Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal

Climate action and sustainable development: equity, justice and inclusion in developed vs. developing economies

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Received 24 March 2026
Revised 20 August 2026
Accepted 20 August 2026

Abstract

Purpose – This article introduces a special issue volume on climate action and sustainable development, with a central focus on equity, justice and inclusion (EJI). It examines how climate impacts and policy responses intersect with gender, labour and governance systems, applying an adaptation–maladaptation lens to identify challenges and opportunities for equitable and inclusive climate action.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach synthesises multidisciplinary insights from seven articles spanning developed and developing economies. It employs an adaptation–maladaptation framework to analyse climate action through gendered experiences, policy design, labour transitions, and governance capacity.

Findings – The articles highlight how climate change disproportionately affects those least responsible for its causes, with vulnerabilities compounded by existing socioeconomic and structural inequalities. Weak global emissions-reduction commitments have facilitated maladaptive practices – notably increased reliance on energy-intensive technologies – that perpetuate vulnerability. Across the volume, authors illustrate the need for gender-responsive policies, just transitions in labour markets and equitable governance mechanisms that integrate EJI considerations into climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Originality/value – As an introductory article, this piece does not present original empirical data. Instead, it synthesises findings and identifies a conceptual gap – the under-theorised relationship between adaptation–maladaptation outcomes and EJI principles in empirical climate research. It concludes with a call for future research evaluating the long-term impacts of climate interventions on diverse and marginalised groups.

Keywords Adaptation and maladaptation, Climate change, Climate debt theory, Climate mitigation, Developed vs developing countries, Equity and inclusion, Governance, Just transitions, Vulnerability

Paper type General review

Introduction

This special issue (SI) of *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* focuses on the intersection of climate change, sustainability, and equity, justice, and inclusion (EJI). The volume examines the multilayered dimensions of EJI in relation to climate change and sustainable development. Climate change represents a complex, multidimensional challenge shaped by structural inequalities, socioeconomic disparities, and intergenerational injustice

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2040-7157
p-ISSN: 2040-7149
DOI 10.1108/EDI-03-2026-0239

(Trott *et al.*, 2023). This SI captures both the global policy implications and the practical dimensions of evolving climate challenges and potential solutions at a critical juncture where climate action and justice imperatives converge—hallmarks of the Anthropocene. As Crutzen (2002) contends, the Anthropocene is marked by a fundamental shift in the Earth's systems, moving irreversibly away from natural baseline conditions while intensifying under human impacts. However, evidence suggests that countries in the Global South have emerged as leaders in sustainability and climate action. For example, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda addresses climate change through economic diversification and the establishment of ambitious sustainability targets (Alessa and Dhakal, 2026). Conversely, Western leadership concerning climate action and sustainability is waning, driven by economic pressures, geopolitical conflicts, maladaptive efforts, and competing priorities. Several alarming trends exemplify this decline: US withdrawal from climate agreements (Bigerna and Michel, 2025); geopolitical conflicts displacing climate action from policy agendas (Barbara and Galea, 2024); systematic reductions in climate finance by developed economies (UN, 2025); delays in ambitious mitigation policies (OECD, 2025); maladaptive heat-coping behaviours in Australia—such as increased alcohol and soft drink consumption and air-conditioning reliance—impacting health and well-being (Zander *et al.*, 2024),

The current United States administration overtly attacks the concept of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), seeking to remove it from discourse and penalise those who advocate for it. As Ng *et al.* (2025) argue, Trump's anti-DEI policies have global implications, influencing fairness and equity practices beyond the US. These anti-DEI efforts likely undermine environmental justice for marginalised communities facing increased environmental hazards (Choi *et al.*, 2025). More significantly, the US administration has attacked climate science itself, labelling climate change a "hoax" and withdrawing funding for mitigation. This abandonment of climate science was rendered complete on 7 January 2026, when the US withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement (The White House, 2026). As several contributions in this SI demonstrate, this hostility illustrates that climate change is not merely an environmental and technical challenge; it is fundamentally a wicked problem (Lazarus, 2008) characterised by diverse stakeholders with competing interests, power imbalances, political ideology, and questions of justice and inequity. Witnessing a global superpower wielding hegemonic power in ways that are antithetical to equity, social inclusion, and scientific integrity in climate action (Ettinger and Collins, 2025) brings into sharp focus many of the issues examined in this SI. Across diverse contexts and jurisdictions, the studies included here demonstrate that climate action is inseparable from questions of equity, justice, and inclusion. Whether examining green jobs, climate governance, or community-based adaptation, the contributions reveal how climate policies and initiatives often intersect with—and risk reinforcing—existing social inequalities and exclusion unless justice is centred.

