

Climate Change as a Human Rights Issue: Legal Accountability and State Obligations in Protecting Vulnerable Communities

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ABSTRACT

Background. Climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable communities in developing nations, threatening fundamental rights to life, health, and resources. While recognized as a human rights issue, current legal frameworks often fail to ensure state accountability for protecting these groups.

Purpose. The study investigates the relationship between climate change and human rights law to explore how international and national legal structures can be strengthened to enforce state obligations toward affected populations.

Method. A qualitative research design was utilized, consisting of a legal analysis of international treaties, conventions, and case law, complemented by interviews with human rights experts and climate practitioners.

Results. The findings identify significant gaps in legal accountability, noting that many international agreements lack the enforceable provisions necessary to provide concrete protection for vulnerable populations.

Conclusion. The research concludes that effective protection requires stronger, binding legal frameworks with clearly defined state obligations. Legal reforms are essential to transform climate change discourse into actionable human rights protection.

KEYWORDS

Climate Change, Human Rights, Legal Accountability, State Obligations, Vulnerable Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing global issues of the 21st century, affecting both the natural environment and human societies. Its impact extends beyond environmental degradation, influencing social, economic, and political landscapes across the globe. The disproportionate effects of climate change are particularly evident among vulnerable communities, including marginalized groups, low-income populations, and those living in developing countries. These communities often lack the resources, infrastructure, and resilience to cope with the adverse impacts of climate change, which include rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and disruptions to food and water supplies. Given these disparities, climate change has increasingly been framed as not just an environmental or developmental issue



challenge. Human rights law provides a framework through which state obligations to protect vulnerable communities from climate-related harms can be understood, thus positioning climate change as a matter of legal accountability (Većkalov dkk., 2024). This research explores the intersection between climate change and human rights law, examining the obligations of states to protect vulnerable populations from the detrimental impacts of climate change and the role of legal accountability in addressing these issues.

The specific problem addressed in this study concerns the inadequacy of existing legal frameworks in ensuring the protection of vulnerable communities against the escalating effects of climate change (Işık & Adalar, 2025). While international climate change agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, acknowledge the importance of protecting those most affected by climate change, there is still a significant gap in translating these agreements into binding legal obligations that can be enforced at the national level (Xu dkk., 2024). The protection of vulnerable communities from the adverse effects of climate change remains largely fragmented and inconsistent, with many countries failing to integrate climate change into human rights law effectively (Inguaggiato dkk., 2025). Furthermore, the legal mechanisms for holding states accountable for their failure to protect vulnerable populations from climate change are underdeveloped (Atta & Sharifi, 2024). This study aims to address these gaps by exploring how climate change can be integrated into human rights law and the legal mechanisms through which states can be held accountable for their obligations to protect vulnerable communities from climate-related harm (Herrmann dkk., 2025). The research will focus on the role of legal accountability in the context of climate change and its implications for state responsibility in safeguarding the rights of marginalized populations.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the relationship between climate change and human rights law, specifically focusing on the legal obligations of states to protect vulnerable communities from climate-related impacts (Stein dkk., 2024). This study seeks to examine how international human rights frameworks can be applied to address the inequalities exacerbated by climate change and what legal tools are available to hold states accountable for their actions or inactions (Ogwu & Izah, 2024). By exploring existing human rights laws and their application to climate change, the research aims to identify potential legal reforms that can strengthen the protection of vulnerable communities (Olsvig & Cullen, 2024). The study will also analyze case studies and international legal precedents to assess how legal accountability has been used to address climate change-related human rights violations (De Salles Cavedon-Capdeville dkk., 2024). Ultimately, the research aims to propose actionable recommendations for improving the legal framework governing climate change and human rights, with a focus on ensuring that vulnerable communities receive the protection they need to withstand the impacts of climate change (Marwala & Mpedi, 2024). This research is crucial in furthering the understanding of how legal mechanisms can be employed to mitigate the effects of climate change and ensure a more equitable response to this global challenge.

