

Climate Justice in Africa, A Systems Perspective



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Problem Statement

Africa contributes approximately 4% to global greenhouse gas emissions, yet experiences significant impacts from climate change, including severe droughts, floods, and food insecurity (4). Challenges within African nations are present, specifically financial constraints such as market-rate debt influenced by climate vulnerability, which impacts development and climate initiatives (6). Additionally, Certain development ideologies have been associated with ecological degradation and the marginalisation of affected communities (5, 7).

African youth (15-35 years), including those from indigenous communities, are affected by the climate crisis (1, 2, 3, 4). However, their participation and leadership in climate justice efforts encounter barriers, resulting in reduced agency for specific groups, including women, indigenous youth, youth with disabilities, and refugees, in shaping local and global responses even though they possess vast ecological knowledge and lived experiences (1, 2, 3, 5).

The purpose of this report is to attempt to map, unravel and understand the systems landscape of climate-impacted youth and the dynamics of this system. For this report, "youth" is defined as individuals between 15 and 35 years of age, consistent with the Africa Youth Charter 2006.

Problem Landscape

The current climate crisis in Africa is not a contemporary occurrence but the culmination of historical processes, systemic inequalities, and robust ideological frameworks. Understanding this complex landscape requires examining its historical roots, the evolving concept of justice within it, and the system dynamics that impact vulnerable populations, particularly African youth.

History of Climate Change and Its Disproportionate Impact on Africa

The global climate crisis, largely driven by industrialised nations, particularly the Global North, has historically placed an unjust burden on the African continent, despite its minimal contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions (4). This historical imbalance has led to Africa experiencing some of the most severe climate impacts, including droughts, floods, and food insecurity (4). Over time, these climate-related events have only increased, which many have now dubbed “a crisis of child rights”, given the heightened exposure of children across the continent to climate-induced shocks (4). The policies and decisions made globally over decades have shaped these climate outcomes, creating a legacy of vulnerability for present and future African generations (5).

History of Climate Justice

The concept of climate justice is to address the ethical and political dimensions of climate change, focusing on equitable responsibilities and the fair distribution of its burdens and benefits. Historically, prevailing development ideologies, often emphasising continuous economic growth, have contributed to ecological degradation and the marginalisation of communities, particularly in the Global South (5, 7). These frameworks have influenced global financial systems, leading to historical disadvantages in climate finance that manifest as significant gaps today (6). The discourse around climate action has also seen the historical marginalisation of voices from disproportionately affected regions and communities, including youth and indigenous populations, in global policy-making processes (1, 3, 7).

Systemic Denial and Undermining of African Indigenous Leaders

An aspect of the problem landscape is the concept of intergenerational justice, which outlines the responsibilities and obligations of present generations to future ones regarding the planet's environmental quality, resources, and social systems (8). This concept is commonly undermined by systemic denial from political and economic interests, which have historically resisted substantial action on climate change (5). This denial runs parallel with institutional resistance to change, evident in the often tokenistic representation of youth within global governance structures (1). Global North systems have historically removed themselves, devalued, and, in many instances, actively undermined African indigenous knowledge systems (7). These indigenous knowledge systems, which emphasise relationality and offer alternative, holistic practices for sustainability, contrast with the dominant Western, often reductionist, approaches (7). This undermining has contributed to the marginalisation of African indigenous leaders, hindering the integration of their intergenerational wisdom and unique insights into global climate solutions (7).

Socio-Economic and Financial Vulnerabilities

African nations continue to face socio-economic and financial vulnerabilities that hinder effective climate action, often having to allocate financial resources to addressing issues like poverty rather than transitioning away from coal-based power production. Financial constraints like this and market-rate debt severely limit the capacity available for implementing essential development initiatives and robust climate-positive measures (6). This ongoing struggle for adequate debt funding perpetuates a cycle where countries with the least historical responsibility for climate change face the greatest barriers to adaptation and mitigation.

The Vulnerability and Agency of Climate-Impacted Youth

African youth, including women, indigenous youth, disabled individuals, and refugees, remain at the forefront of climate vulnerability(1, 3, 4). Despite bearing this disproportionate burden, these groups possess invaluable ecological knowledge and lived experiences, stemming from their deep connections to land and life, which are crucial for co-creating effective and equitable climate responses (1, 2, 3, 7). Young people are increasingly asserting their agency through active participation in a global movement for climate justice, leveraging activism as a powerful form of education and storytelling to challenge existing power relationships and political interests (2, 5). That being said, there are still systemic barriers that limit the full and meaningful participation and leadership of these youth voices in the current climate justice efforts. Their capacity to shape local and global responses is frequently constrained by fragmented approaches and institutional resistance to change, inherently perpetuating cycles of exclusion in their own futures (1, 3, 5).

