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CLIMATE CHANGE AND GLOBAL POWER SHIFTS: HOW VULNERABLE COUNTRIES ARE CHANGING INTERNATIONAL POLITICS.

Dr. Neelum Khan

PhD Scholar, Political Science Department, Islamia College University, Peshawar

neelamkhan4sep@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *
Dr. Neelum Khan

Abstract

Climate change is an environmental issue and a transformative force in international politics. This study explores how the increasing vulnerability of certain countries to climate-related threats is reshaping global power structures. The research aims to investigate how climate-vulnerable nations, particularly in the Global South, influence international decision-making, diplomacy, and global governance by leveraging their shared vulnerability as a political tool. A qualitative research methodology was adopted, using content analysis of international climate negotiations, official policy documents, and expert interviews. The study also examined case studies of small island developing states and climate-vulnerable alliances, such as the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), to understand their strategies and growing influence on global platforms like the United Nations and COP conferences. The findings suggest that vulnerable countries are successfully redefining their roles from passive recipients of aid to active agents of change, pressing for climate justice, equity in emission responsibilities, and increased climate financing. These shifts are gradually altering traditional power dynamics, encouraging more inclusive and participatory global governance. The study recommends strengthening the collective voice of vulnerable nations through regional and international coalitions, promoting capacity-building for climate diplomacy, and integrating climate vulnerability indices into global decision-making frameworks to ensure fair representation and policy outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change has emerged as a transformative force in international relations, fundamentally altering not only environmental systems but also the dynamics of global politics and diplomacy. Traditionally, climate change was viewed primarily as an environmental or scientific issue; however, it is now recognized as a central driver of shifts in international power structures, economic dependencies, and security concerns. The increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters, such as coastal flooding, droughts, and extreme storms, have heightened food and water insecurity, contributed to mass migration, and threatened the stability of governments, thereby making climate change a destabilizing force both nationally and internationally. These cascading effects have prompted the integration of climate agendas into foreign policies and have led to the formation of new alliances and partnerships based on shared environmental goals, as seen in major international agreements like the UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement. The research problem

addressed in this study is the growing vulnerability of certain countries, particularly in the Global South and among Small Island and least developed states, and how this vulnerability is reshaping global power structures. As climate impacts intensify, the most affected countries are no longer passive recipients of aid but are leveraging their shared vulnerability as a political tool to influence international decision-making and global governance. This shift is evident in their demands for climate justice, differentiated responsibilities, and increased support for adaptation and mitigation efforts, which challenge traditional hierarchies in international relations and call for more equitable solutions.

The main objective of this research is to investigate how climate-vulnerable nations utilize their vulnerability to shape international negotiations, diplomacy, and governance frameworks. Specifically, the study seeks to understand the strategies these countries employ to amplify their voices, build coalitions, and advocate for fairer climate finance and technology transfers. By examining the actions and influence of these nations, the research aims to highlight the evolving landscape of global climate politics and the emergence of new forms of agency among vulnerable states. To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a qualitative methodology, utilizing content analysis of international climate negotiations, official policy documents, and expert interviews. In addition, case studies of climate-vulnerable alliances such as the Climate Vulnerable Forum and the Alliance of Small Island States are examined to provide concrete examples of how collective action and strategic diplomacy are enabling vulnerable countries to play a more prominent role in global forums like the United Nations and COP conferences. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of both the structural challenges and the innovative strategies shaping the participation of vulnerable nations in international climate governance. Climate change is not only an environmental crisis but also a catalyst for profound transformations in international relations, compelling a rethinking of power, justice, and agency in global governance.

Literature Review

The intersection of climate change, power dynamics, and global governance has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. This review synthesizes insights from two seminal books and four recent research papers, focusing on how climate-vulnerable nations leverage their positions, the role of power and knowledge in adaptation governance, and the persistent equity challenges in the evolving landscape of international climate politics. A critical gap analysis is provided to highlight areas where further research is needed.