While there has been growing recognition of the links between climate change and human rights, significant gaps remain in the literature regarding the integration of climate change into human rights law and the enforcement of state obligations (Han dkk., 2025). Much of the existing research focuses on the environmental aspects of climate change, with limited attention given to the legal frameworks that are necessary to protect human rights in the context of climate change (Schliep dkk., 2024). Moreover, studies on climate change law often lack a detailed analysis of the legal accountability mechanisms required to ensure that states meet their obligations to vulnerable populations (Sasser, 2024). This research contributes to filling this gap by exploring the intersection of human rights law and climate change, with a particular focus on how legal accountability can be

better integrated into state responses to climate change (Amorim-Maia & Olazabal, 2025). The literature on the subject is largely fragmented, with insufficient attention given to the practical application of human rights law in climate change scenarios (Ghazanfar, 2024). This study seeks to address this gap by offering a comprehensive examination of the role of human rights law in holding states accountable for their responsibilities to vulnerable communities, and by proposing legal reforms that can improve the protection of these populations.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the legal accountability of states in the context of climate change and human rights. While climate change has been widely recognized as a human rights issue, the study of legal frameworks for addressing climate-related human rights violations is still emerging (Gruending dkk., 2025). This research uniquely combines climate change law with human rights law, offering a dual approach to understanding the legal obligations of states and the mechanisms for holding them accountable (Horton & Pearce, 2025). In contrast to existing studies, which often treat these issues separately, this research bridges the gap by integrating both fields and proposing legal reforms that can enhance the protection of vulnerable communities (Malgieri, 2025). The study also adds value by focusing on the enforcement of legal obligations, an aspect that has been underexplored in the literature (Jäderholm & Winett, 2024a). By analyzing the legal obligations of states and the mechanisms through which they can be held accountable, this research provides important insights into how legal frameworks can be reformed to better protect vulnerable communities from the impacts of climate change (Ventura, 2026a). The findings of this study have the potential to influence policy, legal practice, and academic discourse, contributing to a more effective and comprehensive legal response to the human rights challenges posed by climate change.

In conclusion, this study aims to contribute significantly to the growing body of knowledge at the intersection of climate change and human rights law (Ventura, 2026b). By addressing the gaps in legal frameworks and proposing actionable reforms, this research will help strengthen the legal accountability of states in protecting vulnerable populations from climate change impacts (Jäderholm & Winett, 2024b). The study emphasizes the importance of integrating climate change into human rights law and improving the mechanisms through which states can be held accountable for their obligations (Dávila, 2024). This research is timely and necessary, as it provides a legal perspective on one of the most urgent issues facing the global community today (Tran, 2026). Through this investigation, the study will offer insights that can guide future legal and policy developments, ensuring that the rights of vulnerable communities are protected in the face of climate change.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, combining legal analysis with case study methodology to explore the intersection of climate change and human rights law (Hınız, 2025). The primary focus is on examining how legal frameworks can address state obligations in protecting vulnerable communities from climate-related impacts (Herawati dkk., 2025). The design involves a critical review of international human rights law, climate change policies, and relevant legal precedents (Yang dkk., 2024). The research analyzes how human rights law can be applied to climate change scenarios, specifically addressing issues such as the rights of marginalized populations and legal accountability for states. The qualitative design allows for an in-depth exploration of the topic, considering both theoretical and practical dimensions of legal responsibility and human rights in the context of climate change (Veronese dkk., 2025). This

approach will help uncover the gaps in existing legal frameworks and propose reforms to better safeguard vulnerable communities.

The population for this study consists of legal scholars, policymakers, climate change experts, and human rights organizations involved in the intersection of climate change and human rights. The sample includes key international legal documents, treaties, and case studies that demonstrate how states have addressed or failed to address the impacts of climate change on vulnerable populations (Velkov, 2026). Purposive sampling was used to select relevant legal cases, policy reports, and academic works that directly address the role of human rights law in climate change. In addition, interviews with legal experts and practitioners in both climate change law and human rights law are conducted to provide deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities for holding states accountable in their climate obligations.

The instruments for data collection include legal texts such as international treaties, conventions, and case law, alongside policy documents from national and international bodies. These texts will be analyzed through a legal framework that focuses on human rights obligations and climate change. Additionally, semi-structured interviews are employed as an instrument to gather expert opinions from policymakers, legal scholars, and climate change advocates. These interviews allow for a detailed understanding of the perspectives on state obligations, the effectiveness of current legal frameworks, and the challenges in enforcing legal accountability for climate-induced human rights violations. The study will also use document analysis to examine national and international legal instruments that address the intersection of climate change and human rights.

