Afrocentric Legal Review (ALR)

https://doi.org/10.68928/ALR-2026-2-1-05

|Print ISSN: 3156-7207|e-ISSN: 3156-7193|

Received: 12th February, 2026
Revised: 4th May, 2026
Accepted: 12th June, 2026

Community-Led Climate Justice in Uganda: An Assessment of Legal Protection and Participation of Affected Communities

Muheki Sheila[1]*, Ammanya Queen Melody[2] and Akena Stephen[3]

[1]*School of Law, Kampala International University, Uganda, Email: sheila.muheki.52889@studmc.kiu.ac.ug*

[2]*School of Law, Kampala International University, Uganda, Email: melody.amanya@studmc.kiu.ac.ug*

[3]*School of Law, Kampala International University, Uganda, Email: stephen.akena@studmc.kiu.ac.ug*

** Correspondence: sheila.muheki.52889@studmc.kiu.ac.ug*

Abstract: Climate change presents many environmental, social and economic problems for Uganda, especially for communities whose livelihoods are dependent on natural resources. Although there are laws and policies in place, communities adversely affected by climate change could suffer a lack of legal protection and involvement in climate-related decision-making processes. This research explores the effectiveness of Uganda's laws and institutional structure with regard to protecting such communities and ensuring their meaningful participation in climate governance. In this regard, the research looks at the legal protections, barriers to participation, and ways of accessing environmental information and justice. Doctrinal and qualitative research approaches are used, where an analysis of legislation, policies, court decisions and international instruments will be conducted, along with qualitative data gathered from 20 interviewees, including community members, lawyers, CSOs, NGOs, government and local authorities. The following results identified include weaknesses in law enforcement, institutional accountability, and community representation. The research indicates that achieving climate justice necessitates better law enforcement and community engagement in climate policies. It suggests that participatory mechanisms be strengthened, information on the environment be made more accessible, and local knowledge be acknowledged for achieving climate justice.

Keywords: Community Participation, Climate Justice, Environment, Legal, Uganda

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1. INTRODUCTION

Climate change is increasingly affecting the social, economic and environmental conditions under which communities in Uganda live. Changes in rainfall patterns, floods, droughts, landslides[1], environmental degradation and other climate-related pressures can affect agriculture, water availability, food security, health and household livelihoods[2]. These impacts

[1] Grace Acan, Evelyn Amony, John Harris, and Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, "How Formerly Abducted Women in Post-Conflict Situations Are Reasserting Their Humanity in a Hostile Environment: Photovoice Evidence from Northern Uganda," *Gender & Development* 27, no. 2 (2019): 273–94.

[2] Junior Ainomujuni, M. Twinamatsko, Stefaan Smis, and Upton Nuwagira, "A Review of Exploring the Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Environmental Governance: A Case Study of Lake Mburo and Bwindi

are particularly significant for communities that depend heavily on natural resources and have limited capacity to adapt to environmental changes. The issue of climate change therefore goes beyond reducing greenhouse-gas emissions[3]. It also raises questions about fairness, rights, participation and access to decision-making. Climate justice is concerned with ensuring that people who are affected by climate change are not excluded from decisions concerning climate policies, adaptation measures, environmental projects and the distribution of climate-related benefits and burdens[4]. Research on Uganda's Batwa community, for example, has highlighted concerns relating to recognition, rights, unequal disadvantage and participation in climate adaptation processes[5].

Uganda has established several legal and institutional mechanisms that can support community participation and environmental protection[6]. The National Environment Act, 2019 recognizes public participation in the development of environmental policies, plans and programs and requires consideration of equitable and sustainable use of environmental resources. It also provides for environmental and social impact assessment for projects that may significantly affect the environment or natural resources[7]. The National Climate Change Act, 2021 further provides Uganda with a specific legal framework for responding to climate change. Among other things, the Act requires climate-change planning to consider the resilience and adaptation needs of vulnerable and marginalized communities, as well as gender and human-rights considerations[8]. It also places responsibilities on government institutions to promote multi-stakeholder and public participation in developing responses to climate change and its adverse effects[9].

Despite these legal provisions, the existence of laws does not automatically mean that affected communities are able to participate effectively or obtain adequate protection in practice[10]. Recent literature on Uganda's climate and environmental governance has identified concerns including limited institutional capacity, weak enforcement and inadequate public awareness of climate-related rights and responsibilities. This creates an important area for academic inquiry because communities may formally have opportunities to participate while experiencing practical barriers that limit their ability to influence decisions. The study therefore

Impenetrable National Parks in Uganda," *African Journal of Climate Change Research and Sustainability* 4 (2025): 324–53.

[3] Grady Arnott, Beatrice Odallo, Teddy Nakubulwa, Fazila Banu Lily, and Shankar Singh Dhami, "Accountability for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Humanitarian and Disaster Situations: Case Studies from Uganda, Bangladesh, and Nepal," *Health and Human Rights* 27, no. 2 (2025): 51.

[4] Elias O. Opongo, Decolonizing NGO Peacebuilding and Liberal Peace Agenda in Northern Uganda (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2026).

[5] Mukhlish Mukhlisha, Paul Atagamen Aidonojie, Muwaffiq Jufri, Mercy Osemudiame Okpoko, and Eregbuonye Obieshi, "Legal and Regulatory Issues Concerning the Concept of Cloud Seeding in Climate Change Mitigation," *Indonesian Journal of Environmental Law and Sustainable Development* 121, no. 9 (2025): 4877–4893.

