

## **CLIMATE JUSTICE CLINICS: WHERE ARE NIGERIAN PROGRAMMES AND WHAT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST?**

**Vivian Ijeoma Uzoma\***

### **Abstract**

*Climate justice clinics represent one of the most dynamic intersections of legal education and environmental advocacy in the contemporary world. Yet, whilst such institutions have taken root across the Global North and, increasingly, in parts of Africa, Nigeria, a country bearing some of the most severe climate burdens on the continent, has yet to establish a dedicated climate justice clinical programme. This article traces the global and African origins of climate justice clinics, examines the existing landscape of clinical legal education in Nigeria, interrogates the legal and institutional gaps that impede their development, and maps out the considerable opportunities that exist for Nigerian law schools, civil society organisations, and policy-makers to cultivate climate-specific legal clinics. It argues that the confluence of a pressing climate crisis, an evolving legislative framework, and an energised civil society makes the present moment a uniquely favourable one for building institutional capacity in this space.*

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Law Clinics, Climate Justice, Climate Justice Clinics

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The intersection of climate change and justice is no longer a peripheral academic concern. In the second and third decades of the twenty-first

---

\* Vivian I. Uzoma, LLB, B.L, LL.M. PhD. (Nigeria), Lecturer, Abia State University, Umuahia, Abia State. E-mail: [uzomavivian72@gmail.com](mailto:uzomavivian72@gmail.com); [vinnysparks13@yahoo.com](mailto:vinnysparks13@yahoo.com)

century, it has become one of the defining legal and political questions of our time.<sup>1</sup> The communities most harshly affected by rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, desertification, and sea-level rise are, more often than not, those that have contributed the least to the problem: communities in the Global South, indigenous peoples, smallholder farmers, and coastal dwellers whose livelihoods are held hostage to a climatic instability they did not engineer.<sup>2</sup> It is from this profound moral tension that the concept of climate justice draws its urgency.

Climate justice, as a legal doctrine and a social movement, insists that the burdens and responsibilities of the climate crisis must be distributed fairly, and that those most vulnerable must have access to meaningful legal remedies when their rights are violated by both state inaction and corporate malfeasance.<sup>3</sup> This framework has, over the past two decades, generated an entirely new genre of legal advocacy: the climate justice clinic. Operating at the intersection of clinical legal education and environmental law, these clinics train law students to represent real clients, communities, and causes while simultaneously advancing the broader project of climate accountability.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary Robinson, *Climate Justice: Hope, Resilience, and the Fight for a Sustainable Future* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2018) 1-3

<sup>2</sup> UNFCCC, *Paris Agreement* (adopted 12 December 2015, entered into force 4 November 2016) UNTS vol 3156 art 2

<sup>3</sup> Ghinelli G, 'Standing, Justiciability, and Burden of Proof in Climate Litigation: Challenges and Proposals' in *YSEC Yearbook of Socio-Economic Constitutions 2022: Funding of Justice* (Springer Nature Switzerland 2023) 147-181.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Humphreys (ed), *Human Rights and Climate Change* (Cambridge University Press 2010) 12-15

Nigeria presents a compelling and somewhat paradoxical case study in this regard. It is a country where communities in the Niger Delta have lived with industrial-scale environmental degradation for over six decades, where desertification ravages the north, and erratic floods displace thousands in the south, and where a landmark Climate Change Act was enacted in 2021. General legal aid clinics exist, and several civil society organisations engage in environmental advocacy, but the institutional scaffolding of a proper climate justice clinic that combines legal representation, policy engagement, research, and student training remains conspicuously absent.

This article seeks to understand why that gap exists and what can be done about it. Section II traces the global origins of climate justice clinics, showing how the clinical legal education movement evolved to embrace environmental and climate causes. Section III examines the African experience, surveying nascent but important developments in Zimbabwe, Kenya, and other jurisdictions. Section IV turns to Nigeria, surveying the existing landscape of clinical legal education and environmental advocacy. Section V analyses the specific challenges that have inhibited the emergence of climate justice clinics in Nigeria. Section VI, which forms the heart of the article's forward-looking argument, maps the rich opportunities (legislative, institutional, pedagogical, and geopolitical) that exist for developing such programmes. Section VII offers brief conclusions and a call to action.

## **2.0 THE GLOBAL ORIGINS OF CLIMATE JUSTICE CLINICS**

### **2.1 The Clinical Legal Education Movement**

Clinical legal education, which is the model of teaching law through supervised engagement with real legal problems, did not emerge as a fully

formed concept but rather evolved gradually over the course of the twentieth century, shaped by debates about what law schools were for and whom they were meant to serve.<sup>5</sup> The earliest stirrings can be traced to the United States, where a series of critical voices in the 1930s began to question the then-dominant Socratic, case-method pedagogy of elite law schools. Jerome Frank, writing in 1933, argued provocatively that law schools needed to function more like medical schools: combining theoretical knowledge with supervised practical experience.<sup>6</sup> His vision was largely ignored at the time, but it planted a seed.

