



Climate Change in Fragile States: A Ten-Year Call to Action for South Sudan through Government Stewardship and Community Partnership

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Abstract

Climate change represents an existential threat to fragile and conflict-affected states, where weak institutions, limited fiscal space, and high vulnerability converge. South Sudan exemplifies this challenge. Recurrent floods, prolonged droughts, food insecurity, displacement, and disease outbreaks have intensified over the past decade, eroding development gains and exacerbating fragility. This OpEd argues that climate action in South Sudan must move beyond emergency response toward a ten-year, government-led, community-anchored investment pathway that is affordable, realistic, and contextually grounded. Drawing on lessons from community health systems, livelihoods programming, and climate adaptation evidence, the paper proposes priority mitigation and adaptation measures and outlines an investment framework anchored in state stewardship, community partnership, and blended financing. The article calls for climate resilience to be treated as a governance and development imperative, not merely an environmental concern.

Climate Change and Fragility: The South Sudan Context

South Sudan is among the countries most exposed to climate shocks while possessing the least adaptive capacity. Seasonal flooding along the Nile Basin has displaced millions, destroyed livelihoods, damaged health and education infrastructure, and accelerated food insecurity. Conversely, droughts in pastoralist areas have intensified competition over land and water, heightening communal tensions. These climate-induced stresses interact with poverty, weak service delivery, and limited institutional reach, reinforcing cycles of vulnerability (Figure 1).

In fragile contexts, climate change is not a future risk—it is a present and compounding crisis. The health, nutrition, water, education, and protection sectors all bear its imprint. Without deliberate action, climate impacts will continue to reverse development

investments and undermine peace-building efforts over the next decade.

Why Government Leadership and Community Partnership Matter

Climate responses in fragile states often remain externally driven, project-based, and short-term. While humanitarian assistance saves lives, it cannot substitute for national ownership. Government stewardship is essential to set priorities, align partners, and ensure sustainability. Equally, communities are not passive beneficiaries; they are frontline responders with deep contextual knowledge and coping strategies.

A viable climate strategy for South Sudan must therefore rest on a dual compact:



Figure 1

a) Government stewardship – Policy leadership, coordination, regulation, and integration of climate action into national and sub-national plans.

b) Community partnership – Co-design, co-implementation, and co-monitoring of locally appropriate adaptation and mitigation actions.

This partnership approach builds legitimacy, improves cost-effectiveness, and strengthens social cohesion—an often-overlooked climate dividend.

Affordable and Realistic Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Measures

In a low-emission country like South Sudan, climate action should prioritize adaptation with co-benefits for mitigation. The following measures are feasible within a fragile setting and scalable over ten years.

Climate-Resilient Community Systems

- Flood-resistant health posts, schools, and community centers using elevated designs and local materials.
- Decentralized service delivery models that reduce travel distances during floods and insecurity.
- Community early-warning systems integrating local knowledge with basic meteorological data.

Climate-Smart Livelihoods and Food Systems

- Promotion of flood-tolerant and drought-resistant crops.
- Support to pastoralist mobility corridors and negotiated grazing agreements.

- Small-scale irrigation, water harvesting, and soil conservation practices managed by community groups.

Renewable Energy for Essential Services

- Solarization of health facilities, water points, and schools to ensure continuity during climate shocks.
- Solar-powered cold chains for vaccines and essential medicines.
- Community-managed mini-grids for productive use, enhancing incomes and resilience.

Water, Sanitation, and Environmental Protection

- Climate-resilient boreholes and elevated latrines in flood-prone areas.
- Community-led waste management and drainage maintenance.
- Reforestation and wetland protection as natural flood buffers.

Human Capital and Social Protection

- Climate-responsive social protection targeting the most vulnerable households.
- Integration of climate literacy into community education and youth programs.
- Protection of women and girls, who disproportionately bear climate impacts.

These interventions are not high-tech or capital-intensive; rather, they emphasize appropriate technology, local ownership, and incremental scaling.

Investment Needs and Financing Pathways (2025–2035)

A ten-year climate resilience pathway for South Sudan requires predictable, blended financing. While precise costing depends on scope, evidence suggests that early investment in adaptation yields high returns, particularly in health, food security, and infrastructure protection [1–6].

Public Sector Commitments

- a) Gradual integration of climate lines into national and state budgets.
- b) Climate-proofing of existing sectoral investments rather than parallel programs.
- c) Strengthened public financial management to track climate expenditures.

International and Climate Finance

- a) Alignment with global climate funds while simplifying access modalities.
- b) Shift from fragmented pilots to programmatic, multi-year financing.
- c) Greater emphasis on adaptation finance for fragile states.

Community and Private Sector Engagement

- a) Community contribution through labour, governance, and maintenance.
- b) Incentivizing private sector participation in renewable energy and agri-value chains.
- c) Exploration of innovative financing (diaspora bonds, risk pooling, blended finance).

The guiding principle should be sustainability over scale—doing what can be maintained, expanded, and governed locally.

Governance, Accountability, and Measurement

Effective climate action requires clear roles, transparency, and learning. Key governance priorities include:

- a. Anchoring climate coordination within central government while empowering states and counties.
- b. Establishing simple, outcome-focused indicators that communities can understand and monitor.

- c. Linking climate investments to peace-building, service delivery, and equity outcomes.

Success should be measured not only in emissions avoided or hectares protected, but in lives stabilized, livelihoods preserved, and systems strengthened.

A Ten-Year Call to Action

Over the next decade, South Sudan faces a choice: continue reacting to climate shocks or invest in resilience as a foundation for stability and development. Climate change, if left unaddressed, will magnify fragility. If confronted strategically, it can catalyze innovation, partnership, and renewed social contracts between state and citizens.

This OpEd calls on:

- a) Government leaders to place climate resilience at the heart of national development and peace agendas.
- b) Communities to remain active partners and custodians of local solutions.
- c) Development partners and investors to commit to long-term, flexible, and locally anchored financing.

In fragile contexts, climate action is not optional—it is central to survival, dignity, and the possibility of a sustainable future.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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