

Regional Africa Human Rights Academic Network Conference 2025

Theme:

**Human Rights, Environment and Climate Change:
*Access to Environmental and Climate Justice within the
Regional and Sub-Regional Human Rights Systems in
Africa***

Date:

Wednesday – Friday, 19 – 21 February 2025

Venue:

Abuja, Nigeria

12 June 2024

The Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (RWI), in collaboration with its academic partner institutions (the Academic Network) under the Regional Africa Programme¹ is organizing the 2025 Regional Africa Human Rights Academic Network Conference in Abuja, Nigeria, hosted by the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN).

The conference's theme is '*Human Rights, Environment and Climate Change: Access to Environmental and Climate Justice within the Regional and Sub-Regional Human Rights Systems in Africa*'.

Researchers, scholars, and staff affiliated with any member institution of the Academic Network², the RWI Regional Africa Programme partners, and other institutions partnering with RWI or the University of Nigeria in organizing the conference are invited to submit abstracts on the theme and sub-themes of the Conference as identified below.

Young and early-career researchers and scholars are encouraged to apply. Papers presented at the conference will be eligible for double-blind peer-reviewed publication in a high-quality scientific journal or a book published by a reputable international publisher. In-person participation is preferred, but the organisers may consider online participation where necessary.

The closing date for submitting an abstract is 31 July 2024.

¹ RWI's Regional Africa Programme is financially supported by Swedish Development Cooperation (Sida).

² The Academic Network's members are the Faculty of Law, University of Nigeria, Nsukka; the School of Law, Kenyatta University; Faculty of Law, University of Zimbabwe; College of Business, Peace, Leadership and Governance, African University; Gender, Health and Justice Research Unit, University of Cape Town; Faculty of Law, Stellenbosch University; Centre for Human Rights, Addis Ababa University; and Faculty of Law, British University in Egypt.

Conference Theme: Background

The theme of the conference: *'Human Rights, Environment and Climate Change: Access to Environmental and Climate Justice within the Regional and Sub-Regional Human Rights Systems in Africa'* has been carefully chosen to enable participants to engage with the manifold impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on human rights and how human rights law can serve as a catalyst of positive change. The planetary crises, including the global climate crisis, now constitute one of the greatest threats to the enjoyment of globally recognised fundamental freedoms and rights, including life, health, food, shelter, property, family life, development, and an adequate standard of living for individuals and communities, present and future generations.

Increasing temperatures and rapidly changing weather patterns are causing droughts, hurricanes, wildfires, and floods in more intense and unpredictable manners. There is a connection between climate change and environmental degradation. Many forms of degradation, such as deforestation and pollution, contribute to climate change by increasing greenhouse gases (GNGs) emissions. In turn, climate change exacerbates environmental degradation, creating a vicious cycle that threatens the stability of the climate system. Adverse weather conditions affect virtually every aspect of human life and the environment. Increased global warming caused by climate change causes illnesses and reduced life expectancy. Droughts and floods impact agriculture, causing food shortages, migration, and attendant insecurity, including the struggle for arable land for farming and grazing. Therefore, it is essential for the enjoyment of human rights that access to a healthy, clean, and sustainable environment is guaranteed for all, without discrimination.

In recognition of the global concern on environmental pollution and climate change, at the *Rio Earth Summit* in 1992, 154 nations signed the UN Framework for Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC), which committed governments of the State parties to reduce atmospheric concentrations of GHGs with the aim of 'preventing dangerous anthropogenic interference with Earth's climate system'. Well-functioning ecosystems are vital for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, SGD 13, 'Climate Action' is inherently linked to environmental degradation such as soil, air and water pollution thereby impacting on several SDGs, including SDG 2, 'Zero Hunger', SDG 3, 'Good Health and Well-being', SDG 6, 'Clean Water and Sanitation', SDG 11, 'Sustainable Cities and Communities'. Other global efforts at combating climate change include the Paris Climate Accord 2015³ and the 2023 SDG Summit. The United Nations recently warned of a looming climate cataclysm as increasingly frequent and intense extreme weather events are impacting every region on Earth with rising temperatures that escalate the hazards. Yet, the pace and scale of current climate action plans

³ The Paris Climate Accord/Agreement is legally binding international treaty on climate adopted by 196 State parties at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) on 12 December 2015.

remain wholly insufficient to tackle the climate change crisis effectively.⁴ At the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 28), negotiators from nearly 200 State parties concluded the world's first 'global stocktake' to notch up climate action.