It was only during the social upheaval of the 1960s and early 1970s that clinical legal education truly came into its own in the United States. Driven by a combination of the civil rights movement, the War on Poverty, and a new generation of socially conscious law students, American law schools began establishing clinics that provided free legal services to low-income clients while training students in the craft of lawyering.<sup>7</sup> Federal funding through the Office of Economic Opportunity gave these programmes institutional stability, and by the late 1970s, clinical education had become a standard feature of American legal education.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> FS Bloch (ed), *The Global Clinical Movement: Educating Lawyers for Social Justice* (Oxford University Press 2010) 1

<sup>6</sup> Jerome Frank, 'Why Not a Clinical Lawyer-School?' *University of Pennsylvania Law Review and American Law Register* [1933] 81(8) 907, 915

<sup>7</sup> Richard Wilson, 'Western Europe: Last Holdout in the Worldwide Acceptance of Clinical Legal Education' *German Law Journal* [2009] 10(6-7) 823, 826

<sup>8</sup> Margaret B Drew and Andrew P Morriss, 'Clinical Legal Education and Access to Justice: Conflicts, Interests, and Evolution' in Samuel Estreicher and Joy Radice (eds), *Beyond Elite Law* (Cambridge University Press 2016) 194-218

From its American origins, the clinical model spread gradually to other common law jurisdictions: Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, and then, with increasing momentum from the 1990s onwards, to the Global South, driven in part by the efforts of international foundations and the Global Alliance for Justice Education.<sup>9</sup> The model adapted as it travelled, taking on different emphases in different contexts: some clinics focused on criminal justice, others on housing, immigration, or family law. What they shared was a commitment to the dual mission of legal service and legal education.

### **2.1 The Turn to Environmental and Climate Justice**

The emergence of environmental law clinics within this broader tradition followed logically from the environmental movement's growth in the 1970s. Organisations like Earthjustice, (founded in the United States in 1971 as the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund) demonstrated that litigation could be a powerful tool for environmental protection, and law schools began incorporating environmental advocacy into their clinical programmes.<sup>10</sup> Vermont Law School's Environmental Law Centre, established in the 1970s, became an early model for what a dedicated environmental legal clinic could achieve, combining student training with real casework on issues ranging from pollution to land use.<sup>11</sup>

Climate change as a discrete focus within environmental law clinics, however, is a more recent development, emerging in earnest only in the

---

<sup>9</sup> Bloch (n 5) 4–5

<sup>10</sup>Earthjustice, 'About Us' (Earthjustice, 2023) <<https://earthjustice.org/about>> accessed 10 May 2026

<sup>11</sup>Vermont Law School, 'Environmental Law Centre' (VLS, 2022) <<https://www.vermontlaw.edu/academics/centers-and-programs/environmental-law-center>> accessed 10 May 2026

2000s. The seminal moment, in many respects, was the decision of the United States Supreme Court in *Massachusetts v Environmental Protection Agency*<sup>12</sup> in 2007, which established that greenhouse gases could be regulated under the Clean Air Act and opened the door to a wave of climate-related litigation.<sup>13</sup> Law school clinics began pivoting to include climate work: the Columbia Law School Sabin Centre for Climate Change Law, established in 2009, became one of the most prominent examples, combining rigorous scholarship with hands-on litigation support and student training.<sup>14</sup>

It is against this backdrop that climate justice clinics, as opposed to more general environmental clinics, have emerged as a distinct institutional form. Their defining features set them somewhat apart from their predecessors: they are explicitly attentive to the distributional dimensions of climate harm, centring the experiences of marginalised communities; they frequently combine litigation with advocacy, policy engagement, and public education; and they operate with a consciousness that climate change is not merely an environmental problem but a human rights emergency.<sup>15</sup> In the United States, clinics at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Vermont are among the most established; in the United Kingdom, the Environmental Law Clinic at Edinburgh and the Oxford Programme on International Peace and Security have made important contributions; and

---

<sup>12</sup> *Massachusetts v Environmental Protection Agency* [2007] 549 US 497

<sup>13</sup> Peel J and Osofsky HM, 'Climate Change Litigation' *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* [2020] 16(1) 21

<sup>14</sup> Columbia Law School Sabin Centre for Climate Change Law, 'Climate Science Legal Defense Fund' (Columbia Law School, 2023) <<https://climate.law.columbia.edu>> accessed 12 May 2026

<sup>15</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Sixth Assessment Report: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (IPCC 2022) Summary for Policymakers B.1

in Australia, the Environmental Defenders' Offices have provided a model that bridges clinic work and dedicated advocacy organisations.

### **3.0 CLIMATE JUSTICE CLINICS IN AFRICA: AN EMERGING LANDSCAPE**

#### **3.1 The African Climate Context**

Before tracing the institutional development of climate justice clinics in Africa, it is worth pausing to appreciate the particular urgency posed by the continent's climate situation. Africa contributes less than four per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, yet it is consistently identified by the IPCC as one of the regions most vulnerable to climate impacts.<sup>16</sup> The combination of extreme weather events, climate-induced food insecurity, water stress, and sea-level rise poses existential threats to millions of people across the continent. The African Development Bank has estimated that climate change could cost sub-Saharan Africa up to 3 per cent of annual GDP by 2050, with the burden falling disproportionately on the poorest.<sup>17</sup> This structural inequity between contribution and consequence, power and vulnerability, is precisely what makes climate justice a particularly resonant frame for African advocacy.

#### **3.2 South Africa as a Pioneering Model**

The Centre for Environmental Rights (CER), whilst not a law school clinic in the technical sense, operates as a dedicated public interest

---

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> African Development Bank, 'Climate Change and Africa' (AfDB, 2022) <<https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Generic-Documents/The%20Solutions%20for%20a%20Changing%20Climate%20The%20African%20Development%20Bank%27s%20Response%20to%20Impacts%20in%20Africa.pdf>> accessed 15 May 2026

environmental law organisation that has become a critical part of South Africa's climate justice infrastructure.<sup>18</sup> The CER has pursued strategic litigation, policy advocacy, and public interest work across a range of environmental justice issues, and has been instrumental in developing South Africa's climate jurisprudence. Its work has increasingly intersected with academic institutions, creating a de facto ecosystem that resembles, in many respects, the kind of clinic-plus-advocacy model that has proven so effective in the United States.

The landmark case of *Earthlife Africa Johannesburg v Minister of Environmental Affairs* in 2017, in which a South African court became the first on the continent to require that climate change impacts be considered in the environmental authorisation process for a new coal-fired power station, was a watershed moment for the field.<sup>19</sup> The CER was instrumental in that litigation, demonstrating what coordinated legal advocacy can achieve even in jurisdictions with significant institutional resistance.