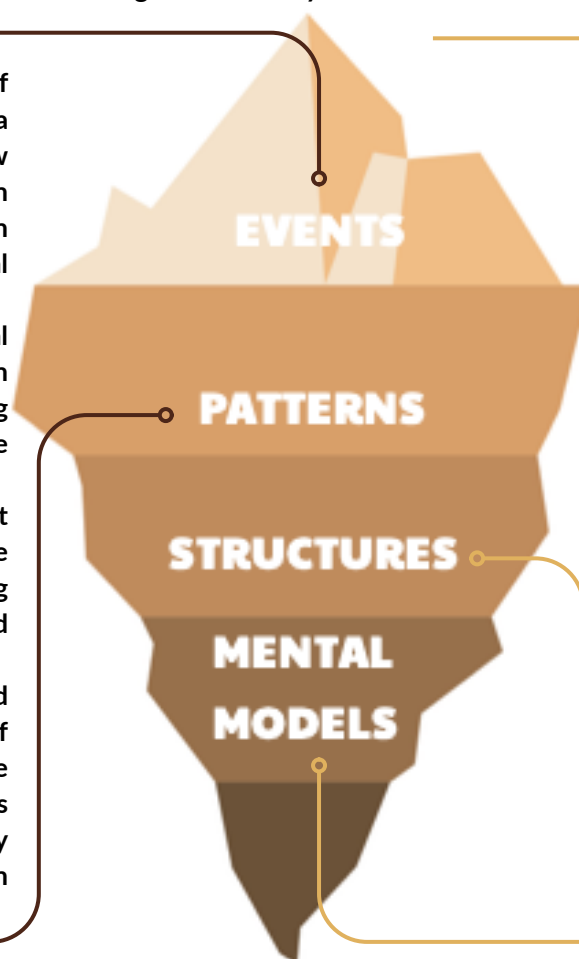


Iceberg Model

The Iceberg Model provides a framework for understanding complex issues by moving beyond immediate observations to explore underlying patterns, systemic structures, and deeply held mental models. Applying this model to the system of climate-impacted youth in Africa reveals layers of interconnected factors that contribute to the current landscape.

- Severe droughts, recurrent floods, and instances of food insecurity across African regions (4).
- The disproportionate impact of the climate crisis on children in Africa, given their heightened exposure to climate-induced shocks (4).
- Activism on climate change is observed globally and locally, involving various forms of dissent and engagement in climate justice movements (2, 5).
- African nations are encountering financial constraints and market-rate debt, which impacts their capacity for climate-positive initiatives (6).
- Instances of limited inclusion or marginalisation of youth voices in decision-making forums (1, 3).

- A consistent impact of climate change on Africa despite its low emissions, indicating an ongoing imbalance in global environmental burdens (4).
- Ongoing financial limitations for African nations in accessing debt-related climate finance (6).
- A recurring engagement of youth in climate activism, challenging existing policies and power structures (2, 5).
- Barriers to the full and meaningful inclusion of youth in climate governance, sometimes characterised by tokenistic representation (1, 3).



- Global economic frameworks that contribute to financial constraints and market-rate debt in African nations (6).
- Prevailing development ideologies and governance structures (5, 7).
- Institutional resistance within global governance to fully integrate youth perspectives acts as a structural barrier to their agency (1).

- Development ideologies emphasising continuous growth have been associated with ecological degradation and the marginalisation of communities (5, 7).
- Contrasting African knowledge systems that embrace relationality, offering alternative conceptualisations of sustainability compared to more prevalent Western paradigms (7).
- Assumptions held within some global governance bodies regarding youth roles, which can lead to resistance to deeper youth inclusion beyond symbolic gestures (1).

Systems Map

This section explores two systems maps in an attempt to understand the forces at play in climate justice for African youth. The first map, loose and explorative, provides a “macro-level” overview, highlighting broad systemic influences. This map is assumption-based and relies on tacit and researched knowledge. The second systems map is a “micro-level”, focusing on African Youth within the Climate Crisis.

Macro-level Map: A General Overview of Climate Justice in Africa

The Marco-level systems map shows a series of reinforcing and balancing factors that characterise the climate justice landscape. Such as the “Consequences of Global Climate Change” directly affects “Environmental related issues in Africa,” which, in turn, negatively affects “African youth livelihoods”[4] This cycle indicates a socio-ecological challenge characterised by the direct consequence of environmental issues affecting the livelihoods of African Youth and the broader community.

“Africa's limited financial and developmental resources” constrain African countries’ ability to respond to climate-related issues”[1,6]. This challenge is amplified by the “Unjust debt interest rate” that African countries incur, which further limits financial resources, thus reducing the capacity for effective climate responses[6]. This is a reinforcing loop where debt and limited resources perpetuate inadequate climate action and responses in the most affected regions in the world.