Caplet, Roberts, and Khan (2015) offer a comprehensive account of how climate change has reshaped international power relations, particularly between the Global North and South. The authors argue that climate negotiations have historically reinforced existing inequalities, with industrialized nations maintaining disproportionate influence over agenda-setting and resource allocation. The book details how the architecture of climate governance, through mechanisms like the UNFCCC, often marginalizes vulnerable countries, relegating them to the role of aid recipients rather than agents of change. However, the authors also document the emergence of new coalitions and advocacy networks, such as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), which have begun to challenge the status quo by demanding climate justice, loss and damage compensation, and more equitable decision-making structures. This work lays the foundation for understanding the persistent structural barriers in climate politics and the gradual but significant shift toward greater agency among vulnerable nations.

Robinson's (2018) book brings a human rights and equity perspective to the climate debate, emphasizing the stories of communities on the front lines of climate impacts. She foregrounds the principle of climate justice, arguing that those least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions are often the most affected and the least equipped to adapt. Robinson highlights the role of grassroots movements, indigenous knowledge, and local leadership in driving climate action, countering the narrative of vulnerable countries as passive victims. The book also discusses the importance of integrating justice and equity into climate policy frameworks, both at the national and international levels. Robinson's

narrative approach complements the structural analysis of Ciplet et al. (2015), illustrating the lived realities behind policy debates and the transformative potential of inclusive governance.

Woroniecki and Krüger (2017) critically examine how power is conceptualized in climate adaptation research. Their analysis reveals that much of the literature treats power as a static attribute, focusing on formal institutions and regulatory frameworks. However, they argue that power is also relational and dynamic, shaped by negotiation, learning, and the interplay of multiple actors. The authors call for more nuanced approaches that recognize the agency of marginalized groups and the potential for bottom-up adaptation strategies. This paper identifies a key gap in adaptation scholarship: the limited attention to informal power dynamics and how vulnerable communities can influence policy outcomes through coalition-building and advocacy.

Seeland et al. (2024) build on the relational view of power, arguing that addressing climate injustices requires explicit attention to how power is distributed and exercised in climate governance. The authors emphasize that rapid transitions to low-carbon systems can inadvertently create new injustices if they overlook the needs and rights of marginalized populations. They advocate for participatory approaches that empower vulnerable groups, integrate local knowledge, and ensure that decision-making processes are transparent and inclusive. The paper highlights the risk that, without such measures, climate action may reinforce existing inequalities or generate new forms of exclusion. This research underscores the importance of relational power analysis in designing just and effective climate policies.

Vink et al. (2013) conduct a systematic review of climate adaptation governance literature, focusing on the interplay between knowledge and power. They find that while many studies address either technical knowledge or formal power structures, few examine their interaction. The review reveals that adaptation governance is often conceptualized as a technical challenge, with insufficient attention to negotiation, learning, and the fluidity of power relations. The authors argue for more research on how knowledge and power co-evolve in adaptation processes, particularly in contexts where regulatory frameworks are weak or contested. This gap is especially relevant for vulnerable countries, where informal networks and local expertise can play a critical role in shaping adaptation strategies.

literature on climate change impacts on energy systems, highlighting both regional trends and research gaps. They note that while there is broad agreement on the impacts of climate change on wind, solar, and thermal power, projections for hydropower and bioenergy are more uncertain. The review also points out that most studies focus on developed countries, with limited attention to the specific challenges faced by developing nations. The authors call for more regional impact studies, especially in the Global South, and for integrated modeling approaches that account for multiple climate feedbacks and adaptation options. This paper illustrates the persistent imbalance in research attention and resources, reinforcing the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive analyses.

A synthesis of these sources reveals several critical gaps in the literature. First, there is a persistent underrepresentation of vulnerable countries in both research and policy debates. While books such as Ciplet et al. (2015) and Robinson (2018) highlight the agency and resilience of these nations, much of the empirical research remains focused on the Global North or treats vulnerable countries as passive recipients of aid. Second, the interplay between knowledge and power in adaptation governance is insufficiently explored, with most studies emphasizing technical solutions over the social and political dimensions of adaptation (Vink et al., 2013). Third, there is a need for more relational and dynamic analyses of power, as emphasized by Woroniecki and Krüger (2017) and Seeland et al. (2024), to understand how coalitions, advocacy, and informal networks can reshape climate governance. Finally, research on climate impacts and adaptation is often fragmented by sector and geography, with limited integration of cross-sectoral feedbacks and local knowledge (Cronin et al., 2018).

