Who Bears the Climate Burden? Resource Governance, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Environmental Risk

Climate change is often discussed in the language of temperatures, emissions, and adaptation strategies, yet its consequences are ultimately borne by people, unevenly, unjustly, and often silently. In resource-dependent economies, environmental change does not simply arrive as a natural phenomenon; it is filtered through political decisions, governance failures, and long-standing social inequalities. Despite a growing body of political economy literature on natural resources, insufficient attention has been paid to who bears the everyday costs of environmental degradation and climate risk. This study addresses that gap by asking a deceptively simple but urgent question: who bears the climate burden in Rivers State, Nigeria?

Rivers State is one of Nigeria's most resource-rich regions and yet one of its most environmentally fragile. Decades of oil extraction have left deep ecological scars, polluted rivers, degraded farmlands, disappearing mangroves, and poisoned livelihoods. Today, these historical injustices intersect with intensifying climate change impacts, particularly flooding, coastal erosion, and unpredictable weather patterns. However, these risks are not shared equally. Women, subsistence fisherfolk, small-scale farmers, and rural riverine communities often bear the heaviest burdens while remaining excluded mainly from decisions that shape their environments and futures.

This study approaches environmental change as a profoundly political and moral issue, shaped by power relations embedded in resource governance systems. It argues that climate vulnerability in Rivers State is not accidental, but socially produced through institutional arrangements that privilege extraction over protection and profit over people. By centring inequality and justice, the research moves beyond abstract discussions of environmental harm to illuminate how everyday experiences of loss, insecurity, and resilience are structured by governance and social stratification.

Three questions guide the analysis: How do resource governance arrangements in Rivers State shape the distribution of environmental and climate-related risks? In what ways do social hierarchies—particularly gender roles, occupational dependence on natural ecosystems, and rural–urban divides—mediate vulnerability to environmental change? And how do power relations between the state, oil companies, and local communities determine whose lives are protected, whose voices are heard, and whose suffering is normalised?

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, community-centred approach, focusing on selected oil-producing and riverine communities in Rivers State. Through in-depth interviews with women, youth, fisherfolk, farmers, and informal workers, as well as focus group discussions and conversations with community leaders, activists, and local officials, the research foregrounds lived experiences and local knowledge. Qualitative analysis of environmental policies and corporate practices further reveals the distance between formal governance promises and everyday realities.

By listening closely to those most affected, this study seeks not only to analyse inequality, but to restore visibility and dignity to voices often marginalised in environmental decision-making. While rooted in Rivers State, its insights resonate far beyond Nigeria, offering lessons for resource-dependent societies across the Global South. Ultimately, the study argues that responding meaningfully to environmental change requires confronting the unequal distribution of power and risk, and recognising that climate justice begins with asking who bears the burden, and why.

Keywords: Climate justice, Resource governance, Environmental inequality, Political economy, Nigeria

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1. Chidhume, F.J., **Akinrinde, O**., Parachi, M. (2024). Pan-African Integration: Afrophobia Conundrum and Migration Politicking in South Africa. In: Akinola, A.O., Liaga, E.A. (eds) Development and Regional Stability in Africa. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-56695-0_15. (**Offshore).**

2. Tar, U.A. & **Akinrinde, O.O.** (2023). Nigeria-South Africa Relations: Prospects and Challenges of a Strategic Partnership. In: Tar, U.A., Wapmuk, S. (eds) Nigerian Foreign Policy 60 Years After Independence. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06882-9_9. (**Offshore).**

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