[6] Michael Reuben, Fauzia Mohamed, and Felician Mutasa, "The Effects of Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms on Sexual Violence against Children in Rombo District, Tanzania," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2022): 57–71.

[7] Buyana Kareem, Shuaib Lwasa, Denis Tugume, Paul Mukwaya, Jacqueline Walubwa, Samuel Owuor, Peter Kasaija, Hakimu Sseviiri, Gloria Nsangi, and Disan Byarugaba, "Pathways for Resilience to Climate Change in African Cities," *Environmental Research Letters* 15, no. 7 (2020): 073002.

[8] Jackie Shaw, Carolina Holland-Szyp, and Ben Boham Okiror, Towards Inclusive Social Assistance for Marginalised People in East and Northeast Uganda (Institute of Development Studies and Partner Organisations, 2025).

[9] Oluwaseye Thompson Adeboye and Aderemi Olubunmi Oyebanji, "Air Pollution and the Right to Health in Nigeria: Developing an Environmental Health Liability Framework," *African Journal of Health and Environmental Law* 1, no. 1 (2026): 15.

[10] Faith Kelechi Ekwe and Abdulaziz Saud Salim Almamari, "A Legal Pathway towards Adopting Digital Technology as a Sustainable Means of Addressing Environmental Challenges in Nigeria," *African Journal of Health and Environmental Law* 1, no. 1 (2026): 58.

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

examines community-led climate justice in Uganda, focusing specifically on the legal protection and participation of communities affected by climate change. It seeks to understand not only what the law provides but also how the legal framework can support meaningful participation, recognition of community interests and access to justice. The study is particularly concerned with whether affected communities are treated as active participants in climate governance rather than merely as recipients of government or externally designed interventions.

2. METHOD

The study adopts a qualitative research approach because the subject under investigation involves legal protection, community participation, institutional practices, rights and experiences that cannot adequately be understood through numerical measurements alone. A qualitative approach allows the researchers to examine how Uganda's laws and policies address climate justice and how participation is understood and implemented in practice. The study is conducted in Uganda with particular attention to communities that are vulnerable to climate-related impacts. Depending on the availability of information and field access, the study focuses on selected districts experiencing significant climate-related challenges such as flooding, drought, landslides, environmental degradation or changes affecting agricultural livelihoods. The selection of the specific study area is guided by the relevance of the location to the research questions. The research also uses a case-study and doctrinal legal research design. The doctrinal component involves analyzing relevant legal provisions, while the case-study component provides an opportunity to examine how climate-related legal and institutional arrangements affect communities in Uganda. The primary and secondary data were also obtained through legislation, government policies, institutional reports, judicial decisions, international legal instruments, academic books, journal articles, research reports and other credible scholarly materials. Particular attention is given to the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, the National Environment Act, 2019 and the National Climate Change Act, 2021. The National Climate Change Act is especially relevant because it provides for climate-change governance, vulnerable communities, public participation and climate-related litigation.

Concerning the qualitative method, where fieldwork is undertaken, where obtained through semi-structured interviews with selected key informants and members of affected communities. Key informants may include local government officials, environmental officers, community leaders, civil society actors and other individuals with knowledge of climate-change governance and community participation. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to identify participants who have relevant knowledge or experience concerning climate change, environmental governance and community participation. The researcher selected participants based on their involvement in climate-related activities, local environmental management, community leadership or climate-policy implementation. The final number of participants was based on the scope of the study and the point at which sufficient information has been obtained to address the research questions. The principle of data saturation guided the decision on whether additional interviews are necessary. Semi-structured online interviews allow participants to explain their experiences and perceptions in their own words. Questions focus on community involvement in climate-related decisions, access to environmental information, awareness of legal rights, participation in environmental projects, access to justice and challenges affecting meaningful community participation. Data obtained from interviews and documentary sources were analyzed thematically. Interview responses were organised into major themes emerging from the research questions. Some of the themes may include legal protection, public participation, access to information, community knowledge, institutional barriers, access to justice and climate-related inequalities.

The study observes the relevant ethical requirements for academic research. Participants are informed about the purpose of the study before taking part. Participation is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw from the study where appropriate. Confidentiality and

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

anonymity were maintained, especially where requested, and information obtained from participants were used strictly for academic purposes.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Conceptual Discussion on community-led climate justice

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. Such shifts can be natural, due to changes in the sun's activity or large volcanic eruptions. But since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change, primarily due to the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas.[11] Analysing the climate crisis and its varying framings is a precondition for understanding what climate justice means. Climate justice, which defines climate change as a question of human rights and justice, can mean different things for different people.[12] Uganda is greatly affected by climate change and experiences pronounced issues including flooding, deforestation, landslides, and extreme temperatures. Uganda is ranked 163th of 187 and therefore belongs to the most vulnerable countries; it is also the 28th least-prepared country to combat its effects.[13] Climate justice in Uganda looks at whether everyday people, especially those hardest hit by climate disasters, have the legal power and the opportunity to protect their environment and make decisions about their future.