The contributions also highlight how vulnerable groups (women, young people, migrant workers, the poor) in the Global South are impacted by and respond to climate change. Paradoxically, although these groups contribute the least to climate change in terms of carbon footprints, they are frequently the most affected (UN, 2023), as their livelihoods are most exposed to environmental changes, including extreme weather. Yet these vulnerabilities do not preclude agency. Several articles demonstrate that women, indigenous people, migrant workers, and community leaders play critical roles in responding to climate change, though much of their work remains informal, invisible, or undervalued (Johnson *et al.*, 2023; Yánez and House-Peters, 2026 – this volume). An agency without recognition, resources, or decision-making authority remains a persistent limitation, underscoring the need to move beyond superficial engagement towards genuinely inclusive approaches to climate mitigation. While some inclusive approaches seek to harness the capabilities of these groups, there is a risk that inclusion and justice become performative rather than substantive. More importantly, the contributions underscore glaring inequities in the policies and processes that address climate mitigation and its consequences. While climate responsibility and environmental externalities are unevenly distributed between the Global North and South, adaptive capacity is likewise

unequally distributed across countries, classes, and minorities. This inequity exacerbates vulnerabilities and constrains agency. Collectively, this SI advances the case for a just transition in climate change mitigation—the shift to a low-emissions economy (UNFCC-KCI, 2025)—one that prioritises social justice, focussing on the experiences and agency of vulnerable groups, and pursues an equitable future.

This introductory article is organised into three sections. The next section defines key terms used in the volume and provides a brief overview of the current state of climate change, contextualising the contributions that follow. The subsequent section introduces and summarises each of the seven articles and the final section identifies common themes across the collection, highlighting their value in advancing understanding of the criticality of a just transition.

Definitions

The intersection of climate change, sustainable development, and equity, justice, and inclusion (EJI) presents both critical challenges and opportunities for global action. To ensure conceptual clarity and establish a shared foundation for analysis, the following key terms are defined. According to the IPCC (2022), adaptation is the process of adjusting to actual or expected climate change to mitigate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities. In contrast, maladaptation refers to actions that unintentionally increase the risk of adverse outcomes, including heightened greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, increased climate vulnerability, or the erosion of equity, justice, and inclusion (Dhakal and Mahmood, 2014). In addition, vulnerability encompasses sensitivity to harm and a lack of capacity to cope and adapt. It is shaped by both exposure to climate impacts and limited adaptive capacity. Within this context, EJI functions as a core guiding principle—particularly within the Paris Agreement—underscoring the centrality of climate justice in responding to climate change. Drawing on Burgess *et al.* (2022), Schlosberg and Collins (2014), and Smith and Wodajo (2022), we define the three elements of EJI in climate change and sustainable development as follows:

Equity acknowledges that different barriers require differentiated support mechanisms to ensure fair access to opportunities and resources. It encompasses both the distributive concept of justice and its absence—inequity.

Justice recognises that climate change imposes disproportionate sustainable development challenges—social, economic, and environmental—on vulnerable communities that have contributed least to the crisis.

Inclusion encompasses the diversity of personal and group characteristics among human beings. It requires improving the meaningful participation of marginalised and vulnerable individuals and communities in addressing their distinct social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Overview of the changing climate

