

Analysis Report

July 2025

Climate Justice and Integration in the Horn of Africa: An Analysis of Ethiopia as a Case Study

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To Cite this Report

Kayse, M. & Cosatti, S. (2025). *Climate Justice and Integration in the Horn of Africa: An Analysis of Ethiopia as a Case Study*. Institute for Peace and Security Studies.

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Abstract

The Horn of Africa is one of the global epicentres of the climate crisis, facing challenges such as droughts, floods, and desertification. These pressures deepen existing social inequalities, exacerbate political tensions, and strain economic systems, affecting a growing portion of the local population. Regional organizations have made progress in fostering dialogue upon these issues by advocating resource-sharing, knowledge exchange, and best practices. However, the urgency for concrete action is greater than ever. Based on an analysis of secondary sources, this article examines the interplay between climate justice and regional cooperation in the Horn of Africa, using Ethiopia as a case study. It underscores how climate-related challenges have served as a catalyst for regional integration, which, in turn, constitutes a strategic asset in advancing collective self-reliance and resilience-building efforts. Throughout Ethiopia has played a central role. This case study also illuminates tangible limitations in deepening regional integration and, by extension, in the pursuit of climate justice.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Horn of Africa, Climate Change, Climate Justice, Regional Integration.

Introduction

The Horn of Africa (HoA), is among the world's most climate-vulnerable regions as rising temperatures, recurrent droughts, and extreme weather events, compounded by ongoing conflicts, are adding to environmental degradation (WMO, 2024). These climate impacts act as “threat multipliers” in a region already characterized by endemic fragility, with severe social and economic consequences (Simane et al., 2016). The most visible effects include heightened food and water insecurity, increasing resource scarcity, and forced displacement of communities, all of which contribute to conflict and violence (Gavin, 2022).

The case of Ethiopia highlights how climate change is not only an environmental issue but also an ethical and political challenge due to its disregard for borders, stressing the need for joint efforts to tackle the issue. Over the last three decades, Ethiopian leaders have attempted to address climate change, given that the country's geography and socio-economic structure make it particularly vulnerable to its adverse effects (Endalew & Craft, 2016). The country is characterized by extensive drylands, lacks maritime access, and is heavily dependent on agriculture and pastoralism, while the low level of human and economic development reflects a low coping capacity. Thus, any variation in climate is a risk from multiple perspectives (Berhanu et al., 2024; Teferi et al., 2025). With the aim of maintaining and affirming its geopolitical regional influence, Ethiopia plays an important regional role on the issue. The federal government pursues a number of policies and actions with regards to climate-security both nationally and regionally, notably through IGAD (Yishak, 2019; Getachew et al., 2024; Dizolele et al., 2025).

This external engagement on the issue aligns with Ethiopia's domestic dynamism in addressing climate vulnerabilities, a focus that has emerged alongside its interest in regional integration. However, the explicit interconnection between these two fields is still understudied (Mersha & van Laerhoven, 2019; Dagne et al., 2022; Tadesse, 2019). This article explores the interplay between climate justice and regional integration in Ethiopia, based on the following research questions: *Can regional integration serve as a mechanism to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change? Can it represent a pathway towards achieving climate justice?*

This paper uses secondary sources and qualitative methods, such as documentary analysis, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis. Such research methods allow depth, critique, and academic rigour to project the theoretical and practical evolution of climate justice and regional integration in Ethiopia.

It is structured as follows. Section two provides a comprehensive theoretical overview of the concepts of climate justice and regional integration. Section three explores the climate-related security risks affecting the Horn of Africa, specifically Ethiopia. Section four delves into an analysis of the correlation between regional integration and climate justice, with a focus on the role of Ethiopia. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the interplay between regional integration and climate justice.