Another set of interactions stems from deeply embedded ideologies. The “individualistic ideology” and a “Western superiority mindset” influence “Systemic exclusion from decision making”[3,7]. This systemic exclusion, in turn, contributes to “African Youth marginalised voices”[1,3]. The marginalisation of these voices, along with the systemic exclusion, can further impact “African countries’ ability to respond to climate-related issues”, in turn affecting “African youth livelihoods”[1,4]. This creates a feedback loop where the exclusion and marginalisation of youth voices further highlight intergenerational injustices as well as climate injustices related to African youth

Mirco-level Map: Focusing on African Youth within the Climate Crisis

This systems map offers a youth-centred perspective, exploring the specific interactions and feedback loops that directly affect African youth within the climate justice landscape. It can be observed that "Climate-related issues in Africa" directly affect "Access to 'primary' resources", which in turn affects "African youth livelihoods"[4]. This indicates a direct, negative environmental impact on the well-being and basic needs of African youth. Historical systemic and cultural factors also influence the system. "Colonial systemic legacies" reinforce "Marginalised African youth (Females, disabled and refugee) voices", and can restrict "Access to 'primary' resources." Additionally, "Cultural patriarchal norms" directly reinforce the marginalisation of these voices [3,7]. This form of marginalisation creates a reinforcing feedback loop. This means that the more these voices are marginalised, the more their livelihoods suffer and their access to essential resources is systemically restricted [3,4].

However, the map also identifies a pathway or leverage point for agency and positive change. "Indigenous/interconnected practices" positively contribute to and strengthen "African-led climate-related responses," highlighting the importance of local knowledge and holistic approaches in developing effective solutions[7]. "African youth livelihoods," when built up, can become a positive influence on "African-led climate-related responses," suggesting that the direct experiences and needs of youth can be a powerful leverage point for action[1,3]. In addition to this, "African Youth related fellowships" hold potential to empower "African-led climate-related responses," indicating that dedicated support programmes could foster impactful youth-led responses[1].

Together, these two systems maps provide a basic understanding of the African climate justice landscape, from the overarching global and historical forces to the specific, immediate impacts on African youth and the potential pathways for their agency and leadership. It is important to note that the system mapping process is iterative and ongoing; these two maps are far from perfect, as the premise of system maps is that they are never-ending, forever changing, and constantly connect to far more than what is seen.

Solutions Landscape

The primary purpose of this paper has been to unravel the dynamics of the climate justice system in Africa. In line with this, the solutions landscape, while not expansive, does highlight two points of potential within the system.

Firstly, opportunity lies in the potential of African youth climate-related fellowships. These initiatives can potentially strengthen African-led climate responses. By investing in and empowering these fellowships, there is a potential pathway to empowering, nurturing and incubating impactful youth-leadership that could then directly address the climate crisis across different areas of application.

Secondly, the systems map identifies the role of Indigenous/interconnected practices. These practices are observed to positively contribute to and strengthen African-led climate-related responses, emphasising the importance and increasing global trend of leveraging local knowledge and holistic approaches in developing effective and not only sustainable but regenerative solutions.

Together, these observations from the systems map point to potential leverage points within the African climate justice landscape, offering potential areas for action.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to map and understand the African climate justice system affecting African youth. Drawing on frameworks like the Iceberg Model and systems mapping, it revealed the complex challenges faced, including disproportionate climate impacts on African livelihoods, financial constraints, and the marginalisation of African youth voices. Importantly, the analysis also identified two potential leverage points for change: the potential of African youth climate-related fellowships to build capacity among youth to lead Africa's response to climate change, and the role of indigenous practices in fostering African-led solutions. While acknowledging that systems mapping is an ongoing and evolving process, these insights underscore the potential that exists in empowering African youth agency and leadership in shaping a more just climate future.

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Appendix A

Stakeholder list (African Youth Climate-related fellowships)

- Africa Climate Ambassadors Programme [ACAP](#) → African Youth Climate Finance Fellowship [AYCFF](#), Africa Young Climate Ambassadors Programme ([AYCAP](#))
- Africa Climate Fellows [ACF](#) (Climate Justice Fellowship) → Lake Chad Climate Justice Youth Fellowship ([LCCJCF](#))
- The African Climate Creatives Fellowship([ACCF](#))
- African Group of Negotiators Experts Support ([AGNES](#)) → Early Career Climate Fellowship ([ECCF](#))
- African Climate Legal Fellowship Program ([ACLFP](#))
- Africa Climate Fellowship ([ACF](#))
- African Climate Leaders Fellowship ([ACLF](#))
- The African Climate Foundation ([TACF](#))
- Africa Climate Change Fund ([ACCF,NDC](#))
- Climate Investment Funds ([CIF](#))
- Climate Change Fund ([CCF](#))
- Africa Dream Foundation Fellowships ([ADFF](#))
- Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders ([MWF](#))
- African Stars Fellowship ([ASF](#))
- YoungEd Africa ([YoungEd](#))
- Generation Africa Fellowship Program ([GAFP](#))
- [BeVisioners](#)