

Research Article**Climate, Adaptation, Inequality and Social Institutions in The Global South: A Sociological Analysis of Institutional Mediation and Differential Vulnerability****Lilian O. Itoje-Akpokiniovo¹, Goodluck, I. Nwaogwugwu²**¹*Department of Sociology, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria*²*Department of Sociology, Coal City University, Enugu Nigeria***ABSTRACT:**

Climate adaptation has become a primary priority today with countries in the Global South that are susceptible to climate and the multilayered social and economic inequalities. Despite the fact that the concept of adaptation is often talked about in the context of scientific and policy discussion as a technical or environmental issue, the findings of the paper are that the success of adaptation depends extensively on social institutions mediating the process of resource, power and knowledge allocation. The article is a qualitative meta-synthesis of case studies and peer-reviewed articles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, which mentions three processes in the institution that reproduce the similar adaptation capacities in a systemic way, namely: gatekeeping, resource capture, and adaptive legitimacy. These processes reveal that the capacity of power systems in the local governance and traditional systems, the development institutions and market forms determine who is incorporated in the adaptation process and beneficiaries. As has been analyzed, the adaptation process is a process of relations and a contested process which has been influenced by historical inequalities, institutionalized practices as well as social identities. The conclusion of the article is that equitable and efficient climate change response is founded on participatory governance, transparent institutions and paying more attention to the knowledge and voice of the marginalized populations. It requires a greater sociological intervention of climate adjusting studies to impact policy that facilitates social justice and strengthens communities.

Keywords: *Climate, Adaptation, Inequality, Social Institutions, Global South***1. INTRODUCTION**

Climate change has taken one of the most critical developmental challenges of the twenty first century and its dangers are very complex and extend way beyond environmental degradation. It is specifically acute in the Global South where the climatic stresses interact with the long-term patterns of poverty, exclusion and structural inequality (Adger, 2006). The countries of Africa, Latin America, South Asia and Southeast Asia already observe the increase of sea levels, regular droughts, soil salinization, decline in agricultural activity, as well as the emergence of more severe weather patterns. Such ecological transformations are also compounded by social vulnerabilities such as unequal tenure of the land, informal means of livelihood, poor institutional and

historical disenfranchisement of certain groups (Ribot, 2014). Although the physical side of the climate change has been thoroughly covered in the scientific literature, the social processes of the community response to it and the people who can effectively adapt to them are poorly researched.

The importance of sociological concepts of development is that they emphasize the fact that climate adjustment is not a technical or scientific challenge but an essentially social and political phenomenon (Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin, 2015). The institutions affect the outcomes of the adaptation and define the access to the resources, distribute the opportunities and make the decisions. Among these organizations the local governments and the customary land systems or the NGOs and

Corresponding author: Lilian O. Itoje-Akpokiniovo**DOI:** 10.5281/zenodo.17820002**Received:** 10 Nov 2025; **Accepted:** 28 Nov 2025; **Published:** 30 Nov 2025

Copyright © 2025 The Author(s): This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution- Non-Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) International License

community networks act as mediators of the risk perception of communities, arbitrate conflicting interests and put the adaptation plans in effect (Ostrom, 2009). Thus, climate adaptation processes are impossible to explain without referring to the extended institutional setting and the power relations based on it. A newly developed body of scholarly literature has unveiled that the imposition of social inequalities are likely to have an impact on the beneficiaries of adaptation interventions. Females, indigenous people, and the smallholder farmer are all marginalized groups with regards to the adaptation programs and access to the necessary resources, including credit, technology, and information (Nightingale, 2017).