### **3.3 Mining, Mobile Clinics, and the Emerging Model in Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe offers one of the most instructive and recent examples of how civil society organisations and universities can forge a genuinely transformative partnership around environmental law. The Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA), founded in 2000 as a public interest environmental law organisation, has spent over two decades

---

<sup>18</sup> Centre for Environmental Rights, 'Annual Report 2023' (CER, 2023) <<https://cer.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Impact-report-digital-FINAL.pdf>> accessed 15 May 2026

<sup>19</sup> *Earthlife Africa Johannesburg v Minister of Environmental Affairs* [2017] 65662/16 (High Court of South Africa, Gauteng Division)

pursuing environmental justice through litigation, research, advocacy, and community legal education.<sup>20</sup> Its work has evolved well beyond narrowly environmental concerns to encompass a broader natural resource governance agenda covering land, water, wildlife, and mineral resources — the full range of issues at the heart of Zimbabwe's most urgent environmental challenges.

In March 2025, Zimbabwe marked a significant institutional milestone with the establishment of a specialised environmental law division within the existing legal clinic at Midlands State University (MSU). This was the result of a Memorandum of Understanding between ZELA's research and education arm, the Africa Institute of Environmental Law (AIEL), and MSU's Faculty of Law.<sup>21</sup> The partnership integrates environmental law into the university's existing clinic framework, offering students practical experience in environmental litigation, policy analysis, and community legal support. Dr Mugadza, Dean of the Faculty of Law at MSU, captured the significance plainly: the initiative gives students the chance to engage directly with environmental law cases, equipping them with the skills necessary to advocate for environmental justice in Zimbabwe.

Equally significant is the work being done through mobile legal clinics: a model that takes the clinic out of the university building and into the affected community itself. ZELA and the Great Zimbabwe University

---

<sup>20</sup> Grassroots Justice Network, 'Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA)' (2021) <<https://grassrootsjusticenetwork.org/connect/organization/zimbabwe-environmental-law-association/>> accessed 20 May 2026

<sup>21</sup> Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA), 'Advancing Legal Education and Environmental Justice through Environmental Law Clinics' (ZELA, 7 March 2025) <<https://zela.org/advancing-legal-education-and-environmental-justice-through-environmental-law-clinics/>> accessed 20 May 2026

(GZU) Herbert Chitepo Law School jointly conducted an environmental law clinic in Bikita, a community in Masvingo Province facing serious environmental and social disruption from lithium mining activities.<sup>22</sup> Supported by the Norwegian Church Aid's HUMAK project, the clinic brought law students and lecturers face-to-face with Chief Marozva and community members, providing a platform for dialogue, legal support, and research. The Dean of GZU's law faculty, Dean Maphosa, articulated the animating principle with admirable directness: legal education must be grounded in the contextual realities and challenges happening in the country, and students must understand those challenges rather than be divorced from them.

The lithium mining context is particularly significant in the climate justice frame. Lithium is a critical mineral in the global energy transition — its extraction underpins the batteries that power electric vehicles and renewable energy storage systems. But the communities most directly bearing the environmental costs of lithium extraction in Zimbabwe are not the communities that will benefit most from those technologies. This is the climate justice paradox in miniature: the green transition, if pursued without adequate environmental governance, can reproduce the same patterns of dispossession and ecological harm that characterised the fossil fuel economy. By taking clinic students into Bikita and similar communities, ZELA and GZU are doing something rare and important — they are ensuring that future Zimbabwean lawyers understand this paradox not from a textbook but from the voices of those living inside it.

---

<sup>22</sup> Zimbabwe Environmental Law Organisation (ZELO), 'Environmental Law in Context: ZELO Partners with GZU Herbert Chitepo Law School' (ZELA, 12 March 2026) <<https://zela.org/environmental-law-in-context-zelo-partners-with-gzu-herbert-chitepo-law-school/>> accessed 20 May 2026

ZELA has also run mobile legal clinics in the mining host communities of Mutoko and Zvishavane, focusing on business and human rights accountability.<sup>23</sup> During these clinics, facilitators identified corporate human rights violations, informed communities of their environmental, social, economic, and cultural rights, and helped them take concrete initial steps toward accountability, including drafting complaint letters to rural district councils and the Environmental Management Agency (EMA). From earlier university outreach sessions, environmental law societies formed at Midlands State University, Great Zimbabwe University, and Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, helping to sustain student engagement with community environmental issues beyond the life of any single clinic event.

### **3.4 Kenya and East Africa**

Kenya presents a different but equally instructive case. Strathmore University Law School in Nairobi has, over the past decade, developed one of the more robust clinical legal education programmes in East Africa, with a particular emphasis on access to justice and, increasingly, environmental matters.<sup>24</sup> The Law Society of Kenya has also been an important player, producing reports that highlight the barriers to effective environmental justice litigation and advocating for structural reforms to the court system that would make climate claims more accessible.<sup>25</sup> Kenya's constitutionalisation of environmental rights in its 2010 Constitution<sup>26</sup> which explicitly recognises the right to a clean and healthy

---

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Strathmore University Law School, *Environmental Justice Clinic Report 2022* (Strathmore University 2022) 4-6

<sup>25</sup> Law Society of Kenya and Kenya Law Reform Commission, *Access to Justice in Environmental Cases: A Report* (Law Society of Kenya 2021) 12

<sup>26</sup> Article 69(1) Constitution of Kenya 2010.

environment and provides for enforcement by any person has created a particularly hospitable legal environment for climate justice claims. This constitutional architecture, combined with growing judicial confidence in environmental matters, has made Kenya a jurisdiction to watch as climate litigation on the continent develops. Several Kenyan NGOs have begun exploring strategic climate litigation, and the connection between these advocacy organisations and clinical programmes at law schools remains an important area for development.