Conceptual Framework: Climate Justice and Regional Integration

Climate Justice

Climate justice has emerged as a critical framework for addressing the unequal temporal, spatial, and interpersonal impacts of climate change, particularly between the Global North and Global South (Bhattarai, 2017; Burrell et al., 2020; IPCC, 2021; Kporukpo, 2022; Masson-Delmotte et al., 2020; Ornes, 2018; Palomo, 2017; Parry et al., 2007). Critically, Global South states have spearheaded demands for accountability, with coalitions like the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) and the G77+China institutionalizing equity principles in negotiations on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Mead, 2021; Roberts & Weikmans, 2022). Responding to the unequal distribution and disproportionate effects of climate change (Pottier et al., 2017; Porter et al., 2020), the concept evolved from broader environmental justice movements, gaining prominence as the impacts of climate change became increasingly visible and severe (Schlosberg, 2013). Initially championed by activists (Pettit, 2009; Wahlstrom et al., 2019; Badianne et al., 2020; Benkenstein et al., 2020; Fisher, 2019, 2020) and grassroots organizations, the discourse was later formalized and expanded by scholars in the 2000s and 2010s. Climate justice is “fundamentally about paying attention to how climate change impacts people differently, unevenly, and disproportionately, as well as redressing the resultant injustices in fair and equitable ways” (Sultana, 2021).

The expanding discourse on climate justice has raised three critical questions central to its implementation. First, what constitutes fairness? Second, who should bear responsibility for ensuring climate justice? Finally, how can accountability be ensured, especially when actors are reluctant to act? (Kporukpo, 2022). The question of defining fairness in the pursuit and implementation of climate justice is central to the discourse. This issue is often addressed through three dimensions: distributive, procedural, and recognition justice (Newell et al., 2021). A cornerstone of defining fairness includes apportioning historical responsibility, which involves acknowledging the disproportionate

contributions of industrialized nations to greenhouse gas emissions and their historical exploitation of resources (Burkett, 2008). The concept of distributive justice also links fairness to the capacity to act and the vulnerability of affected populations (Caney, 2010; Farber, 2008). Farber (2008) introduces the notion that the “polluter pays”, which holds that those who have contributed most to climate change should bear the greatest responsibility for mitigation and adaptation. Similarly, the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” underscores the ethical framework that historical emitters must take on a larger share of the burden (Shue, 2014). However, the current distribution of responsibilities remains highly unequal. Southern states have challenged this inertia through legal campaigns, such as Vanuatu’s push for an International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory opinion on climate harm, and policy tools, like the Dhaka-Glasgow Declaration’s emphasis on adaptation finance (CVF, 2021; UNGA, 2023).

Beyond distributive justice, procedural and recognition justice are critical dimensions of climate justice. Cameron et al. (2013) stresses the importance of procedural fairness, emphasizing the need to ensure that all stakeholders, especially marginalized communities, have a meaningful voice in climate decision-making processes. Similarly, Schlosberg (2013) argues that justice itself must include recognition, which addresses the unique vulnerabilities of indigenous peoples, women, and other marginalized groups. This dimension highlights the need to tackle intersecting forms of oppression, such as race, gender, and class, to achieve equitable outcomes. However, global climate governance institutions, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the UNFCCC, often marginalize actors from the Global South as a result of economic and political imbalances (Newell et al., 2021). Despite this exclusion, Global South actors have created alternative spaces for influence, such as the African Group of Negotiators’ (AGN) technical working groups (AGN, 2022) and the Lima Work Programme’s mandate for indigenous participation (UNFCCC, 2015). Wealthier nations, particularly from the Global North, exert disproportionate influence in forums like the Conference of Parties (CoP), relegating vulnerable nations to the periphery of decision-making. This exclusion undermines the ability of marginalized communities to shape policies that directly affect their lives. For example, small island developing states (SIDS) and least developed countries (LDCs) often struggle to secure meaningful representation at international climate negotiations due to financial and diplomatic constraints (Mead, 2021). Furthermore, Newell (2005) critiques the racialized exploitation of energy resources, which underpins the global energy economy and perpetuates systemic inequalities.

The second central question in the climate justice discourse is: who is responsible for ensuring climate justice? The literature identifies both state and non-state actors as key stakeholders in addressing this issue. The IPCC, the CoP and the UNFCCC have played significant roles in advancing climate justice. Although these institutions have been instrumental in creating awareness, their effectiveness hinges on political will, which has been disproportionately shaped by Global North interests, despite vocal advocacy from the Global South (Roberts & Weikmans, 2017; Khan et al., 2020). The strategies for achieving climate justice are outlined in the UNFCCC and the reports of various CoP meetings. Additionally, African states have advanced parallel frameworks.

