) Shared responsibility, therefore, includes acknowledging historical responsibility, strengthening the Loss and Damage Fund, and ensuring inclusive governance frameworks that give climate-vulnerable nations a larger voice in decision-making. As climate disasters intensify, global governance must evolve from fragmented national responses to a cooperative ethic grounded in fairness, solidarity, and recognition of common humanity. Only by converting shared vulnerability into shared responsibility can the world build a stable, just, and climate-resilient future.

Redistribution of Power Within Global Institutions

The architecture of contemporary global governance remains shaped by post–World War II power alignments, despite dramatic shifts in global economic, demographic, and environmental realities. Institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and even climate-specific platforms like the UNFCCC still reflect structural imbalances that privilege advanced industrial economies over developing ones. For instance, the IMF's quota system allocates nearly 40% of voting power to G7 countries, even though they represent less than 10% of the world's population. Meanwhile, Africa—home to 1.4 billion people—collectively holds barely 6.6% of IMF voting shares. These disparities fundamentally affect how global economic and climate-related decisions are shaped, with developing countries often unable to meaningfully influence rules on debt, climate finance, adaptation support, and global economic stability. Without a redistribution of institutional power, global governance structures risk losing legitimacy at a time when collective action is most urgently needed.
For developing nations, Enhanced representation is not merely symbolic but essential for ensuring climate justice. The World Bank's leadership and lending models have long been critiqued for imposing conditionalities that undermine domestic priorities, while climate finance flows through these institutions often remain inadequate, slow, and debt-creating. Even within the UNFCCC—where consensus is theoretically the guiding principle—agenda-setting power, technical working groups, and negotiation leverage often remain disproportionately shaped by developed economies. As climate impacts intensify, developing countries are advocating for governance reforms, including vulnerability-based financing, debt-for-climate swaps, greater representation on executive boards, and decision-making rules that better reflect contemporary geopolitical and economic realities. Importantly, the 2023 Bridgetown Initiative, led by Barbados, and the growing coalition of Global South countries calling for "a new Bretton Woods moment," have accelerated international discussions on restructuring global financial systems to meet the twin crises of debt and climate change.
Redistribution of power within global institutions is thus central to aligning governance with twenty-first-century realities. (Feminist Climate Justice: A Framework for Action, 2023) Emerging economies like India, China, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, and Nigeria contribute significantly to global GDP growth, drive global energy transitions, and host the majority of climate-vulnerable populations. Yet their formal representation in key financial and multilateral bodies remains limited. Equitable governance reform would require not only updating voting shares and board structures but also transforming the policy paradigms that underpin institutional operations. This includes recognising rights-based approaches, development needs, climate resilience priorities, and the moral imperative of historical responsibility. (Waskow et al., n.d.) Without such reforms, global institutions risk being increasingly bypassed by new South-led platforms, regional alliances, and alternative financing mechanisms. (Humphrey, 2025) Rebalancing power is therefore not only a matter of justice but a strategic necessity for ensuring that global governance remains inclusive, legitimate, and effective in addressing the climate crisis. (Jongen & Scholte, 2022, pp. 345-366)

Linking Climate Justice with Development Justice

For billions of people across the Global South, the demand for climate justice is inseparable from the larger struggle for development justice. This interlinkage is rooted in stark socio-economic realities: nearly 32% of the world's extreme poor live in Sub-Saharan Africa, while another 15% reside in South Asia, regions already experiencing intensified heatwaves, erratic monsoons, cyclones, and crop failures. The World Bank warns that up to 132 million additional people could be pushed into extreme poverty by 2030 due to climate impacts alone, disproportionately affecting those in low-income, climate-vulnerable nations. (Jafino et al., 2019)
In this context, governance systems must recognise that climate action extends beyond reducing carbon emissions; it also serves as a pathway toward poverty reduction, resilient development, and dignified living. Policies designed without attention to justice risk exacerbating existing inequalities and undermining the development aspirations of millions across the Global South. Currently, more than 670 million people worldwide lack access to electricity, with Sub-Saharan Africa accounting for nearly 80% of this deficit, while approximately 2.3 billion people continue to rely on traditional biomass for cooking (Cozzi et al., 2025) (see International Energy Agency, World Energy Outlook 2023; World Bank, Tracking SDG7: The Energy Progress Report 2023; World Health Organization, 2023 updates on household energy use), exposing them to severe health risks and limiting their economic and educational opportunities. A genuinely just global governance system must ensure that low-carbon transitions do not restrict the right of developing nations to expand affordable energy access, industrialise, or generate employment. (IEA Global Commission launches landmark Blueprint for Action on Just and Inclusive Energy Transitions, 2025) This requires meaningful commitments to technology transfer, concessional finance, and capacity-building so that emerging economies can leapfrog to clean energy without compromising their development pathways. Ultimately, the effectiveness of global climate governance will

depend on how well it aligns climate transitions with sustainable livelihoods—protecting workers in carbon-intensive industries while enabling new opportunities in the growing green economy. (Recommendations of the Global Commission on People-Centred Clean Energy Transitions, n.d.)