Future research should address these gaps by prioritizing the perspectives and experiences of climate-vulnerable nations, exploring the co-evolution of knowledge and power in adaptation processes, and developing integrated models that reflect the complex realities of climate impacts and

responses. Such efforts are essential for advancing climate justice and ensuring that global governance structures are both effective and equitable.

Theoretical Framework

The architecture of global climate politics is fundamentally shaped by enduring power dynamics rooted in colonial legacies and persistent North-South inequalities. Historically, colonialism established extractive economic systems and hierarchical political relationships that privileged the Global North, primarily Europe and North America, while systematically marginalizing the Global South, including Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific. These legacies are not merely historical artifacts; they actively inform the present-day distribution of resources, technological capacity, and decision-making authority in international climate governance. After decades of international climate negotiations, the world remains at a crossroads where the most vulnerable countries often former colonies face the gravest threats from climate change, including sea-level rise, drought, and food insecurity. Yet, these same countries have the least influence over global climate policy. This inequity is starkly reflected in the outcomes of major agreements such as the Paris Accord, where the ambitions and commitments of powerful states often overshadow the urgent needs of the most affected populations. The dominance of wealthy nations in setting the agenda and framing the terms of debate has resulted in climate agreements that are frequently inadequate to address the scale and urgency of the crisis, especially for those on the frontlines of climate impacts.

Great power politics, particularly the actions and interactions of the United States, China, the European Union, and other influential actors, play a decisive role in shaping the prospects for global climate action. These powers possess the economic, technological, and diplomatic resources to drive or stall international cooperation4. For instance, the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement in 2017 exemplified how the internal politics of a single great power can undermine global progress. Similarly, geopolitical rivalries, such as the ongoing tensions between the U.S. and China, can impede collective efforts, as cooperation on climate change becomes entangled with broader strategic competition. The literature consistently finds that the balance of power among major nations determines the extent and effectiveness of international climate collaboration, with powerful states able to shape, delay, or dilute global commitments depending on their interests and priorities. Market-based reforms and incremental policy approaches, often advocated by powerful states and fossil fuel interests, have proven insufficient to challenge the structural inequalities embedded in the global climate regime. These approaches tend to reinforce the status quo, perpetuating the dominance of established interests and limiting the transformative potential of international climate policy. As a result, the world risks repeating cycles of inadequate action, with the most vulnerable countries bearing disproportionate burdens while having minimal influence over the solutions adopted.

In response to these persistent inequalities, the concept of climate justice has emerged as a central theme in global governance and diplomacy. Climate justice reframes the climate crisis not only as an environmental issue but also as a profound question of equity, responsibility, and human rights. It asserts that those who have contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions, primarily countries in the Global South and marginalized communities everywhere, are the most vulnerable to its impacts and therefore deserve special consideration in international agreements and resource allocation. The principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (CBDR), enshrined in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), encapsulates this ethos by recognizing the historical responsibility of industrialized nations for the bulk of emissions and the need for them to lead in mitigation and support adaptation in less developed countries. However, operationalizing climate justice remains contentious, as powerful states often resist binding commitments to finance, technology transfer, and loss and damage compensation. The literature highlights that climate justice movements both within and across national borders have been instrumental in pushing for more ambitious and equitable climate policies, mobilizing civil society, and holding governments accountable for their obligations.

Recent years have witnessed the rise of new political coalitions, such as the Climate Vulnerable Forum and the Alliance of Small Island States, which have succeeded in placing issues of justice, loss and damage, and adaptation finance at the forefront of international negotiations5. These coalitions challenge the traditional North-South divide by building alliances with sympathetic actors in the Global North and leveraging moral authority to demand greater ambition and accountability. The literature also emphasizes the importance of intersectionality in climate justice, recognizing that vulnerability is shaped by overlapping factors such as race, gender, class, and geography, and that effective solutions must address these multiple dimensions of inequality. A significant shift in the theoretical and empirical literature on global climate politics is the reconceptualization of vulnerable nations from passive victims to active agents of change156. While the structural disadvantages faced by these countries are undeniable, recent scholarship and practice have highlighted their capacity to influence international outcomes through coalition-building, agenda-setting, and innovative diplomacy. Vulnerable countries have formed strategic alliances—such as the Climate Vulnerable Forum, the Least Developed Countries Group, and the Alliance of Small Island States—to amplify their voices and coordinate their positions in international negotiations5. These coalitions have been effective in introducing new concepts (e.g., loss and damage), securing dedicated adaptation finance, and shaping the language and ambition of global agreements. For example, the persistent advocacy of small island states was instrumental in establishing the 1.5°C temperature target in the Paris Agreement, a goal that reflects the existential risks they face from climate change.