One prominent approach is the concept of creating financial flows to address climate change from developed to developing countries. This is often framed as payments by polluters. African nations institutionalized this demand through the 2009 Abuja Declaration, where the African Group of Negotiators formally linked historical emissions to financial obligations (AGN, 2009). The African Union's 2022 Nairobi Declaration later quantified this, demanding \$600 billion annually for adaptation—a figure now echoed in COP debates (African Union, 2022). Ethiopia, as chair of the Committee of African Heads of State on Climate Change (CAHOSCC), pushed to include 'polluter pays' language in Article 9 of the Paris Agreement Article 9 (Gebremichael, 2021). This idea has gained traction among climate justice organizations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and developing nations, as it aligns with the principle of historical responsibility (Roberts & Parks, 2009; Pickering & Barry, 2012; Khan et al., 2020). Yet, the actual disbursement of funds remains contentious, with only 21% of pledged climate finance reaching low-income countries as grants (OECD, 2023).

The final question focuses on how to ensure accountability for delivering climate justice, particularly when actors are reluctant to act. Scholars have proposed various mechanisms to address this challenge. Chatterton et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of grassroots movements and community-led initiatives in holding powerful actors accountable, highlighting the importance of local activism and participatory governance. For example, the Pacific Islands' "1.5°C to Stay Alive" campaign successfully pressured wealthier nations to adopt more ambitious targets (Farbotko & McGregor, 2020). Bugden (2020) advocates for legal and institutional mechanisms, including binding international agreements and independent monitoring bodies, to enforce compliance with climate commitments. Meanwhile, Derman (2020) proposes the concept of moral and ethical pressure, arguing that societal norms, advocacy campaigns, and public scrutiny can compel reluctant actors to act responsibly.

However, the unwillingness of historical emitters to accept responsibility continues to exacerbate global inequities. For instance, the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under the Trump administration exemplifies how major emitters evade commitments, leaving vulnerable nations without adequate support (Lefstad & Paavola, 2024). The concept of "climate colonialism" highlights the exploitation of resources and labour in the Global South to sustain the energy demands of the Global North, perpetuating systemic inequalities (Arruda Filho et al., 2024). This structural imbalance underscores the urgent need for significant climate finance and technological support from historical contributors to address the disproportionate impacts of climate change (Bulkeley & Newell, 2015). The "triple injustice" – where vulnerable nations contribute the least to the crisis yet suffer its most severe consequences – highlights the necessity of a transformative and equitable approach to climate justice (Adger et al., 2006). Additionally, vulnerable nations often shoulder the cost of climate action, as they are forced to divert scarce public resources to adaptation measures such as flood defences and drought-resistant agriculture. At the same time, international climate finance remains insufficient, delayed, or loan-based – worsening the fiscal strain of these countries (Roberts & Park, 2009).

Despite its theoretical advancements, climate justice faces significant challenges in practice. Current neoliberal and reductionist solutions often fail to address the root causes of the crisis, perpetuating systemic inequalities (Newell et al., 2021). For instance, climate finance mechanisms remain inadequate, with proposed targets falling far short of the \$1.3 trillion per year demanded by developing nations (Climate Action Network Europe, 2023). Southern-led proposals, such as the Bridgetown Initiative's reform of multilateral development banks (Barbados, 2022), are often sidelined in favour of Northern-dominated solutions. Additionally, intersectional dimensions of oppression, such as race, gender, and class, are frequently overlooked in climate policies, further marginalizing vulnerable groups (Maldonado et al., 2013).

Regional Integration

Regional integration gained prominence as a concept in the mid-20th century. Its early development is often linked to Europe following the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 and later the European Economic Community in 1957. These institutions were designed to bind together the economies of former adversaries and thus prevent future conflict through economic interdependence (Haas, 1961; Moravcsik, 1998). Inspired by the success of European cooperation,

scholars developed several mainstream theories of integration, including liberal institutionalism (Keohane, 1984), constructivism (Wendt, 1999), and realism (Mearsheimer, 1994).