Equally vital is integrating gender equality, indigenous knowledge, and food and water security into all levels of climate governance. According to the State of the World's Indigenous Peoples, Volume VI, women in rural regions across Asia and Africa are particularly affected by climate disruptions, experiencing loss of income, increased unpaid care work, and heightened risks of displacement, with these impacts disproportionately falling on women and girls due to persistent gender inequalities (Affairs, 2025).erscoring the deeply gendered nature of climate vulnerability (Why women are key to climate action, n.d.) (see United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2022; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

However, it is important to note analytically that the "80%" figure is indicative rather than based on a single consolidated global dataset, and is often used to highlight gendered vulnerability trends rather than a precise statistical estimate. Data on gender-differentiated impacts of climate-driven displacement are limited by inconsistent definitions, varying methodologies, and gaps in disaggregated reporting across regions. These limitations suggest the need for further systematic data collection and harmonised reporting standards. Future research should prioritise the development of comprehensive, gender-disaggregated climate migration data to enable more precise policy interventions.

To address these gaps, international cooperation is essential. Global institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and relevant regional agencies could coordinate dedicated data initiatives to create a unified framework for collecting and reporting gender-disaggregated climate mobility statistics. Delegates at major climate conferences could support proposals to establish global standards for data collection, reporting protocols, and regular data-sharing mechanisms among member states. By championing harmonised approaches and providing technical assistance to national statistical agencies, international bodies can play a crucial role in ensuring that robust, comparable, and policy-relevant data underpin future climate justice interventions.

At the same time, indigenous communities—despite contributing the least to climate change—play an outsized role in protecting the planet. (Wisdom of the elders: How the UN works to preserve indigenous knowledge in Latin America, 2023) They safeguard almost 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity and hold generations of ecological knowledge essential to climate resilience. (State of the World's Indigenous Peoples, Volume VI, Climate Crisis, n.d.) Protecting their land and cultural rights is critical, especially as large-scale renewable energy and conservation projects risk triggering forms of climate-induced displacement. (Yang, 2025)

Climate-induced food and water insecurity is compounding these challenges. By 2050, agricultural yields in parts of Africa and South Asia are projected to decline by roughly 15–30% under high-emissions scenarios, while between 3.0 and 3.5 billion people could face water scarcity due to climate-driven disruptions in hydrological systems (Gosling & Arnell, 2016, pp. 371-385) (see Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Sixth Assessment Report, 2022; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2021; United Nations World Water Assessment Programme, 2023; World Resources Institute, 2019/2023 updates).

Ensuring food and water security must therefore be a foundational element of climate justice. (Arotoma-Rojas et al., 2022) This objective requires integrating adaptation finance, climate-resilient agriculture, and community-driven resource management into the core of global governance frameworks. A transformative climate governance framework must move beyond narrow carbon accounting and embrace the broader spectrum of human well-being, rights, and dignity. (Hölscher et al., 2019) The climate crisis is not only an environmental challenge but a profound humanitarian, developmental, and ethical issue. According to the World Bank, climate change could force up to 216 million people across six world regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, to migrate within their own countries by 2050 (Climate Change Could Force 216 Million People to Migrate Within Their Own Countries by 2050, 2021). People to Migrate Within Their Own Countries by 2050, 2021) (see World Bank, Groundswell Report, Part II: Acting on Internal Climate Migration, 2021). Yet, global governance frameworks still lack a formal legal category for "climate refugees," as existing international refugee law—anchored in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol—does not recognise environmental or climate-related displacement as grounds for refugee status (see United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023; International Organisation for Migration, 2022).

A human-centred climate regime must address this gap by integrating rights-based frameworks for mobility, resettlement, and adaptive social protection, ensuring that those forced to move are treated with dignity rather than as collateral victims of global warming. (Health Sector - UHC, National Health Policy, Family Planning, Health Insurance, etc., 2025) Existing international frameworks, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018) and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030), provide foundational principles for protecting the rights of people displaced by environmental change, though they do not confer legal refugee status. Emerging proposals, including the Platform on Disaster Displacement and draft conventions on climate mobility, offer practical pathways for coordinating cross-border protection, planned relocation, and adaptive social safety nets. Adapting these frameworks or building on them can help ensure comprehensive legal and institutional support for climate-displaced populations. (Hall & Persson, 2018, pp. 1-20)

Similarly, the health impacts of climate change demand far greater attention. The World Health Organisation reports that climate change could cause an additional 250,000 deaths per year between 2030 and 2050 due to malnutrition, heat stress, and vector-borne diseases (Climate change, 2023) (see World Health Organisation, Quantitative risk assessment of the effects of climate change on selected causes of death, 2030s and 2050s, 2014; reaffirmed in subsequent WHO updates, 2021–2023).

