



ATHENA

Third Tier

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Climate Adaptation in Nigeria:
How Weak Local Authority
Undermines Community Resilience



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Our mission is to conduct rigorous research and provide evidence-based recommendations that contribute to the development of a prosperous and forward-looking society in Nigeria.

COVER IMAGE: Two women wait for a canoe as floodwater overflows streets in Wadata, Makurdi, Benue State of Nigeria, Oct. 1, 2022.
Credit: VOA / www.voanews.com

Climate stress in Nigeria has entered a phase of persistent disruption rather than episodic shock. Between 2022 and 2024, nationwide flooding displaced more than 3 million people, destroyed over 600,000 hectares of farmland, and caused direct economic losses estimated at over [USD 9 billion](#). Desertification continues to advance southward at an estimated rate of 0.6 kilometres per year in the [Sahelian belt](#), while coastal erosion threatens settlements and infrastructure across the Niger Delta and [South-East](#). These pressures interact with existing livelihood fragility, intensifying communal conflict, migration, and food insecurity.

The significance of this moment lies not only in the scale of climate impacts but in the timing. Nigeria is simultaneously implementing its updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), finalising elements of its National Adaptation Plan, and navigating severe fiscal constraints at [subnational levels](#). Local government councils face declining real revenues due to inflation, fuel subsidy reforms, and rising service [delivery demands](#). At the same time, climate finance discussions, both domestic and international, are increasingly emphasising “locally led adaptation” as a condition for [effectiveness](#).

Against this backdrop, Nigeria’s climate response exhibits a structural weakness that constrains outcomes where exposure is highest. While national and state-level climate frameworks have expanded over the past decade, adaptation performance remains uneven and often weak at community, ward, and local government levels. This gap is not best explained by climate awareness alone nor by financing constraints in isolation. Rather, it reflects a deeper institutional misalignment between where climate risks materialise and where authority, incentives, and accountability are located.

This paper advances a central analytical proposition: Nigeria’s climate adaptation challenge is best understood as a third-tier governance failure. Local governments, traditional authorities, and community institutions, those closest to land use, water access, livelihoods, and social mediation, remain marginal within formal climate governance systems. They bear the consequences of climate stress but lack commensurate authority, resources, and procedural standing to shape adaptation responses.

Available empirical evidence supports this diagnosis. Fewer than 35 per cent of Nigeria’s 774 local government areas (LGAs) operate functional environmental or climate [coordination units](#). More than half of the surveyed residents across multiple regions report a limited understanding of climate risks and available adaptation [options](#). Traditional and faith-based institutions, despite their central role in land allocation, conflict mediation, and collective mobilisation, are rarely integrated into formal adaptation planning or monitoring [arrangements](#). The result is that climate policy remains largely operational at higher administrative levels, but attenuated at the point of impact.

This is not a claim that national or state policies are irrelevant. Rather, it is an observation that adaptation has been constructed primarily as a planning and reporting exercise, rather than as a delivery system rooted in local institutions. Until authority, incentives, and accountability are realigned toward community-facing governance structures, adaptation outcomes are likely to remain limited, fragmented, and reactive.

1 The Institutional Failure Behind Nigeria's Climate Adaptation Gap

Nigeria's climate challenge is often framed in terms of exposure, vulnerability, or financing needs. These factors are material. However, they do not fully explain why adaptation measures frequently fail to translate into durable outcomes at the community level. The more consequential determinant lies in how climate authority is distributed and exercised across governance tiers.

From Communal Stewardship to Centralised Distance

Before colonial administration and subsequent post-independence centralisation, environmental management in many Nigerian societies was locally embedded. Land tenure systems, water access rules, forest use, sanitation practices, and seasonal resource management were governed through customary institutions, councils of elders, lineage heads, age-grade systems, and communal labour [arrangements](#). Enforcement relied on social sanctions, shared norms, and proximity between decision-makers and resource users.