Liberal institutionalism emphasizes the role of international institutions in fostering cooperation among states, arguing that repeated interaction, interdependence, and institutional norms can reduce the likelihood of conflict and encourage integration, especially through mechanisms such as trade liberalization and collective rulemaking (Keohane, 1984). In the European context, this theory has been used to explain the success of institutions like the European Union in fostering economic and political integration. Constructivism focuses on the role of identities, norms, and shared understandings (Wendt, 1999). From this view, regional integration is not only about material interests but also about how states perceive themselves and others within a region. Shared historical narratives, regional identity, and collective memory can thus shape the trajectory of integration efforts. Realism, by contrast, is skeptical of regional integration, positing that states are primarily concerned with survival and power (Mearsheimer, 1994). It sees integration as a subordinate concept to the balance of power. When applied to the European case, realism interprets institutions like the EU as tools for the most powerful states to secure their interests.

However, these mainstream theories are often critiqued for their Eurocentric assumptions, especially their treatment of the EU as the normative model of integration. They often presume a level of economic interdependence, institutional trust, and political will that is not always present in other regions. For instance, unlike Europe, where integration historically prioritized trade liberalization and supranational governance (Haas, 1961; Gordon, 1961), regions like Africa and south-east Asia navigate integration in the context of starkly different historical, political, and economic realities.

To address these limitations, Acharya's (2016) concept of "regional autonomy" offers a more fitting lens. This theory emphasizes non-Western agency in crafting regional orders, arguing that integration in the Global South is often driven by concerns for state sovereignty, postcolonial autonomy, and resistance to external domination. In African and Asian contexts, regional integration tends to focus on collective self-reliance, flexible arrangements, and political solidarity, rather than the development of binding supranational institutions. This is consistent with earlier insights by Axline (1977), who argued that integration in the Global South has focused on developmental coordination rather than economic convergence, and Nesadurai (2003), who has highlighted how south-east Asian states have prioritized national sovereignty even within cooperative frameworks like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Climate-Induced Security Risks in the Horn of Africa and the Case Study of Ethiopia

The Horn of Africa exemplifies how climate injustice applies to the most vulnerable contexts, highlighting the urgent need to revive sustainable approaches based on non-anthropocentric values. In the framework of environmental justice, the eco-collective responsibility theory emphasizes the need for both human and environmental sustainability. It postulates the importance of an equal and give-and-take relationship between humans and the environment aiming at both the preservation of the planet and the well-being of future generations (Ssebunya et al., 2019). Even though countries in the Horn of Africa are responsible for insignificant CO₂ emissions and climate change cannot be considered the primary cause of instability in this region, since 2019 it has been experiencing an alternating phase of intense rainfall and catastrophic floods and prolonged drought. Adding to endemic multidimensional fragilities, environmental degradation increasingly represents a major threat which exacerbates existing criticisms and also creates new ones (Gavin, 2022; Dugassa, 2024; Minko, 2025).

Already, all countries in the region, except Kenya, are among the least developed in the world, and rank among the 48 most fragile globally. They either have low-income economies, namely Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, or lower-middle-income economies, namely Djibouti and Kenya, with limited adaptive, technical and financial coping capacities (IGAD, 2023; WPR, 2024; Fragile States Index, 2024; UNCTAD, 2024). Thus, these countries are extremely vulnerable to variations in climate, which can also intensify insecurity. This is especially the case, given that climate-sensitive sectors, such as agriculture and pastoralism, represent the backbone of all regional economies, except Djibouti, and a primary livelihood for the vast majority of the regional inhabitants (Yeboua & Cilliers, 2023; ND-GAIN Index, 2024). The region's population, which is around 200 million people and growing annually at a rate of 2.6%, has faced serious difficulties in meeting their basic physiological needs, due to a progressively lower availability of primary resources and insufficient support (World Bank Group, 2023; Yeboua & Cilliers, 2023).

Despite experts exercising caution when linking climate change to any specific consequence, widespread food and water insecurity, massive and uncontrolled migration, and recurrent violence are the most frequently mentioned possible impacts of variation in climate (UNDRR, 2024). In 2024, more than 21 million people in the region suffered from food insecurity and many more were in urgent