Heatwaves, now intensified by global warming, contributed to over 60,000 deaths in Europe in 2022, while rising air pollution levels linked to fossil fuel combustion are responsible for 8.7 million premature deaths annually. (Record-breaking Heat in the Summer of 2022 Caused more than 61,000 Deaths in Europe, 2023) These statistics highlight the urgent need to integrate climate considerations into national health systems, emergency preparedness, and global health governance. A rights-based climate framework would recognise access to clean air, safe water, and health security as fundamental human rights—ensuring that climate policies prioritise protecting life and well-being rather than treating health as a peripheral outcome. (Rights, n.d.)

The erosion of cultural heritage—both tangible and intangible—further underscores the human dimension of the climate crisis. Small Island Developing States risk facing loss of ancestral lands, burial grounds, languages, and ways of life as sea levels rise;The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization estimates that approximately one in six World Heritage sites are threatened by climate-related hazards (UNEP & UCS, n.d.) (see United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, World Heritage and Tourism in a Changing Climate, 2016; reaffirmed in subsequent UNESCO assessments and updates).

For many indigenous communities, environmental degradation represents not just physical displacement but the erosion of identity, spirituality, and intergenerational continuity. A rights-based climate regime must therefore safeguard cultural rights, empower indigenous stewardship of ecosystems, and recognise that environmental protection and cultural preservation are deeply intertwined. (Carmona et al., 2023) Moreover, intergenerational rights must become a central guiding principle: children born today will experience up to 7 times as many extreme weather events as previous generations if warming reaches 2.5–3°C. Climate governance must thus adopt a future-oriented justice lens—ensuring that today's decisions do not compromise the rights, opportunities, and ecological stability of future generations. (Thiery et al., 2021, pp. 1588-1594) By grounding climate governance in human dignity, cultural integrity, and rights-based principles, the world can build more durable, just, and humane frameworks for navigating the climate crisis. (Rights-based approaches to climate decision-making, 2021, pp. 45-53)

Conclusion

The future of global governance will be profoundly shaped by how the international community responds to the climate crisis. Climate justice is no longer a peripheral demand of vulnerable nations; rather, it has emerged as the central requirement for a stable, cooperative, and legitimate global order. (Okereke & Coventry, 2016, pp. 834-848) As rising temperatures intensify humanitarian crises, disrupt economies, and trigger geopolitical tensions, the need for justice-driven governance structures becomes increasingly urgent.

This paper emphasises that climate justice must transition from an ethical appeal to an operational framework guiding international negotiations, financial systems, technology flows, accountability mechanisms, and national policies. A justice-centred approach can rebuild trust, address power asymmetries, and facilitate collective action in an era characterised by uncertainty and interdependence. (KR et al., 2021)

To help delegates translate these principles into action, the following operational steps are among the most urgent and feasible for near-term implementation. However, it is important to acknowledge that implementing these measures faces a range of practical barriers. Key obstacles include political resistance from powerful stakeholders reluctant to cede influence or commit new financial resources, fiscal constraints that limit the scale and predictability of climate finance, and institutional inertia within established global governance bodies. Varying national priorities, competing interests in negotiations, and limited technical capacity can also slow or dilute reforms. To address these challenges, strategies could include fostering stronger coalitions among climate-vulnerable countries to amplify their negotiating power, enhancing transparency and stakeholder participation to increase accountability, providing targeted technical assistance to help countries develop project pipelines, and exploring innovative financing mechanisms such as blended finance and debt swaps. Incremental institutional reforms—such as piloting new voting structures or establishing independent monitoring bodies—may serve as practical entry points to build momentum for more ambitious systemic change.

1. Establish predictable, grant-based climate finance flows, prioritising needs-based and vulnerability-based allocation models over loan-based mechanisms.
2. Integrate equitable voting, representation, and agenda-setting reforms into the IMF, World Bank, and UNFCCC to ensure developing countries and climate-vulnerable groups have a genuine voice in decision-making.
3. Launch rapid-access programs for fair and transparent technology transfer, including sharing of patents for critical low-carbon and adaptation technologies.
4. Set up transparent global and national monitoring systems, involving independent civil society bodies and open data platforms, to track delivery on finance, mitigation, adaptation, and technology commitments.
5. Mandate the creation of formal avenues for grievance redressal and participatory consultation with marginalised, indigenous, and climate-affected communities within all major climate policy and finance frameworks.

Prioritising these steps can bridge the gap between climate justice principles and practical, high-impact outcomes, supporting both negotiation priorities and effective policy design.

Ultimately, the prospects for the future of global governance depend on nations' capacity to transform shared vulnerability into shared responsibility, recognising that equity is not a limitation on climate ambition but the foundation for its success. (Principles of Climate Justice, n.d.) Climate justice provides not only a moral compass but also a practical roadmap for building a more inclusive, resilient, and cooperative global future. While this analysis emphasises the critical role of intergovernmental institutions—including the United Nations, IMF,

World Bank, and UNFCCC—it also recognises the increasing significance of regional bodies and non-state actors such as civil society networks, indigenous groups, cities, and private sector coalitions. By considering both state and non-state forms of governance, as well as transnational and regional mechanisms, this paper adopts a broad view of global governance and examines how these diverse actors collectively shape climate justice outcomes.

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