To address this gap, this article makes a contribution in the sociology of climate adaptation in three ways. First, it theorizes the idea of adaptation as an institution and relations process, but not as a technical intervention with a particular focus. Second, it establishes pathways through which the social institutions reproduce or abate unequal adaptive competencies. Third, it outlines a future research agenda where power, inequality and institutional processes are researched beforehand as the subject of climate-adaptation research. By this, the article is targeting to increase sociological information on climatic adaptation as it take place within diverse social contexts in the Global South.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Climate Change Adaptation In The Global South

Climate adaptation is utilized in the global south based on the emphasis of investigations that have examined the capability to adjust to climate that is considerably crippled by the structural aspect of poverty, inadequate facility, and weak state ability. Such restrictions are quite noticeable in rural and peri-urban areas where the area on agriculture, fisheries and pastoralism, which are sensitive to climate, form a large share of the activities (Adger, 2006). However, the researchers tend to think more that the outcomes of the adaptation are very diverse in the community context and reveal the origins of inequalities in the sense of historical, political, and social contexts (Ribot, 2014). Development sociology also dwells upon the fact that climate

vulnerability no longer remains an issue of the biophysical exposure but becomes an issue of stratified social relations, which encompasses class relations, gender, caste hierarchies, and ethnic differences predetermining access to resources and opportunities (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987). These lessons underline the importance of the fact that we should regard adaptation as socially diverse process which is situated in more important power relations and inequality.

2.2 Inequality and Differential Vulnerability

The existing body of literature suggests that women, indigenous people, informal workers, and smallholder farmers are the most disadvantaged populations that suffer the impact of climate change. The studies highlight that the land distribution disparities reduce the capacities of the smallholders and tenants to make long-term adaptation investment and expose them to more vulnerabilities to climate shocks (Nightingale, 2017). The gender division of labor and well-established social norms have the propensity of limiting access to adaptation resources such as credit, agricultural technologies, training, and climate information services accessible to women (Carr and Thompson, 2014). Meanwhile, the ethnic minorities and the native groups are usually marginalized by the state institutions, and thus less prone to taking part in the adaptation programmed led by the state and having less weight in the decision-making process, which imparts on the local resources management (Eriksen et al., 2015). The unequal vulnerability distributions are signs that climate risk is mediated by institutional and sociopolitical set-ups and may not always be mediated by environmental exposure. This, in its turn, results in the position of scholars that vulnerability is to be treated as a social relation, historic marginalization, and institutional process.

The formal and informal institutions form the centre of organization of the adaptation processes in the Global South. They include state agencies, local governments that are decentralized, customary land tenure systems, kinship networks, non-governmental organizations, donor organizations and market actors such as microfinance institutions. The institutional sociology states that such structures often reproduce inequalities through a process of gate keeping and distributive practices

selectively and legitimize some actors or knowledge (North, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986). Most of the climate-adaptation research has taken into consideration the institutional forces, without taking into consideration sociological studies of power flow on and within these institutions. Based on the views of the political ecology scholars, those adaptation initiatives that do not emphasize the political and social processes are likely to increase the inequalities that they seek to address (Robbins, 2012). In that sense, the principle of institutional mediation may be important to comprehend the fact that there are unequal results of adaptation and the causes thereof and why certain groups of people turn out to be vulnerable despite the introduction of more adaptative actions.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The institutional-political economy paradigm applied in this study embraces the expertise of the institutional theory, political ecology and sociology of inequality. Collectively these perceptions aid in shedding light on the fact that the issue of climate adaptation in the Global South is not just an issue of the environment, but it is also the issue of the pattern of power historically established, inequality in access to institutions and power struggles of various forms of social legitimacy. The initial theory of analysis is the institutional theory. According to North (1990), institutions encompass rules of the game which organize human interactions, and create incentives or opportunities and constraints. Institutions determine how the resources are divided, who enjoys the benefits of the public goods as well as the players who have been empowered to participate in the process of governance. About climate adaptation, institutions such as local government, the customary land system, and the NGOs control access to land, credit, infrastructure, information and decision-making space. Another important point given by the publication of Ostrom (2009) is that collective action and institutional arrangement are powerful predictors of how the communities manage common resources when under the pressure of environmental concerns. By doing so, it is possible to apply the institutional theory to the reason why the adaptation initiatives may be effective in one situation and not in another: institutional performance, inclusivity, and

accountability are the factors that determine the availability of adaptive capacity between social groups.