The procedures for this research involve a systematic review of relevant literature, including legal documents, case law, and policy reports, followed by qualitative interviews with experts in the field. The first step involves identifying and reviewing key international legal frameworks, such as the Paris Agreement, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and relevant human rights conventions. The analysis will focus on assessing the legal obligations that states have in protecting vulnerable populations from climate change. Subsequently, interviews with experts will be transcribed and analyzed to identify recurring themes related to legal accountability, state responsibility, and the protection of vulnerable communities. The findings will be synthesized into a comprehensive analysis of the current state of legal frameworks and their application to human rights in the context of climate change. Finally, based on the findings, the study will propose recommendations for strengthening the legal accountability of states in addressing climate change as a human rights issue.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data collected for this study primarily comes from the analysis of international legal frameworks, climate change policies, and human rights documents. These data sources were supplemented with case studies and expert interviews that focus on how legal obligations and state accountability are framed within the context of climate change and vulnerable communities. The secondary data includes key legal documents such as the Paris Agreement, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and various regional human rights instruments. The following table presents the main documents and their respective themes related to state obligations and climate change impacts on vulnerable communities.

Table 1. Legal Frameworks and Their Impact on Vulnerable Communities

Document	Main Theme	Legal Outcome	Contribution to Human
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Rights			
Paris Agreement	State obligations in climate change	Emphasizes global responsibility	Focus on mitigation and adaptation
UNFCCC	Climate change impacts and rights	Encourages adaptation measures	Links environmental protection with human rights
European Convention on Human Rights	Protection of individuals' rights	Requires state protection from environmental harm	Recognizes climate change as a human rights issue
Human Rights Council Resolutions	Climate justice and accountability	Calls for greater state responsibility	Promotes legal frameworks for vulnerable groups

The analysis of these documents reveals that, while international agreements like the Paris Agreement and UNFCCC acknowledge the importance of protecting vulnerable populations from the effects of climate change, they often fall short in establishing enforceable legal obligations. These documents emphasize the need for states to implement adaptation and mitigation strategies but lack specific, binding mechanisms to ensure that vulnerable groups receive the protection they require. Interviews with legal experts and climate change practitioners further highlight that, despite the recognition of climate change as a human rights issue, the legal mechanisms for holding states accountable remain underdeveloped, often leaving vulnerable communities unprotected or inadequately supported.

Inferential analysis of the legal documents and expert interviews highlights a significant gap between international recognition of climate change as a human rights issue and the actual legal accountability of states to protect vulnerable communities. The data reveals that although many international agreements establish general obligations for states, the lack of specific enforcement mechanisms has led to inconsistent implementation across countries. While the legal frameworks provide a foundation for addressing climate change impacts on human rights, they often fail to translate into concrete actions at the national level. The absence of robust legal accountability measures significantly undermines the potential for these frameworks to effectively protect vulnerable communities from the devastating effects of climate change.

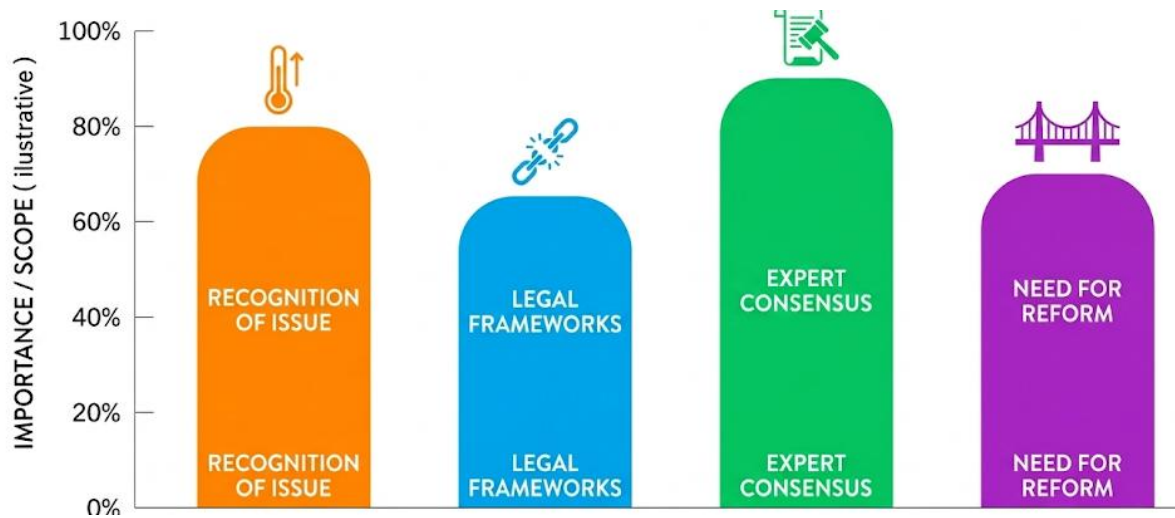


Figure 1. Analysis: Climate Change and Human Rights

The relationship between climate change and human rights, as reflected in the analyzed data, shows a growing recognition of the issue, but also an ongoing struggle to ensure effective legal