Uganda actually has strong environmental goals and policies written on paper that align with international standards. However, there are some level of implementation challenges and gaps[14]. Framing climate justice from a grassroots and youth perspective in Uganda requires looking past formalistic state narratives[15]. True environmental action must bypass the top-down, 'checkbox' structures of institutional policy and instead center the intersectional realities of vulnerable local populations who face both ecological crises and systemic political exclusion.[16] The book Climate Justice in Action: Activism and Adaptation in Eastern Africa emphasizes that those least responsible for climate change bear its heaviest impacts and must lead the solutions. True adaptation requires centering the structural inequalities causing environmental vulnerability rather than relying solely on technological fixes.[17] Central government plans often miss what communities actually need. True climate justice requires locally led initiatives. Organisations like the Climate Action Network Uganda advocate for giving local people the actual voice and the capacity to bring about their own change[18].

There are three reasons why "community-led" works better; one of which is Melding science with Indigenous Knowledge. Local communities have lived on their lands for generations and therefore possess invaluable knowledge regarding climate change, weather

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[12] Law," in Ethics, Media, *Theology and Development in Africa* (2022), 142.
Ali Cheshmehzangi, Nicholas You, Zaheer Allam, and Bao-Jie He, "People-Centered Approach, Urban Innovation, and the SDGs," in People-Centered Innovation: Local Actions for Sustainable Cities and Communities (2025), 1–31.
[13] According to data from the Notre Dame global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) Index, as cited in Daniel (2026, p.148)
[14] Paul Atagamen Aidonojie, "Environmental Hazard: The Legal Issues Concerning Environmental Justice in Nigeria," *Journal of Human Rights, Culture and Legal System* 3, no. 1 (2023): 17–32.
[15] Anna Marie Solberg, Community Perception of Environmental Change in Queen Elizabeth National Park, Uganda (Kent State University, 2022).
[16] Antje Daniel, "Framing Climate Justice from a Youth Perspective: Intersectional Activism in Uganda," in Climate Justice in Action: Activism and Adaptation in Eastern Africa, ed. Katie McQuaid et al. (Bristol University Press, 2026), 148–149.
[17] Eileen Jahn and others (eds), Climate Justice in Action: Activism and Adaptation in Eastern Africa (Bristol University Press 2026).
[18] Inagbor Michael and Sarah Jeta Atumga, "The Right to a Healthy Environment as a Legal Foundation for Public Health Protection in Nigeria," *African Journal of Health and Environmental Law* 1, no. 1 (2026): 1.

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

patterns, soil behaviours, among others[19]. They have, over a long period of time, developed local coping methods for prolonged droughts, heavy rains and landslides. Community-led initiatives combine historical knowledge with modern climate expertise to create effective solutions tailored for specific communities[20]. This is because different regions in Uganda have different geographies and therefore face different climate disasters; for instance, the mountainous regions like Bududa and areas around Mountain Elgon experience heavy rains that cause severe mudslides and the semi-arid areas of Karamoja and Kabong experience prolonged drought and water scarcity[21]. Communities, when involved in climate justice, are able to receive custom-made solutions tailored to suit their climate challenges, not rigid plans that disregard regional climate differences.

The second part is Creating Real livelihoods, not just awareness. The central government often wastes resources hosting "awareness workshops". These do not help citizens survive the harsh realities of climate change. While teaching people about climate change is important, awareness alone does not put food on the table. Community-led initiatives focus on economic survival[22]. This approach equips local groups with practical and hands-on skills such as beekeeping and poultry farming that can build communities and reliable livelihoods that withstand severe droughts and floods[23]. Furthermore, the third part is Sustainability Through Local Ownership. When outsider organizations build infrastructure and walk away, those projects normally collapse when a part breaks, or funding dries up. By routing 70% of climate finance directly to local levels through elected structures (like Uganda's Parish Climate Change Committees), the community chooses, designs, and budgets for its own projects[24]. This is because they hold direct financial accountability and possess the deep sense of personal care needed to maintain and sustain the infrastructure for years to come.

3.2. Community-Led Climate Adaptation and Grassroots Justice

Community-led climate adaptation is increasingly important in Uganda because the effects of climate change are experienced most directly at the local level[25]. Rural communities, farmers, women, youth and other vulnerable groups often have first-hand knowledge of changes in rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, floods, soil degradation and declining agricultural productivity[26]. Their knowledge is therefore important in determining which adaptation measures are appropriate for their particular circumstances. Uganda's National Climate Change Act, 2021 recognizes the importance of indigenous knowledge and requires climate change planning to consider the specific adaptation and resilience needs of vulnerable

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[25] Marie-Louise Fehun Aren, "Advancing Legal Recognition and Community-Led Reparations for Indigenous Rights in Combating Climate Change and Environmental Degradation" (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 171–76.

[26] Akankshya Anuska Babu and Bijayini Namrata Patel, "Environmental and Climate Justice: A Public Policy Discourse," in NDIEAS-2024 International Symposium on New Dimensions and Ideas in Environmental Anthropology (2024), 301–13.

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

and marginalized communities[27]. The Act also provides for climate change structures at district and lower local government levels. From a grassroots justice perspective, community participation should go beyond simply informing people about projects that have already been designed by government agencies or development organizations[28]. Meaningful participation requires affected communities to have an opportunity to explain their experiences, identify their priorities and contribute to decisions concerning adaptation interventions[29]. This is particularly important because communities do not experience climate change in the same way. A farming community affected by prolonged drought may prioritise water harvesting and drought-resistant crops, while a community frequently affected by floods may place greater emphasis on drainage systems, relocation planning, early-warning systems and protection of livelihoods[30].