need of humanitarian assistance. Deadly fights over resources have occurred, at an increasing rate, in every country in the region, especially between cross-border farmers and herders. More than 10 million people were forced to flee their homes to survive, either within state's borders or as asylum seekers in neighboring countries (Conceição, 2024; WFP & FAO, 2024; Nogueira Pinto, 2025). Governments' inability to take effective action has contributed to a decline in legitimacy, which in turn, facilitated the expansion and affirmation of non-state armed groups across the region. Notably, in the more marginal peripheral areas, where official authorities are particularly weak or totally absent, non-state actors' *de facto* rule through the establishment of proper structures, providing services and goods in exchange for affiliation (Mach et al., 2019; Yishak, 2019; Mutangadura et al., 2022; Ripamonti et al., 2024; Salonen & Vihma, 2024). Whereas climate change cannot be considered the only direct cause of this concerning situation, there is growing evidence that it acts as a "threat multiplier". Most notably, it constrains responsiveness capacity and the formulation of adequate medium-term and long-term solutions (Bubsy & Von Uexkull, 2018; Gavin, 2022).

Within the region, Ethiopia is a useful case study for analysing the effects of the "triple injustice" and how unpredictable natural hazards jeopardize security while acting as cross-border threats. Despite being responsible for less than 0.4% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, Ethiopia ranks 155 out of 187 countries analysed in the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) Index. This means the country is highly and disproportionately exposed to the effect of climate change, which further limit adaptive and resilience capabilities (Crippa et al., 2023; ND-GAIN Index, 2024). This phenomenon adds to pre-existing vulnerabilities recently exacerbated by the fallout from the civil war in Tigray, between 2020 and 2022 and escalating clashes in northern Oromia and Amhara, which have led to the destruction of the environment and infrastructure and a massive humanitarian crisis (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2024). Although the country has evolved economically over the last few decades, due to the rapid growth of the increasingly dominant service sector, and is set to become a middle-income economy by the end of 2025, more than 60% of the total population is still employed in agriculture (World Bank, 2023). The sector continues to play a pivotal role in income generation, with over 70% of those in agriculture practicing semi-subsistence farming, which is especially vulnerable to variations in climate (Thornton et al., 2024).

Without effective interventions, the impact of climate change is projected to cause an average annual loss of 5% of GDP over the next 20 years, with major effects on the poverty rate, which already is already at 68% (World Bank, 2023; World Bank, 2024; MPI, 2024). Moreover, Ethiopia has low levels of health, education, and living standards as captured by its position in the Human Development

Index. It ranked 176th place in 2024. This highlights how persistent issues related to access to quality education, often linked to the lack of funding, remain a serious limit to adaptation capabilities and resilience-building processes (Thornton et al., 2024). Ultimately, even though Ethiopia has port access through Djibouti and Somaliland and is equipped with a modern railway system, it is a landlocked developing country (LLDC) According to the International Organisation for Migration, this limits development and resilience-building processes, leading to geographical isolation and high dependency on neighboring states (Adela et al., 2023; Thornton et al., 2024; UNDRR, 2024).

Although Ethiopia has demonstrated great dynamism in responding to these challenges, most recently at COP29 and the Partnering for Green Growth and Global Goals (P4G) Summit in Hanoi, concrete action is limited by structural weaknesses, gaps between commitments and actions, insufficient financial resources, and weak global cooperation (UNFCCC, 2024; ENA, 2025). The effects of climate change have negatively impacted on access to water and food across the country, which ranks 102nd out of 127 countries in the Global Hunger Index (2024). During 2024, more than 20 million people were identified as in need of food, water, or protection, and over 15 million people were identified as in urgent need of humanitarian assistance (WHO, 2024; WFP, 2024). Poorer and smaller rural households, practicing subsistence farming on less than 2 hectares of land, face the brunt of the impact, as 67% are already under the national poverty line and any further environmental degradation leads to negative consumption shocks (Begashaw, 2024; Thornton et al., 2024). Studies recently conducted in areas where rain-fed agriculture is the primary source of income – including the Hadiya and Bench Maji Zones of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) Regional State, and in Guji and West Guji of Oromia Regional State – revealed that between 52% and 81% of respondents did not have regular access to adequate nutrition and lived in conditions of persistent uncertainty (Gebre & Deshmukh, 2025; Caritas Switzerland, 2025; Begashaw, 2024). Clearly, this situation is the result of a combination of factors, of which climate change is just one. However, all sources mentioned cite the phenomenon as a major contributor to this precarious environment.

