

Climate Justice and Humanitarian Crisis in Africa: Insights from Lived Experiences in Buhera, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The article examines the nexus between climate justice and humanitarian crises in Southern Africa, focusing on Buhera District, Zimbabwe. It seeks to interrogate how structural inequalities, climate-induced livelihood disruptions, and humanitarian assistance converge to shape rural vulnerabilities. A desk-based interpretivist approach grounded on a post-colonial development lens, has been utilized to understand the challenges and complexities of just transitions in Africa. The lived experiences of smallholder farmers, humanitarian actors, and vulnerable households are explored through document analysis, policy briefs and other secondary data. The study argues that while humanitarian assistance addresses immediate needs, it remains insufficient in addressing broader governance challenges and systemic inequalities for just transitions in Africa. Despite Africa's insignificant contribution to the global carbon footprint, it is imperative for international actors on climate adaptation efforts to recognize historical responsibilities for emissions and the urgent need to amplify marginalized voices in global policy fora. The study advocates for a shift in international humanitarian assistance efforts from relief to community resilience-building programs through embedding justice principles within climate adaptation frameworks in Africa. By situating Buhera, in Zimbabwe, within the broader African climate discourse, the study envisages to contribute to current debates on just transitions for contextualized climate policy frameworks.

Keywords: Climate justice, humanitarian crisis, Buhera, lived experiences, Southern Africa

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1. 0 Introduction

Developing regions, particularly Africa, require substantial financial and technical assistance for transitioning to low-carbon economies. Africa faces some of the most severe impacts of climate change despite the continent's insignificant contribution of less than 4% of global emissions (Maria *et al.*, 2023). The distribution of climate change induced harms is highly uneven with developing countries disproportionately bearing the brunt while contributing the least to global carbon foot print. Bond (2020) contends that often poor communities are the ones most exposed to extreme weather through historical, economic, political, and social factors resulting in numerous humanitarian crises. This scenario demands global responses to the climate change crisis that are anchored on historical responsibilities, accountability and justice. In this regard, climate change becomes not merely an environmental challenge but fundamentally a justice issue. The notion of climate justice entails a fair and inclusive shift towards green and climate-resilient economies. For Africa, the transition must avoid magnifying pre-existing social, economic and political inequalities which exacerbates current humanitarian crises in most parts of the continent. Robinson & Carlson (2021) opine that framing climate change as a justice issue shifts attention from purely technical solutions to issues of responsibility, rights, and the fair allocation of resources for adaptation, mitigation and recovery. This perspective is crucial in international humanitarian assistance, which must be delivered with regard to underlying historical inequalities for just transitions to be achieved for poor communities in Africa.

For Africa, a critical challenge lies in mobilising international humanitarian assistance to climate-change induced crises which promotes a fair and inclusive shift towards low-emission and climate-resilient smart economies. McCauley *et al.*, (2022) note that a 'just transition' must include distributive, procedural, and restorative dimensions. For distributive justice to be achieved, it is imperative that climate financing models ensure vulnerable groups are not disproportionately burdened. Procedural justice on the other hand requires an inclusive and participatory approach while restorative justice is anchored on addressing

historical injustices of environmental harms by the rich countries of the North (Sharman, 2022). So, the issue is about the North taking full responsibilities for the South's just transition through framing global humanitarian climate response strategies that take into account the polluter pays principle.

Southern Africa has emerged as a climate hotspot within the continent, with increasing intensity of droughts, erratic rainfall, floods and prolonged dry spells (IPCC, 2022). These shifts in climatic conditions are exacerbating entrenched vulnerabilities especially for the poor and marginalized communities. According to World Bank (2022) and FAO (2023) reports, even moderate climate shocks can precipitate humanitarian disasters in sub-Saharan Africa due high rates of poverty and weak social safety nets. These humanitarian crises include large-scale food insecurities, internal displacements and the refugee crisis. Such disasters tend to undermine community coping mechanisms and social cohesion resulting in humanitarian crisis due to weak social and institutional capacities to absorb the climatic shocks (UNICEF, 2022; OCHA, 2023). In short, the reports underscore the urgency of addressing these biophysical impacts of a changing climate to avert increasing humanitarian crises in the southern African region, including Zimbabwe.