#### **4.0 Clinical Legal Education and Environmental Law in Nigeria**

##### **4.1 The State of Clinical Legal Education**

Nigeria's legal education system, like many post-colonial systems, has historically been dominated by a lecture-based, doctrinal pedagogy that prioritises the transmission of legal rules over the development of practical skills.<sup>27</sup> The law faculties of Nigeria's federal and state universities have largely followed a curriculum shaped by the requirements of the Council for Legal Education and the Nigerian Universities Commission, both of which have traditionally emphasised substantive knowledge over clinical experience.<sup>28</sup>

The emergence of Clinical Legal Education (CLE) in Nigeria has significantly transformed legal education and access to justice within the country. Through the establishment of campus-based law clinics in various universities and campuses of the Nigerian Law School, law students are increasingly exposed to practical lawyering skills while

---

<sup>27</sup> JA Ohiare, 'Problems and Prospects of Legal Education in Nigeria: An Assessment of the Council for Legal Education Act in Nigeria' *International Journal of Scientific Research in Humanities, Legal Studies and International Relations* (2020) 5(1) 208.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

simultaneously rendering free legal services to indigent and vulnerable members of society. The Compendium of Campus-Based Law Clinics in Nigeria published by the Network of University Legal Aid Institutions (NULAI Nigeria) demonstrates that many of these clinics were established between 2005 and 2013 as part of broader efforts to institutionalise experiential legal education and promote social justice within the Nigerian legal system.

One of the earliest and most active clinics is the Abia State University Law Clinic established in 2005. The clinic focuses on prison pre-trial detainee services, child rights, Freedom of Information advocacy and community human rights education. Since its establishment, the clinic has handled several prison-related matters and reportedly secured the release of over fifty detainees, including inmates who had spent several years in detention without trial. The clinic also undertook anti-sexual harassment campaigns in secondary schools and launched a Freedom of Information unit in 2013. These activities demonstrate the clinic's strong commitment to public interest lawyering and access to justice.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, the Adekunle Ajasin University Law Clinic, also established in 2005, has distinguished itself through community justice initiatives and its environmental law and sanitation advocacy. The clinic specialises in human rights, child rights, prison detainee services and environmental law through its Environmental Law and Right to Sanitation Unit. Although the report does not indicate extensive environmental litigation activities, the

---

<sup>29</sup> Ernest Ojukwu, Odinakaonye Lagi and Mahmud Yusuf, 'Compendium of Campus Based Law Clinics in Nigeria' (NULAI Nigeria, 2014) 10 <<http://www.nulai.org/index.php/media1/downloads-resources/file/45-compendium-of-campus-based-law-clinics-in-nigeria>> accessed 16 May 2026

creation of a dedicated environmental law unit is significant because it reflects an early appreciation of environmental justice within Nigeria's clinical legal education movement. Through annual outreach programmes and stakeholder engagement involving community leaders, law enforcement agencies and civil society organisations, the clinic has contributed to environmental awareness and public health advocacy within its host communities.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable progress in environmental clinical legal education was recorded by the Ebonyi State University Law Clinic. Established during the 2005/2006 academic session, the clinic developed specialised interests in public interest law, environmental law, prison justice and child rights advocacy. Its most notable contribution was a research project conducted on the environmental and health implications of quarry activities within the Abakaliki metropolis.<sup>31</sup> The findings of the study were reportedly submitted to the Ebonyi State Government and development partners, leading to the relocation of quarry and stone-blasting activities from residential areas to Okposi Umuoghara. This achievement represents one of the clearest examples of a Nigerian law clinic influencing environmental policy and governance through empirical research and community advocacy. In addition, the clinic collaborated with non-governmental organisations to educate quarry workers on health rights, labour rights and HIV/AIDS-related discrimination.<sup>32</sup> The activities of the Ebonyi State University Law Clinic therefore illustrate the growing

---

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*

<sup>31</sup> CN Nwedu, 'Enhancing Legal Aid through University Law Student Engagement: A Case Study of EBSU Law Clinic Model' *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* (2017) 24 98.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

capacity of Nigerian law clinics to address environmental degradation and public health concerns through practical legal interventions.

The University of Nigeria, Nsukka Law Clinic also incorporated environmental and planning matters within its service areas. Established in 2008 with support from NULAI Nigeria and the MacArthur Foundation, the clinic provides free legal advice, mediation and legal representation in areas such as consumer rights, negligence, family law, employment disputes and environmental planning.<sup>33</sup> Although the clinic did not operate a standalone environmental law unit, the inclusion of environmental and planning matters within its advisory mandate demonstrates an expanding understanding of environmental justice within Nigerian clinical legal education.

Beyond environmental law, many Nigerian law clinics have concentrated their efforts on prison decongestion and access to justice for pre-trial detainees. The University of Abuja Law Clinic, established in 2008, has been particularly effective in this regard. The clinic reportedly provided legal education to approximately two thousand persons annually and secured the release of sixty detainees from Kuje Prison between 2013 and 2014. Likewise, the University of Uyo Law Clinic handled over one hundred and eighty prison-related cases and facilitated justice services for more than one hundred and fifty detainees. The Ahmadu Bello University Law Clinic also contributed to prison justice reform by interviewing detainees and securing the release of some inmates through its prison outreach projects.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Ojukwu (n 32)

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

Specialised clinics have also emerged to address gender and family-related concerns. The Women's Law Clinic at the University of Ibadan, inaugurated in 2007, focuses on women's rights, reproductive rights, family law and human rights advocacy. Through collaborations with non-governmental organisations and community outreach programmes, the clinic has engaged in advocacy against female genital mutilation, violence against women and child welfare abuses. The clinic also intervened in a community dispute involving military shooting exercises that endangered residents of the Idi-Omo community in Ibadan, thereby demonstrating the potential of law clinics to engage in broader public interest and community safety matters.<sup>35</sup>

Overall, the development of law clinics in Nigeria reflects a gradual but important shift from purely theoretical legal education toward practical and socially responsive legal training. While many clinics continue to focus primarily on prison justice, human rights and mediation, a few have begun to expand into environmental justice and public health advocacy.

