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POLICY BRIEF

Climate Statecraft in Pakistan

Why Pakistan's Emergency is Institutional,
Not Accidental

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Executive Summary

Pakistan's climate crisis is no longer episodic, sectoral, or abstract. It is systemic. From plastic-choked drains in cities to catastrophic floods, from smog-filled winters to mounting climate debt, Pakistan's lived climate reality exposes the structural failures of global climate governance and domestic policy incoherence. This advocacy brief synthesizes three expert-led public conversations to tell one continuous story of climate change, where material choices, governance gaps, scientific warnings, and global inequities intersect.

Drawing on insights from an [environmental entrepreneur, Maria Qayyum](#), a [global climate policy practitioner, Aftab Alam](#), and [Pakistan's Chief Meteorologist, Dr Mohammad Afzal](#), the brief argues that Pakistan's climate vulnerability is produced not only by emissions elsewhere but also by policy vacuums, weak accountability, delayed finance, and fragmented institutions at home. At the same time, the conversations reveal a powerful counter-narrative: youth leadership, scientific capacity, grassroots innovation, and policy windows that civil society must urgently seize. This document is written as an advocacy tool. It is designed to help civil society organisations, climate justice networks, and citizen movements sharpen their demands, strengthen their narratives, and anchor their advocacy in evidence, lived experience, and expert insight.

Climate Change Has Reached the Household

Across all three podcasts, one message is consistent: climate change is no longer a future risk; it is a present condition. Floods that once appeared once a generation now recur [every few years](#). Winters feel like summers, summers feel unbearable, and [rainfall patterns](#) no longer follow historical logic.

Dr. Mohammad Afzal explains this as a breakdown of climate stability: "Spring and autumn have shrunk. Now it is either very hot or very cold. Climate extremes have increased a lot." This volatility is not merely meteorological; it destabilises agriculture, water systems, urban infrastructure, and household economies.

Aftab Alam contextualises this within global trends. The gap between Pakistan's major floods narrowed from twelve years (2010–2022) to just [three years](#) (2022–2025). According to [Germanwatch](#), Pakistan ranked among the most climate-affected countries globally, despite contributing less than 1% of global emissions. Climate injustice is no longer theoretical - it is visible in destroyed homes, indebted families, and lost futures.

Plastic as Climate Infrastructure Failure

Plastic pollution emerges in these conversations not as a side issue, but as a **core climate failure**. Maria Qayyum calls plastic "a silent disaster," noting that Pakistan produces 3.9 million tons of plastic waste annually, 70% of which is mismanaged.

This mismanagement amplifies climate impacts in three ways:

- **Carbon emissions:** Petroleum-based plastics emit roughly [1.7 tons of CO₂](#) per ton produced.
- **Disaster intensification:** Plastic-clogged drainage systems worsen urban flooding.
- **Toxic legacy:** Burning plastic releases greenhouse gases and hazardous pollutants, while degradation produces microplastics that contaminate soil and water.

Yet Pakistan lacks even basic policy definitions for biodegradable or compostable materials. Qayyum highlights how producers exploit this vacuum: “We are misleading the consumer in the name of greenwashing.” In the absence of certification systems, accountability collapses, and responsibility is pushed onto unaware consumers. This is a governance failure that locks Pakistan into a linear, **fossil-dependent economy** while the global market shifts toward circular alternatives.

Innovation Without Policy: A Repeated Pattern

One of the most striking insights across the podcasts is that Pakistan does not lack ideas or expertise - it lacks pathways to scale them. From biodegradable materials to early warning systems, innovation repeatedly hits a policy ceiling.

Qayyum’s journey from lab research to market-ready biodegradable products illustrate this clearly. While Europe, Japan, and China backed **single-use bans** with certification systems, incentives, and infrastructure, Pakistan stopped halfway, issuing bans without viable alternatives, standards, or composting systems.