Buhera District in Zimbabwe's Natural Region IV provides an illustrative and instructive case of this dynamic. Buhera is characterized by semi-arid conditions, low and highly variable rainfall, shallow soils and limited irrigation. These conditions make rain-fed smallholder agriculture precarious (Chanza, 2021). The majority of households in Buhera depend primarily on maize and small livestock for food and cash. Reduced and erratic rainfall the decline in therefore translates directly into reduced harvests, rising food insecurity and increased reliance on external assistance (FAO, 2023). Field-based and narrative studies from Buhera document how crop failures cascade into school dropouts, sale of productive assets, indebtedness and out-migration as coping mechanisms which resultantly translates into vicious cycles of poverty (Nyahunda & Tirivangasi, 2021).

Matikinca, et al. (2023) observe that, the humanitarian crisis manifestations observed in Buhera cannot be divorced from broader governance and political economy factors of the country. The scholars argue that misallocation of relief, poor access to farming inputs, and weak early-warning systems are shaped by local governance capacity and national policy choices. In such scenarios, characterised by weak governance and short-term donor-driven humanitarian assistance, the interventions risk becoming palliative rather than addressing broader structural causes. This approach has the tendency of reinforcing a cycle of dependency in which communities oscillate between relief and recovery without achieving sustained resilience (OCHA, 2023). Such scenarios necessitate the need for a climate-justice lens into humanitarian assistance interventions. A climate-justice lens has the advantage of foregrounding issues of recognition and participation of local communities in framing their responses to their crises. Local communities, in places like Buhera, frequently report that their local knowledge, priorities and preferences receive little weight in program design and policy dialogues, which are often dominated by external actors and top-down modalities (Robinson & Carlson, 2021). There is therefore need for recognition justice through valuing local lived experiences and for procedural justice by ensuring that affected communities have a meaningful voice in adaptation decisions, humanitarian priorities and financing mechanisms (Schlosberg & Collins, 2020). Schlosberg & Collins, (2020) argue that without meaningful local participation, adaptation programs risk being poorly targeted, culturally inappropriate and unsustainable.

These humanitarian intervention dynamics demonstrate why climate change in rural sub-Saharan Africa, such as Buhera and in many parts of Southern Africa region, must be analyzed as a problem of layered vulnerabilities and contested justice (Bond, 2020). This article therefore situates the lived experiences of local rural communities within regional and global debates on just transitions and humanitarianism, arguing for effective local and international responses which are not only technical but also equitable. This can be achieved through sustained

financing and inclusive decision-making processes to redress historical and contemporary inequities (Bond, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

1.1 The need for Climate Justice

The call for climate justice reframes the discourse surrounding climate change and humanitarian work by shifting it away from a purely environmental or technical issue to a socio-political struggle. This shift must necessarily interrogate historical responsibilities of the global North in the distribution of risks and resources for climate mitigation and adaptation. Instead of focusing narrowly on mitigation technologies or adaptation strategies, climate justice highlights inequities in responsibility, levels of exposure, and the capacity of societies to respond effectively to climate risks (Okereke & Coventry, 2017). It emphasizes the need for accountability by those responsible for global greenhouse gas emissions to assist the global South, such as African rural communities, as they are often the ones who suffer most from its devastating impacts.

In Africa, and Southern Africa in particular, this injustice is starkly visible. While the continent contributes less than 4% to the global carbon footprint, it is disproportionately vulnerable to rising temperatures, increased droughts, extreme rainfall, and other climate extremes (African Climate Policy Centre [ACPC], 2022). This uneven distribution of climate change impacts illustrates a profound justice dilemma with countries and communities that lack financial resources, adaptive infrastructure, and robust governance frameworks facing the heaviest burdens through what has been termed climate coloniality (Sultana, 2022). Resultantly, the climate coloniality syndrome is characterised by increasing food insecurity, forced migration, public health vulnerabilities, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods which are inseparably linked to structural inequities and historical patterns of marginalization (Matikinca *et al.*, 2022; Sultana, 2022).