#### **4.2 The Civil Society Picture in Environmental Advocacy**

If the law school clinic space in Nigeria is underdeveloped, the picture in civil society is rather more energetic, particularly in the area of environmental and human rights advocacy. Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria (ERA/FoEN) has, since its founding in the 1990s, been one of the most vocal and legally sophisticated organisations confronting the environmental devastation of the Niger

---

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

Delta.<sup>36</sup> ERA/FoEN has combined grassroots community mobilisation with legal advocacy, producing landmark documentation of the social and environmental impacts of oil extraction and supporting affected communities in pursuing legal remedies.

The Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) has similarly developed a model of public interest litigation that, while not exclusively focused on environmental matters, has increasingly engaged with the relationship between environmental degradation, socio-economic rights, and state accountability.<sup>37</sup> SERAP's willingness to use both domestic courts and international human rights mechanisms — including the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice — has expanded the repertoire of climate and environmental justice advocacy in Nigeria in important ways.

The famous decision in *Gbemre v Shell Petroleum Development Company*<sup>38</sup> remains one of the most significant environmental justice judgments in Nigerian legal history. Justice Nwokorie of the Federal High Court held that the continuous gas flaring by Shell and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation violated the fundamental rights of communities in the Niger Delta to life and dignity, guaranteed by the 1999 Constitution and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, 'Annual Report 2022' (ERA/FoEN 2022) <[https://erafoen.org/?era\\_publications=2022-annual-report](https://erafoen.org/?era_publications=2022-annual-report)> accessed 16 May 2026

<sup>37</sup> Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), 'Annual Report 2022' (SERAP 2022) <<https://serap-nigeria.org>> accessed 16 May 2026

<sup>38</sup> *Gbemre v Shell Petroleum Development Company Nigeria Ltd* [2005] FHC/B/CS/53/05 (Federal High Court, Benin Division).

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

The decision was ground breaking in its framing of environmental harm as a human rights violation, and it demonstrated that Nigerian courts were not categorically closed to such claims. Enforcement of the judgment, however, was deeply problematic, reflecting a systemic gap between judicial pronouncement and effective remedy that continues to bedevil environmental justice in Nigeria.

The combined force of these civil society efforts like ERA/FoEN, SERAP, Amnesty International Nigeria, and a network of community-based organisations in the Niger Delta has created a body of knowledge, advocacy practice, and community relationships that would constitute an invaluable resource base for any future climate justice clinic in Nigeria. The weakness, however, is the structural fragility of these organisations: most are NGO-dependent on foreign donor funding, lack the institutional permanence of a university-based clinic, and are unable to provide the systematic legal training that the clinic model promises.

## **5.0 DIAGNOSING WHY NIGERIA HAS NO DEDICATED CLIMATE JUSTICE CLINICS**

### ***a. Structural Constraints in Legal Education***

The absence of climate justice clinics in Nigeria is not accidental. It reflects a confluence of structural, cultural, and institutional factors that have combined to prevent the emergence of this form of legal education and advocacy. Understanding these constraints clearly is a prerequisite for identifying meaningful solutions. Perhaps the most fundamental constraint is the resource environment of Nigerian law faculties and schools. Nigerian public universities have, for decades, been subject to chronic underfunding, with consequences that cascade across every aspect of institutional life: staffing shortages, crumbling infrastructure, outdated

library collections, and a systemic inability to retain talented academics who are frequently lost to private practice, the judiciary, or foreign institutions.<sup>40</sup> Clinical programmes are resource-intensive by their nature: they require dedicated staff with both academic expertise and practical legal experience, office space for client consultations, and administrative support for case management.<sup>41</sup> These are not extravagances but minimum conditions that are often simply unavailable.

The curriculum frameworks governing Nigerian legal education also present challenges. The Council for Legal Education, which sets the curriculum for law faculties across the country, has been slow to embrace clinical education as a mandatory or even formally recognised component of the law degree. Environmental law itself, let alone climate law, is not uniformly taught across Nigerian law faculties, and the specific intersection of climate science, international climate law, human rights, and community advocacy that a climate justice clinic would need to equip students to navigate is entirely absent from most curricula.

### **b. *The Knowledge Gap***

There is, relatedly, a significant knowledge gap within the Nigerian legal academy when it comes to climate law specifically. Climate law is a relatively new, rapidly evolving field that sits at the intersection of international law, constitutional law, environmental regulation, tort, and corporate governance. It requires familiarity with climate science, with

---

<sup>40</sup> ON Jacob and A Lawan, 'Public Universities Administration in Nigeria: Challenges and the Ways Forward' *International Journal on Integrated Education* (2020) 3(11) 163-169.

<sup>41</sup> Beatrice Obianuju Obuka and Festus Okechukwu Ukwueze, 'Challenges and Strategies for Sustainable Clinical Legal Education in Nigeria' *The Law Teacher* (2020) 54(3) 385-399.

IPCC reports, with the intricacies of the Paris Agreement, and with the growing body of climate litigation jurisprudence from around the world.<sup>42</sup> Many Nigerian law faculties do not have academics with this specific expertise, and the research infrastructure in terms of databases, access to international journals, and connections to the global climate law community is inadequate to support rapid capacity-building.