Despite contributing negligibly to global warming, with vast rain-fed agriculture as the major source of employment and contributor to national GDPs, the African continent is particularly vulnerable to climate change and ecosystems degradation. The continent faces exponential collateral damage from climate change, suffering loss of lives, damage to infrastructure, systemic risks to economies, infrastructure investments, water and food systems, public health, agriculture, and livelihoods, and pushing the continent to slip into higher levels of extreme poverty. Climate change, biodiversity loss and ecosystems degradation are a significant threat to Africa's SDG achievement.

Climate and environmental justice have become topical issues as climate change, adaptation, and mitigation continue to attract the attention of the international community. Since the Paris Climate Agreement 2015, the 2023 SDG Summit, and recent happenings in the world attributed to climate change, there has been a significant shift to justice for those affected, particularly by the action of state and non-state actors contributing to the loss of socio-economic opportunities, including for indigenous communities. This is particularly relevant for vulnerable communities disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, such as peasants, rural and indigenous communities.

In recent years, the recognition of the links between human rights and the environment has dramatically increased. The number and scope of international and domestic laws, judicial decisions, and academic studies on the relationship between human rights and the environment are snowballing. Although the right to a safe, clean, and healthy environment (recently, the right to a healthy and sustainable environment) is not expressly recognized as an independent right in the international Bill of Rights discussions revolving around its international recognition have continued since the early 1970s, following the UN Declaration on Environment (Stockholm Declaration 1972 and Rio Declaration, 1992). Both the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966 (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC), refer to an adequate condition of the environment.⁵ Furthermore, the jurisprudence of international and regional human rights bodies, treaties and national constitutions has increasingly recognized the application of human rights in environmental contexts.

In the African region, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, 1981 (Banjul Charter) is reputed to be the first regional human rights instrument in the world to provide for

⁴ UN, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report* special edition (2023) 38.

⁵ Art 12 ICESCR and art 24 CRC.

an environmental right; Article 24 recognizes the right to a generally satisfactory environment. These environmental rights provisions are complemented by articles 13(3) and 16(1), which respectively provide access to public services such as water, waste and sanitation services and the right of every individual to ‘enjoy the best attainable state of physical and mental health’. The Arab Charter on Human Rights 2004, in which some African states are parties, in Article 38, provides for the right to a safe environment. The African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention), in its article IX (2)(j), also enjoins State parties to take necessary measures to safeguard against environmental degradation in areas where internally displaced persons are located, either within the jurisdiction of the State Parties or in areas under their effective control.

The AU Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022 – 2032) prepared by the *Committee of the African Heads of State and Government on Climate Change*, is a key instrument in supporting regional collaboration on climate change and more effective international partnerships providing a framework for joint action. It identifies key organs of the AU with climate change policy and implementation roles, including the judicial, human rights, and legal organs.

The UN Environment Programme Africa Office is working in the region to support countries to put in place a structure for implementing their climate action commitments, popularly known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), in a manner that meets leading socio-economic priorities – food security, creation of income and enterprise opportunities for the youth and economic expansion. The African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) and the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) drive climate and environment action as an investment opportunity and a source of socio-economic improvement through mitigation and adaptation to climate change.

Since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, all but one African country (Libya) has submitted at least one nationally determined contribution (NDC) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and many have comprehensive climate action strategies and adaptation plans. While climate change adaptation and mitigation are being preached, such programmes do not address the loss victims suffer. Thus, academics and environmental activists worldwide have long debated whether climate change-induced impacts should be considered human rights issues and accorded the various protections attached to human rights violations. The issue that has agitated environmentalists, human rights activists and lawyers is whether there is a sufficient link between human rights and environmental rights for them to be treated alike. Climate change and environmental degradation threatens the effective enjoyment of a range of human rights, including those to life, water and sanitation, food, health, housing, self-determination, culture, and development. States have a human rights obligation to prevent the foreseeable adverse effects of climate

change and ensure that those affected by it, particularly those in vulnerable situations, have access to effective remedies and means of adaptation to enjoy lives of human dignity.