The National Climate Change Act provides a legal foundation for this kind of local involvement. It requires districts to develop climate change action plans that assess local climate vulnerabilities and identify adaptation and resilience measures[31]. It also assigns responsibilities to lower local government climate change committees, including mobilizing communities to implement adaptation and mitigation measures and monitoring climate-related activities within their jurisdictions[32]. This demonstrates that the law does not view communities merely as beneficiaries of climate programmes; it creates a framework in which local structures are expected to participate in climate action. However, community-led adaptation is not only about the existence of local structures. The quality of participation matters. A community may attend a meeting without having any meaningful influence over the final decision[33]. Similarly, consultation can become a formal requirement rather than a genuine process of listening and responding to local concerns[34]. Therefore, grassroots climate justice should be assessed in terms of whether community views actually influence decisions, whether local knowledge is respected and whether communities have access to information and resources necessary to participate effectively.

This concern is also reflected in Uganda's adaptation experience. A government assessment of adaptation technology identified weak involvement of local communities, weak extension support, poor coordination, limited technical capacity and inadequate financial support as important barriers to effective adaptation[35]. The implication is that creating legal

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[28] Tasnia Jahan Anika and Erin Daniels, "Environmental Justice and Human Rights: Protecting Communities in the Face of Climate Change," *Revista de Derechos Humanos Contemporáneos* 1, no. 1 (2025): 101–44.

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Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

and institutional structures alone does not automatically produce community-led climate adaptation. Communities require resources, information, technical support and genuine opportunities to participate[36]. The discussion therefore suggests that grassroots justice in Uganda should be understood as both participatory and distributive. Participation requires affected communities to have a meaningful voice in decisions, while distributive justice requires climate resources, adaptation opportunities and protection to reach communities that experience the greatest vulnerability. Without these two elements, climate adaptation may remain largely government-driven rather than genuinely community-led.

3.3. Legal and Socio-Economic Barriers to Legal Protection

One of the most important issues emerging from the assessment is the gap between Uganda's legal framework and the reality experienced by affected communities. On paper, Uganda has established an extensive framework for addressing climate change[37]. The National Climate Change Act, 2021 provides for adaptation, resilience, protection of vulnerable and marginalized communities, district climate change action plans and public participation. The Act further requires lead agencies to take measures to reduce the vulnerability of communities and strengthen their adaptive capacity.[38] These provisions matter because they show that Uganda's legal and institutional framework recognises climate justice and community participation. The Act specifically requires lead agencies to undertake vulnerability and impact assessments and to establish measures aimed at enhancing the adaptive capacities of communities[39]. It also requires public consultations in relation to the establishment of climate change standards and measures. The problem, however, lies largely in implementation. There can be a considerable difference between having a legal right or institutional mechanism and being able to experience that right in practice[40]. A law may require participation, but communities may still lack adequate information, financial resources, technical knowledge or institutional access to participate effectively. Similarly, a district may be required to prepare a climate change action plan, but the existence of a plan does not necessarily mean that adequate resources are available to implement the measures identified in it[41].

This implementation challenge is particularly important for vulnerable rural communities. Such communities may have limited access to government information and technical expertise and may depend heavily on agriculture and natural resources that are increasingly affected by climate variability. The Ugandan adaptation technology assessment identified inadequate financing, weak institutional capacity, poor coordination and weak implementation of existing policies as significant barriers to effective climate adaptation[42]. It

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[39] Kari Grain, Tonny Katumba, Dennis Kirumira, Rosemary Nakasiita, Saudah Nakayenga, Eseza Nankya, Vicent Nteza, and Micheal Ssegawa, "Co-Constructing Knowledge in Uganda: Host Community Conceptions of Relationships in International Service-Learning," *Journal of Experiential Education* 42, no. 1 (2019): 22–36.

[40] Sushmita Gupta and Meliana Putri, "Climate Justice in the Tourism Industry: Coastal Impacts and Community Rights," *Indonesian Climate Justice Review* 2, no. 1 (2025): 37–58.

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also noted that weak involvement of local communities and the private sector remains a challenge. The gap can therefore be understood at three related levels. First, there is a participation gap where communities may be consulted but do not necessarily have meaningful influence over decisions[43]. Second, there is an implementation gap where legal and policy commitments exist but are not adequately translated into programmes and services at the local level. Third, there is a resource gap, where local governments and communities may have responsibilities for climate adaptation without having sufficient financial and technical resources to fulfil them effectively[44]. This distinction is important because blaming communities for limited participation can overlook the structural barriers that prevent effective participation. Genuine participation requires an enabling environment. Communities need timely information, accessible decision-making processes, capacity building and resources[45]. The National Climate Change Act itself recognises the importance of technical assistance to districts and assigns the responsible climate change department a role in promoting multi-stakeholder and public participation[46].

The findings therefore indicate that Uganda's main challenge is not necessarily the complete absence of laws protecting affected communities. Rather, the more significant concern is the translation of legal commitments into everyday practice. There is a difference between what the legal framework promises and what a farmer, village resident or other climate-vulnerable person actually experiences. For community-led climate justice to become more meaningful, implementation should therefore receive as much attention as legislation[47]. Local governments need adequate resources to implement climate action plans, communities need access to relevant climate information, and participation mechanisms should allow local people to influence decisions rather than merely attend consultations. This would help move climate justice from being primarily a legal and policy principle to becoming a practical reality for affected communities. Overall, the analysis shows that Uganda has established an important legal foundation for community participation and climate adaptation[48]. The continuing challenge is to close the distance between law, institutions and lived experience. For the affected communities, climate justice becomes meaningful not simply when participation is mentioned in legislation but when their voices influence decisions, their knowledge is respected, and adaptation resources reach the places and people most affected by climate change[49].