The second pillar of the framework is political ecology which highlights the existence of uneven vulnerabilities in environmental matters, which is generated by political and economic institutions. To the scholars such as Blaikie and Brookfield (1987), environmental risks such as those concerning climate change cannot be felt outside the social relations that regulate access to land, labour and resources. Another important point that Robbins (2012) makes is that the character of environmental interventions is political because it is a struggle of authority, knowledge and authorization. Politically ecologically, the climate adaptation projects are deployed into the framework of greater power relations when the state, the donors, and the local elites are able to influence priorities of people who are listened and whose wisdom is denied. This outlook explains that the patterns of exclusion and privilege can be reproduced even in policies about adaptation even though they are in technical form.

The third pillar is grounded on the sociology of inequality particularly the work of Tilly (1998) and Bourdieu (1986) to give the explanation on inequality distribution of adaptive capacities of various groups of the society. The concept of durable inequality formulated by Tilly underlines the fact that the social stratifications, created on the basis of classes, gender, ethnic groups et cetera, are perpetuated by the organizational factors, which categorize people and divide them. These steps can define the perceived validity of individuals to the programs of adapting, and the individuals who are excluded in the process of decisions. The idea of capital, created by Bourdieu (economic, social, and cultural), also justifies how individuals and organizations can utilize different resources and handle the impacts of climate. A good example is the social capital which is capable of breaking or building a household informed about the programs on adaptation in time or mobilizing the community members in times of crisis. The cultural capital ascertains the knowledge which is regarded in the process of adaptation planning and symbolic capital the emotions of legitimacy and authority.

Incorporating these three theoretical schools of thought, institutional political economy theory assumes that the outcomes of the process of adaptation are not solely predetermined by material resources, but also four factors in a social setting which are mutually dependent. The resources available to the institutions will determine the type of individuals who get access to the formal and informal systems of resource allocation. The relations of power delimitate the interests that dominate in the agendas of adaptation and voices that are marginalized. The social capital and legitimacy define the identification of some actors as valid partners to collaborate with in the adaptation endeavors. The dissimilar levels of exposure and vulnerability to climatic effects are still being affected by old inequalities that are fixed in colonial, economic, and social forms (Ribot, 2014). Collectively, these dimensions contribute to the revelation of adaptation not being a neutral or a technological process but a controversial social space in which the actors are grappling with the disparity of institutional possibilities and constraints.

This framework can be singly offered as to why adaptation to climate in the Global South is disproportionate since it bridges the institutional dynamics with the political and sociological analyses of inequality. It emphasizes the need to study the process of adaptation as a very social and political process which is determined by the prevailing hierarchies, power relations and institutional structures.

4. METHODOLOGY

Given that this study is conceptual and analytic, it was found that the method of qualitative meta-synthesis is a research that was conducted to synthesize and enlarge findings in different sources of information on climate adaptation, institutional processes, and social inequality in the Global South. It is through meta-synthesis that one can perform a study when the researcher is interested in extracting new theoretical insights rather than just summarizing the current qualitative research using a strictly descriptive research style of summarizing. The meta-synthesis approach applied in this paper relies on the principles of the tenets given by Noblit

and Hare (1988) to transform ideas among the studies, identify trends of similarities and differences, and construct a scheme of interpretation that can add to the sociological literature on climate adaptation.

The first stage entailed a systemic review of peer-reviewed studies that were published between the years 2010-24. It is the period of the thriving growth of climate-adaptation scholarship including the major international climate agreements and the increased involvement of the social science perspective in climate studies. In order to find the studies that examine climate vulnerability, adaptation, and institutional governance and social inequality in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the databases of Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar have been consulted. The criteria included qualitative and mixed-method studies which provided an empirical or conceptual data relevant to the institutional analysis. The systematic review activities were performed with references to the number of rules and standards that concentrate on the transparency, replicability, and critical interaction with the sources (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006).

