Climate FiGS
Speaker brief
2025:1

FEW CONTRIBUTORS, LIMITED RECIPIENTS

Dissecting the Distribution Patterns of Climate Finance in Africa

By Janina Krupski, 16th October 2025

Summary

Under the UNFCCC, wealthy countries pledged to direct climate finance to the "most vulnerable" countries. But is this happening in practice? This study uses a mixed-methods approach to answer two questions: When bilateral contributors fund African adaptation, do they prioritize the most at-risk countries, or those with closer political and economic ties? And are there differences between contributor groups? I find that vulnerability affects the *amount* of finance countries receive but plays a limited role in *who* gets selected. Selection is instead shaped by trade links, shared languages, and especially colonial ties. However, contributors do not behave the same. The UK, US, Germany, France, and Japan are less likely to prioritize vulnerability in selecting recipients, while the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Austria, Ireland, and Switzerland are more likely to do so.

Motivation

Africa produces only 3% of global emissions, yet it is the most climate-vulnerable continent. Still, Africa receives just 20% of global adaptation funds—and more than half of this goes to only ten countries (Wignarajah et al., 2023). This uneven distribution raises doubts about whether finance is reaching those most in need, as promised under the Paris Agreement. With many large bilateral contributors cutting aid budgets, it is more urgent than ever to make sure that the funds available are allocated fairly.

Approach and methods

I test two models of allocation to 54 African countries over the period 2017-2021. The extent to which contributors allocate adaptation finance to countries that are vulnerable to climate change (based on recipient need) or to countries that are of economic and political interest to the contributor (based on donor interests). My research draws on a combination of regression analysis and interviews. In the first part, I look at two separate decisions: whether a country is chosen to receive funding at all, and how much it receives once selected. I also compare patterns between two groups of contributors—the largest OECD providers (the US, UK, Germany, France, and Japan) and the Nordic+ group—to see how their approaches differ. Finally, I conducted nine interviews with experts to help explain the reasoning behind these patterns.

Key findings

- **Vulnerability matters, but only when it comes to allocation amounts.** Being highly climate-vulnerable increases how much funding a country gets, but has little influence on whether a country is chosen as a recipient of adaptation finance in the first place.
- **Old ties shape new money.** Trade links, shared languages, and especially colonial ties strongly drive who receives adaptation finance.
- **Risk aversion shapes flows.** Contributors channel funds to countries with familiar institutions and established ties, as this is seen to reduce costs and perceived risks.
- **Contributors do not behave the same.** Nordic+ countries give more weight to vulnerability, while the largest contributors (US, UK, Germany, France, Japan) lean heavily on political and economic ties.

Insights and interpretation

The findings reveal a "triple burden" faced by some of Africa's most climate-vulnerable countries: weak governance, limited bilateral ties, and high exposure to climate risks. Together, these factors restrict their access to adaptation finance, directly contradicting the Paris Agreement's promise to prioritize the most vulnerable.

Equally striking is that vulnerability plays only a small role in deciding *who* gets funded, showing how climate finance remains locked into old patterns. Rather than responding to climate risks, money follows established aid relationships. This creates a cycle of "aid darlings" that attract repeated funding and "aid orphans" that remain overlooked, echoing long-observed trends in development aid.

Contributor differences reinforce this divide. Larger contributors rely on colonial and economic ties to minimize risks and protect strategic interests, while Nordic+ contributors, with fewer such ties and stronger norms of climate justice, more often select recipients based on vulnerability. This contrast underscores how adaptation finance reflects deeper power structures and diverging aid strategies, rather than a straightforward response to climate need.

Key Takeaways

- **Path dependence persists.** As long as climate finance is tied to ODA budgets and institutions, it will likely continue to follow historical aid patterns.
- **Physical vulnerability to climate change has limited influence on how contributors allocate adaptation finance**, resulting in funding that often bypasses the most at-risk countries in Africa.
- **Former colonies are significantly more likely to receive adaptation finance** from their former colonial powers, reflecting persistent historical ties
- **Highly vulnerable, poorly governed countries lacking bilateral ties are neglected,** highlighting the need for contributors to balance adaptation finance effectiveness with supporting those most at-risk.

Reference

Wignarajah, D., Richmond, M., Stout, S., Martinez, G., Schell-Smith, K., & Padmanabhi, R. (2023). *State and Trends in Climate Adaptation Finance 2023.* Climate Policy Initiative. https://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/State-and-Trends-in-Climate-Adaptation-Finance-2023_.pdf

Attribution: This Research Brief is an output associated with the ClimateFiGS Speaker Series. It is based on the Masters Thesis "*Few Donors, Limited Recipients: Dissecting the Distribution Patterns of Climate Adaptation Finance in Africa*" available here https://scripties.uba.uva.nl/search?id=c11054667. This brief is shared in relation to the session "**Harvesting Insights from Masters Theses on Climate Finance in Africa**" to be held on 16th October 2025. ClimateFiGS did not fund, commission, or edit the underlying paper.

Funded by the European Union

European Research Council

Climate FiGS is funded primarily by the European Union (ERC, ClimateFiGS, 101117670). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the grantng authority can be held responsible for them