

Why Pakistan's Climate Response Needs a **Bottom-Up Approach**



One Unchanged Reality:

For Ghulam Farooq, a small farmer from the town of Jhat Pat, in the district of Jaffarabad, Balochistan, the 2022 floods were a cruel *déjà vu*. Twelve years earlier, in 2010, he had lost everything to floodwaters. He rebuilt his life from scratch, only to watch it all drown again in 2022.

“It rained for over three days without a break”. He told in a recent interaction. “I knew what was coming, but there was nothing I could do. The water swallowed my house, my land and my livestock—everything. My family was afraid as we ran in the middle of the night, but I couldn’t stop to comfort them. We had to leave.”

With nowhere to go, Ghulam Farooq took his family to Sibi, where they lived with a close family of relatives for about four months. When they finally returned home, there was only mud where their house had once stood. Like many others, he had heard about the support pledged by the government and various humanitarian organizations for the



flood-affected families. He waited, hoping for assistance, but it never reached his family. With no other option, he rebuilt his home using whatever resources he could gather.

The stories of Ghulam Farooq and Abdul Rehman are not unique. They are not merely victims of a natural disaster; they are victims of neglect, trapped in a governance system that operates from the boardrooms, far away from the realities on the ground.

“We survived on our own,” he said. “I sold my last livestock, borrowed money, and rebuilt what I could. No one came to check on us.”

The Night the Water Took Everything:

“I was asleep with my family when we heard the neighbors shouting,” he recalled. “Before I could make sense of what was happening, water was rushing into our home.” Told Abdul Rehman, a laborer and resident of Bahadur Shah Colony, Dera Allahyar, Jaffarabad.

The mud walls that had sheltered his family for years crumbled within minutes. He gathered his wife and ten children and ran. By the time dawn broke, his home was gone. Everything—his few belongings and clothes his family had gathered over the years—had vanished in the blink of an eye. Abdul Rehman, his wife, and their ten children lived in a tent for a year, waiting for help that never came. Today, more than two years later, he still calls a makeshift mud-and-thatch shelter home, built by the family, with no certainty of how long it will stand against the next disaster.

The stories of Ghulam Farooq and Abdul Rehman are not unique. Their struggle mirrors the lives of thousands of families stranded by Pakistan’s worsening climate disasters – families who have lost everything, not just to floods, but



to a system that has abandoned them. These families are not merely victims of a natural disaster; they are victims of neglect, trapped in a governance system that operates from the boardrooms, far away from the realities on the ground. The billions in aid that make headlines rarely reach those who need them the most. Even today, the 2022

flood survivors continue to struggle—not just against the forces of nature, but against a system that has changed little since their world was swept away.

From Disaster to Intervention: A Disconnect in Response

Pakistan is no stranger to climate-induced catastrophes. In 2022, floods submerged a third of the country, affecting over 33 million people and resulting in more than [\\$15 billion](#) in damages. Climate change is no longer an abstract threat; it is a reality, displacing families, pushing millions into poverty, and destroying cultivable lands, livestock, and livelihoods of millions across the country. While the government and international financial institutions continue to focus on large-scale financial solutions, the communities most affected remain unheard and unaccounted for.

The stories of Ghulam Farooq and Abdul Rehman reflect the deep, often unseen challenges faced by Pakistan's most vulnerable communities. These personal experiences also highlight a broader disconnect between grassroots struggles and policy interventions. In recent years, Market-driven solutions have



increasingly been positioned as key tools for addressing climate impacts, promising financial relief and long-term recovery. However, the effectiveness of these interventions remains a question when examined through the lens of those most affected. Many of these interventions, such as [flood insurance schemes](#) to [carbon credit projects](#), lack meaningful community participation, leaving gaps in accessibility, sustainability, and equitable distribution of benefits. As a result, the most at-risk populations often find themselves excluded from the very solutions meant to support them. Let's explore some of the key gaps preventing these initiatives from delivering real impact:

Top-Down Decision Making:

Climate policies and projects are largely [designed without consulting the communities](#) most affected. Bureaucrats, financial institutions, and international donors dictate terms, while those who suffer the consequences are excluded from the design process. Flood victims, microfarmers, and marginalized groups rarely have a say in disaster preparedness and climate adaptation strategies developed by public institutions.