The UN (2023) Emissions Report found that pledges under the Paris Agreement indicate the world is on track for a 2.5–2.9 °C temperature rise this century—considerably exceeding the 1.5 °C target set to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. More importantly, the recent reporting (Rising *et al.*, 2026) indicates that macroeconomic effects of climate change are difficult to quantify but are growing rapidly. For example, populations in low- and lower-middle-income countries are already 4–12% poorer in terms of GDP per capita due to temperature changes and sea-level rise, with projections indicating a 3–15% decrease in per capita income by 2050 (p. 6). The contributions included in this special issue are situated within specific and evolving geopolitical contexts, emphasising their urgency and timeliness. For example, although the G20 countries are collectively committed to supporting equitable and sustainable growth, none is currently reducing emissions at a pace sufficient to achieve net-zero targets (UN, 2023). Consequently, combating climate change is pivotal to achieving

the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under the 2030 Agenda (Wohlgezogen *et al.*, 2020). Severe weather events are deeply intertwined with global inequality: the poorest and most vulnerable suffer most from climate impacts yet contribute least to their causes (Fankhauser and McDermott, 2014). Conversely, climate adaptation measures in the Middle East and South Asia have been shown to be maladaptive (Dhakal and Mahmood, 2014; Kerr, 2023).

Climate debt theory (associated with climate justice) posits that, as developed countries have benefited from economic activities that generate substantial greenhouse gas emissions, they bear a moral responsibility for addressing the resulting effects (Hickel, 2020). However, as Platje and Kampen (2016) argue, although climate threats are acknowledged, they are also easily neglected, indicating insufficient urgency in taking action to mitigate their effects and achieve the SDG targets. As Tawiah and Alessa (2025, p. 49) point out, "prior studies have established that developed countries are higher emitters than developing countries," citing authors such as Wu *et al.* (2018), who argue that developed countries emit more greenhouse gases due to greater consumption of electronic gadgets and travel. Consequently, "in fairness, developed countries should bear more of the burden of climate change than developing countries." Moreover, the social impacts of climate change—including labour rights, employment opportunities, income, prosperity, life satisfaction, and well-being—require greater scholarly attention than has been evident thus far (Markkannen and Anger-Kraavi, 2019).

The changing climate is linked to both apparent and hidden generational impacts. The apparent impact is that those with longer life expectancies face longer-term consequences. The hidden impact is that future generations will face the same challenges without a direct voice. This exclusion of agency and voice extends to children, who are excluded from participatory democracy (Phillips *et al.*, 2024). As climate impacts intensify, millions of vulnerable people face disproportionate challenges: job loss, physical harm, disease, mental health issues, food insecurity, water shortages, migration and forced displacement, and increased natural disasters (World Bank, 2025). Pulido (1996) argues that studying environmental racism—the relationship between marginalised groups and environmental issues—offers alternative perspectives on climate change and its disproportionate effects on the already marginalised low-income populations.

Climate change and EJI in developed and developing countries

The seven articles included in this volume are introduced in two contextual categories: low-income and high-income countries. It is worth noting that, despite widespread use of "developing" and "developed" since the 1940s in academic research and foreign policy, these terms have a contested history regarding what "developed" and "developing" mean (Barros Leal Farias, 2024). Khan *et al.* (2022, p. 1) argue that such classifications represent a false hierarchy among nations based on divisions associated with access to wealth and political power, thus allowing "some groups to extract, exploit and subjugate others." The United Arab Emirates [UAE] exemplifies this complexity: officially classified as a developing economy, it possesses many characteristics of a highly advanced, developed nation. Following the United Nations Country Classification (2014), which designates the UAE as a developing, high-income economy, we have categorised it accordingly for this article.

For the purposes of this analysis, we apply the Low-Income/High-Income dichotomy when describing economic development in the countries examined. We do so advisedly, acknowledging that such a simple dichotomy obscures substantial complexity, internal diversity, and the multidimensional nature of developmental differences among nation-states. However, it provides a useful analytical lens for highlighting structural differences in economic capacity, institutional infrastructure, and historical responsibility—all of which shape climate vulnerability and response options. We argue that simplifying this complexity offers conceptual clarity for this SI.

High-income economies possess the financial and technical capacity to address climate change and ensure that mitigation policies are effective and equitable. Importantly, high-income countries also bear a disproportionate share of historical greenhouse gas emissions, linking their capacity to lead mitigation efforts with responsibility to support low-income countries that lack the resources, technology, and infrastructure to address climate challenges. By contrast, low-income countries have limited fiscal means and weaker institutional capacity, heightening their vulnerability to climate impacts to which they have contributed little, further emphasising the disparity between responsibility and impact.

