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*Forward-Looking Transitional Climate Justice:
The Role of ECOWAS in Ensuring Regional Integration*

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This paper is part of the ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series (EPAS)—a flagship initiative that highlights the perspectives of African thought leaders and researchers on ECOWAS. EPAS aims to critically examine the evolution of ECOWAS over the past five decades, from the viewpoint of scholars and citizens alike, and to contribute to a forward-looking vision for regional integration in West Africa. The series is coordinated by the Africa Policy Research Institute as part of the Support to the ECOWAS Commission on Organisational Development project. This project is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

INTRODUCTION

Climate change in the West African region is not only an environmental crisis, but it is also a crisis of social justice, posing serious threats to peace, security, and development. Increasingly frequent and severe weather shocks do not fall upon a social blank slate: they land on societies structured by historical inequities, gendered divisions of labour, and skewed access to power and resources. These structural inequities largely determine who suffers, who recovers, and who benefits from the recovery efforts. Women, who are disproportionately responsible for subsistence agriculture across the region, are therefore systematically over-exposed to climate harms.

If climate policy continues to treat gender as an incidental variable, adaptation and transition efforts will reproduce the very exclusions they are meant to redress. Feminist political ecology highlights that such differential vulnerability stems from entrenched power relations and gendered social hierarchies (Elmhirst, 2015). For instance, recent United Nations data indicate that around 80 percent of people displaced by climate-related disasters are women. Therefore, when disaster management and adaptation policies ignore these gendered dimensions, they risk reinforcing existing inequalities (Mainu, 2022).

ECOWAS has played a central role in regional integration and disaster management in West Africa. However, as climate risks increase, there is an opportunity to integrate forward-looking transitional justice principles into regional climate governance. Forward-looking transitional justice, as articulated by scholars such as Brankovic (2023), extends the logic of traditional transitional justice beyond post-conflict contexts to structural harms, emphasising prevention and the transformation of socio-political relations that produce vulnerability. Importantly, this perspective does not undermine ECOWAS' current efforts. Instead, it complements the bloc's mandate by ensuring that integration and climate action are justice-informed, forward-looking, and socially transformative.

Additionally, Brankovic suggests that forward-looking transitional justice should not be understood as a blueprint for automatic justice but as a set of normative and

procedural aspirations that must contend with entrenched inequalities, contested governance, and structural barriers.

Applied to climate governance, forward-looking transitional justice emphasises institutional transformation, reparations,

and inclusive participation; however, these goals must be critically interrogated considering West African realities, including uneven state capacity, gendered exclusion, and political constraints. This lens challenges conventional optimism surrounding ‘just transitions’, and reframes justice as an ongoing, contested process rather than a fixed outcome.

“Globally, climate governance has begun to institutionalise solutions for structurally embedded vulnerabilities”

Globally, climate governance has begun to institutionalise solutions for structurally embedded vulnerabilities. The COP27 decision to establish dedicated arrangements and a Fund for responding to Loss and Damage marked a significant step toward acknowledging the need for reparative finance within the climate regime (McDonnell, 2023). Yet, the stability and sustainability of such multilateral mechanisms remain fragile. The recent withdrawal of the United States from both the Fund’s Board and the Paris Agreement under the renewed U.S. administration reinforces this fragility. Such actions erode trust in global burden sharing, signal declining political commitment among major emitters and overall international climate finance, and raise the risk that the Fund will operate at a sub-transformative scale, showing how easily reparative ambitions can be reversed.

Forward-looking transitional justice reframes climate governance to confront such institutional fragilities. Rather than relying solely on global compliance or goodwill, this framework emphasises non-recurrence, redistributive mechanisms, and institutional reforms that are locally and regionally formulated. Applied to ECOWAS, this means developing resilient structures such as gender-responsive adaptation funds, regional reparations facilities, and participatory climate adaptation governance that can operate independently of the instability of international governance. By institutionalising justice within its own governance systems, ECOWAS can ensure that climate equity and regional integration remain durable even when multilateral agreements fail.

This paper proposes that ECOWAS adopt a forward-looking transitional justice framework for climate governance that explicitly foregrounds gender equality and regional solidarity. In the West African context, past injustices refer to the structural inequities, including but not limited to resource governance, structural inequities in land access, and decision-making that have long marginalised women and rural communities. At a time of shifting geopolitical alliances and unstable global climate finance, ECOWAS must consolidate its regional justice architecture by anchoring it to context-based climate adaptation governance. Furthermore, ECOWAS’s engagement with international climate frameworks should serve to complement, rather than determine regional priorities. This enables ECOWAS to secure predictable support for

its agenda while pioneering a gender-responsive and justice-oriented energy transition that addresses the recurrence of structural injustices.