Intersecting Inequalities to Building Accountable Relationships (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2018).

[43] Vivek N. Mathur, Stavros Afionis, Jouni Paavola, Andrew J. Dougill, and Lindsay C. Stringer, "Experiences of Host Communities with Carbon Market Projects: Towards Multi-Level Climate Justice," *Climate Policy* 14, no. 1 (2014): 42–62.

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e-ISSN: 3156-7193

Several communities in Uganda suffer from severe droughts, floods and unpredictable rainfall. They need legal protection to safeguard their land, get compensation for damages and have a voice in environmental policies[50]. There is a significant gap between the legal protection and the reality that is on ground. These barriers range from systematic institutional gaps to poverty that prevent vulnerable communities from accessing justice and bringing about their own climate change[51]. While most of the climate disasters happen in rural areas such as the severe mudslides in Bududa, extreme droughts in Karamoja, or severe flash floods in Kasese District, the legal institutions capable of addressing these challenges remain highly centralized. Major environmental public interest litigation is traditionally filed within the High Court land division. While the judiciary has set up new regional circuits across the country, many remote areas still lack direct and local access to specialised environmental judicial officers. This leaves these communities physically detached from the very institutions meant to preserve their environmental rights[52]. The geographical gap extends beyond the courtroom. There is Isolation from legal Aid and advisory services. Legal aid clinics, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and environmental defenders that offer pro bono representation are heavily concentrated in urban centres. Rural communities are not able to walk into a legal aid clinic to report degradation or illegal wetland encroachment. This isolation ensures that environmental injustices go unreported and unlitigated[53]. When courts are distant, judicial processes happen completely out of sight of the affected population. True community-led justice relies on local mobilization, testimonies from communities, and public attendance at the hearings. Holding the legal session many kilometres away, strips the community of its collective voice, turning a grass root environment struggle into a bureaucratic struggle.

The Bududa Landslide Litigation (Eastern Uganda) The Climate Context: The Mount Elgon region, particularly Bududa District, suffers from catastrophic, climate-induced landslides caused by erratic, heavy rainfall and ecological degradation. In Tsama William & 48 Others v Attorney General, National Environment Authority and Bududa Local Government Council,[54] 48 survivors and family members of victims from the December 2019 Bushika sub-county landslides sued the Ugandan government at the High Court of Uganda over failing to implement effective disaster risk management frameworks, violating their constitutional right to life, property, and a clean environment, delayed relocation and climate inaction. While Bududa is naturally prone to landslides, the frequency and severity of these disasters have been significantly exacerbated by climate[55]. The state cannot treat climate-induced landslides as unforeseeable "Acts of God". Several government reports explicitly acknowledge that climate change worsens Bududa's environment. The lawsuit had to be handled by the Mbale High Court. For rural, displaced subsistence farmers in mountainous Bududa, routinely travelling

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[51] Payal Thaorey and Abid Mustafa Khan, "Role of Participatory Approach and Local Governance in Achieving Climate Justice for Cities," in Urban Climate: Volume 2: A Comprehensive Assessment of Climate Solutions in Cities (2026), 157–83.

[52] Carlie D. Trott, Emma M. Shepherd-Reyes, Stephanie Lam, Abigail Lusnak, and Cara Dreher, "Community-Led Climate Resilience at the Neighborhood Scale: Examining Multi-Level Impacts of a Participatory Planning Process," *npj Climate Action* 5, no. 1 (2026): 49.

[53] Fiadh Tubridy, Mick Lennon, and Mark Scott, "Managed Retreat and Coastal Climate Change Adaptation: The Environmental Justice Implications and Value of a Coproduction Approach," *Land Use Policy* 114 (2022): 105960.

[54] Miscellaneous cause No. 11 of 2020[2026] UGHC 768

[55] Mariangela Veronesi, Line Algoed, and María E. Hernández Torrales, "Community-Led Development and Collective Land Tenure for Environmental Justice: The Case of the Caño Martín Peña Community Land Trust, Puerto Rico," *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* 14, no. 1 (2022): 388–97.

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

down the terrain to Mbale town for court hearings is highly prohibitive[56]. The financial cost of commuting over multiple years, coupled with poor road networks prone to washing out, severely restricted the community's ability to mobilize the masses, witness their own trial, or supply immediate localized testimonies to push for urgent resettlement.

The other structural barriers include financial and cost barriers; filing environmental lawsuits requires financial muscle. From legal representation costs to filing fees and hiring science experts to prove environmental degradation[57]. These high litigation costs are a nightmare in trying to advance community-led climate justice. There are severe judicial case backlogs and delays, restrictive procedural hurdles, and some litigants lack the locus standi to initiate and institute legal proceedings; there is a lack of a specialised Environmental Institutional framework in Uganda, as there are no specialised environmental courts and the cases on climate justice are handled by ordinary courts, which lack technical training in complex environmental legal principles. Conclusively, there is weak enforcement of court orders; even when public interest litigants win a court case against government institutions or powerful private developers, there is little or no enforcement of those orders.