Moreover, the UN Human Rights Council recognizes the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a human right that is important for the enjoyment of human rights and that is related to other rights and existing international law.⁶ A safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is integral to the full enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, and sanitation.

Furthermore, as highlighted by the UN General Assembly, “environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification and unsustainable development constitute some of most pressing and serious threats to the ability of present and future generations to effectively enjoy all human rights”.⁷ In other words, without a healthy environment, people may not have access to even the minimum standards of human dignity. The Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework under the Convention on Biological Diversity makes explicit reference to the right to a healthy environment and Target 22 refers to access to information, public participation, access to justice and environmental human rights defenders.⁸

Many States now incorporate a right to a healthy environment in their constitutions. Yet many questions about the relationship between human rights and the environment remain unanswered and require further examination in the African context.

For these reasons, it is essential to delineate the way the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is promoted and protected within a democratic society, including the identification of state obligations related to the rights to access information, public participation, and access to justice with effective remedies in environmental matters as stand-alone rights and as procedural elements of the right to a healthy environment. The fulfillment of these rights, together with the promotion of environmental education, is key for populations who may be particularly vulnerable to climate and environmental harm (e.g., women, children, persons living in poverty, Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities, older persons, persons with disabilities, ethnic, racial, or other minorities, and displaced persons). In this sense, the adoption of regional treaties on environmental democracy, such as the Escazu agreement in Latin America and the Caribbean, could constitute an example to be explored in Africa too. This could not only consolidate the effort of the African Human Rights System in

⁶ See, Human Rights Council, Resolution adopted by on 8 October 2021, “The human right to clean, healthy an sustainable environment”, A/HRC/RES/48/13.

⁷ UN General Assembly, *The Human Rights to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment*, A/RES/76/300. 28 July 2022.

⁸ Conference of Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*, CBD/COP/15/L25, 18 December 2022.

advancing human rights but also pave the way for expanding environmental democracy on the continent.

Call Objectives and Conference Thematic Areas

The overall objective of the RWI Regional Africa Programme is to increase implementation of decisions, judgments, provisional measures, and recommendations from regional and sub-regional bodies in Africa. Within the framework of the Programme, the Academic Network was established to bring together universities from across the continent to carry out research, produce knowledge resources, build capacity, and develop spaces for inter-sectoral dialogue among different players, including non-academic partners in the Programme. Among other activities supported and undertaken by the Network, the RWI and its partners intend, through the organisation of the Annual Conference, to provide an opportunity for reflection, dialogue and knowledge sharing among members of the academic community, representatives of civil society organisations, bar associations and regional bodies that contribute to the overall advancement of human rights in Africa.

The first Annual Conference was held in Harare, Zimbabwe, on 28-29 October 2022, hosted by the University of Zimbabwe. The theme of the Conference was *'Human Rights Adjudication in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities within the African Regional and Sub-Regional Human Rights Systems'*. This broad theme enabled participants to engage with and reflect on a multitude of comparative issues within the African human rights systems and beyond. An edited volume of selected papers from the 2022 Conference has been published.⁹ In 2023, the Academic Network Conference was held 13-15 September 2023 at Stellenbosch, South Africa, hosted by Stellenbosch University. The theme was *'Women's Rights, Gender Inequality and Intersectional Vulnerabilities: Exploring Substantive Transformative Equality in the African Regional and Sub-Regional Human Rights Systems 20 years after the adoption of the Maputo Protocol'*. This theme enabled the participants to engage with a multitude of issues related to women's rights and gender-based discrimination, abuse, exploitation, and violence. Currently, the process of publication of selected conference papers is underway.