### ***c. The Policy Environment***

The enactment of the Nigeria Climate Change Act in 2021 was, in many respects, a landmark development. The Act establishes a framework for climate action, creates a Climate Change Council<sup>43</sup> chaired by the President,<sup>44</sup> and mandates the development of climate action plans across government.<sup>45</sup> It represents a genuine legislative commitment to taking climate change seriously, and it creates a set of legal obligations that, in principle, are justiciable.

Yet the gap between the Act's aspirations and its implementation remains vast. Nigeria has not yet translated the Act's provisions into the kind of detailed regulatory framework and enforcement infrastructure that would make climate litigation routinely viable. The National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA), the Department of Petroleum Resources (now the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission), and the Federal Ministry of Environment all have

---

<sup>42</sup> Orr Karassin, 'Mind the Gap: Knowledge and Need in Regulating Adaptation to Climate Change' *Georgetown International Environmental Law Review* (2009) 22 383; Mike Hulme, "'Gaps' in Climate Change Knowledge: Do They Exist? Can They Be Filled?' *Environmental Humanities* (2018) 10(1) 330-337.

<sup>43</sup> Section 3(1) Climate Change Act 2021

<sup>44</sup> *ibid* section 5(1)

<sup>45</sup> *ibid* Section 1(1)(i)

overlapping and often poorly coordinated mandates in this space.<sup>46</sup> This institutional fragmentation creates legal complexity that, without expert guidance, is often impenetrable to the communities most affected by climate and environmental harm.

**d. *Judicial and Access-to-Justice Constraints***

Access to justice in Nigeria is, by any measure, a profound challenge. The costs of litigation, the geographic concentration of specialised courts in major urban centres, the delays endemic to the Nigerian court system, and the general unfamiliarity of many judges with environmental and climate law combine to create formidable barriers to effective climate justice claims.<sup>47</sup> The Legal Aid Council of Nigeria, though it exists to provide legal assistance to indigent persons, operates with severely limited resources and is mostly concerned with persons who have been charged with capital offences. Also, it has not developed specific expertise in environmental or climate matters.

Procedural barriers also matter. Nigeria's law of standing has not yet fully embraced the open-standing model that makes public interest environmental litigation possible in jurisdictions like Kenya. Whilst there have been some liberalising developments, the constitutional provisions

---

<sup>46</sup> Vivian I Uzoma, 'Oil Pollution, Food Insecurity, and the Law: Rethinking Nigeria's Regulatory Framework' *Margaret Lawrence University Law Journal (MLULJ)* (2025) 1(1) 251-280.

<sup>47</sup> RO Adeoluwa, 'Assessment of Legal Frameworks on Environment and Climate Change Enforceable in Nigeria by the National Environmental Institution' *International Review of Law and Jurisprudence (IRLJ)* (2019) 1 81; Chidebe Matthew Nwankwo and Benjamin Mukoro, 'Climate Change Litigation and the Accountability Function of Judge-Made Law in Contemporary Nigeria' *Rivers State University Journal of Public Law* (2025) 13(1) 57.

on fundamental rights enforcement, and the Environmental Impact Assessment Act which make up the procedural landscape for climate claims remains uncertain enough to deter all but the most determined advocates.

## **6.0 Opportunities for Building Climate Justice Clinics in Nigeria**

### **i. The Legislative Moment**

The passage of the Nigeria Climate Change Act 2021 is a genuine legal opportunity and not just a symbolic development. The Act's provisions on carbon budgets,<sup>48</sup> sectoral action plans,<sup>49</sup> and government accountability create, for the first time in Nigerian law, a set of legally enforceable climate obligations that could form the basis of litigation in the event of non-compliance. A climate justice clinic with the expertise to monitor governmental compliance with the Act's requirements, to advise communities whose rights are affected by climate inaction, and to pursue strategic litigation, when necessary, would operate in an environment that now, at least in principle, provides significant legal handholds.

The Nigeria Climate Change Act's requirement that the Federal Government develop and update a national climate action plan creates a recurring accountability moment that a dedicated clinic could track and, where necessary, challenge. The Act also creates obligations on private sector actors, including oil companies, to report on their climate impacts — obligations that could be enforced through litigation with appropriate advocacy support.<sup>50</sup> In short, the 2021 Act has created a legal architecture

---

<sup>48</sup> Climate Change Act 2021 section 19

<sup>49</sup> *ibid* section 20

<sup>50</sup> *ibid* section 24

for which skilled climate litigators are now needed. The clinic model is ideally positioned to produce them.

## **ii. The Constitutional Framework**

Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, as amended, contains important resources for climate justice advocates. Chapter IV, which guarantees fundamental rights including the right to life and the right to dignity, has already been interpreted by courts (most notably in *Gbemre's* case) as capable of protecting communities from the most egregious forms of environmental harm. Chapter II, whilst containing justiciability limitations on fundamental objectives, has increasingly been read by activist lawyers as providing a normative backdrop for constitutional environmental claims. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which is domesticated in Nigerian law, provides additional human rights resources, including the right to a satisfactory environment guaranteed by Article 24. The *SERAC v Nigeria*<sup>51</sup> decision of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, whilst not a court judgment, established authoritatively that the dumping of toxic waste and the destruction of the environment in the Niger Delta constituted violations of the African Charter.<sup>52</sup> A climate justice clinic that is well-versed in both domestic constitutional law and international and regional human rights law would be positioned to develop innovative legal theories that connect climate harm to constitutional rights, following the trajectory set by the *Urgenda*<sup>53</sup> case and its successors in the Global North.

---

<sup>51</sup> *Social and Economic Rights Action Centre (SERAC) and Centre for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) v Nigeria* (Communication 155/96, African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2001)

<sup>52</sup> *ibid* para 52.