3.4. Presentation of Results

The researchers designed questionnaires distributed to 20 respondents, including community members, legal practitioners, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), government authorities, and local authorities.

Interview Question 1

The pie chart and tables above were obtained from the climate justice questionnaire 1. These were distributed to the community members as the respondents on challenges faced because of climate change, obstacles specific that prevent community members from seeking legal justice or reporting environmental rights violations of the community.

Figure 1: Primary Climate Change Impacts on Grassroots Livelihood

This chart quantifies where climate shifts have hit community survival hardest. Agricultural disruptions dominate local concerns due to shifting weather.

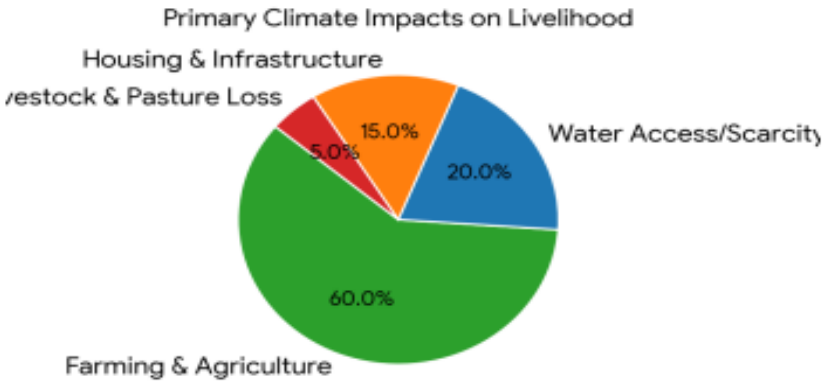

Table 1: Obstacles that prevent community members from seeking legal justice and reporting environmental rights violations.

When community members face environmental or land rights violations, multiple overlapping socioeconomic and structural hurdles block access to legal remedy.

[56] Benjamin T. Wood, Andrew J. Dougill, Lindsay C. Stringer, and Claire H. Quinn, "Implementing Climate-Compatible Development in the Context of Power: Lessons for Encouraging Procedural Justice through Community-Based Projects," Resources 7, no. 2 (2018): 36.

[57] Philippa Osim Inyang, "Citizen Science, Mobile Technology, and Environmental Justice in Africa: Rights-Based Legal Pathways for Community Empowerment," *World Development* 200 (2026): 107254.

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Identified Obstacle	Count (Out of 11 Responses)	Key Empirical Examples from Text
High Costs / Legal Fees	7	"High costs", "legal costs involved", "lack of finances to push cases to the end"
Distance to Institutions	3	"Distance", "long distances to legal institutions"
Fear / Retaliation	3	"Fear of intimidation or retaliation", "rich are protected by higher powers"
Language Barrier & Ignorance	3	"Ignorance of where to report", "language barrier", "lack of knowledge about rights"
Procedural Delay / Bureaucracy	2	"Slow legal processes", "long case backlogs"
Systemic Corruption	1	"Corruption", power imbalances favouring rich violators

Table 2: Local Climate Change Adaptation Strategies

Communities are actively self-organizing and adapting their agricultural and survival practices to manage prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall, and flash flooding.

Adaptation Strategy Developed	Count (Out of 11 Responses)	Implementation Action
Drought-Resistant/Improved Crops	6	Cultivating improved/fast varieties to withstand dry spells; replacing extinct traditional varieties
Irrigation Deployment	3	Setting up small-scale manual or solar-powered irrigation schemes
Water Harvesting & Infrastructure	2	Building underground tanks, community dams, and improving drainage channels
Afforestation / Re-greening	2	Locally-driven tree planting initiatives acting as windbreaks and weather buffers
Food Resource Stockpiling	1	Storing extra dry food rations specifically to bypass famine periods
Income Diversification	1	Branching away from pure rain-fed agriculture to safeguard household revenue
Structural Housing Improvements	1	Constructing physically reinforced brick/stone shelters to survive heavy storms

Visual Breakdown: Climate Change Adaptation Strategies

(Scaled to show the percentage weight of each community strategy out of 100%)

Agricultural Alterations (Crops) (37.5%)

Water Management & Storage (31.3%)

Household Resilience (Housing/Food) (18.7%)

Ecosystem Management (Trees/Wetlands) (12.5%)

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Interview Question 2

The pie charts and Tables above were obtained from the climate justice questionnaire 2. These were distributed to legal practitioners, NGOs and CSOs. The pie chart shows the main disconnects between environmental law and enforcement, as reported by respondents in the climate justice questionnaire. The chart shows the specific challenges preventing effective implementation of laws.

Figure 2: The disconnect between the law and its actual enforcement.

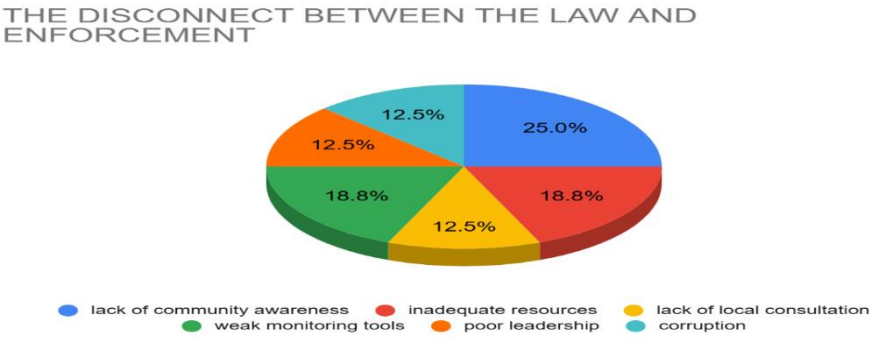

Table 3: The Enforcement Gap (National Environment Act vs. Reality)

This table outlines why strong environmental laws on paper are failing to protect people on the ground.