Flood insurance schemes, for instance, are promoted as financial relief mechanisms but remain largely inaccessible to low-income families due to associated premium costs and lack of awareness. Many vulnerable communities are unaware of disaster risk insurance frameworks, making these mechanisms ineffective despite their theoretical benefits.

Long-Term Sustainability:

Market-driven approaches often prioritize business over people. Flood insurance compensates after a disaster strikes, but does not invest in flood prevention infrastructure or early warning systems. Similarly, blue carbon projects like the Delta Blue Carbon initiative focus on generating revenue through carbon credits but struggle with [land tenure issues](#), regulatory gaps, and limited technical expertise at the communities' end—factors that affect the long-term sustainability of such initiatives.

Pakistan's climate response needs a fundamental shift—from bureaucratic and donor-driven policies to an inclusive approach, locally led initiatives that prioritize community inclusion and resilience.

Lack of Accountability Mechanisms:

Billions have been pledged for climate adaptation, yet little of it has reached the ground. [Corruption, mismanagement, and bureaucratic red tape](#) hinder the effective use of funds. For instance, despite over \$10 billion pledged for recovery after the 2022 floods, [delays in the release of funds](#) and project implementation left millions without adequate shelter or support.

Investigations into Karachi's Water and Sewerage Board found that up to [42% of the city's water supply](#) is lost due to theft and mismanagement. [These inefficiencies](#) not only limit immediate relief but also deter international donors from further investment due to concerns about fund mismanagement.



Picture credit: CNN

Without transparent oversight and active citizen participation in decision-making, even well-intended policies and projects fail to deliver results. Strengthening institutional checks and empowering grassroots organizations to hold authorities accountable is essential for ensuring meaningful climate action.

Learning from Locally-Driven Initiatives:

In the journey toward effective governance and accountability, bridging the gap between national policies and local realities is critical. While top-down policies play a crucial role in shaping the broader framework for development, their success often hinges on how well they are adapted and implemented at the grassroots level. The following examples of local initiatives illustrate how tailored, community-driven approaches can complement and enhance the broader policy

landscape. These local efforts not only demonstrate the adaptability of national frameworks but also highlight the transformative potential when local solutions are aligned with national policies.

[Recharge Pakistan](#) perfectly illustrates how diverse stakeholders can unite for a shared vision of environmental resilience. The project uses ecosystem-based solutions to restore and recharge groundwater aquifers, building resilience against drought and water scarcity. It involves local communities in the restoration of wetlands, which provides an opportunity for greater ownership of water resources and long-term sustainability. By integrating local knowledge and practices, Recharge Pakistan provides an effective model for climate adaptation in rural areas, emphasizing local engagement and capacity building.



The initiative, led by the Ministry of Climate Change and the Federal Flood Commission, exemplifies the power of collaboration across public, private, civil society, and community sectors. Recharge Pakistan is the largest ecosystem-based approach to flood and water resource management in the country's history, setting the stage for future, more inclusive and sustainable environmental solutions.

[Clifton Urban Forest](#) in Karachi is a successful example of a local initiative that integrates green infrastructure into urban planning. It aims to tackle urban heat island effects and enhance climate resilience by planting native trees and restoring natural ecosystems in the city. This project not only addresses the city's environmental challenges but also engages local communities in urban greening efforts, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility toward their environment.



[The Living Indus](#) Initiative highlights the importance of restoring the ecological balance of the Indus River and engaging local communities in river basin management. This initiative is rooted in the idea that climate change cannot be tackled without involving the people who directly interact with natural

resources. The program emphasizes sustainable farming practices and community-led water management solutions, supporting vulnerable communities along the river's course.