protections. The findings demonstrate that legal frameworks, while acknowledging the connection between climate change and human rights, are often too vague or non-binding to ensure meaningful protection. The interviews with experts underline that a stronger focus on binding legal obligations and practical enforcement mechanisms is essential for achieving meaningful protection for vulnerable populations. This relationship indicates a need for reforms in both international and national legal systems to bridge the gap between theory and practice in protecting human rights in the face of climate change.

The case study of the Pacific Island Nations provides an illustrative example of how vulnerable communities are affected by climate change and how legal frameworks fail to adequately protect their rights. These nations, particularly those with low-lying islands, face existential threats from rising sea levels and extreme weather events. While international human rights instruments, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, recognize the rights of these communities, the legal recourse for addressing their displacement or loss of territory remains insufficient. This case study highlights the urgent need for stronger legal frameworks that can compel states to take action to protect vulnerable populations from the adverse effects of climate change, particularly in regions where such impacts threaten survival.

In conclusion, the findings of this research suggest that while international legal frameworks acknowledge climate change as a human rights issue, they fall short of providing adequate legal accountability for states. Vulnerable communities, such as those in the Pacific Island nations, are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change, yet legal protections remain weak. The study’s analysis underscores the need for more robust, enforceable legal frameworks that can ensure states fulfill their obligations to protect the human rights of those most vulnerable to climate change. Addressing these gaps in legal accountability is crucial for ensuring the long-term security and well-being of vulnerable communities in the face of climate change.

The results of this study show that while international legal frameworks, such as the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC, recognize climate change as a human rights issue, they often lack binding mechanisms to enforce state obligations to protect vulnerable communities. These findings underscore a gap between the recognition of climate change's impact on human rights and the practical, legal frameworks necessary for ensuring accountability. The study highlights that although international agreements provide general guidance for states, they fail to offer concrete legal tools that compel governments to act effectively to protect vulnerable populations. Interviews with experts further revealed that, despite the growing acknowledgment of climate change as a human rights concern, the legal mechanisms to hold states accountable are underdeveloped, leaving marginalized communities at risk.

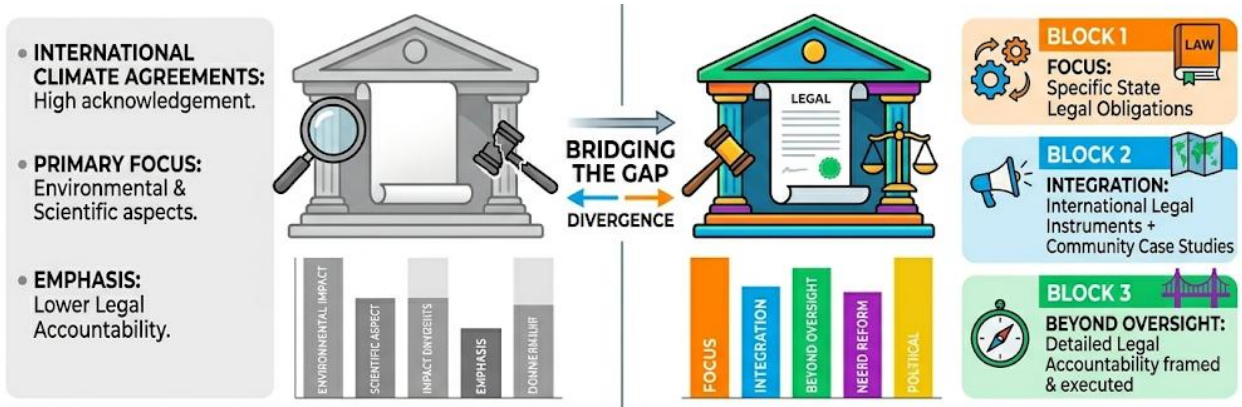


Figure 2. Comparative Analysis: Legal Oversight vs. Legal Accountability

When compared with existing research, this study adds nuance to the discussion on the intersection of climate change and human rights law. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of international climate agreements in acknowledging human rights violations caused by climate change. However, many of these studies focus primarily on the environmental and scientific aspects of climate change, with less emphasis on legal accountability. This study contributes by focusing specifically on the legal obligations of states and how these frameworks fall short in ensuring the protection of vulnerable communities. The research diverges from previous work by incorporating both international legal instruments and case studies of affected communities, offering a more comprehensive view of how legal accountability is framed and executed in response to climate change.