These structural differences have direct implications for equitable climate action. While high-income countries possess the capacity to meet their own climate targets and provide financial, technological, and institutional support to others, low-income countries do not. Consequently, the High-Income/Low-Income distinction helps accentuate issues of fairness, burden-sharing, and capability—central considerations in advancing equitable adaptation and mitigation within the framework of climate justice.

Critical synthesis

This SI attracted 17 submissions from 11 countries. Of these, 7 articles (a 41% acceptance rate) with lead authors affiliated with institutions in six different countries were accepted for publication following several rounds of double-blind peer review. Table 1 summarises the key features of the seven articles.

Article 1 — radical environmentalism and corporate environmental responsibility in the Global North and South

This article investigates the relationship among national income levels, environmental awareness, Corporate Environmental Responsibility (CER), and the emergence of radical environmental movements, contrasting patterns between the Global North and Global South to advance insights into environmental justice. The findings reveal that higher GDP per capita is positively associated with more robust CER practices and increased radical environmentalism in Global North countries. However, incidents involving violence or harmful outcomes occur more frequently in the Global South. Notably, corporations in the Global North demonstrate substantially higher environmental performance quality, reflecting stronger environmental awareness and institutionalised accountability. In contrast, corporate actors in the Global South face structural barriers that limit the quality and consistency of CER—a pattern reflecting broader wealth asymmetries with profound environmental and peace implications. Environmental activism in the Global South is disproportionately characterised by violence, repression, and the criminalisation of activists. The authors argue for two key interventions: first, wealthier countries need to support lower-income nations through concessional green financing and environmental initiatives; and second, more inclusive, justice-oriented approaches must be considered essential—moving beyond symbolic gestures to substantive accountability, particularly in the Global South, where communities experience disproportionate environmental burdens.

Article 2 — climate change adaptation programs to promote equity and social justice among youth: insights from a global perspective (low-income country)

This study presents a systematic literature review of 48 peer-reviewed publications examining how climate change adaptation programs influence equity and social justice among young people in the Global South. The authors emphasise that young people are often "climate conscious" and environmentally aware, making their role in climate mitigation crucial—particularly in the Global South, where vulnerable groups experience disproportionate climate impacts yet possess limited adaptive capacity. The authors employ the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to organise their

Table 1. Summary of the seven articles

Authors	Title	Primary theoretical framework(s)	Method used	Central findings	Key contribution
Meinhold *et al.* (2026)	Radical environmentalism and corporate environmental responsibility: Does a country's GDP per capita matter for environmental justice?	Normative ethical framework	Mixed-methods quantitative study	Strong association between GDP and corporate environmental responsibility	Environmental conflict as a justice indicator as a part of the Global North-South asymmetry analysis
Asad *et al.* (2025)	Climate change adoption programs to promote equity and social justice among youth: insights from a global perspective	Global distributive justice, just resilience and rights-based approach	Narrative literature review	Youth are critical yet marginalised actors due to symbolic rather than substantive representation	Establishes that youth participation is a prerequisite for achieving intergenerational equity
Yánez and House-Peters (2026)	Identifying the (gendered) elephants in the room: women's invisible work within transdisciplinary climate change and sustainability efforts	Feminist theory, invisible work framework	Qualitative interpretivist study	Invisible work is gendered, essential, and structurally erased; performative inclusion dominates	Extends invisible work theory by linking micro labour to macro systems
Magno *et al.* (2026)	Fostering inclusive climate governance in the Global South: gender-responsive adaptation in coastal communities	Institutional analysis and development (IAD)	Exploratory qualitative case study	Women's Critical Yet Undervalued Roles; Persistent Gender Norms and Social Resistance	Gendered Institutional Analysis
Kumar *et al.* (2025)	Inclusive stakeholder engagement for intergenerational equity: the moderating and mediating roles of climate capacities	Dynamic Capability Perspective (DCP), Participatory Governance Theory (PGT)	Quantitative cross-sectional survey	Climate capacities act as an enabler but not the sole driver of intergenerational equity	Enhanced climate technical capacities can paradoxically weaken equity outcomes by marginalising inclusive stakeholder processes
Chandranathan and Waring (2025)	Green jobs in the red dot – prospects for a just transition in Singapore	Just transition theory, Green Economy	Qualitative case study	Comprehensive Green Jobs Architecture depends on white-collar green jobs	Reframes green jobs as an integral part of the climate justice paradigm
Kohli *et al.* (2026)	How is justice addressed in collaborative local climate action?	Urban climate justice theory	Qualitative comparative case study analysis	Local governments recognise disproportionate climate impacts but struggle to operationalise equity	Systematically conceptualise equity in collaborative urban climate action as a negotiated process