[Climate Smart Agriculture](#) is a notable example of a community-led initiative promoting sustainable and resilient agricultural practices in Pakistan. Focused on flood-affected villages in District Khairpur, the project has empowered women farmers with knowledge and resources to implement sustainable farming practices. One such farmer, Malka, transformed her life by adopting climate-smart practices, significantly increasing her crop yield and financial stability. She now mentors other women, fostering resilience and encouraging sustainable agricultural practices within her community. This initiative not only showcases the effectiveness of community-driven approaches but also emphasizes the importance of integrating climate-resilient farming techniques tailored to local needs.

[Digital Dera](#) is redefining rural farming in Pakistan through community-led, tech-enabled solutions. The initiative currently benefits 25,000+ residents across five villages of district Pakpattan, offering smallholding farmers access to precision agriculture tools, solar-powered irrigation, rainwater harvesting, and IoT-based soil and water monitoring systems. Digital Dera provides real-time weather data and training programs focused on climate-smart practices, with a strong emphasis on empowering women and youth. By blending traditional knowledge with modern technology, Digital Dera helps farmers improve yields, cut input costs, and build long-term resilience. The project also strengthens local value chains by connecting farmers directly with markets—eliminating exploitative practices of the middlemen.



[Eco-Leaders](#) initiative is cultivating a generation of young climate champions across Pakistan. So far the initiative has trained 150 university students in Chitral, Karachi, Rawalpindi, and Quetta through climate boot camps, field visits, mentoring, and policy engagement—empowering them to lead

mitigation efforts in their communities. Through co-creation of climate action plans, Eco-Leaders are driving sustainable change in universities, with academic institutions committing to become “Green Campuses.” Students have initiated awareness campaigns, adopted eco-friendly practices, and engaged policymakers on environmental reforms. Eco-Leaders is a growing movement for strengthening community-led climate response, in Pakistan.



The key takeaway from these models is clear: climate resilience must be cultivated at the grassroots level, rather than imposed from the top. Whether through ecosystem restoration, urban greening, river basin management, or sustainable agriculture, lasting success depends on community-driven efforts that are inclusive, participatory, and rooted in local knowledge and needs. These approaches underscore the critical importance of empowering communities to lead and sustain their own climate resilience initiatives.

What Needs to Change?

Pakistan’s climate response needs a fundamental shift—from bureaucratic and donor-driven policies to an inclusive approach, locally led initiatives that prioritize community inclusion and resilience. The current approach, which relies on centralized decision-making and market-driven interventions, has not been enough to address the needs of those on the frontlines of climate disasters. If we have to build a sustainable and equitable climate response, it must embrace a bottom-up approach that empowers communities, strengthens accountability, and ensures that resources reach those who need them the most. Here’s what needs to change:

Decentralizing Climate Governance

For Pakistan’s climate response to be effective, decision-making must move closer to the communities, especially those directly affected by climate-related disasters. Currently, climate policies and disaster management strategies are largely centralized at the federal and provincial levels, which often limits the ability of local communities to influence responses. This lack of local representation undermines the effectiveness of interventions, as they do not always reflect the specific needs of the most vulnerable populations.

Decentralizing climate governance requires a structured framework that ensures financial autonomy and decision-making power at the local level. While Pakistan’s 18th Constitutional

Amendment devolved many responsibilities to provinces, climate adaptation remains largely centralized. To make decentralization effective, the following approach can be helpful:

- **Strengthening Local Disaster Management Authorities (LDMAs):** LDMAs should be empowered with financial and technical autonomy to develop and implement district-level climate adaptation plans. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) may function primarily as a coordinating body, rather than a direct implementer, enabling local authorities to respond more quickly and effectively.
- **Fiscal Devolution for Climate Resilience:** A dedicated Climate Resilience Fund can be established at the district level, supported by direct allocations from provincial governments and international climate finance mechanisms. This would ensure that funds are distributed and monitored more effectively, and that local governments have the necessary resources to lead adaptation efforts.
- **Empowering Community-Led Adaptation Committees (CLACs):** Local councils should be given the authority to form CLACs, which would assess local climate risks, allocate micro-grants, and oversee resilience-building projects. This would ensure that solutions are not only tailored to specific local needs but also driven by the communities they are meant to protect, enhancing sustainability and local ownership. Decentralized governance would enable district-level climate action plans, ensuring that responses are tailored to the specific environmental and socio-economic realities of each community. By strengthening community inclusion and leadership, Pakistan can transition from reactive crisis management to proactive, context-specific solutions, ultimately building long-term climate resilience across the country.