Coming at the heels of the UN Climate Conference 2023 (COP 28) held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 30 November – 13 December 2023, the theme of the 2025 Academic Network Conference is *'Human Rights, Environment and Climate Change: Access to Environmental*

⁹ Alejandro Fuentes and Annika Rudman (eds.) *Human Rights Adjudication in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities within the African Union and Sub-regional Human Rights Systems* (Pretoria University Law Press, 2023) <<https://www.pulp.up.ac.za/component/edocman/human-rights-adjudication-in-africa-challenges-and-opportunities-within-the-african-union-and-sub-regional-human-rights-systems>> accessed 20 March 2024.

and Climate Justice within the Regional and Sub-Regional Human Rights Systems in Africa. This theme will enable participants to build and reflect on some of the outcomes and engage vigorously in addressing gaps, especially in law and justice, towards tackling the vexed issue of climate justice and environmental governance as it affects humanity and the achievements of SDGs through effective participation. Climate change and the erosion of the clean, healthy, and sustainable environment impact the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education, especially for girl children and others displaced or affected by climate and environmental crises. The conference will also explore how climate change affects critical elements of the right to education: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability, and how human rights law and environmental democracy can be catalysed for positive social-ecological outcomes. Some of the key questions that will be addressed include:

- How does the right to a healthy environment, especially the procedural elements of access to information, public participation and the rights of environmental human rights defenders contribute to advancing climate justice?
- How will human rights education on climate change and the environment mitigate human rights breaches and foster climate action and justice?
- What is the judiciary's role in ensuring climate justice and effective remedies in responding to environmental rights violations and state obligations to positive climate action?

The Banjul Charter provides fertile ground for analysing the relationship between human rights and climate change. It is worth noting that the charter lacks a jurisdiction clause, leaving the door open for extraterritorial application of the included rights. This underscores the significance of African regional and sub-regional human rights frameworks and corresponding jurisprudence in the crystallization of climate and environmental justice. The conference will enable the participants to explore the manner in which the environmental rights envisaged in extant African regional, sub-regional and national human rights frameworks are presently being respected and protected, as well as how they should be promoted and fulfilled. Thus, it will provide valuable insights into the human rights-environmental protection relationship in extant African regional, sub-regional and national human rights systems.

The 2025 Academic Network Conference will be held in Abuja, Nigeria, **from Wednesday to Friday, 19 to 21 February 2025. It will be hosted by the University of Nigeria, Faculty of Law**, in collaboration with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Abuja.

This year's Call is open for abstracts relevant to the theme: *'Human Rights, Environment and Climate Change: Access to Environmental and Climate Justice within the Regional and Sub-Regional Human Rights Systems in Africa'*.

Considering the above, research related to the following areas is encouraged:

1. Climate justice and environmental rights in emerging human rights jurisprudence.
2. Mainstreaming environmental rights (open information, public participation, and access to justice) into African regional and sub-regional human rights systems.
3. Biosphere defenders/ environmental and human rights defenders leveraging the law to tackle interconnected climate and biodiversity challenges.
4. Developing effective human rights remedies in addressing climate change and environmental vulnerabilities.
5. Open information and public participation in climate law and environmental governance.
6. The judiciary's role in promoting climate justice and environmental rights.
7. Climate and environmental justice and protection of indigenous peoples from the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation through human rights law.
8. Gender and climate and environmental justice.
9. Education, environmental protection, and climate change.
10. Connecting the dots between biodiversity, ecosystems, and climate justice.
11. Criminal justice system and climate and environmental justice.
12. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), inclusive development, protection of the environment and human rights.
13. Climate change, drought, land degradation and migration: exploring the linkages.
14. Access to environmental and climate justice at the regional, sub-regional and national levels in Africa.
15. Comparative experiences in the adjudication of human rights and environmental protection with a focus on the African, European and Inter-American Human Rights Systems.

Eligibility

Researchers, scholars, and staff affiliated with academic institutions and non-academic institutions within the RWI Regional Africa Programme and other partners collaborating with RWI or the University of Nigeria and the NHRC in organizing the conference are eligible to submit an abstract for the 2025 Academic Network Conference. Junior or early career researchers or scholars and female scholars and researchers are particularly encouraged to apply. Joint paper submissions are also eligible. The organisers aim to ensure a balanced gender representation and participation at the Conference. Research abstracts and papers should be submitted in English.