The resulting general insecurity has two further implications, as it leads to forced migration or to escalating inter-ethnic and inter-group conflict over resources. In both cases, the connections between Ethiopia and its neighbouring states are clear, highlighting the transnational nature of the impacts of climate change. The displacement crisis has hit the whole region, with Ethiopia being particularly exposed to the consequences. As well as 4.4 million internally displaced people (IDPs), Ethiopia hosts one million asylum seekers, mainly from Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan (WHO, 2024). They are mostly confined to 24 overcrowded refugee camps established across the country, where

access to essential services, health, and safety represents a daily challenge (FSIN, GNAFC & IGAD. 2024). Additionally, although migration is an important adaptive strategy, the intensity of the phenomenon and the absence of planning has meant that violent confrontations between migrants and locals are not uncommon (Minale et al., 2024). At the same time, climate change aggravates resource scarcity, igniting conflict between groups relying on decreasing natural resources for agriculture, pastoralism, and fishing. In this vein, climate-induced scarcity frequently overlaps with pre-existing ethnic cleavages, within and across borders. South Omo is the scene of ongoing cross-border clashes between the Ethiopian Nyangatom, Dassanech, and Hammer communities and the Kenyan Turkana community who compete over the control of water, land, and boundary demarcations (Alemneh, 2024). Similarly, disputes have become more frequent between Somali herders and Ethiopian farmers in the Ogaden region, while in the Amhara region the lack of water and the degradation of arable land are intensifying violent confrontations between the pastoral Afar and semi-pastoral Amhara communities (Minale et al., 2024; Minko, 2025).

This section has highlighted the impact of climate change on insecurity, displacement, and conflict dynamics in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. On a similar note, it demonstrated that the region and the country are subjected to conditions of climate injustice. To date the path towards sustainability and resilience is long and regional governments still lack sufficient capacity. However, there is growing recognition of the need for urgent action. Joint regional efforts are not merely beneficial but essential for building resilience and developing innovative and comprehensive medium-term and long-term adaptation strategies (Tadesse, 2019; Emirates Policy Centre, 2023). In the next section we elaborate on the contribution of strengthened regional integration towards enabling climate justice, specifically whether and to what extent it can effectively help tackle the “triple injustice”.

The Role of Ethiopia in Enhancing Regional Cooperation on Climate Justice and Security

Addressing the contemporary climate crisis that is afflicting the Horn of Africa requires a holistic approach in line with the African Development Bank Group's ten-year strategy (2024-2033) (African Development Bank, 2024). Drawing on the principles of regional autonomy, this process should prioritize the self-reliance and collective agency of member states, fostering collaboration that enhances their shared social, cultural, and economic interests (Aworaro, 2015; Niemann et al., 2019; Soko, 2022). Transboundary climate-related issues emerged as a key catalyst for regional cooperation

and integration, as these have long represented a major common concern (Endalew & Craft, 2016; IGAD, 2024). The first attempt to collectively address the violent repercussions of climate change, took place in 1986 with the establishment of the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD), which consisted of six east African countries exposed to natural hazards, namely Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda. This was a first attempt to develop the collective agency of the Horn of Africa (Dersso, 2014). Despite ideological divergences and antagonisms between national governments, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) played a fundamental leading role in this process. Interestingly, whereas other case studies highlight how stronger regional integration has provided the opportunity to promote stronger environmental standards and policies, in the case of the Horn of Africa the process seems to have occurred in reverse (Ai & Xu, 2023).

Ethiopia has played a pivotal role in climate diplomacy since the 1970s, when it took part in the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) in Stockholm. From the 1990s the national government has also pursued regional cooperation to achieve national development and security objectives, engaging more in multilateral initiatives (Geberemeskel et al., 2024). After Ethiopia ratified the UNFCCC in 1994, the government increased efforts to safeguard rights and duties related to living in a safe and healthy environment, while pursuing sustainable development. This was reflected in the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in 1995, specifically in articles 43, 44, 89 and 92 (FDRE, 1995). The same year an ad hoc institution was established with the name of Environmental Protection Authority (FDRE, 2021).