Biggest Enforcement Disconnect	Frequency (Out of 5)	Field Reality & Details
Information Gap / Ignorance	2	Communities simply do not know that these protective laws exist.
Severe Resource & Funding Starvation	1	NEMA and local district councils lack the basic budget, staff, vehicles, and monitoring equipment to do field inspections.
Poor Inter-Agency Coordination	1	A huge structural gap exists between national authorities (NEMA) and local government teams.
Top-Down Lawmaking	1	The people writing the regulations do not consult the frontline communities experiencing climate shocks.
Weak Leadership	1	Weak oversight and poor governance inside responsible agencies.

Table 4: Legal and Socio-economic in Representing Marginalized Communities

Lawyers and activists face massive hurdles when trying to defend vulnerable communities in court.

Primary Legal Hurdle	Frequency (Out of 6)	What it Means in Practice
Lack of Funding & High Costs	2	Total lack of finances to sustain a legal battle to its actual end.

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The Technical Evidence Wall	1	Climate cases require expensive scientific testing (pollution, water quality) that poor communities cannot afford.
Severe Case Backlogs	1	Court delays are so bad that communities become frustrated and lose hope before a verdict is reached.
State Security Interference	1	Security organizations actively frustrate civic activities and legal assembly.
Unequal Bargaining Power	1	Deep systemic imbalances when matching marginalized groups against rich corporate developers or customary land norms.

Table 5: Risks Faced by Local Environmental Defenders

Despite constitutional protections (like Article 29's freedom of expression), activists on the ground face high personal risk.

Retaliation Risk Faced	Frequency (Out of 6)	Specific Field Dangers Named
Arrest and Imprisonment	4	Police arrests, arbitrary detention, and ground-level prosecution for speaking up.
Physical Abuse and Torture	1	Direct physical harassment and intimidation from security actors or powerful groups.
Closure of Civic Space	1	Systematic legal and political efforts by the government to clamp down on civic groups.

Table 6: Recommended Solutions

The structural fixes recommended by the field experts to close these gaps.

Recommended Action	Frequency (Out of 6)	Implementation Step
Legal Protections for Defenders	2	Pass a specific Environmental Human Rights Defenders Protection Law; stop criminalizing peaceful protest.
Mass Public Sensitization	2	Educate and inform local populations about their legal rights and climate-smart strategies.
Strict Enforcement & Institutional Reform	2	Enforce existing laws strictly; replace corrupt or weak leadership in responsible agencies.

Interview Question 3

The pie chart and table above were obtained from the climate justice questionnaire 3. These were distributed to environmental and government officers. The pie chart shows the challenges facing environmental and government officers who are trying to enforce climate protection laws within the community, as identified by the respondents in the climate justice questionnaire.

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

Figure 3: Challenges faced by the government in enforcement of climate justice.

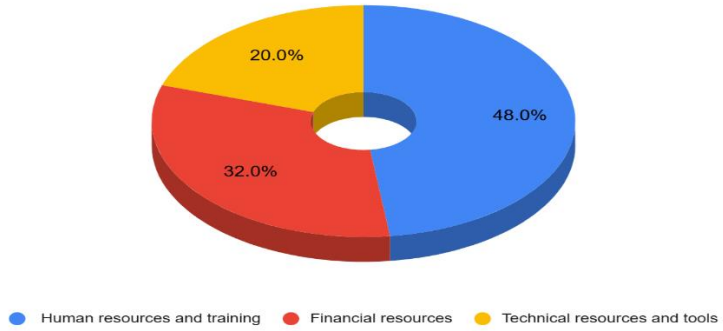

Table 7: Community Survey Feedback: Local Climate Law Enforcement and Engagement

Core Challenge / Theme	Specific Concerns & Barriers	Key Strategies & Feedback
Enforcement Resource Gaps *(Local Government & Environmental Officers)*	Technical personnel: Lack of upfront frontline human capacity. Financial constraints: Limited funding and fiscal resources to execute oversight. Expertise deficits: Shortage of strong technical skills in environmental law, climate science, data analysis, and pollution control.	Local authorities require heavy upskilling and dedicated, decentralized funding streams to accurately monitor modern climate violations.
Vulnerable Group Inclusion *(Women, Youth, & Indigenous Communities)*	Policy design gaps: Risk of being treated as passive reviewers instead of policy co-creators. Geographic isolation: Vulnerable neighbourhoods are often excluded from high-level forums.	Community sensitization and neighbourhood-level forums. Involving groups from the very beginning of policy design. Partnering with grassroots administrative structures to centre on-ground realities.
Balancing Development vs. Environment *(Large-scale Agriculture, Oil, & Gas)*	Constitutional violations: Development encroaching on the community's right to a healthy environment. Monitoring complex fields: Keeping multi-billion-dollar projects compliant.	Mandating periodic environmental assessments. Treating ecological safeguards as a strict legal condition. Enforcing targeted environmental permits. Deploying inter-agency monitoring teams.
Dispute Resolution Effectiveness *(Traditional/Informal Mechanisms vs. Courts)*	Technical gaps: Lack of formalized legal training. Enforcement issues: Vulnerable to failure if a powerful party influences the outcome or ignores the process.	Deep understanding of customary land, historical boundaries, and heritage. Significantly cheaper than formal legal representation. Usually much faster to resolve disputes locally.