Research Methodology Workshop

With the contribution of senior scholars from the Academic Network, junior or early career researchers or scholars affiliated with academic and non-academic partner institutions within the RWI Regional Africa Programme whose abstracts have been accepted will be invited to participate in a research methodology workshop. This aims to support the early career researchers/ junior scholars to develop their papers and strengthen their research. The research methodology workshop will take place in mid-November 2024 and will be in English. Junior or early career researchers will participate in this workshop by invitation only. The organiser's decision is final and not subject to appeal.

Regional Africa Academic Network Conference

The Regional Africa Academic Network Conference will take place on **Wednesday – Friday, 19 – 21 February 2025**, in Abuja, Nigeria, hosted by the University of Nigeria (UNN) Faculty of Law and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Abuja. During the conference, selected papers will be presented and discussed in panel sessions chaired by senior scholars and researchers from the Academic Network. It is expected that all selected participants will be able to travel to Nigeria to attend the Conference. Grants for travel, accommodation, and per diem for participation at the conference could be available to selected participants. Online participation could be considered by the organisers if necessary.

Publication of Conference Papers

Research papers selected for presentation at the conference will be eligible for publication in a double-blind-peer-reviewed publication. The publication will have the format of an edited book or a special issue of a journal, co-edited by Professors Joy Ngozi Ezeilo and Festus Okechukwu Ukwueze both of the Faculty of Law, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, together with Dr Claudia

Ituarte-Lima and Dr Matthew Scott from the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Sweden, and Professor Alejandro Fuentes from the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Sweden, and Africa University, Zimbabwe. The decisions of the co-editors regarding any aspect of the publication process are final and not subject to appeal.

In addition to the deliverables mentioned above, the organizers and partner institutions envisage the publication of selected policy papers based on the substantive papers presented at the conference.

Policy, Practice and Research Briefs

One of the expected outcomes of the conference will be the creation and dissemination of policy, practice, and research briefs aimed at practically implementing the recommendations and other outcomes. As a result, researchers whose papers are accepted for presentation at the conference may be required or supported to develop and disseminate policy, practice, and research briefs from their papers, in addition to producing full articles for publication. These briefs will be targeted at the executive, legislative, judiciary, and rights holders, as well as for further research.

Application Procedure

Researchers, scholars and staff that meet the eligibility criteria are invited to submit their research paper proposals in English for their participation in the Regional Africa Academic Network Conference, including the documents indicated below, by **31 July 2024** to Professor Joy Ezeilo at the following email address: joy.ezeilo@unn.edu.ng and copy to nairobi@rwi.lu.se

The following documentation should be attached:

- 1. Current curriculum vitae (CV) of the author (and each author in the case of co-authorship).**
- 2. Abstract (300-500 words)** – A short description of the proposed paper, indicating to which theme or subtheme it is related.
- 3. Motivation letter (200-500 words)** – A personal statement explaining your motivation to participate in the conference, indicating whether you should be considered as a *junior or early career researcher or scholar* and, therefore, be eligible for participation in the research methodology workshop.

All applicants will receive an email confirmation that their applications have been received.

Timeline¹⁰

1. Deadline for the submission of abstracts: **31 July 2024.**
2. Decision regarding the selection of abstracts: **31 August 2024.**
3. Deadline for submitting the first draft of the paper (only for junior or early career researchers or scholars admitted to the online workshop): **30 September 2024.**
4. Research methodology workshop: **mid-November 2024.**
5. The deadline for submitting the full draft of the paper for all participants at the conference (including junior or early career researchers or scholars): **31 December 2024.**
6. Regional Africa Human Rights Academic Network, organized by the University of Nigeria, in Abuja: **Wednesday – Friday, 19 – 21 February 2025.**
7. Deadline for the submission of the final draft of the paper for publication: **end of March 2025.**

¹⁰ The organizers reserve the right to extend or change the deadlines and dates indicated in this Call if organizational or operational needs require it. Applicants whose abstracts have been accepted will be duly notified of any changes.

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