

Policy brief

Climate justice and the right to the city in Latin America: communities at the forefront of transformation



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Key words

Latin America, cities, knowledge, rights, climate justice, participation, urban transformation

Executive Summary

The global average temperature in 2024 was 1.55°C above pre-industrial levels (WMO 2025)¹. Extreme events –heat waves, cold waves, storms, droughts and floods– led to human losses, disruption of livelihoods and increasing constraints on access to water and energy (Singh, 2024). Latin American cities critically concentrate these impacts, putting fundamental rights at risk such as adequate housing, basic services, the public space and life itself. More than 80% of the region’s population live in urban environments marked by inequality, exclusion, sectoral policies and institutional fragmentation.

Despite often being invisible, its poorest communities are, however, **leading collective and innovative actions and solutions that combine adaptation, mitigation and social justice**. These experiences demonstrate that urban transformations will only be sustainable if they are based on a recognition of rights, active participation and the strengthening of local capacities (I/A Court H.R., 2023), applying decolonial, innovative and collaborative approaches that recognise the diversity of knowledge, local contexts and everyday practices. Without climate justice and rights-based policies that involve local participation and capacity building, an increasing number of people will be trapped in a cycle of crisis, uncertainty and exclusion that only deepens the urban poverty trap (Allen et al., 2017). In contrast, inclusive, rights-based, climate-responsible and environmentally-friendly urban development can be a powerful driver of socio-ecological transformation (Dick et.al., 2025).

Why it matters

- Urban climate action will only be fair and effective if it starts by recognising structural inequalities and puts the inhabitants, their organisations and capacities, front and centre.
- Communities are already implementing solutions that combine mitigation, adaptation and social justice.
- Recognising, strengthening, multiplying and investing in these initiatives is essential for just and sustainable urban transformations.

Challenges, inequities and opportunities facing an inclusive urban governance that addresses the climate crisis in Latin American cities

Climate challenges in Latin American cities

With more than 80% of its population living in cities by 2025, Latin America is one of the most urbanised and unequal regions on the planet (ECLAC, 2024) and it is facing major socio-economic, environmental and climate challenges. Cities were designed and built for past climate conditions and are not adapting at the scale and speed required. The speed of change is exceeding the time it takes to study, agree and implement policies (Short and Farmer, 2021).

Climate change amplifies pre-existing vulnerabilities and puts the full realisation of fundamental rights such as adequate housing, basic services and public spaces at risk. It affects vulnerable

¹ Press Release 10.01.2025 World Meteorological Organization <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/wmo-confirms-2024-warmest-year-record-about-155degc-above-pre-industrial-level>

populations more severely because of their race, ethnicity, gender, age, income or place of residence, intensifying everyday risks associated with limited access to water, sanitation, adequate housing and security of land tenure (Escalante and Miranda, 2020; Resnick, 2022). Low-income urban communities, located in hazard-prone areas with poor infrastructure, suffer the impacts of climate change disproportionately –heat waves, droughts, floods and storms– all of which exacerbate health risks, food insecurity and forced displacement, and only deepen poverty (IPCC, 2023). These conditions are reflected in urban inequalities that magnify people’s exposure to hazards and further limit adaptive capacity.

The magnitude of urban risks and the capacity of urban communities to manage them remains under-recognised. The social construction of risk (Maskrey, 1993) is closely linked to historical processes of inequality, exclusion and institutional fragmentation that define who has access to land, housing and services and who is most exposed to climate impacts. This inequality is not only territorial but also political, as these populations often lack a voice in urban decision-making, perpetuating a vicious circle of exclusion and risk. This calls for an integrated response that combines mitigation, adaptation and sustainable development policies (IPCC, 2022; Cociña et al., 2025) with a focus on social, environmental and climate justice.

Dimensions of urban climate justice

Different understandings of equity and justice in climate adaptation produce different interpretations; language is not neutral and frameworks for analysing and understanding reality themselves result in an exercise of power that influences outcomes (Gear and Dehm, 2020). Responses need to incorporate notions of justice, power and distribution. In this sense, the loss and damage associated with climate change should be understood as part of the reparations pillar of the climate justice framework (United Nations Human Rights, 2024).