<sup>53</sup> *Urgenda Foundation v State of the Netherlands* (District Court of The Hague, C/09/456689 / HA ZA 13-1396, 24 June 2015)

### **iii. Institutional Partnerships and the Civil Society Ecosystem**

One of the most distinctive opportunities for Nigerian climate justice clinics lies in the richness of the civil society ecosystem that already exists. ERA/FoEN, SERAP, Amnesty International Nigeria, the Environmental Law Research Institute, and a network of community-based organisations in the Niger Delta and across the north of the country represent not merely potential clients but genuine partners for a university-based clinic. The clinical model works best when it is embedded in a broader advocacy ecosystem: clinics provide legal analysis, strategic litigation support, and trained student practitioners; civil society organisations provide community relationships, campaign expertise, and political will. The synthesis can be extraordinarily powerful. Law Faculties and Law schools in Nigeria's major cities are geographically proximate to communities experiencing acute climate and environmental harm. Many of them are all within range of affected communities and have at least some existing infrastructures for clinical legal education on which climate-specific work could be built.

### **iv. International Support and Funding**

The international climate justice movement has, in recent years, shown increasing interest in supporting advocacy capacity in the Global South. The Open Society Justice Initiative has already identified the development of clinical legal education in Africa as a priority, and has directed funding towards clinical programmes in several African jurisdictions.<sup>54</sup> The Ford

---

<sup>54</sup> Open Society Justice Initiative, 'Combining Learning and Legal Aid: Clinical Legal Education in Africa' <<https://www.justiceinitiative.org/publications/combining-learning-and-legal-aid-clinical-legal-education-africa>> and <[https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/c443e78d-b0cb-470f-b1de-65ad726002ee/southafrica\\_20030628.pdf](https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/c443e78d-b0cb-470f-b1de-65ad726002ee/southafrica_20030628.pdf)> accessed 25 May 2026

Foundation's commitment to Climate justice works in West Africa,<sup>55</sup> and the work of organisations like the Global Greengrants Fund, represent potential sources of support for Nigerian climate justice clinics.<sup>56</sup>

International partnerships with established climate justice clinics in the Global North also represent a significant opportunity. Collaborative relationships with institutions such as Columbia's Sabin Centre, the Environmental Law Clinic at Vermont Law School, or the Climate Justice Clinic at Harvard could facilitate knowledge transfer, curriculum development, and joint advocacy on cases with transnational dimensions including, for example, cases involving multinational oil companies operating in Nigeria. Several major oil spill and environmental devastation cases in the Niger Delta have already established the principle that foreign courts can exercise jurisdiction over multinational companies for conduct occurring in Nigeria;<sup>57</sup> a climate justice clinic that is connected to the global network of climate advocates would be far better positioned to leverage these legal possibilities.

#### **v. Regional Architecture: ECOWAS and the African Union**

A dimension of climate justice advocacy in Nigeria that is often underappreciated is the potential of regional and continental legal

---

<sup>55</sup> Anozie Egole, 'Ford Foundation, Partners Drive Climate Justice Across West Africa' *Punch Newspaper* (9 March 2026) <<https://punchng.com/ford-foundation-partners-drive-climate-justice-across-wafrica/>> accessed 25 May 2026.

<sup>56</sup> Global Green Grant Fund <<https://www.greengrants.org/where-we-work/africa/>> accessed 25 May 2026

<sup>57</sup> *Akpan and Others v Royal Dutch Shell plc and Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Ltd* (ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2021:132, Court of Appeal of The Hague, 29 January 2021); *Okpabi and Others v Royal Dutch Shell plc and Another* [2021] UKSC 3; *Vedanta Resources PLC and Another v Lungowe and Others* [2019] UKSC 20, [2020] AC 1045

mechanisms. The ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, headquartered in Abuja, has demonstrated a willingness to entertain human rights cases with environmental dimensions and has shown independence from political pressure in some notable cases.<sup>58</sup> A climate justice clinic with expertise in ECOWAS jurisprudence would be positioned to bring cases before the Community Court where domestic remedies have been exhausted or are manifestly inadequate, creating another avenue for accountability.

At the continental level, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights offer additional avenues. The African Commission's General Comment on the right to life explicitly contemplates environmental dimensions, and climate litigation before African regional bodies represents a largely unexplored frontier.<sup>59</sup> Given Nigeria's membership of both the African Union and ECOWAS, a Nigerian climate justice clinic could operate simultaneously at domestic, regional, and continental levels, building jurisprudence across all three systems. This multi-layered approach is, in fact, precisely what the most sophisticated climate justice clinics in other regions already do.

#### **vi. Pedagogical Opportunities**

Beyond the advocacy function, climate justice clinics represent a genuinely transformative pedagogical opportunity for Nigerian legal

---

<sup>58</sup> Abdoul Kader Abou Koini, 'The ECOWAS Court of Justice and the Prevention of Environmental Damage to Indigenous Peoples in the Exploitation of Oil and Gas Resources' *International Journal of Law* (2024) 10(4) 246-250.

<sup>59</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 'General Comment No 3 on the African Charter: The Right to Life' (ACHPR 2015) para 3

education. The current generation of Nigerian law students will practice in a world increasingly shaped by climate-related legal disputes: disputes involving insurance, property, migration, commercial contracts, public law, and human rights. Equipping them with the analytical tools to navigate this landscape, the practical skills of climate advocacy, and the ethical consciousness of a justice-centred approach to lawyering would be a service not merely to those individual students but to the broader project of building a Nigerian legal system that is fit for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Climate justice clinics are uniquely well-suited to interdisciplinary teaching. The complexity of climate law with its dependence on scientific evidence, economic modelling, community testimony, and multi-level legal analysis demands engagement with disciplines beyond law: environmental science, economics, public health, political science, and community development.<sup>60</sup> Nigerian universities, which invariably house these disciplines alongside their law faculties, are therefore well-placed to develop innovative interdisciplinary clinical programmes. Such programmes would not only train better lawyers; they would produce graduates capable of occupying leadership roles in government, civil society, and the private sector in relation to climate governance.