“The job of a researcher is to bring ideas, the entrepreneur to develop them, and the policy to scale them,” Qayyum argues. In Pakistan, the first two exist; the third does not. As a result, Pakistan’s share in the global biodegradable market remains below 1%, despite abundant agricultural waste and youth-led innovation. This same pattern appears in disaster preparedness, renewable energy, and climate education: pilots flourish, systems stagnate.

Climate Science Exists, But Coordination Does Not

Dr. Afzal’s discussion exposes another structural weakness: fragmented climate governance. Pakistan has strong technical institutions, the Pakistan Meteorological Department (PMD), the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), and Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (PDMAs), but weak coordination among them.

“When mandates overlap,” he explains, “credit is shared when things go right, and blame is shifted when things go wrong.” Early warnings are issued, but they do not consistently trigger early action due to unclear roles, limited trust in data, and poor translation of forecasts for communities.

Post-2022 investments, such as **hydromet modernisation**, **radar acquisition**, and **cloud-based early warning systems**, are important gains. But without political continuity and civil society oversight, these advances risk remaining technical islands rather than public goods.

COPs, Finance, and the Cost of Delay

At the global level, Pakistan’s experience at COPs reflects both progress and frustration. Aftab Alam describes Pakistan’s strong negotiation presence at COP29, particularly on Loss and Damage, yet warns that outcomes remain symbolic. The much-celebrated **USD 300 billion climate finance** commitment, he notes, falls far short of the USD 1.2-3 trillion needed annually. Worse, funds that do exist move slowly. The Loss and Damage Fund - won after decades of advocacy - has yet to meaningfully reach affected communities. The human cost of delay is severe. Alam recounts families forced into high-interest debt months after floods, trapping future generations in poverty. When finance arrives late, it indebts instead of healing.

Youth, Gender, and the Missing Center

Despite systemic failures, the podcasts converge on one source of hope: youth. From climate science to green entrepreneurship to volunteer disaster response, young Pakistanis are already carrying the burden of adaptation. Women face additional barriers. Qayyum describes green manufacturing as a male-dominated sector, yet her work shows that women-led climate innovation is not only possible but transformative - creating skills, confidence, and green livelihoods. Dr. Afzal reinforces this, arguing that climate education must cut across disciplines. “How many doctors are also experts in climate change?” he asks. Without integrating climate into economics, medicine, engineering, and governance, Pakistan will continue producing professionals unprepared for its greatest challenge.

Toward Climate Statecraft: Policy Directions for Civil Society Advocacy

The insights emerging from these conversations point toward a clear conclusion.

Pakistan does not need more climate slogans or isolated pilot projects. It needs climate statecraft. Climate action must become a governing principle that shapes how institutions coordinate, how markets are regulated, how finance is accessed, and how citizens are informed and protected.

For civil society and advocacy networks, the task is to push the state and international actors toward this coherence.

First, climate governance in Pakistan must move from fragmented authority to coordinated responsibility. The existence of early warning systems and climate data is no longer the core challenge. The challenge lies in translating warnings into timely action. Civil society should advocate for clearly defined institutional protocols that link the Pakistan Meteorological Department’s forecasts to automatic response mechanisms within the National and Provincial Disaster Management Authorities. When warnings are issued, predefined actions should follow, including local government mobilisation, public advisories in an accessible language, and pre-positioning of emergency resources.

Accountability mechanisms must also be strengthened so that after every major climate event, independent reviews assess whether warnings were acted upon and where failures occurred.

Without such feedback loops, institutional learning remains weak, and disasters repeat.

Second, Pakistan’s engagement with global climate finance must become both more assertive and more technically grounded. While Pakistan has played an **important diplomatic role** in advancing the Loss and Damage agenda, advocacy efforts must now focus on implementation speed and accessibility. Civil society organisations should press for simplified procedures for accessing Loss and Damage funding and for transparency in how administrative costs are managed.

At the national level, Pakistan needs specialised technical units capable of preparing high-quality funding proposals, tracking climate finance flows, and ensuring that funds reach affected communities rather than being absorbed by bureaucratic layers.

