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Opinion Brief

Loss and Damage: Centring Justice for
African Communities

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Loss and damage in Africa is often discussed as if it were a technical climate term or a future risk. But for many of us, it is already part of everyday life. It shows up in empty fields, dry rivers, displaced families, and communities that are constantly trying to recover from the next shock before they have healed from the last one. This crisis is not only about climate. It is about history, inequality, and power and about who is expected to carry the cost of a problem they did not create.

Across the continent, African communities are paying the highest price for climate change. Women, children, small-scale farmers, and pastoralist communities experience loss and damage not as numbers in a report, but as lived realities. Crops fail. Livestock die. Families are forced to move. Women take on more unpaid care work. Young people migrate in unsafe conditions. Culture, identity, and dignity are slowly eroded. For many communities, there is no longer anything left to “adapt” to. What has been lost cannot simply be rebuilt. In Ethiopia, this reality is visible and deeply personal. Recurrent droughts and floods have hit pastoralist and farming communities across Oromia and the Somali region. Livelihoods that depend on land and livestock are collapsing. Families are displaced again and again, often with no meaningful support. Women are usually the first to absorb the impact walking longer distances for water, keeping households together with fewer resources, and pulling girls out of school when survival becomes the priority. These are not isolated climate events. They are cumulative losses that permanently change people’s lives.

Yet global discussions on loss and damage continue to avoid naming responsibility. Africa is still spoken of as a recipient of aid, not as a rights holder. The continent’s long history of exploitation, debt, and economic extraction is rarely acknowledged in climate negotiations, even though these realities shape who is vulnerable today. Local knowledge and adaptation practices, many of them led by women, are often praised in speeches but ignored when decisions are made and money is allocated.

This problem is built into the way loss and damage is currently addressed. When people talk about loss and damage response frameworks, they are referring to international mechanisms under the UNFCCC, including the Loss and Damage Fund, that are meant to respond to climate harms that cannot be adapted to. In reality, these systems are slow, distant, and difficult to access. Decisions are made far from affected communities, and developing countries also have minimal influence rooted in geopolitics. Support is treated as help, not responsibility. Too often, it takes the form of loans that push developing countries deeper into debt rather than helping them recover and address the negative impacts of climate change.

By framing climate displacement and destruction as humanitarian emergencies rather than climate change impacts and rights violations, the current approaches deny African communities legal recognition and meaningful remedies. Responsibility is delayed, negotiated away, or softened while people’s lives continue to unravel. A different approach is needed. Loss and damage must be treated as a matter of justice and accountability, rooted in historical and ongoing emissions. African communities are not passive victims. Across the continent, people have survived through indigenous and community-based practices such as pastoralist mobility, communal land and water management, women-led support networks, and seed preservation. These practices are not informal or outdated. They are knowledge systems that have sustained communities for generations and should shape climate responses today.

What needs to change is not complicated. Loss and damage financing should be delivered through grants, not loans. Funds should reach communities directly and trust local, women and youth-led organisations to lead responses. Gender and child-centred approaches are essential because women and children carry the heaviest burdens through displacement, care work, disrupted education, and increased exposure to violence. Political promises are not enough. There must be clear timelines, transparency, and accountability for those most responsible for climate harm.

Loss and damage in Africa is not distant environmental concern. It is a present injustice. The real question is not whether African communities are owed reparative support, but how long the world will continue to look away. Climate justice begins when responsibility is acknowledged, rights are taken seriously, and communities are given the space and resources to rebuild their lives with dignity.