The literature also documents how vulnerable nations leverage their moral authority and lived experience to challenge the legitimacy of dominant narratives and demand greater accountability from major emitters568. By reframing vulnerability as a source of political agency, these countries have been able to mobilize international support, attract media attention, and build alliances with non-state actors, including civil society organizations, indigenous groups, and progressive governments in the Global North. This agency is not without its limits—structural power imbalances persist, and the ability of vulnerable countries to secure their interests often depends on the willingness of powerful states to compromise. Nonetheless, the growing assertiveness of these nations is reshaping the architecture of global climate governance, challenging the persistence of unequal power relations, and opening new possibilities for more just and effective climate action1568.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that power dynamics, climate justice, and agency are deeply intertwined in shaping the global response to climate change. Colonial legacies and North-South divides continue to structure inequalities in resources, representation, and outcomes, while climate justice has become a rallying cry for more equitable and ambitious policies. Vulnerable nations, far from being passive recipients of aid, are increasingly recognized as key actors in international climate politics, capable of driving change through strategic action and coalition-building. However, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing research focuses on state actors and formal negotiations, with less attention paid to the role of non-state actors, transnational networks, and subnational governments in advancing climate justice and agency236. Additionally, there is a need for more empirical research on the effectiveness of different coalition strategies, the dynamics of North-South alliances, and the long-term impacts of agency on global climate governance outcomes. Addressing these gaps will be crucial for developing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how power, justice, and agency interact in the evolving landscape of global climate politics.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, suitable for exploring the nuanced strategies and experiences of climate-vulnerable countries in international politics. Qualitative methods enable an in-depth understanding of how these nations negotiate power, build coalitions, and influence global climate governance. Data for this research were collected through secondary sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and official reports from international organizations such as the UNFCCC and IPCC.

These sources provide rich textual data that capture the narratives, policies, and diplomatic efforts of vulnerable countries. The research employs content and thematic analysis to systematically examine these texts, identifying key themes related to vulnerability, agency, and equity in climate negotiations. Using secondary data allows for a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge and facilitates the exploration of complex power dynamics without the constraints of primary data collection. This approach provides valuable insights into the evolving role of vulnerable nations in shaping international climate politics.

Climate Vulnerability and International Relations

Climate vulnerability is not evenly distributed across the globe. Certain regions and countries, particularly in the Global South, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and Least Developed Countries (LDCs), are disproportionately exposed to the adverse impacts of climate change (Ngcamu, 2023). These areas face heightened risks due to their geographic, economic, and social characteristics. The Global South encompasses much of Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania. These regions are characterized by lower economic development, high dependence on agriculture, and limited adaptive capacity. Climate change exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, including poverty, food insecurity, and weak infrastructure (Ngcamu, 2023). For example, countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Senegal, and Mozambique are among the most at risk, as measured by the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index (ND-GAIN) and Standard & Poor's vulnerability assessments. These nations have significant portions of their populations living in low-lying coastal areas, high reliance on agriculture, and limited financial resources to absorb climate shocks (Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 2014). SIDS are a distinct group of countries and territories sharing similar sustainable development challenges and acute vulnerability to climate change. These states are typically remote, have small populations, and are heavily dependent on ocean resources for their economies. Their geographic isolation leads to high import reliance and limited access to finance. SIDS face some of the most severe climate impacts, including more frequent and intense extreme weather events, sea level rise, ocean warming, and acidification. Despite contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, SIDS are on the frontlines of climate change, experiencing significant loss and damage, including destroyed infrastructure, loss of livelihoods, and forced displacement (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024).