Colonial and post-colonial governance reforms altered this arrangement. The environmental authority became increasingly bureaucratised and centralised, while local institutions were progressively relegated to informal or advisory roles. Responsibility for outcomes remained local, but formal control over regulation, enforcement, and financing shifted upward. This produced what may be described as a decentralisation paradox: exposure

is decentralised, but authority is not.

This paradox remains embedded in Nigeria's contemporary climate framework. The 1999 Constitution recognises local governments as the third tier of governance, assigning them responsibilities related to markets, sanitation, local roads, and community [development](#). Yet fiscal control over local governments is largely exercised by state governments through state-local government joint accounts, constraining [local discretion](#). Environmental regulation and climate policy formulation are predominantly handled at the federal and state levels, while implementation expectations fall on local authorities without corresponding empowerment.

Institutional Distance in Current Climate Governance

Climate adaptation frameworks in Nigeria reflect this imbalance. National strategies and state action plans articulate objectives and targets, but rarely specify operational roles for local governments, traditional institutions, or ward-level structures. Where local climate desks exist, they are often unfunded, staffed on an ad hoc basis, and disconnected from development planning and budgetary [processes](#).

Traditional authorities occupy an ambiguous position. They retain substantial de facto influence over land access, grazing routes, settlement expansion, and dispute resolution, functions directly implicated in climate adaptation. Yet they lack formal recognition

within statutory climate governance arrangements. Their exclusion reduces compliance, weakens conflict mediation capacity, and limits the integration of local knowledge into adaptation planning.

Accountability mechanisms reinforce this distance. Environmental obligations are difficult to enforce at the community level. Procedural barriers, limited legal standing, and weak grievance mechanisms constrain communities' ability

to compel institutional response when adaptation measures fail. Accountability tends to flow upward through administrative hierarchies rather than outward toward affected populations.

The cumulative effect is a system that generates policy outputs without commensurate delivery capacity at the local level. Climate plans proliferate. Adaptive capacity remains uneven.



A young woman draws water from a well in rural community.

2 The Binding Institutional Constraint

Climate governance responsibilities in Nigeria are decentralised in rhetoric but centralised in authority, finance, and enforcement, leaving local institutions exposed to climate risks without aligned decision-making power, incentives, or accountability.

The causal chain is linear and persistent:

- I. Climate risks manifest locally (flooding, erosion, land degradation, resource scarcity).
- II. Local governments and traditional institutions are expected to manage impacts.
- III. Authority over finance, regulation, and enforcement remains centralised at the state and federal levels.
- IV. Local institutions lack incentives, tools, and accountability leverage.
- V. Adaptation measures remain fragmented, reactive, and weakly sustained



A girl walks along a dusty road in a rural landscape with sparse vegetation due to changing climate. Credit: UNICEF/UN0854475/Owoicho

3 What The Evidence Reveals About Local Climate Governance

Empirical data from national surveys, subnational assessments, and sectoral studies converge on a consistent pattern: climate exposure is local, but institutional capacity is not.

Local Government Capacity and Presence

According to assessments by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and development partners, fewer than one-third of LGAs maintain functional environmental or climate coordination units. Where such units exist, they often lack dedicated budget lines and technical staff. Climate considerations are rarely integrated into local government development plans or annual budgets.

Community Awareness and Information Flows

Survey data indicate that approximately 50 per cent of community residents report low awareness of climate risks, early warning systems, or adaptation [options](#). Importantly, information dissemination tends to rely on top-down channels rather than trusted local intermediaries. Traditional rulers, religious leaders, women's associations, and farmer cooperatives, institutions with high social legitimacy, are underutilised in climate communication strategies.

Role of Traditional Institutions

Multiple case studies demonstrate that customary authorities continue to regulate land allocation, grazing access, and conflict mediation across Nigeria's

[ecological zones](#). However, these institutions are rarely incorporated into formal adaptation planning, monitoring, or enforcement frameworks. This disconnect limits compliance with land-use regulations and weakens early conflict resolution mechanisms in climate-stressed areas.