While there are many definitions of climate justice, all highlight the asymmetry between the responsibilities for and impacts of climate change and the need for systemic changes to transform the structural conditions that produce vulnerability (Bulkeley, 2014; Schlosberg and Collins, 2014; Wood et al., 2018; Allen, 2021; Juhola et al., 2022; IPCC, 2023). Climate justice is deeply rooted in human rights (Allen, 2021); without policies grounded in this principle, increasing numbers of people will be at risk of losing their lives and being locked into persistent cycles of crisis and inequality. Given that human survival also depends on non-human beings, ecosystems and biodiversity, particularly in Latin America, which is home to eight of the 17 megadiverse countries on the planet, it is also essential to recognise the rights of nature (Cárdenas and Angulo, 2020), as reflected in the constitutions of Bolivia, Ecuador and other regulatory frameworks in Latin America.

There are six key dimensions to a justice approach that guide its practice:

- 1. Recognition justice** highlights the context of identities, knowledge, cultures, values and economic inequalities in which the rights and responsibilities of the parties must be understood: which people are considered vulnerable or affected. It demands respect for the dignity, knowledge and voices of marginalised populations.
- 2. Distributive justice** addresses how the benefits and burdens of climate change are divided among individuals, communities and states.

3. Procedural justice, linked to governance, calls for participatory, accessible, fair and inclusive processes, with a capacities approach that is linked to each individual's possibility for full development. It promotes inclusiveness and transparency in decision-making, strengthening local capacities.

4. Intergenerational justice considers historical responsibilities and equity between present and future generations.

5. Restorative justice emphasises corrective policies with which to provide redress to victims of structural injustices.

6. Eco-justice recognises both humans and non-humans, ecosystems and nature as a common good to be protected and celebrated in order to foster **socio-ecological transformation**.

Climate justice argues that action on climate change should actively contribute to reducing social and environmental inequalities by strengthening the rights of those communities most affected. It is not simply about mitigation or adaptation but about transforming the structural conditions that generate vulnerability. This approach responds to the call of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (2022) –Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability– to build synergies between mitigation, adaptation and sustainable development, guiding policies towards just and inclusive transitions. Placing **equity at the heart of urban policies** means reviewing who decides, who benefits and who bears the costs of climate action (Leal Filho et al., 2021; Dodman et al., 2022).

Equity and justice in urban responses to climate change

Evidence shows that the most vulnerable groups suffer greater exposure to climate hazards and have less adaptive capacity, despite bearing the higher costs of inaction (Resnick, 2022). Dimensions of gender, age, ethnicity, class, poverty, disability, migration, place of residence, etc. all act as filters or lenses that influence how a person experiences a problem and what opportunities they have for dealing with it (Prakash et al., 2022; Mashoodi, 2021; Amorim-Maia et al., 2022; Stein et al., 2024). According to Pellerey, Torabi and Lombardi (2025), of 146 articles reviewed on the incorporation of justice into climate resilience, only five actually addressed forms of justice that consider the needs and preferences of marginalised communities in imagining pathways for future transformation (retributive and/or intergenerational justice), and only 14 addressed the possibility of compensation as a means of reversing the status quo (restorative justice). Ignoring these dimensions reinforces injustices and leads to poorly designed policies (Leal Filho et al., 2021).

Cities can also drive lasting transformations when they adopt decolonial approaches that question which forms of knowledge and actors define urban resilience. According to Jimenez, Hofsloot and Miranda (2025), frameworks such as the pluriverse and conviviality² enable us to dismantle colonial legacies of domination and move towards more just and regenerative urban-rural-natural systems. Effective climate action therefore requires inclusive governance, community participation and recognition of local knowledge, rooted in principles of climate justice, in order to address pre-existing inequalities. Finally, in addition to often being more expensive, the most advanced technologies alone will not build local resilience unless they put the inhabitants, their organisations, and knowledge of their territories and ecosystems at their heart and integrate climate risk into urban plans, land-use regulations and public investment instruments, guiding development towards more just, equitable and sustainable livelihoods.

² The pluriverse proposes the coexistence of multiple ways of understanding and inhabiting the world, recognising cultural and ecological diversity, while conviviality promotes cooperative and caring relationships between people and with nature.

Inclusive urban climate governance

Climate justice is, in practice, embodied in how policies are designed and implemented with an approach to human rights and protection of the common good, and in how resources are distributed and local knowledge is recognised. **Participatory strategies, inclusive governance and community co-design processes** are essential to reduce vulnerabilities and build resilience.

For decades, climate change debates have been dominated by technocratic views and scientific approaches, with little involvement from those living with the impacts (Satterthwaite et al., 2020; Almansi et al., 2024). Incorporating **local voices, situated knowledge and everyday experiences** into dialogue with scientific knowledge is a condition for designing effective and transformative solutions (Huq and Shafique, 2022; Walnycki and Landesman, 2024). When urban adaptation includes physical, social and institutional measures, it prioritises risk reduction in informal settlements, reduces poverty and generates co-benefits in the form of well-being, sustainability and mitigation (IPCC, 2023).