LDCs, many of which overlap with the Global South and SIDS, are designated based on low income, weak human assets, and high economic vulnerability. These countries struggle to access international finance and technology needed for climate adaptation and mitigation. Their limited institutional capacity further constrains their ability to respond effectively to climate risks (UNDP, 2024).

The roots of contemporary climate vulnerability are deeply intertwined with the legacies of colonialism and the resulting economic disparities. Colonial powers systematically extracted resources, altered land use, and imposed economic structures that prioritized export-oriented agriculture and resource extraction over local resilience. These practices led to environmental degradation, loss of traditional knowledge, and persistent inequalities (Columbia Climate School, 2022). Colonialism's environmental legacy is evident in the forced deforestation and desertification of colonized regions. For example, French colonial policies in North and West Africa banned indigenous farming methods, leading to extensive environmental harm as forests were cleared for cash crops (Columbia Climate School, 2022). The consequences of these historical actions are still felt today, as formerly colonized countries face higher exposure to climate risks but possess fewer resources for adaptation. Contemporary climate vulnerability is further exacerbated by ongoing patterns of inequity rooted in colonialism. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has recognized colonialism as both a historical and ongoing driver of climate risk, particularly for Indigenous peoples and local communities (Columbia Climate School, 2022). Despite gaining political independence, many countries in the Global South remain economically marginalized and are excluded from the benefits of global development, while bearing the brunt of climate impacts (Sultana, 2024).

Economic disparities, perpetuated by global capitalism and the development industry, reinforce

climate coloniality—a system where those least responsible for climate change suffer its worst consequences. The Global North, historically responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions, continues to dominate global economic and political systems, leaving the Global South with limited agency and resources to address climate challenges (Sultana, 2024). International institutions play a central role in shaping the global response to climate change. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) are the primary platforms for international climate negotiations and scientific assessments. The UNFCCC provides the main forum for negotiating global climate agreements, such as the Paris Agreement. However, power dynamics within the UNFCCC often reflect broader geopolitical inequalities. Wealthier nations in the Global North have greater capacity to participate in negotiations, influence agenda-setting, and shape outcomes. Vulnerable countries, despite being most affected by climate change, frequently struggle to make their voices heard due to limited technical, financial, and diplomatic resources (Ngcamu, 2023). The IPCC synthesizes and assesses scientific knowledge on climate change. While its reports are critical for informing policy, the production of climate knowledge remains dominated by researchers and institutions from the Global North. This imbalance affects which issues are prioritized and how solutions are framed, often sidelining the perspectives and needs of the Global South (Columbia Climate School, 2022). A 2021 study published in *Nature* found that research on climate impacts is less likely to focus on the Global South, even though these countries face the most severe consequences. This knowledge gap perpetuates a cycle where the most vulnerable are underrepresented in scientific literature and, consequently, in international policy discussions (Columbia Climate School, 2022). Coloniality persists not only through economic and political structures but also through the dominance of Western knowledge systems in climate science and policy. The marginalization of indigenous and local knowledge undermines the ability of vulnerable communities to advocate for context-specific solutions. Decolonizing climate governance requires recognizing and integrating diverse forms of knowledge and addressing the power imbalances that shape global climate discourse (Sultana, 2024).

Climate vulnerability is deeply rooted in historical and contemporary inequalities. The Global South, SIDS, and LDCs are disproportionately affected by climate change due to a combination of geographic exposure, economic marginalization, and the enduring legacies of colonialism. International institutions like the UNFCCC and IPCC are critical for global climate governance but are often shaped by the interests and knowledge systems of the Global North. Addressing climate vulnerability requires not only technical solutions but also a fundamental rethinking of global power relations, knowledge production, and the inclusion of historically marginalized voices in international decision-making.