Climate finance delayed is climate justice denied. Preventing disaster-affected households from falling into long-term debt must become a central metric of success.

Third, market regulation must catch up with environmental necessity, particularly in the plastics and materials sector. Pakistan urgently requires a national framework that legally defines biodegradable, compostable, recyclable, and oxo-degradable materials. Certification systems aligned with international standards should be established through accredited national laboratories, enabling objective verification of environmental claims. Civil society has a critical role in demanding enforcement mechanisms that penalise greenwashing and reward genuine innovation. As Maria Qayyum's experience demonstrates, innovation cannot scale in an unregulated market where credibility is absent. Regulation is not a barrier to entrepreneurship. It is the condition that allows responsible solutions to gain public trust and market access.

Fourth, climate education must be treated as a core capacity issue rather than a niche environmental subject. Advocacy efforts should target higher education reform so that climate change is integrated across disciplines, including medicine, engineering, economics, urban planning, agriculture, and public administration. Pakistan's climate crisis cuts across every sector, yet professional training remains siloed. Beyond universities, district-level climate information and learning centres could play a transformative role by translating scientific data into practical guidance for farmers, workers, and urban communities.

A climate-literate society is more resilient not because it fears disasters, but because it understands risk and acts early.

Fifth, urban environmental governance must shift from episodic crisis management to sustained reform. Smog, flooding, and waste accumulation are not accidental phenomena. They are the cumulative result of transport policies, industrial regulation, land use planning, and weak enforcement. Civil society advocacy should consistently link air pollution to governance failures, pushing for cleaner transport systems, effective emissions control, improved waste management, and investment in green urban infrastructure. Long-term air quality improvement, as demonstrated by cities such as Beijing, requires policy continuity, enforcement discipline, and public buy-in. Short-term measures without structural reform will continue to fail.

Finally, climate action must be grounded in social justice and public participation. Climate awareness cannot remain confined to policy forums and conferences. It must become part of everyday decision-making in households, schools, workplaces, and local governments. Public campaigns should normalise waste reduction, recycling, energy efficiency, and environmental stewardship, not as moral appeals but as practical survival strategies. As Dr. Mohammad Afzal reminded, environmental protection is not abstract. It begins with daily choices and intergenerational responsibility. For civil society and advocacy networks, advancing climate statecraft means connecting these domains. Science must inform governance. Policy must enable markets. Finance must reach people. Education must shape professions. And justice must remain at the centre of climate action. Only through this integration can Pakistan move from managing climate disasters to governing climate risk.

From Fragmentation to Climate Justice

Pakistan's climate story is not one of helplessness; it is one of misalignment. Science exists without coordination. Innovation exists without policy. Suffering exists without timely finance. Civil society's role is to connect these fragments into a single demand for justice. Climate change has already reached Pakistan's homes. The next phase must ensure it reaches Pakistan's policies, power structures, and global negotiations, with accountability at the centre.

Based on synthesized insights from three public expert podcasts conducted by Accountability Lab Pakistan.

About Accountability Lab Pakistan

Accountability Lab Pakistan is part of a trans-local network of 13 independent, locally registered, governed, and managed organizations. As a locally registered think tank in Pakistan, Accountability Lab is committed to fostering transparency, accountability, and good governance. With a focus on driving positive change through innovative approaches, the Lab has been at the forefront of initiatives aimed at enhancing the democratic processes in the country.

The Lab's profound impact on the discourse surrounding women's empowerment in Pakistan is a testament to its commitment to catalyzing positive change through innovative and forward-thinking approaches. In the purview of strengthening women's role in the country's development, the Lab has consistently occupied headship by harnessing the power of innovative methodologies, actively contributing to the evolution of inclusive practices in Pakistan. Central to the Lab's mission is its unwavering emphasis on factors such as social acceptability, institutional insulation, the holistic strengthening of democracy, climate action and environmental sustainability. These core principles not only underpin the Lab's approach but also resonate deeply with the recommendations outlined in this policy brief.