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

Climate enforcement in the local area entails a delicate balance between development and community rights, constrained heavily by the lack of finances and technological knowledge. Although the traditional court system provides an inexpensive and timely way of solving conflicts that is culturally sensitive, it needs better legal support. Going forward, engaging the community right from the onset and empowering field officers with relevant knowledge is very important.

Discussion of Findings

Based on the empirical data obtained from twenty survey participants in communities, legal actors, civil society groups, NGOs, and governments, some socioeconomic and structural constraints have been established, which deny access to environmental justice for marginalized communities. When individuals from these communities experience serious violations of their environmental rights and climate change impacts on their lives, the problem of lack of finance is stated as the main constraint, mentioned by seven out of eleven respondents. Also, the distance to judicial institutions, fear of political intimidation and retaliation, language problems and lack of knowledge of their rights each concern three out of eleven respondents. Moreover, procedural delays in courts and corruption that supports wealthy perpetrators are additional constraints in the case of legal access to environmental justice. From the perspective of legal constraints, the lawyers and human rights activists representing marginalized populations have to deal with the technical nature of the process, which requires expensive scientific analysis of water pollution, state security involvement, and the power imbalance with corporate developers[58]. As a result, legal protection is not accessible for victims of serious climate degradation.

The threat posed by climate change, such as drought and flash flooding, has been met by an amazing display of self-reliance among the affected communities in terms of adaptation measures within their localities. Agricultural adjustments represent thirty-seven-point-five per cent of community adaptation methods, where six out of eleven interviewees have resorted to planting drought-resistant crops. Water management and conservation techniques represent thirty-one-point three per cent of adaptation measures, and these include solar irrigation, underground water collection reservoirs, community dams, and flood draining structures. Household adaptation strategies represent eighteen-point seven per cent, involving food resource storage, improved housing, and economic diversification, whereas ecosystem restorations represent twelve-point five per cent through community reforestation initiatives. However, despite the presence of all these grassroots innovations, there is a great disparity in enforcement when it comes to national legislation and on-the-ground reality. Community ignorance of the existing environmental legislation, along with an extreme lack of funds in organizations such as the National Environment Management Authority, means that there can be no effective environmental regulation, thus leaving the local adaptation measures vulnerable to any illegal ecological activities.

Additionally, the problem of institutional enforcement is aggravated by the deficiency in capacities at the local government level, where environmental law enforcement officials are under permanent pressure in terms of financial and personnel resources, as well as a lack of competencies in climate change science, data management, and pollution monitoring. The problem seriously limits the potential for the regulation of mega-commercial projects such as those related to agriculture, oil, and gas, that often encroach upon the constitutional right to a healthy environment. In order to solve the problem, communities are forced to resort to informal mechanisms of conflict resolution that provide quick and cheap culturally informed solutions; however, being informal, they do not have any legal support and can be easily compromised in case of non-compliance or influence by the powerful party. At the same time, civic space activists and environmental human rights defenders working there are subjected to

[58] Jiaojiao Yu and Jianjiang Shen, "Assessing the Equitable Renewable Energy Access and Environmental Justice for Sustainable Development in China," *Geological Journal* 60, no. 11 (2025): 2634–51.

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e-ISSN: 3156-7193

danger; this is shown by four out of six legal experts who emphasize arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture, and suppression of civic assembly.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the findings of the research highlight the essential disconnect that exists between the existence of complete national legal frameworks on environmental matters and effective environmental law enforcement in vulnerable communities on the ground level. Structural poverty, prohibitive cost of legal processes, evidentiary obstacles, administrative remoteness, and corruption effectively disenfranchise the communities, making it impossible for them to seek justice for any violations of environmental rights. What is more, the existing enforcement mechanisms in the sphere of environmental law are grossly underfunded, understaffed, and technologically inadequate, and the state security agencies are engaged in criminalization of any efforts made by environmental rights activists fighting against the illegal destruction of the environment. Marginalized communities take advantage of localized changes in agriculture, construction of water management facilities, and informal means of resolving disputes to survive during climatic shocks, but they cannot compensate for the lack of state accountability.

In order to address this problem in the environmental enforcement process, there is an urgent need for national state authorities to immediately enact legislative reforms, such as providing legal protection for environmental human rights defenders, thereby preventing unnecessary arrests, attacks, and crackdowns on citizens' civil liberties. Governments have also been encouraged to decentralized financial resources, recruit frontline officials, and build up their capacity through special training programs in order to ensure proper monitoring and regulation of corporate development projects. In order to give power to these frontline communities, there is a need to start public legal education and sensitization campaigns, along with providing community legal aid services and scientific testing facilities for pollution cases. Lastly, there is a need to formalize dispute resolution institutions through legal provisions and technical assistance, along with requiring consultation with marginalized women, youth, and indigenous communities at the time of climate policy formulation at the local level.

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