Dynamism on the national level was reflected in activity at the regional level. The institutionalization of IGADD represented a key turning point – following a meeting held in Addis Ababa in 1995 and a summit in Nairobi in 1996, it was superseded by IGAD. Its mission and scope were broadened to include promoting regional integration and cooperation to achieve peace, security, and prosperity through four hierarchical policy organs, backed by directors for specific subjects and multiple specialized institutions. Thus, collective self-reliance constitutes one of the core pillars of the institution. Environmental protection was included as a priority and an institution specialized in monitoring and prevention was created, namely the IGAD Climate Prediction and Application Centre (ICPAC) (IGAD, 1996; ICPAC, 2025). IGAD member countries jointly formulate strategies every five years, actively prioritizing food security, environmental protection, economic cooperation, regional integration, social development, good governance, peace, and security. ICPAC plays an even wider role, providing climate services to eleven east African countries, with the aim of enhancing

community resilience, fostering stronger cooperation, and ensuring regional autonomy. IGAD also holds observer status at the CoP, representing and speaking for the region at an international level (Minko, 2025; IGAD, 2022). Given this evolution, regional integration in the Horn of Africa around IGAD holds significant promise as a pathway to climate justice and in this dynamic, Ethiopia is often considered an anchor state (IGAD, 1996; ICPAC, 2022).

Since the institutionalisation of IGAD, Ethiopia has been actively searching for sustainable and suitable solutions to address climate change (Dersso, 2014; Sarkar, 2022). Meles Zenawi represented a key figure in this process, and worked on bridging national and regional agendas, advocating against environmental degradation and stressing the need for joint commitment (Endalew & Craft, 2016). With the aim of enhancing Ethiopia's role regionally and internationally, both development and sustainability guided domestic policies. In 1997 the Environmental Policy of Ethiopia, built around the concept of sustainable development, was enacted and the Environmental Protection Authority was established with the objective of monitoring sustainable social and economic development. In 2005, the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), which highlighted the benefits of deploying sustainable social protection initiatives and the importance of future generations, was described as one of the major African climate-adaption programs. In 2006, the Ethiopian Policy and Strategy on the development, conservation, and use of forests (2006), underlined the importance of bottom-up approaches, and was centred on community participation (FDRE, 2002; Vibhute, 2008; Ethiopian Academy of Sciences, 2015; Tadesse & Gebremedhin Zeleke, 2022). All these initiatives inspired joint actions across the region: the Conference of African Heads of State on Climate Change (CAHOSCC) was established in 2009 with the objective of uniting Africa's voice and developing a common view, specifically ahead of COP15 and the signing of the Copenhagen Accord (AU, 2025). The latter was criticized for its political and non-binding nature, but it stimulated open and inclusive dialogue on climate change and advancing concrete actions towards climate justice. In this framework, Meles Zenawi acted as a spokesman not only for Ethiopia, but for Africa (Endalew & Craft, 2016; Ethiopian Academy of Sciences, 2015; Akanle et al., 2009). These processes help demonstrate how, in Africa, cooperation is pushed more by common challenges, rather than by political or economic drivers and, more specifically, how climate-related challenges have contributed to integration.

In line with the growing international and regional attention towards climate change and sustainability, Ethiopia is one of the few countries in the developing world that outlined and adopted a comprehensive climate policy, providing an inspiration for neighbouring countries and reflecting

the will to find concrete solutions (Emirates Policy Centre, 2023). First, the Climate Resilient Green Economy (CRGE) Strategy, defined in 2011, puts the country at the forefront of the low-carbon revolution and prioritizes green economic growth. It addresses adaptation, mitigation, and resilience, with the broader aim of achieving a climate resilient green economy by 2025 (FDRE, 2019; Ethiopian Academy of Sciences, 2015; FDRE, 2011). Second, the government enacted two five-year Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP I 2010/2011-2014/2015 and GTP II 2015/2016-2019/2020), reflecting the country's long-term vision to become a climate-resilient lower-middle income economy by 2025 by pursuing sustainable development, good governance, and social justice through a bottom-up approach (FDRE, 2016; FDRE, 2010). Third, in line with the Paris Agreement, Ethiopia was the first of the least developed countries to submit an ambitious list of Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in March 2015. These commitments were updated in 2021, including an emission reduction target of 68.8% by 2030, supported by the 2024-2030 NDC Implementation Plan (Endalew & Craft, 2016; NDC Partnership, 2024; FDRE, 2021). Fourth, the Green Legacy Initiative launched in 2019 under the government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, supported by the 10-year development plan (2021-2030) and aimed at tackling deforestation and promoting green development, has encouraged greater activism within bordering countries, namely Djibouti and Somalia. Consequently, it energized regional efforts to fight against environmental degradation, highlighting the region's agency and will to act (Emirates Policy Centre, 2019; Massrie, 2024; UNECA, 2024).