analysis around seven thematic areas: program design, youth engagement, NGO roles, barriers to participation, impacts on social justice, financial constraints, and strategies supporting equitable, youth-led adaptation. The systematic review reveals a critical paradox: whilst young people are widely recognised as essential stakeholders in climate action, they remain systematically marginalised, excluded from decision-making spaces, and under-resourced. Young people in the Global South are often positioned as 'passive victims rather than proactive participants' in adaptation efforts, significantly constraining their capacity to shape adaptation agendas in socially just and contextually appropriate ways. The authors conclude that addressing these challenges requires three interconnected interventions: targeted capacity-building initiatives, meaningful youth representation in formal governance processes, and sustained long-term funding mechanisms. These measures are essential to achieving equitable climate adaptation outcomes and empowering young people to assume active leadership roles in climate action across the Global South.

Article 3 — identifying the (gendered) elephants in the room: women's "invisible work" within transdisciplinary climate change and sustainability efforts (low-income country)
This qualitative study examines the essential yet systematically invisible labour of women in climate change mitigation efforts. The authors argue that addressing environmental crises requires a deeper understanding of socioecological systems—ones that recognise nature and society as fundamentally interconnected rather than separate domains. Drawing on four case studies from Jamaica, Panama, Colombia, and Brazil, the authors document how Indigenous leaders, women activists, and regional advocates undertake vital, consistently unacknowledged forms of labour. They characterise this phenomenon as the "gendered elephant in the room"—work that "undermines the inclusivity, equity, and sustainability of collaborations tackling climate change". The findings reveal that women activists perform essential emotional, relational, and epistemic labour: mediating between diverse knowledge systems, sustaining community networks, and defending territorial interests. Yet this work remains routinely obscured by tokenistic inclusion and superficial representation within climate governance processes. The authors conclude that meaningful change requires institutional arrangements that formally recognise and adequately compensate gendered invisible labour; integrating Indigenous and women's voices into substantive (rather than symbolic) decision-making roles; and advancing genuinely collaborative, context-responsive climate justice approaches grounded in local realities.

Article 4 — fostering inclusive climate governance in the Global South: gender-responsive adaptation in coastal communities (low-income country)
This qualitative research examines women's participation in local climate initiatives in the Philippines, specifically mangrove restoration projects, and analyses the institutional, sociocultural, and environmental drivers and barriers shaping their involvement. The authors conducted key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis across four municipalities in Iloilo Province—a region of exceptional climate vulnerability given its coastal geography, exposure to typhoons, and history of devastating extreme weather events. The findings affirm women's critical agency as active environmental stewards and grassroots leaders in community-based climate initiatives. However, the research identifies persistent and interconnected constraints limiting women's meaningful participation: inadequate institutional support, severe financial constraints, entrenched patriarchal gender norms, climate-induced damage to community reforestation sites, and exclusion from formal decision-making processes. These barriers reveal a fundamental governance gap in climate adaptation. The authors argue that advancing genuinely inclusive climate adaptation requires three interconnected institutional reforms: (1) establishing gender-responsive climate governance frameworks that integrate women into substantive (rather than symbolic) decision-making structures; (2) strengthening municipal institutional capacity

through sustained financial and technical support with dedicated staff; and (3) enabling and resourcing women-led climate innovation. The research underscores that recognising and formalising women's environmental labour—through fair compensation, leadership development, and genuine power-sharing—is both an equity imperative and a resilience-building strategy essential for effective climate adaptation in vulnerable coastal communities.