The second phase was thematic analysis that involved a summary of the findings in terms of the chosen studies. The thematic analysis allows the researcher to define, identify and describe common themes in diverse qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Codes were developed inductively and began with broad categories such as institutional access, power hierarchies and differentiation of vulnerability and then narrowed down to certain themes. This cycle-like approach helped in identifying the presence of institutional mechanisms such as gatekeeping, resource capture, and adaptive legitimacy that are replicated in environments despite the differences that exist in regions.

The third part of the methodology was in comparative analysis within the case studies in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Comparative methods come in handy in revealing the parallels of the institutional processes within diverse social, cultural and political settings in order to identify the consequences of adaptation (Ragin, 1994). It was an indispensable stage in discovering patterns of cross-context and not overlooking local particularity. The

cases have been compared considering the institutional structure, governance behavior, social stratification and adaptations. Such comparisons made it possible to differentiate between context-specific dynamics and more general structural processes according to which the outcome of the adaptation is determined in a systematic way.

Finally, synthesis of the various streams of evidence was done in an interpretive manner as proposed by Paterson et al. (2001), so as to concentrate on conceptual integration rather than mere aggregation. Such synthesis allowed building a sociological model that can explain institutional processes at a global and local level that are context-specific and could influence climate adaptation. The combination of systematic review, thematic analysis, and comparative interpretation is done through a rigorous and comprehensive approach to the problem of understanding the role of social institutions in forming unequal adaptive capacities across the Global South.

5. FINDINGS

The Institutional Mechanisms Which Lead to Inequality

5.1 Institutional Gatekeeping

This discussion has proven that institutional gatekeeping is arguably among the strongest mechanisms that contribute to the disproportionate climate-adaptation effects in the entire Global South. The gatekeeping process occurs when the official and informal authority (local governments, traditional leaders, NGOs and donor agencies) decides who will receive the adaptation resources and who will not be included in the decision-making process. Politically loyal household, local elites or individuals who are affiliated to the superior power structures are highlighted when opportunities or resources are imminent in as far as climate is concerned in majority of the communities. There is not a uniform distribution of adaptation programs which may be received by individuals with better social networks, more literate or with more connections with the institution. Then, those individuals and households in the less developed places may remain unaware of available resources and training.

Access limitation also exists owing to bureaucratic necessities. Many of the adaptation schemes are founded on the written form or identification or a membership in formal association which can be a disadvantage to those very households with low literacy and without official records. These institutional barriers do not only hold back the community level involvement, but also cause structural disparities since they provide greater influence to those individuals who are already at a better position to bargain the administrative processes. The status of inclusion of adaptation initiatives is also limited by the gate keeping and the beneficiaries of adaptation interventions are also subject to gate keeping.

5.2 Resource Capture

Resource capture is the second process that has an effect on the unequal outcomes. This is happening where the elites and the well-connected categories are robbing the climate-adaptation resources and exploiting them to their advantage at the expense of the other vulnerable individuals. The wealthier farmers including those tend to take over producer cooperatives or local associations which distribute agricultural subsidies such as drought-resistant seeds, subsidies or irrigation facilities. Since such institutions are more likely to be driven by already developed hierarchies, they allow the actors endowed more advantageously to end up with a disproportionate amount of the climate-adaptation resources.

Gender relations are also applicable in the capture of resources. Men normally have greater access to training, extension or access to financial resources rendering them more adaptive limiting the participation of women. In the case of climate induced displacement or resettlement, the local elites or traditional power could be employed to influence the allocation of communal land and housing against the vulnerable groups. These tendencies show that even the programs that have best intentions as adaptive ones can legitimize the status quo by allowing more dominant people or organizations to enjoy their fruits.

5.3 Adaptive Legitimacy

The third mechanism that was identified in the analysis process is the adaptive legitimacy, i.e. how certain actors are perceived to play a social and institutional role as the legitimate agents of adaptation planning and other actors are marginalized. Consultation processes and decision making space are normally open to community leaders, men of high status, Non Governmental Organization and individuals of political affiliations as privileged individuals. Their voices are supposed to be authoritative and they usually become the intermediaries in terms of which the adaptation programs can be implemented.