Strategies of Vulnerable Countries in Global Politics

Vulnerable countries have increasingly recognized the necessity of collective action to amplify their voices and influence in international climate politics. Coalition-building has become a cornerstone strategy, with alliances such as the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) playing a pivotal role. The CVF, established in 2009, provides a collaborative platform for countries most affected by climate change to articulate shared concerns, set agendas, and develop unified positions in international negotiations (Appropedia, n.d.). Its membership includes nations from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, such as Bangladesh, the Maldives, Ethiopia, and Vanuatu, all of which face acute climate risks. The CVF's objectives include agenda-setting for vulnerable countries, consensus building, and awareness raising, and sharing best practices on climate change policy. By fostering trust and breaking down divides among stakeholders, the CVF enhances the collective bargaining power of its members in global forums. This semi-formal, inclusive approach has enabled the CVF to contribute to more effective and equitable global climate governance (Appropedia, n.d.). Similarly, other coalitions—such as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and the Least Developed Countries (LDC) Group—have emerged to address the unique challenges faced by their members. These coalitions facilitate policy framing, coordinate negotiation

strategies, and mobilize support for adaptation finance and just transitions. Political science research confirms that broad, multi-sectoral coalitions are effective in addressing collective action problems and overcoming resistance from entrenched interests (GSDRC, 2017).

Climate diplomacy has evolved into a central pillar of foreign policy for vulnerable nations. Recognizing the existential threat posed by climate change, these countries have prioritized climate resilience in their diplomatic engagements, both bilaterally and multilaterally (LinkedIn, 2023).

Diplomatic strategies are deployed to:

- Mobilize climate finance and technology transfer from developed nations.
- Forge alliances and partnerships to strengthen negotiating positions.
- Advocate for loss and damage compensation and disaster risk reduction frameworks.
- Facilitate knowledge sharing and capacity-building initiatives.

Diplomats from vulnerable countries play a critical role in negotiating agreements that enable access to adaptation technologies and climate finance, often through mechanisms established under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement. These efforts are essential for bridging the gap between the financial and technological needs of vulnerable nations and the resources available in the international system (LinkedIn, 2023). Furthermore, climate diplomacy enables vulnerable countries to pool resources, share best practices, and collectively address transboundary climate threats. Regional alliances and joint research projects are increasingly common, allowing countries to develop shared infrastructure and coordinate emergency response mechanisms. The success of global agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, underscores the importance of coordinated diplomatic efforts in advancing the interests of vulnerable nations (LinkedIn, 2023).

Advocacy for climate justice is a defining feature of the strategies employed by vulnerable countries. These nations consistently emphasize the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, arguing that those who have contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions should not bear the brunt of climate impacts (OHCHR, 2025)3.

Their demands typically include:

- Equitable allocation of emission reduction responsibilities.
- Adequate and predictable climate finance for adaptation and mitigation.
- Support for loss and damage resulting from climate-induced disasters.
- Recognition of vulnerability as a key criterion in the allocation of international resources.

Initiatives such as the Bridgetown Initiative, spearheaded by Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley, exemplify the advocacy efforts of vulnerable countries. This initiative calls for a fundamental reform of the global financial architecture to address the liquidity crisis in developing countries and ensure adequate financing for climate transition and development (OHCHR, 2025). Vulnerable countries also advocate for innovative financing mechanisms, such as climate risk insurance and compensation for loss and damage, to support recovery from climate-related disasters. These demands are increasingly recognized in international negotiations, as evidenced by the growing prominence of loss and damage in the UNFCCC process (OHCHR, 2025). .

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have long been at the forefront of international climate negotiations, leveraging their unique vulnerabilities to drive global ambition. Despite contributing negligibly to global emissions, SIDS are among the most severely impacted by climate change, facing existential threats from sea level rise, extreme weather, and ocean acidification (University of York, 2021).

At COP conferences, SIDS, often through AOSIS, have played a critical role in:

- Raising global awareness about the disproportionate impacts of climate change on small islands.
- Advocating for the 1.5°C temperature target, which was ultimately enshrined in the Paris Agreement.
- Coordinating messaging and negotiation strategies to articulate clear, unified positions.

• Pushing for increased ambition in national commitments and greater support for adaptation and loss and damage.

The coordinated approach of SIDS, exemplified by their collective action at COP21 in Paris and subsequent conferences, has been instrumental in shaping the global climate agenda. Their persistent advocacy has ensured that the concerns of the most vulnerable are not sidelined, even as the world struggles to meet agreed-upon targets (University of York, 2021).

The Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) has emerged as a significant actor in international climate negotiations. By uniting countries from diverse regions, the CVF amplifies the voices of the most affected nations and drives consensus on key issues (Appropedia, n.d.). The CVF's activities include:

• Setting the agenda for highlighting the challenges faced by vulnerable countries.

• Building consensus and position convergence on international policies.

• Raising collective awareness and sharing best practices.

• Contributing to the development of a more inclusive and responsible global climate governance regime.

The CVF's influence is evident in its ability to bring together government leaders, foster trust, and break down divides among stakeholders. Its semi-formal, open, and inclusive approach has enabled it to play a pivotal role in shaping negotiation outcomes at major climate summits, including COP conferences. The CVF's advocacy has contributed to greater recognition of the needs of vulnerable countries in international agreements and has helped to secure commitments for increased climate finance and adaptation support (Appropedia, n.d.).

Vulnerable countries have developed sophisticated strategies to navigate the complexities of global climate politics. Through coalition-building, climate diplomacy, and advocacy for climate justice, they have transformed from passive recipients of aid to active agents of change. Alliances such as the CVF and AOSIS have enhanced their collective bargaining power, while their persistent advocacy has driven the global agenda towards greater equity and ambition. Case studies of SIDS at COP conferences and the CVF's role in negotiations highlight the effectiveness of these strategies in shaping international outcomes. As the climate crisis intensifies, the continued empowerment and inclusion of vulnerable countries will be essential for achieving a just and sustainable global response.

Shifting Global Power Structures

Vulnerable countries, particularly in the Global South, are increasingly moving beyond their traditional roles as passive recipients of aid to become proactive agents in shaping international agendas. This transformation is evident in their growing participation in global climate negotiations, advocacy for climate justice, and the establishment of new alliances and institutions. Emerging powers such as China, India, Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia are now influencing global energy, climate, security, and development policies, asserting their interests and refusing to simply adhere to Western norms or directives. These countries are not only demanding a seat at the table but are also setting their own priorities and strategies, often challenging established power structures and advocating for a more equitable global order. The evolving role of vulnerable countries is pushing global governance toward greater inclusivity and participation. As the balance of power shifts towards a multipolar world, there is an increasing emphasis on multilateralism and the integration of diverse perspectives into decision-making processes. Vulnerable countries are advocating for the use of vulnerability indices and other context-specific metrics to ensure fairer representation and resource allocation in international frameworks, particularly in climate finance and adaptation policies. This push is reshaping the architecture of global governance, with new institutions and coalitions emerging to address gaps left by traditional Western-led organizations. The creation of alternative institutions, such as the BRICS Development Bank, exemplifies how emerging powers are establishing parallel mechanisms to challenge and complement existing global structures.

The shifting global power landscape is characterized by both increased cooperation among emerging and vulnerable countries and heightened competition among major powers. South-South cooperation is on the rise, with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin

America forming new alliances to promote mutual interests and increase their bargaining power in international negotiations. At the same time, competition between established and emerging powers, such as the strategic rivalry between China and the West, has intensified, often leading to fragmented governance and difficulties in reaching multilateral agreements. Non-state actors, including multinational corporations, civil society organizations, and transnational advocacy networks, are also playing a more prominent role in shaping global policies and holding governments accountable. This complex interplay of cooperation and competition is contributing to a more dynamic but also more fragmented and contested global order, where leadership and the provision of global public goods are increasingly dispersed.

Challenges and Limitations

Vulnerable countries face deep-rooted structural barriers that limit their ability to fully participate in and benefit from international climate politics. Economic inequality remains a major global challenge, with wealth and income disparities both within and between countries continuing to rise, especially in the wake of recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing geopolitical shocks. This persistent inequality is not only economic but also political, as those with greater wealth often wield disproportionate influence over policy and decision-making processes, both domestically and internationally. Such influence can lead to the marginalization of less affluent nations in global forums, reducing their ability to shape outcomes that directly affect their interests. Epistemic inequality further compounds these challenges. The dominance of knowledge production and agenda-setting by institutions and experts from wealthier countries often sidelines the perspectives and lived experiences of vulnerable nations. This epistemic imbalance impairs the legitimacy and effectiveness of international decision-making, as it fails to adequately incorporate the diverse realities and priorities of those most affected by climate change.