Article 5 — inclusive stakeholder engagement for intergenerational equity: the moderating and mediating roles of climate capacities (high-income country)

The construction industry is a significant global contributor to carbon emissions and a strategically important economic sector in the United Arab Emirates, making it the empirical focus of this quantitative study. The authors examine how inclusive stakeholder engagement influences intergenerational equity in the UAE's construction sector, employing dynamic capabilities theory and participatory governance frameworks to analyse the complex relationships among stakeholder involvement, climate capacities, and intergenerational equity—dimensions that intersect critically in this carbon-intensive industry. The findings reveal that inclusive stakeholder engagement initiatives directly and positively contribute to intergenerational equity outcomes. However, climate capacities demonstrate a paradoxical dual role: they partially mediate the engagement-equity relationship whilst simultaneously exerting a negative moderating effect on specific dimensions. This counterintuitive finding exposes a critical tension: enhanced technical climate capacity can inadvertently marginalise inclusive stakeholder processes if not deliberately aligned with equity objectives. The authors argue that construction sector managers must adopt genuinely inclusive engagement approaches that balance the competing needs of present and future generations, whilst strategically investing in climate capacities that strengthen organisational adaptability and resilience. They recommend establishing integrated, participatory decision-making frameworks that explicitly align climate action with long-term sustainability and intergenerational justice objectives—ensuring that stakeholder engagement translates into substantive, equitable intergenerational benefits rather than symbolic inclusion. The research underscores a critical insight for climate governance: technical capacity-building and inclusive participation are not automatically complementary. Achieving climate justice requires deliberate institutional design that prioritises equity considerations throughout climate action planning and implementation.

Article 6 — green jobs in the red dot: prospects for a just transition in Singapore (high-income country)

Singapore presents a paradox: despite being one of the world's highest-income economies by GDP per capita, it remains extremely vulnerable to climate change as a low-lying island experiencing high annual rainfall. This article examines how Singapore navigates its twin objectives—mitigating climate risks whilst capitalising on economic opportunities arising from decarbonisation and climate adaptation. The authors analyse the institutional, social, and labour market drivers shaping Singapore's green job creation strategy, with particular attention to equity and justice considerations in a developed economy. They argue that Singapore's approach must prioritise three interconnected elements: fair employment standards through mechanisms such as the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices (TAFEP); addressing societal perceptions that discourage participation in technical and vocational green roles; and strengthening Singapore's regional leadership in supporting just transitions across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The article reveals critical equity gaps. For example, low-income groups in Singapore experience disproportionate climate vulnerability, particularly outdoor workers, including low-wage migrant workers, who are exposed to extreme heat risks. The authors emphasise that an inclusive green transition requires targeted support for younger, older, and mid-career workers alongside robust

protections for migrant labour. The article contributes to the emerging evidence base on EJI within green transitions across Asia.

Article 7 — how is justice addressed in collaborative local climate action (high-income country)

The authors advance urban climate justice theory by examining equity as a negotiated process within multistakeholder climate partnerships across 12 local governments in Canada. The analysis reveals persistent governance gaps, including political silos, inadequate mechanisms for managing power imbalances, and insufficient conflict-resolution tools among partners. Drawing on 55 interviews with local government staff, businesses, NGOs, and community organisations, three key findings emerge. First, institutionalising justice commitments from the outset requires dedicated leadership. Second, supporting community-based climate action demands adequate funding, shared decision-making, and non-technocratic approaches that reflect diverse community priorities. Third, effective partnerships require mechanisms for meaningful engagement, participatory evaluation, and adaptive implementation that prioritise justice throughout the process. The authors argue that these findings are essential for establishing relational governance structures and sustaining institutional support for equitable, long-term local climate action.

In summarising the findings from low-income countries, we have identified four key themes.

Climate action is inseparable from EJI. Across all articles, climate change is framed not merely as an environmental or technical challenge, but as a deeply social and equity issue. Climate impacts and adaptation measures disproportionately affect already vulnerable groups—including women, youth, Indigenous communities, migrant workers, and populations in the Global South. Article 3, focussing on Latin America and the Caribbean, underscored the gendered and racialised nature of invisible labour in climate justice, particularly by Indigenous and women leaders, whereas Article 4, based in the Philippines, outlined women's essential roles in grassroots initiatives, noting the structural and cultural barriers that limit formal recognition. Several studies demonstrate that managerial approaches to climate governance are maladaptive and risk reproducing or exacerbating existing inequalities unless equity and justice are explicitly embedded in policy design and implementation. Climate governance is therefore presented as a moral and political project, not merely an efficiency-driven one.