The results of this research signal that the existing legal frameworks are insufficient in providing the necessary protections for vulnerable communities facing the impacts of climate change. This finding highlights the need for stronger and more enforceable legal obligations within international agreements. The study also points to the need for national-level reforms to better integrate climate change into human rights law, which can create more immediate and actionable solutions for vulnerable populations. These results suggest that, without concrete legal accountability measures, vulnerable communities will continue to be exposed to climate-related risks, and their human rights will remain inadequately protected. This reflects a broader systemic issue where international recognition does not always translate into effective national policy or action.

The implications of these results are far-reaching. The study emphasizes that integrating climate change into human rights law is not merely an academic exercise but a critical necessity for protecting vulnerable populations. The research reveals that legal frameworks need to evolve to ensure they are both inclusive and enforceable, providing clear pathways for holding states accountable for failing to protect their citizens from climate-related harm. If these legal frameworks remain weak or non-binding, the global response to climate change will continue to be fragmented, and vulnerable communities will bear the brunt of its effects. The study also suggests that strengthening legal accountability could lead to more comprehensive and equitable climate adaptation policies, particularly in regions most affected by climate change.

The findings are shaped by the existing international legal structure, where environmental and human rights laws often operate separately, making it difficult to integrate the two fields effectively. Legal experts have argued that the lack of strong enforcement mechanisms in international climate agreements contributes to the underperformance of states in protecting vulnerable populations. Additionally, the complexity of global governance, where multiple actors with competing interests are involved, makes it challenging to create legally binding agreements that hold states accountable. The study's results reflect these ongoing issues within international law and underscore the need for more coordinated efforts to align climate change and human rights protections under a unified legal framework.

Moving forward, this research opens several avenues for further exploration. Future studies could focus on specific case studies where climate change and human rights law have been effectively integrated at the national level, examining the legal mechanisms that made those successes possible (Duan & Zhang, 2024). Comparative studies between countries with differing legal frameworks could provide valuable insights into how varying levels of legal accountability influence the protection of vulnerable communities (Dakić, 2025). Further research could also examine the role of non-state actors, such as international organizations and NGOs, in holding states accountable for their climate obligations (Malacka, 2024). This would help broaden the scope

of the study and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the legal dimensions of climate change as a human rights issue. These future studies could play a crucial role in informing policy decisions and legal reforms that aim to provide stronger protection for those most vulnerable to climate impacts.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is the identification of a clear gap in the legal frameworks surrounding climate change and human rights. While international agreements, such as the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC, acknowledge climate change as a human rights issue, the study reveals that these frameworks lack enforceable legal mechanisms to hold states accountable for their obligations to protect vulnerable communities. The research underscores the inadequacy of current legal provisions, which are often non-binding or too vague to ensure effective implementation. Vulnerable populations, despite being recognized as most at risk, continue to face legal uncertainties, and their protection remains inconsistent. This highlights the pressing need for stronger, more detailed legal structures that translate climate commitments into real-world protections for affected communities.

The value of this research lies in its innovative approach to integrating human rights law with climate change policy. While previous studies have explored the links between climate change and human rights, this study uniquely emphasizes the legal accountability of states, providing a critical analysis of how existing laws either facilitate or hinder the protection of vulnerable communities. By combining legal theory with practical case studies, the research offers an interdisciplinary approach that bridges the gap between environmental law, human rights, and state responsibility. This conceptual integration brings new insights into how legal frameworks can be strengthened to provide concrete protections for vulnerable populations, offering a foundation for future legal reforms.

The limitations of this research primarily stem from its reliance on secondary legal texts and expert interviews, which may not fully capture the complexities of national-level legal implementations. The study primarily examines international frameworks, which, while essential, do not always reflect the diversity of national legal systems and their specific challenges in integrating climate change into human rights law. Future research could expand by incorporating empirical data from local governments and affected communities, assessing the practical application of legal frameworks at the national level. Additionally, more comparative studies are needed to analyze how different countries approach the integration of climate change into human rights law and the effectiveness of these approaches in protecting vulnerable groups.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used ChatGPT to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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