Many vulnerable countries struggle with significant capacity constraints that hinder their ability to engage effectively in international negotiations and climate diplomacy. Limited financial resources, underfunded educational systems, and inadequate access to technical expertise all contribute to this challenge. The aftermath of the pandemic has exacerbated these constraints, with 70% of governments worldwide cutting spending on education between 2020 and 2022, further reducing the pool of skilled professionals available to support complex diplomatic efforts. Additionally, the growing debt burdens and diminished access to global financial safety nets leave many developing countries unable to invest in the institutional capacity necessary for sustained engagement in global governance processes.

Despite increased advocacy and coalition-building, vulnerable countries continue to face the risk of marginalization in dominant decision-making forums. Political and economic inequalities often translate into limited representation and influence in multilateral institutions, where the agendas and priorities of wealthier nations tend to prevail. This exclusion is further perpetuated by the lack of mechanisms to ensure equitable participation, such as the integration of vulnerability indices into policy frameworks or the provision of targeted support for under-resourced delegations. As a result, the interests and needs of vulnerable countries may be overlooked or inadequately addressed, undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of global climate governance.

Recommendations

To enhance the influence of vulnerable countries in global climate politics, strengthening coalitions through enhanced regional and international networks is essential. Existing alliances such as the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) have demonstrated the power of collective action in amplifying the voices of those most affected by climate change. Investing in these coalitions by providing dedicated funding, organizing regular summits and workshops, and launching joint advocacy campaigns can significantly improve coordination and strategic impact. Such efforts will enable vulnerable countries to present unified positions, raise global awareness of their unique challenges, and push for equitable climate policies more effectively.

Capacity-building is another critical area requiring focused investment. Vulnerable countries often face significant constraints in human resources and institutional expertise necessary for effective climate diplomacy. To address this, scholarship programs should be established to support advanced education in climate science, international law, and diplomacy for individuals from these countries. Additionally, organizing targeted training workshops for government officials and civil society actors can enhance negotiation skills and deepen understanding of complex climate finance mechanisms. Strengthening national institutions through improved staffing, training, and technology will further empower these countries to engage confidently and competently in international forums. Advocacy for the integration of vulnerability indices into global decision-making frameworks is vital to ensure fair representation and resource allocation. Standardized vulnerability indices that capture environmental, economic, and social dimensions can provide objective criteria for prioritizing support to the most at-risk countries. Vulnerable nations should actively promote the adoption of these indices by international organizations and funding bodies. Simultaneously, building technical capacity to collect, analyze, and apply vulnerability data will enable these countries to leverage such tools effectively in policy advocacy and negotiations.

Finally, policy innovation must focus on promoting locally relevant, context-specific solutions that empower communities and avoid perpetuating existing inequalities. Climate policies should be designed through participatory processes that include local populations, indigenous groups, and civil society organizations to ensure that interventions are culturally appropriate and socially just. Supporting community-based adaptation initiatives that build on indigenous knowledge and local practices can enhance resilience at the grassroots level. Moreover, climate policies must prioritize equitable access to resources, technology, and information to prevent further marginalization of vulnerable groups.

Conclusion

This study highlights the growing influence of vulnerable countries in shaping global climate politics. Through strategic coalition-building, proactive climate diplomacy, and persistent advocacy for climate justice, these nations have shifted from passive aid recipients to active agents of change. Alliances such as the CVF and AOSIS have strengthened their collective bargaining power, enabling them to push for more ambitious and equitable climate policies on the international stage. The implications of this shift are profound for international relations. A move toward more inclusive and just global governance structures is underway, where the voices and needs of the most vulnerable are increasingly recognized and prioritized. This transformation challenges traditional power dynamics and calls for a reimagining of decision-making processes to ensure fairness and effectiveness in addressing the climate crisis.

Looking ahead, further study is needed to understand the long-term impacts of climate change on vulnerable countries and the evolving nature of climate diplomacy. Key areas for future inquiry include the effects of climate-induced migration, the intersection of climate change and security risks, and the efficacy of international climate finance mechanisms in supporting adaptation and mitigation efforts. Continued scholarly attention to these issues will be crucial in informing policies that promote climate justice and foster a sustainable and equitable future for all.

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