Observable Outcomes

The consequences are measurable. Flooding affects over 80 per cent of surveyed riverine and floodplain communities. Erosion threatens settlements across southeastern and coastal regions. Crop yield losses exceeding 50 per cent have been reported in parts of the North-East and [North-West](#). Resource-based conflicts, particularly farmer-herder clashes, have intensified in mixed livelihood zones, with climate stress identified as a contributing [factor](#).

Data gaps exacerbate these challenges. Ward-level risk mapping, localised climate data collection, and community monitoring systems remain limited. As a result, adaptation planning often relies on generalised assumptions rather than context-specific evidence.

4 Why The System Continues To Sustain The Failure: Political Economy Dynamics

The persistence of this governance failure reflects entrenched incentive structures and political economy dynamics.

State–Local Relations

State governments exercise significant fiscal and administrative control over LGAs through joint account arrangements. This centralisation reduces incentives to devolve authority or resources for climate adaptation, particularly where local empowerment may dilute [political control](#).

Donor and Partner Preferences

International donors and development partners often prefer to work with federal or state counterparts due to fiduciary, reporting, and coordination [considerations](#). While rational from a risk-management perspective, this

preference reinforces centralisation and sidelines local institutions.

Traditional Authority Ambiguity

Formal recognition of traditional institutions raises concerns about politicisation, elite capture, and constitutional ambiguity. As a result, policymakers often leave these institutions informal, despite their operational relevance.

Accountability Asymmetry

Communities bear the costs of climate inaction but lack effective mechanisms to enforce accountability. Fragmented responsibility diffuses blame and reduces pressure for reform.

These dynamics collectively sustain a low-performance equilibrium in which planning activity substitutes for delivery capacity.



Flooding in Hadeja, Nigeria, in 2022. As with the latest warning the floods were caused by heavy rainfall and the release of water from the Lagdo dam in Cameroon. Photograph: AP Photo/AP

5 Comparative Insight: Anchoring Adaptation Locally

Comparative experience illustrates that improved adaptation outcomes follow institutional realignment toward local delivery.



The common lesson is not administrative decentralisation alone but alignment of authority, resources, and accountability with local exposure.

6 Policy Pathways For Reform: Rebuilding Climate Authority At The Third Tier

Pillar A:

Reposition Local Governments as Adaptation Delivery Platforms

Responsible institutions: State governments; Local Government Councils

Actions:

- i. [Mandate funded climate](#)/environment units within LGAs
- ii. Integrate climate risk screening into local development plans

Timeline: Short-term (1–2 years)

Indicators: % of LGAs with funded units; number of LGAs with climate-screened plans

Pillar B:

Formalise the Role of Traditional and Community Authorities

Responsible institutions: State governments; Local Government Councils

Actions:

- i. Establish statutory consultation frameworks with traditional councils
- ii. Integrate customary land rules into adaptation planning

Timeline: Short-to medium-term

Indicators: Number of LGAs with formal traditional authority frameworks

Pillar C:

Institutionalise Ward-Level Participation and Intelligence

Responsible institutions: Local councils; community associations

Actions:

- I. Ward-level climate forums and risk mapping
- II. Local early warning dissemination systems

Timeline: Short-term

Indicators: Number of ward assessments completed

Pillar D:

Enable Community-Scale Accountability

Responsible institutions: State judiciaries; environmental agencies

Actions:

- I. Simplify standing for environmental harm affecting communal resources
- II. Establish local grievance mechanisms

Timeline: Medium-term

Indicators: Number of community-initiated cases resolved

7 Conclusion

Nigeria's climate challenge is not defined by policy absence but by institutional distance. Adaptation outcomes will remain limited so long as authority and accountability remain misaligned with exposure. Climate resilience is constructed or undermined through local systems of governance. Strengthening those systems is not optional. It is the binding condition for effective adaptation.

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