Over the last decades Ethiopia has used IGAD to pool technical resources, while preserving national sovereignty, exemplifying what Gebremichael (2021, 2024) calls “sovereignty-first climate regionalism”. By leveraging Article 4 of the Abuja Treaty on environmental protection, Ethiopia has embedded climate justice priorities into its regional integration strategy. It used shared initiatives like ICPAC to bolster hydro-diplomacy in the context of negotiations around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which has been framed as an “African Solution to African Problem” (Solomon, 2020; Akamo, 2022; MoFA, 2023; Geshaw, 2025). It has also been proactive through national strategies and the Horn of Africa Initiative's \$7.9 billion adaptation program. The latter is an example of a regional alternative to Northern-led climate finance models that address common regional challenges while exploring and strengthening regional synergies (FDRE, 2011; World Bank, 2022). In this vein, the AGN—chaired by Ethiopia in 2023—has led to COP agendas addressing Africa's disproportionate adaptation costs (AGN, 2022; Mulugeta, 2023).

This strategic use of regional platforms enables states like Ethiopia to position themselves as climate knowledge brokers, enhancing their soft power, while programs such as Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) allows for the securitization of mobility and access to external climate-security funding (Rettberg & Belay, 2024). However, these gains often reflect a defensive posture—where participation in integration is motivated by risk management rather than a genuine commitment to supranationalism. For instance, Ethiopia’s influence over the Kampala Declaration on Migration, Environment and Climate Change (KDMECC) process, particularly in advocating for voluntary rather than binding relocation clauses, underscores how regional mobility frameworks are shaped to align with national border control interests, especially in contested regions like Somali and Oromia (ACMI, 2023). While Ethiopia contributes to 42% of IGAD’s climate-displaced population, it continues to block data-sharing on real-time pastoralist movements, highlighting the tension between rhetorical support for regionalism and practical resistance to intrusive mechanisms (ACMI, 2022; Gebremichael, 2024).

These dynamics illustrate the paradox Acharya (2016) warned of in regional autonomy frameworks: integration can enhance bargaining power and legitimacy but often at the cost of enforceable collective action. Ethiopia’s 2022 veto of IGAD’s climate fund governance model was not solely a resource issue—it reflected a structural preference for retaining unilateral control over cross-border initiatives (Almi, 2024). Thus, while regionalism can serve as a gateway to climate justice, its potential is curtailed when national interests dominate, revealing the fragile balance between autonomy and obligation in Africa’s climate integration landscape.

Conclusion

Given the harsh security implications of climate change in the Horn of Africa, addressing the phenomenon’s consequences with targeted and effective solutions is vital for the region’s future. To achieve this objective, domestic engagement within single countries must be supported by a comprehensive regional approach, as joint commitment is essential for positive outcomes. Even though concrete results are often hampered by structural limitations, such as the prioritization of national interests by governments, political disagreements, and cross-border conflicts over resources, only through collective action and shared commitment can the region effectively tackle the far-reaching consequences of climate change (Minko, 2025; Moe, 2024). In brief, whereas climate justice has been a driving force for regional integration, the latter has proven to be essential for reaching this goal. Ethiopia represents a valuable case study in this sense, as over the last decades it has

demonstrated leadership through national and regional initiatives, calling for a transformative approach, based on regional autonomy. It has prioritized sustainability, actively promoting awareness, adaptation and resilience-building, with the broader aim of ensuring national development and enhancing the country's image. In this sense, it has contributed to a re-invigorated regional agency, highlighting its decision-making autonomy. However, to date, regional integration aimed at collective self-reliance continues to face competing priorities such as state sovereignty, autonomy, and resistance to external domination, even when such influence originates at the regional level.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to all those who contributed to the development of this paper, with particular thanks to our mentors and professors for their insightful guidance and unwavering support. We are especially grateful to the editors and reviewers at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies for their meticulous reviews and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the academic quality of this work.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors have reported no potential conflict of interest.

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