The climate justice framework also underscores the moral and ethical dimensions of global climate governance. It draws attention to the responsibility of

industrialized nations to provide finance, technology transfer, and capacity-building support to vulnerable communities (Ciplet *et al.*, 2022). However, despite repeated global commitments such as the Paris Agreement and the Glasgow Climate Pact, climate finance flows remain inadequate and often inaccessible to the most marginalized, including rural Zimbabwean districts like Buhera (Nhemachena *et al.*, 2020). This scenario deepens a vicious cycle of vulnerability which lock communities into humanitarian dependence that ignores long-term resilience building. This article argues that aid alone cannot resolve historical systemic injustices and calls for justice-oriented frameworks which addresses the root causes, amplify marginalized voices, and embed equity into climate adaptation strategies (Becker, 2020). Becker (*ibid*) argues that such a reframing not only confronts structural inequalities but also pushes for inclusive governance and accountability mechanisms that ensure that vulnerable communities have agency in shaping their climate futures.

2.0 Climate Change and Humanitarian Crisis in Africa

The African Union report (2023) notes that over 118 million people on the continent were exposed to extreme food insecurity in 2022 alone, much of it linked to climate-induced agricultural losses. One of the defining features of climate change in Africa is the coupling of environmental stressors with fragile socio-economic conditions. Southern African countries, such as Zimbabwe, continue to experience recurrent humanitarian crises where livelihoods collapse due to climatic shocks (FAO, 2023). For instance, recurrent droughts have devastated rural livelihoods which exclusively depend on rain-fed agriculture, with limited financial safety nets to mitigate shocks (UNDP, 2022). The humanitarian consequences of climate change-induced vulnerabilities are not only material but also systemic, worsening pre-existing governance challenges, health issues and inequalities (UNECA, 2021). It is argued that in Africa, climate shocks frequently overlap with political fragility, weak social protection systems, and market volatility, thereby amplifying the humanitarian crisis in the continent (Nhemachena *et al.*, 2020).

Table 1: Selected Climate-Related Humanitarian Crises in Southern Africa (2019–2024)

Year	Event	Countries Affected	Humanitarian Impact
2019	Cyclone Idai	Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi	2.1 million displaced; 1,300 deaths
2020	Prolonged drought	Zimbabwe, Zambia	7 million food insecure
2021	Flooding	South Africa, Mozambique	200,000 displaced
2022	Drought	Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe	Severe crop failure; 14 million food insecure
2023	Cyclone Freddy	Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe	600 deaths; cholera outbreak
2024	Erratic rainfall	Zimbabwe	3.8 million food insecure

Source: Compiled from OCHA (2020–2024); World Bank (2022); FAO (2023).

These crises illustrate the interplay between climate variability and humanitarian emergencies, showing how vulnerable communities are caught in a cycle of recurrent shocks with weak adaptive capacity. For Southern Africa, climate hazards are rarely isolated, rather they trigger cascading effects across food, water, health, and energy systems (UNDRR, 2023). Thus, climate change in Africa must be framed not only as an ecological challenge but also as a humanitarian and development crisis.

2.1 Lived Experiences and Local Knowledge systems

Chanza (2021) avers that lived experiences and local knowledge systems are often ignored in environmental statistical data and climate models. He argues that the voices of those who bear the brunt of the vulgar of climate change are crucial, but often overlooked in climate change response strategies. In rural contexts like Buhera District, lived experiences offer critical insights into how climate change is

embodied and endured by the communities. For instance, recurring reports from Buhera communities highlight declining maize yields, reduced livestock productivity, and shortened growing seasons, which directly undermine food security (Chanza, 2021). National-level studies shows that nearly 40% of Zimbabwe’s rural households remain highly food insecure during drought years due to a complex interplay of factors (ZimVAC, 2022).

The realities of climate impacts in rural sub-Saharan Africa goes beyond material issues but also reshapes social dynamics and livelihood coping strategies resulting in forced migration and internal displacements (Nhemachena *et al.*, 2020). Women, who are primarily responsible for household food provisioning, bear disproportionate burdens of the changing social dynamics due to climate change. Such gendered dimensions of vulnerability highlight the importance of localized adaptation measures that are sensitive to social inequalities.