On the other hand, the views of women, youth, migrants and indigenous are not valued or consulted even though it is these people who can provide the most important information regarding the local ecosystems and vulnerability. An asymmetric distribution of legitimacy such as this influences the knowledge that will be regarded as credible and what strategies of adaption one can prioritize. Local grounded practices and community knowledge systems tend to be disregarded in situations when the external agencies or other local authorities tend to lean toward the technocratic solutions or views by the elites. Migration flows are thereby minimized in being more choosy less accommodative and receptive to the interests of the most vulnerable to climate changes.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of the discussed study show that climate adaptation in the Global South should not be seen as the technical or environmental operation, but the process which is rather social and institutional in its nature. Through the adaptation program, such programs are usually carried out within the already existing structures of governance, power and inequity i.e. interventions can be unconsciously copied to the weakness they seek to mitigate. This is in accordance to the classical sociological observation that the dynamics of development are greatly predetermined by the path dependencies of the institutional as well as the historic power relations (North, 1990; Tilly, 1998). Adaptation is more likely to reproduce such structural inequalities rather than dealing with inequality.

The initial important lesson that can be learnt due to the analysis is that adaptation is not a matter but a relationship. There are social status, political connections, and institutional embeddedness, which predetermine the availability of resources related to climate adaptation. This implies the political-ecology arguments that interventions in the environment are never uncritical since they are affected by the power struggles, the authority struggles, the legitimacy and meaning struggles (Blaikie, 1985; Robbins, 2012). One such area is where power is exercised in climate adaptation whereby choices can be made on the basis of who will be considered in receiving help, the extent of knowledge considered, and whose needs should be given priority. The relational component of adaptation thus suggests that the problem of all technical solutions cannot be removed by isolating its social processes which constitute the way such solutions are implemented.

The second is that institutions can act as obstacles and providers. The idea of institutional gatekeeping and resource capture portrays how formal and informal institution institutions still contribute to the reproduction of social exclusion that it generally is in favor of actors or factions having political links. The same is reflected in institutionalist thinking that emphasizes the fact that rules, norms and set-ups of organizations tend to entrench a set of pre-existing power and resource distributions unless it is restructured deliberately (Ostrom, 2005). However, institutions may equally be used to introduce more inclusive adjustment. Transformative potential of institutions have been shown by examples of mechanisms of participatory decision-making, transparency, and accountability which lacked the inequality among governance structures where deliberate mechanisms were oriented towards reducing the inequality. This duality stance means that institutions do not tend towards either progress or retrogression but are affected by the social and political environment.

The third lesson is that resilience and efficiency cannot be viewed as the solution to climate adaptation, but it is a question of social justice. Adaptability capabilities are mostly affected by inequality coded in land rights, citizenship, gender relations and political voice. This can be related to

the general sociological theories that have highlighted the issue of symbolic power, capital distribution and structural marginalization as determinants of the outcome of social status (Bourdieu, 1986). Failure to consider such dynamics puts the adaptation efforts at risk of replicating the exclusionary trends of the past, particularly among women, the youth, migrants and indigenous people. As levels of the impacts of the climate increase, the distribution of both benefits and costs of adaptation will reflect the high levels of social inequalities, except in the case that justice-related solutions are incorporated into the policymaking process.

A combination of these lessons proves the need of more sociologists intervention in climate change adaptation research and policy. The sociological methods provide quite significant tools of investigating the institutional processes, power politics, and social disparities- the aspects, which are often disregarded in technical or environmental planning. By integrating sociological analysis in the adaptation policy, practitioners and policymakers will be in a better position in identifying structural challenges, foreseeing unintended outcomes, and coming up with interventions that actually work to the advantage of marginalized groups in rendering them resilient. That way, climate adaptation can be technocratized to a greater extent than a more socially and fairly-grounded process.