Community-Led Climate Adaptation

Long-term climate resilience cannot be built without the active involvement of those who are most affected by the climate disasters. Investing in community-driven adaptation measures—such as flood-resistant housing, sustainable water management, and localized early warning systems—ensures that affected communities are not only the beneficiaries but co-creators of climate policies and interventions.



Establishing participatory platforms enabling farmers, laborers, and other marginalized groups to directly contribute to climate action planning will bridge the gap between policy and lived reality. When communities have ownership of the adaptation strategies, they become long-term

stakeholders in building resilience, reducing reliance on top-down interventions that often fail to address ground realities.

Equitable Climate Financing:

For climate finance to create a real impact, it must be transparent, accessible, and directed toward those most vulnerable to climate disasters. Too often, funding is funneled into large-scale infrastructure projects or, while communities on the frontlines struggle to rebuild their lives with little to no support. Climate adaptation grants, disaster insurance, and microfinance initiatives must be simplified and tailored to the needs of small farmers, laborers, and marginalized groups. Removing bureaucratic hurdles, ensuring clear eligibility criteria, awareness, and decentralizing fund distribution can make climate finance more inclusive. Without equitable access to financial resources, the cycle of devastation and delayed recovery will continue to deepen existing inequalities.

Stronger Accountability and Transparency:

Ensuring that funds reach those who need them most requires robust oversight and active citizen participation. Independent citizen-led monitoring mechanisms should be established to track climate financing, audit expenditures, and hold institutions accountable for delays and mismanagement. Public participation in monitoring mechanisms, such as community watchdog groups and digital feedback platforms, can enhance transparency and reduce the risk of corruption, mismanagement, and delays.

Additionally, real-time tracking of aid disbursement, with open data access, will allow citizens and civil society to scrutinize fund allocation and project implementation. Without these checks in place, climate finance will continue to be lost in bureaucratic inefficiencies, failing the very communities it is meant to support.

Bridging the Information Gap:

Access to timely and accurate information means the difference between survival and devastation – yet many vulnerable communities remain uninformed about the risks they face and the resources available to them. To address this, inclusive communication strategies must be developed to educate communities about climate threats, adaptation measures, and financial support mechanisms. Information should be delivered through both digital platforms and community-based networks, ensuring accessibility for those with limited internet and mobile access.

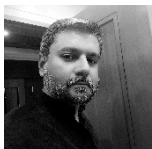
Crucially, information must be made available in local languages and adapted to the cultural contexts of different regions. By making information more accessible, communities can be empowered to take proactive measures and reduce their vulnerability to future disasters.

Strengthening Disaster Preparedness and Infrastructure:

To build long-term resilience against climate change, the focus must shift toward proactive investments in climate-resilient infrastructure and preparedness. This includes constructing flood-resilient housing, reinforcing embankments where required, and promoting climate-smart agriculture to protect livelihoods. Equally important is the establishment of well-equipped emergency response mechanisms at the district level, staffed with trained personnel and stocked with essential resources in collaboration with the local civil society. These localized response mechanisms, supported by early warning systems and community drills, can significantly reduce loss of life and property when disasters strike. By prioritizing preparedness over post-disaster relief, the devastating impacts of climate-induced catastrophes can be mitigated.

The conversation around climate resilience in Pakistan requires a fundamental shift. The stories of Ghulam Farooq and Abdul Rehman are not isolated; they represent the millions of Pakistanis whose voices have been marginalized in the face of escalating climate disasters. To protect the most vulnerable communities against climate impacts, climate resilience policies must be grounded in the lived realities of those most affected by the disasters. Effective climate response goes beyond financial commitments—it requires empowering communities, fostering inclusivity, and placing local leadership at the heart of decision-making. Until these voices are heard and integrated, Pakistan’s climate strategy will continue to fall short.

It is time not only to act but also to listen, learn, and lead together.



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