ECOWAS was the first African Regional Economic Community to adopt a Directive on Gender Assessment in Energy Projects. The Directive aims to integrate women and marginalised groups into energy decision-making and protect them from climate impacts. Cape Verde's 'Capacity Building for Building Back Better' initiative highlighted women's agency and their active participation in decision-making processes (Barros, 2020). However, there is little evidence that this plan effectively increased women's participation and inclusion in decision-making processes, regardless of how 'inclusion' is defined, and outcomes of this initiative have not been systematically documented. Similarly, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso introduced gender quotas to strengthen disaster risk governance. However, the practical effects of these measures remain unclear. These examples reflect ECOWAS's growing attention to gendered dimensions of climate-induced disasters. It also highlights the need for critical evaluation and follow-through to ensure that gender-responsive policies translate into meaningful participation.

A West African transitional justice framework for climate change should examine how ECOWAS can address historical injustices while leveraging transitional justice mechanisms to promote a more equitable future for regional communities. The concept of 'mainstreaming the future', which refers to steps taken to prevent the repetition of past human rights violations, provides a useful analytical lens (Lewis et al., 2023). It is important to recognise that post-conflict transitional justice processes in West Africa, such as those implemented in Liberia and Sierra Leone, were themselves multi-dimensional and forward-looking. The framework proposed in this paper, however, adapts these principles specifically to climate governance. The paper treats forward-looking justice not as a single measure but as the integrated outcome of mechanisms designed to anticipate climate-related harms and integrate gender and social equity into regional decision-making.

Transitional justice processes guided by a forward-looking perspective would address historical grievances while also incorporating broader economic, political, social, and cultural processes within an inclusive climate justice framework. Such processes include land reform initiatives, climate adaptation and mitigation policies, community post-disaster rehabilitation programs, and locally grown disaster risk reduction strategies. This approach emphasises why a mechanism or policy is necessary. For example, 'why' a land redistribution policy or renewable energy program is required to redress structural inequities, before focusing on 'how' such a policy could be implemented. By prioritising justice outcomes over procedural formality, ECOWAS can ensure that its interventions not only remediate past harms but also advance regional integration.

ECOWAS should also engage with the mining and materials sector to ensure that its climate justice framework is comprehensive. Africa holds vast reserves of critical

minerals essential for just energy transition. The African Union's African Green Minerals Strategy notes that Africa stands at the "crossroads of the global energy transition and digital transformation". Through this strategy, the AU emphasises the importance of value addition and sustainable resource management for the continent's prosperity. However, the mining sector often reproduces existing inequalities. In this regard, civil society actors argue that a just climate transition must integrate gender, equitable resource governance, and just climate considerations.

In practice, ECOWAS could strengthen its benefit-sharing mechanism in critical minerals projects. This involves having contractual obligations set for mining companies to allocate a portion of their profits to affected communities, invest in local infrastructure, fund women-led enterprises, or support education and health initiatives. Similarly, strengthening regional beneficiation to create jobs through investing in local mineral processing industries within West Africa for value addition and sustainable management of resources. However, this strategy requires substantial investment, infrastructure, and regulatory coordination that may be difficult to implement across all ECOWAS states.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ECOWAS stands at a critical intersection of regional leadership, gender advocacy, and climate governance. By embracing a transitional climate justice framework that is forward-looking and gender-responsive, the regional bloc can convert its normative commitments into tangible outcomes for West African women and communities most vulnerable to climate impacts. This paper makes the following recommendations to transform existing structural inequalities in West Africa into opportunities for inclusive development.

- **ECOWAS should implement a gender-responsive minerals strategy:** The bloc must develop a set of institutional guidelines requiring that its Member States pursue a gender-inclusive, environmentally responsible mining. A regional certification for green minerals that incentivises job creation in local communities and the development of women’s development funds would be a tangible way of operationalising climate justice in extractive industries and complement the African Green Minerals Strategy.
- **The establishment of a Regional Climate Adaptation Fund for Women:** ECOWAS should build on its existing financing structures, such as the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID). Rather than creating a wholly new institution, this fund could be used to finance on-the-ground adaptation projects led by women, including coastal protection systems with women’s participation or solar-powered irrigation for female farmers. Seed funding could come from regional development partners such as EBID Member States, the African Development Bank, and ECOWAS-mandated special funds. By channelling financial resources into skills training and direct adaptation initiatives, this Fund would provide tangible support to women affected by climate change while advancing ECOWAS’ broader mandates on gender justice and regional resilience.

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