Participation and inclusion matter. Another shared theme is the importance of inclusive stakeholder engagement, yet the articles consistently show that participation alone is insufficient. Who participates, whose knowledge counts, and who holds decision-making power are critical questions. Studies highlight how women, Indigenous actors, and community leaders often perform essential but unrecognised or "invisible" labour that sustains climate initiatives, particularly in transdisciplinary and community-based projects. Gender, youth, Indigenous knowledge, and marginalised labour are central to climate solutions but remain undervalued. Article 2, focussing on youth in the Global South, highlighted systemic barriers that youth face in adaptation programs, prompting calls for equitable governance and financial support. Without formal recognition, resourcing, and authority, inclusion risks becoming symbolic rather than catalysing real change.

Capacity, context, and inequality shape climate outcomes across regions. Several articles emphasise that economic capacity and institutional strength strongly influence climate responses. Wealthier Global North contexts tend to exhibit stronger corporate environmental responsibility, yet often externalise environmental harm to the Global South, where governance is weaker and social costs are higher. Article 6, focussing on Singapore, stressed the need for green job equity, highlighted migrant workers' vulnerabilities, and called for inclusive transition strategies to ensure the country's green plan is effective. Conversely, low-capacity settings face heightened risks of conflict, marginalisation, and radicalisation

when environmental injustices remain unaddressed. Rapid development pressures (evident in the articles examining the UAE and Latin America) create adaptation risks without inclusive governance, and evidence indicates that gaps in financial and governance capacity hinder sustained EJI-aligned climate action.

Toward "just transitions": from technocratic solutions to EJI. Collectively, the articles argue for a shift from narrow, technocentric climate strategies towards inclusive, participatory, and equity-oriented models. Concepts such as intergenerational equity, gender-responsive action, just transitions, and negotiated equity recur throughout this SI. Effective climate action is portrayed as requiring long-term investment in human and institutional capacities, recognition of diverse forms of knowledge and labour, and governance arrangements that redistribute power rather than merely consult stakeholders.

Conclusion

This article began by demonstrating that the USA's withdrawal from climate mitigation and its attack on DEI reveal a critical gap: political leadership and community support for just transitions remain vital in the Global South. Rising right-wing populism—incorporating climate denial and dismissing DEI as a conspiracy—will intensify climate change, exclusions, inequalities, and injustices. A review of the seven articles in this SI show that whilst climate initiatives are underway globally, substantial progress is needed to redress persistent economic and climate imbalances between low- and high-income countries. As Barros Leal Farias (2024) argues, development-based classification remains relevant to climate change. Climate debt theory—grounded in climate justice—posits that developed countries, having benefited economically from high-emission industrial activities, bear moral responsibility to support mitigation and adaptation in climate-vulnerable regions (Hickel, 2020). However, the 2026 geopolitical context—characterised by unreliable US policies and intensifying conflicts—marginalise climate action in policymakers' priorities worldwide.

Without sustained recognition of structural inequities amplifying climate impacts, and without genuine commitment to inclusive, justice-centred solutions, challenges will intensify rather than diminish. There is an urgent need for institutional and governance reforms prioritising equity alongside climate action. Such reforms require political will and international cooperation—both of which are currently scarce. Evidence confirms that global climate action is not progressing at the pace and scale needed to avoid severe impacts (UNFCC, 2025). The vested hegemonic interests of advanced economies—rooted in historical fossil-fuel expansion—have stifled climate action (Wright *et al.*, 2021). In this light, the credibility of adaptation strategies prescribed for the Global South by advanced economies must be critically questioned, given the risks of maladaptation (Magnan *et al.*, 2016; Schipper, 2020). Drawing on the studies included in this volume, this article recommends: (1) using EJI indicators in climate investment decisions; (2) developing inclusive just transition frameworks; (3) ensuring gender mainstreaming; and (4) incorporating Indigenous and local knowledge into adaptation strategies. By centring equity, justice, and inclusion within climate action, societies can reduce intergenerational and socioeconomic disparities in climate risk exposure, strengthen community resilience, reduce forced displacement, and enable participatory, socially just climate governance.

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