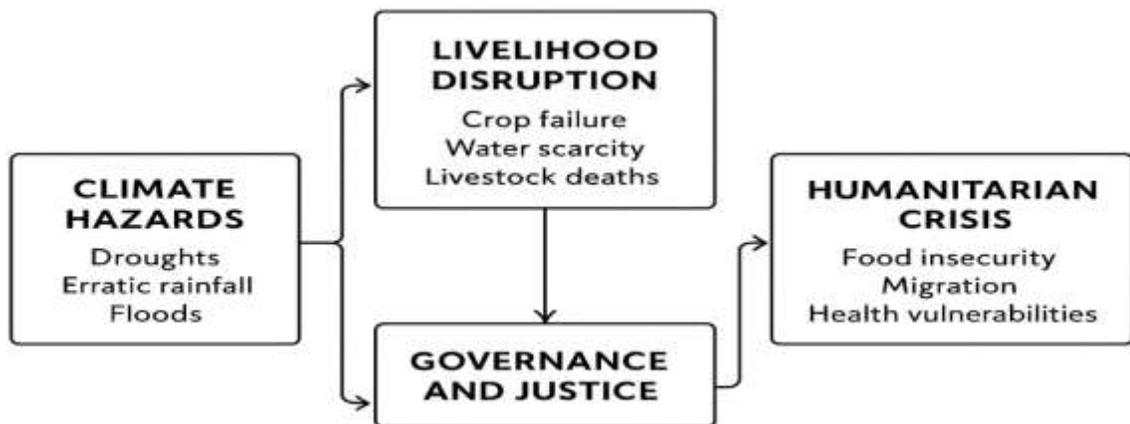


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework — Climate Change, Vulnerability, and Humanitarian Crisis in Buhera

This framework underscores the complex interplay between climate hazards, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and governance systems in shaping humanitarian outcomes. It illustrates that while climate hazards initiate shocks, the severity of humanitarian crises in Buhera is determined by mediating factors such as governance, justice frameworks, and the ability of institutions to integrate local

knowledge. Thus, a justice-oriented perspective is critical in ensuring that humanitarian interventions are equitable, context-sensitive, and resilience-building-focussed rather than perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and dependence.

2.2 Livelihood Disruptions in Buhera

Rain-fed agriculture remains the backbone of Buhera’s rural economy, sustaining the livelihoods of the majority of smallholder households. However, increasing climate variability has severely disrupted agricultural productivity. Erratic rainfall patterns, extended dry spells, and occasional flooding have shortened growing seasons, reduced soil fertility, and increased the frequency of crop failures (FAO, 2023; Nyahunda & Tirivangasi, 2021). Maize, the primary staple crop, has suffered significant yield declines, undermining both household food security and income generation.

Table 2: Climate Impacts on Livelihoods in Buhera

Impact	Description	Secondary Evidence
Crop failure	Maize yields declined by 40% since 2015	FAO (2023)
Water scarcity	Drying boreholes; reliance on unprotected sources	UNICEF (2022)
Livestock deaths	Drought-induced pasture loss	OCHA (2023)
Migration	Youth moving to Harare, South Africa	Chanza (2021)

The table above highlights the multifaceted impacts of climate stressors on Buhera households. Crop failures directly compromise household food security, forcing families to rely on food aid and other negative coping strategies. Thus, a reduction in agricultural output also negatively affects market participation smallholder farmers entrenching economic downturns and poverty (Matikinca et al., 2022).

Water scarcity due to droughts exacerbates the vulnerability of rural communities who often rely on unprotected water sources increasing the risk of waterborne diseases (UNICEF, 2022). Livestock deaths due to pasture and water shortages further diminish household food sources and income, particularly for families that depend on small ruminants and cattle for both nutrition and economic stability (OCHA, 2023). Moreover, these climate-induced pressures result in rural out-migration to urban areas and beyond borders to destinations like South Africa (Chanza, 2021). This demographic shift has wider implications as it reduces the rural labour availability and potentially increasing social fragmentation in rural communities.