7. CONCLUSION

It has been shown in this paper that either environmental science or technical planning can never give proper explanation to the Global South climate adaptation. Whereas weather impacts, such as droughts, floods, high, low temperatures are the concerned issues of material nature, the social and institutional landscape that eventually defines who will be adapted, how and to what extent is the issue of social and institutional nature. Social institutions known as local governments, customary authorities, non-governmental organizations, market and community networks are mediating in access to resources, opportunities allocation, and legitimization of a particular set of knowledge and participation. As a result, the adaptation process might be susceptible to old traditions of privilege, exclusion and inequality.

Three significant mechanisms in institutions which were found in the analysis are institutional gatekeeping, resources capture and adaptive legitimacy which reproduce unequal outcomes of adaptation. These processes reveal the working nature of power within the decision-making process on a daily basis, bureaucracies and social norms. Limiting access to information or establishing administrative barriers is the origin of gatekeeping which establishes boundaries of participation. Through resource grabbing, the elites are able to hoard resources which are normally at the disadvantaged groups. Adaptive legitimacy determines whose voices, experience and strategies may be legitimized in the course of adaptation planning. All these reasons determine why in certain situations, the adaptation programs fail to reach the neediest and even enhance the social disparities that are already present.

A more sociologically sensitive approach to climate adaptation explains the existence of pre-emptive governance structures whereby different members of society are allowed to set priorities and solutions. It requires equitable access to the financial, technological and informational resources in order to ensure the rich and politically powerful people do not restrict adapting. It also argues that we should recognize knowledge held by the marginalized groups as their everyday experiences can create important and context-sensitive information on the risks related to climate. Finally, it also highlights the importance of institutional responsibility and transparency to prevent resource misuse and can ensure that the adaptation measures do contribute to the advantage of vulnerable groups.

The research of how the institutional arrangements affect the outcome of the adaptation in different locations and settings should be continued in the future. Comparison can contribute to illuminating the differences in the governance, social structure and historical differences that resulted in various adaptation paths. There is also a need to study the social impacts of adaptation interventions in the long-run such as how they empower the community, alter relationships of power, and consolidate the reliance of the external actors. Sociological studies can help to reach more equitable, inclusive, and effective solutions to climate adjustment solutions

by investigating these questions further and reaching conclusions that will treat climate change as a social, not merely an environmental challenge

REFERENCES

- Adger, W. N. (2006). Vulnerability. *Global Environmental Change*, 16(3), 268–281.
- Blaikie, P. (1985). *The political economy of soil erosion in developing countries*. Longman.
- Blaikie, P., & Brookfield, H. (1987). *Land degradation and society*. Methuen.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Carr, E. R., & Thompson, M. C. (2014). Gender and climate change adaptation in agrarian settings: Current thinking, new directions, and research frontiers. *Geography Compass*, 8(3), 182–197.
- Eriksen, S. H., Nightingale, A. J., & Eakin, H. (2015). Reframing adaptation: The political nature of climate change adaptation. *Global Environmental Change*, 35, 523–533.
- Nightingale, A. J. (2017). Power and politics in climate change adaptation efforts: Struggles over authority and recognition in the context of political instability. *Geoforum*, 84, 11–20.
- North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, institutional change, and economic performance*. Cambridge University Press.
- Noblit, G. W., & Hare, R. D. (1988). *Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing qualitative studies*. Sage.
- Ostrom, E. (2005). *Understanding institutional diversity*. Princeton University Press.
- Ostrom, E. (2009). A general framework for analyzing sustainability of social-ecological systems. *Science*, 325(5939), 419–422.
- Paterson, B. L., Thorne, S. E., Canam, C., & Jillings, C. (2001). *Meta-study of qualitative health research*. Sage.
- Petticrew, M., & Roberts, H. (2006). *Systematic reviews in the social sciences: A practical guide*. Blackwell.
- Ragin, C. C. (1994). *Constructing social research*. Pine Forge Press.
- Ribot, J. (2014). Cause and response: Vulnerability and climate in the Anthropocene. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 41(5), 667–705.
- Robbins, P. (2012). *Political ecology: A critical introduction* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Tilly, C. (1998). *Durable inequality*. University of California Press.