### **vii. The Niger Delta as a Laboratory for Climate Justice**

Nowhere in Nigeria is the case for climate justice more urgent or more concrete than in the Niger Delta. The region has been subjected to some of the most severe environmental degradation in the world, with decades of

---

<sup>60</sup> S Houghton and others, 'Towards an Interdisciplinary Agenda for Teaching in the Climate Crisis: Reflections from the Humanities and Social Sciences' *Environmental Education Research* (2024) 30(11) 2007-2019.

oil spills, gas flaring, and contaminated water sources having devastated the livelihoods, health, and cultural life of its communities.<sup>61</sup> The additional burden of climate change including rising sea levels, increased flooding, and saltwater intrusion into agricultural land, is compounding these pre-existing vulnerabilities in ways that are both deeply unjust and legally actionable.

A climate justice clinic operating in or in partnership with organisations in the Niger Delta would have access to a rich body of existing documentation: community testimonies, scientific assessments, internal corporate communications disclosed in litigation, and regulatory records that would support both individual and strategic litigation. The Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports on Shell's conduct in the Niger Delta, together with the findings of various Nigerian governmental bodies, provide a documentary basis for legal claims that a well-resourced clinic could develop into coherent and potentially ground-breaking cases.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, the Niger Delta offers an opportunity for the kind of community-centred lawyering that distinguishes the best climate justice clinics from more conventional legal practices. The communities of the Delta are not passive victims; they are active participants in advocacy, with sophisticated understandings of their legal rights and years of

---

<sup>61</sup> Vivian I Uzoma, 'The Impact of Oil Spills on Food Security: Addressing Nigeria's Legal and Institutional Framework' *LexScriptio Journal* (2025) 2(1) 501-526 <<https://journals.kwasu.edu.ng/index.php/lexscriptio/article/view/315>> accessed 25 May 2026.

<sup>62</sup> Amnesty International, 'Nigeria: Negligence in the Niger Delta' (Amnesty International 2018) 5-10 <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AFR4479702018ENGLISH.pdf>> accessed 27 May 2026.

experience engaging with legal processes. A clinic that took their knowledge and agency seriously, that positioned itself as a legal resource for community-led advocacy rather than a provider of charity services to passive beneficiaries, would embody the ethos of climate justice that gives the clinic model its distinctive character.

## **7.0 TOWARDS A MODEL FOR NIGERIAN CLIMATE JUSTICE CLINICS (RECOMMENDATIONS)**

Drawing on the analysis in the preceding sections, it is possible to sketch the outlines of a model for Nigerian climate justice clinics that would be both practically viable and meaningfully ambitious. Such a model would, of necessity, be adapted to the specific constraints and opportunities of the Nigerian context, rather than simply transplanted from jurisdictions with very different legal and institutional environments.

- i. The initial establishment of climate justice clinics would be most feasible within existing law faculties that already have some form of clinical programme and that are open to the development of environmental law expertise. Starting within an existing clinical infrastructure reduces the cost and institutional complexity of launching entirely new programmes, and allows climate-specific work to benefit from established client relationships, staff experience, and administrative systems.
- ii. The clinic model that would serve Nigeria's needs best is one that integrates multiple functions: legal representation for affected communities, strategic litigation on climate and environmental justice matters, policy advocacy in relation to implementation of the Climate Change Act and associated regulations, legal research and documentation, and public legal education. This multi-functional model mirrors the approach of the most effective

climate justice organisations globally and reflects the reality that in a jurisdiction like Nigeria, where regulatory enforcement is weak and the barriers to litigation are high, advocacy must operate at multiple levels simultaneously to be effective.

- iii. Partnerships with civil society organisations and community-based organisations in the Niger Delta as well as the north should be built into the clinic's institutional design from the outset, rather than treated as an afterthought. The clinic should position itself as a legal resource for a broader movement, not as a self-contained academic exercise.
- iv. Curriculum integration is essential. Climate justice clinical work should not be confined to a marginal optional module but should be woven into the core curriculum of participating law faculties, with climate law taught as a substantive subject and clinical participation in climate justice work recognised as a core component of professional legal training. This would require engagement with the Council for Legal Education to secure formal recognition, a project that would itself be a form of advocacy for the importance of clinical education and climate justice in Nigerian legal training.
- v. International partnerships and funding must be pursued proactively. Nigerian law faculties are not islands; they operate in a global legal academy that is, at its best, characterised by generous knowledge-sharing and collaborative capacity-building. Relationships with climate justice clinics in other countries would provide curriculum materials, expertise, and, in some cases, financial support that could be transformative for Nigerian programmes still in their early stages.

## **8.0 CONCLUSION**

This article has argued that Nigeria needs dedicated climate justice clinics, that the conditions for their development are more favourable than they have ever been, and that the failure to establish them constitutes not merely an educational gap but a justice failure. The communities of the Niger Delta, the farmers of the north watching their land dry up, and the coastal populations facing encroaching seas all require legal advocates equipped with the skill and institutional backing to pursue their claims effectively. The building blocks are in place. The Nigeria Climate Change Act 2021 provides a legally enforceable framework; the Constitution and the African Charter offer human rights foundations; a vibrant civil society ecosystem supplies community knowledge and advocacy energy; and African peers in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Kenya demonstrate that comparable jurisdictions have built such institutions when the will existed. What remains is institutional commitment from law school administrators, academics, civil society partners, and funders willing to invest in long-term capacity rather than short-term outputs. Climate justice clinics will not emerge without deliberate effort, but when they do, they change things. The moment is propitious; the opportunity should not be wasted.