Robinson & Carlson, (2021) contends that the net effect of these disruptions on rural livelihoods extends beyond immediate food shortages but contributes to long-term socio-economic instability. Households experience increased vulnerability to debt, malnutrition, and health challenges, creating a cycle of poverty (Nyahunda, 2021).

3.0 Towards Justice-Oriented Humanitarianism

The nexus between climate justice and humanitarian crises in Africa demands policy shifts. To effectively address the intertwined challenges of climate change and humanitarian crises, policy frameworks must prioritize justice-oriented humanitarianism. This approach goes beyond short-term relief to emphasize fairness in the allocation of resources, accountability of major polluters, and inclusion of marginalized communities in decision-making processes. It involves recognizing the historical responsibilities of industrialized nations in contributing to climate change while ensuring that adaptation resources, technology transfers, and financial support are equitably distributed (Bond, 2020; Robinson & Carlson, 2021). Justice-oriented humanitarianism also calls for the integration of human rights principles into climate policies, ensuring that interventions do not inadvertently exacerbate vulnerabilities or perpetuate dependency of the peripheral countries and communities.

This shift calls for the strengthening of local governance and participation of communities in decisions on mitigation and adaptation. Empowering local governance structures is crucial to fostering participatory decision-making and ensuring that climate and humanitarian policies are grounded in the lived realities of affected communities. It calls for the establishment of dialogues between local stakeholders, government officials, and humanitarian agencies for inclusive policy processes which allows rural communities to articulate their needs, priorities, and culturally appropriate solutions (Nyahunda & Tirivangasi, 2021). Local leadership structures are also critical in facilitating the distribution and monitoring of humanitarian aid to ensure transparency, accountability, and sustainability of interventions.

Additionally, developing climate-resilient infrastructure such as storage facilities, flood-resistant roads, and energy-efficient buildings can reduce vulnerability to climate shocks while supporting economic growth. Such an approach has the tendency to build community resilience and reduce long-term dependency on humanitarian aid. Also, community resilience can be strengthened through knowledge sharing and capacity building of local adaptive capacities. Such approaches would include community empowerment through training programs focused on climate-resilient agricultural techniques, water conservation methods, disaster risk management, and sustainable natural resource use (Matikinca et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is need to integrate and bridge the gaps between local knowledge systems with scientific knowledge so as to improve the effectiveness of adaptation strategies while enhancing community ownership and resilience.

OCHA report (2023) recommends the need to strengthen coordination efforts among humanitarian organizations as essential for maximizing the efficiency and impact of humanitarian interventions. The report calls for shared databases for tracking humanitarian needs and resource availability so as to avoid duplication of efforts. This integrated approach ensures that aid reaches the most vulnerable populations. The report also contends that strengthened coordination mechanisms among humanitarian agencies should enable a more rapid and targeted response

during climate emergencies and facilitate long-term planning that integrates both humanitarian relief and development objectives. Such a collaborative approach between public-private, civic and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are more likely to produce sustained improvements in resilience and equity in humanitarian interventions.

4.0 Conclusion

The climate crisis in Buhera exemplifies how humanitarian emergencies are deeply intertwined with justice concerns highlighting the limitations of relief-focused humanitarian efforts. Such relief-focused approaches to aid do not address structural and historical inequalities in rural communities in Zimbabwe and the region. The article illustrates that while humanitarian aid is essential for meeting immediate needs, long-term community resilience necessitates systemic solutions that tackle governance gaps, inequities in resource access, and global climate injustices.

The article also highlights the need to amplify the lived experiences of local communities to ensure that humanitarian interventions are grounded in contextually relevant realities. This requires a shift in humanitarian responses from temporary relief towards sustainable resilience-building built on a commitment to justice-oriented frameworks. It is critical that a justice-oriented framework must be built upon the recognition of historical and structural factors contributing to vulnerability in rural communities of Africa. As climate change continues to threaten rural livelihoods in Buhera and across Southern Africa, integrating equity, inclusion, and decolonizing climate change aid and climate action strategies is imperative to ensure that no community is left behind, and that adaptation measures are both effective and socially just.

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