Transformation from within the territories

Due to the actions and omissions of states, vulnerable urban and peri-urban communities, denied their fundamental rights, **are driving collective, sustainable and innovative solutions on a daily basis** aimed at facing up to climate challenges and demonstrating their capacity for cooperation, innovation, self-management and transformation of their territories, actively responding to the climate crisis. This collective action demonstrates that social, community and women's organisations are fundamental to building and creating a more just and equitable city.

These solutions promote collective well-being and the attainment of rights, access to which is not being duly guaranteed, addressing a climate crisis for which they are not responsible. **These efforts require urgent support from states**, with effective participatory instruments aimed at strengthening solutions developed by and with communities. Participatory strategies, inclusive governance processes and community initiatives, involving co-design, are all essential.

To accelerate and achieve transformations at scale in order to address the climate crisis in a just manner, collective action and public-community partnerships can be incorporated into a framework of inclusive and sustainable long-term land-use planning in which the boundaries between urban, rural and ecological are intertwined, and for which the support of local and national governments is crucial.

Strengthening the work of social organisations and promoting climate justice actions in the urban context in Latin America

From June to October 2025, the members of Habitat International Coalition - Latin America (HIC-LA), the Global Platform for the Right to the City (GPR2C) and Misereor, with the support of Foro Ciudades para La Vida and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED Latin America), conducted a process of training and coordination to strengthen the work of the social organisations and promote actions for climate justice in the face of global negotiations such as

the Conference of the Parties (COP30), the World Urban Forum (WUF13), the 10 years of the New Urban Agenda and other relevant international processes.

The organisations and participants presented examples of actions³ implemented in the region that demonstrate their relevance in risk identification and climate action, generating collaborative mechanisms and working together with local governments and other actors to develop plans and solutions appropriate to the territories. These experiences propose effective governance in which there is a capacity for coordination between actors and resources, and where decision-making is done in a transparent, inclusive and coherent way to achieve common goals and implement policies that work in practice.

From learning-by-doing and decades of accumulated knowledge, the climate actions being led by social organisations show approaches on different scales that are contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation, and which demonstrate a capacity for transformation, innovation and collaboration in the territories.

- At the housing or plot level: housing improvements using bioclimatic design concepts, with safe and healthy housing, using materials and tools to improve the thermal efficiency of buildings by insulating the shell (materials and leaks in the floor, roof, walls), improving ventilation and orientation where possible, using green roofs and walls, white roofs to dissipate heat, as well as technologies to capture and reuse water, and the use of renewable energies.
- At the neighbourhood level: integral improvement of neighbourhoods through the recovery of public spaces, planning and integration of nature-based solutions that incorporate native vegetation in order to generate shaded areas and contain slopes, permeable soils that facilitate rainwater infiltration, including rain gardens, natural pergolas, small urban forests, vegetable gardens (bio-gardens, hydroponics, etc.) that support communal cooking schemes, recycling and composting initiatives, and improved mobility, among other measures.
- At the city-region level: actions for the recovery of urban land, restoration of slopes and fragile ecosystems, farmer networks, biodiversity protection and watershed management in order to mitigate climate risks and protect natural ecosystems, with water and land management actions and the development of strategic land-use plans coming from the community and minimising the consumption of natural soil.

These actions are in addition to others aimed at assessing and generating risk maps, community-based early warning and response systems, with data collection, monitoring and the development of participatory indicators. They are supported by people's training schools, training spaces, capacity building and exchanges on environmental issues, climate change, popular and green economy, food sovereignty, etc. with a participatory and territorial approach (for further details see Annex containing a list of experiences provided by the organisations as part of the training and coordination process).

Persistent barriers

The implementation of solutions is not simple, should not be one-way, and does not take place in isolation from its context. Several barriers were identified as needing attention and response:

| Category | General description | Examples |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Socio-cultural and community participation | Poor involvement, motivation and capacities on the part of people to participate in collective processes and take ownership of projects. | Social apathy and widespread individualism; practices of political patronage; uncertain futures that demotivate young people; lack of knowledge of and resistance to local building cultures and the use of natural materials; lack of dissemination and communication of projects; difficulty in understanding technical language. |
| 2. Institutional and governance | Weak inter-institutional coordination, inadequate regulations and financial and/or administrative constraints. | Legal barriers and a lack of appropriate regulatory frameworks; dispersed and non-integrated actions between institutions; changes in government or lack of openness on the part of the authorities; limited budget for technical support and community training; short-term or small-scale funding and little scope for action by local governments (in terms of resources, lack of staff, and limited decision-making power compared to central government). |
| 3. Contextual and structural | External factors affecting the social fabric and the security or stability conditions necessary for project implementation. | Territorial conflicts linked to mining or megaprojects and the protection of natural heritage; fragmentation of the social fabric; structural violence; physical, social and cultural barriers that hinder collaborative processes; contexts of insecurity |
| 4. Technical and technological ownership | Difficulties associated with the technical complexity of the projects and the capacity of communities to take ownership of them. | Projects with new or unfamiliar technologies may hinder community ownership; complexity of implementation and maintenance. |

Strategic themes for advocacy

During the training and coordination process, a set of advocacy proposals was identified. These can be summarised into the following strategic themes:

1. Climate justice and rights

Objective: To integrate justice and rights-based approaches into all urban climate policies and actions, addressing the structural roots of inequality.

Addressing the structural roots of inequality means ensuring fair access to and control over common goods. These inequalities are expressed in forms of racism and environmental injustice that reproduce historical exclusions and are exacerbated when official responses promote forced displacement or relocation on the grounds of climate adaptation or other arguments.

Communities and territorial organisations must therefore participate in binding negotiations and decision-making on policies and investments, influencing the regulation of land ownership –especially access to secure land– and prioritising **community management of the commons** as a basis for equitable, resilient and sustainable governance.

Access to urban land and safe, accessible and serviced housing for low-income populations also needs to be promoted, avoiding their displacement to high-risk areas (I/A Court of H.R., 2023). National programmes that incorporate **eco-technologies into social housing** should also be encouraged, fostering housing solutions that strengthen community resilience and environmental sustainability.

2. Inclusive governance and binding participation

Objective: To strengthen multi-scale structures and participatory mechanisms with real impact.

Strengthening public-community partnerships is essential for building democratic and co-responsible governance based on legitimacy, trust and joint work. These alliances should strengthen the capacity of communities and organisations to coordinate among themselves, place issues before governments and avoid a fragmentation of action through the creation of forums and permanent spaces for dialogue, reflection and exchange.

Action planning must be adapted to the local context, with a participatory, medium- and long-term approach, clearly directed towards the protection and progressive attainment of human rights without discrimination or exclusion. The energies, time and resources that these processes require for sustainability must be recognised.

To move in this direction, it is essential to establish agreements, regulations and citizen observatories that guarantee environmental democracy, in the sense of ensuring rights of access to information, participation and justice in all processes involving environmental decisions, as well as to promote constitutional reforms that recognise rights to housing and the city and the rights of nature, consolidating a just, resilient and sustainable vision of the territory (I/A Court of H.R.,

2023). Given that, according to Global Witness, 82% of the 146 environmental and land defenders killed or disappeared in 2024 were from Latin America (Global Witness, 2024), it is urgent to ensure a safe and enabling environment in which environmental human rights defenders are able to operate free from threats, as established in Article 9(1) of the Escazú Agreement (ECLAC, 2018).

It is also essential to promote alliances with universities, local organisations and regional networks for territorial defence, articulating a vision based around watersheds, links with nature, and relations between communities. Finally, community climate agendas must have a place in national and international debates as a priority, ensuring their recognition and effective impact on public policies.

3. Fair financing and local action

Objective: To transform financial mechanisms so that they reach communities and local governments directly.

Moving towards a **just and inclusive urban transformation** that ensures the full attainment of human rights requires a **fundamental review of climate finance mechanisms**. It is essential to guarantee and simplify access to funds for communities, social organisations, local governments and municipalities, ensuring transparency, continuity and territorial relevance in their use.

All people affected by the climate crisis have the **right to effective remedy** and this principle should guide the financial architecture and mechanisms for accessing resources (Dodman et al., 2022; IPCC, 2023). Funding for loss and damage must recognise that these impacts disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including those living in informal settlements, and must aim to ensure effective redress within the context of climate justice. **Direct access to resources on the part of local communities and local governments** must be consolidated as a **structural principle of climate finance**, ensuring equity and co-responsibility in their distribution. Ensuring direct access to resources for local communities and local governments is a **legal and political obligation** in the context of climate justice.

These funds should strengthen self-management capacities and support the **social production of habitat, the restoration of urban ecosystems, water harvesting and water buffering**, the implementation of nature-based solutions (NBS) and other community actions that incorporate social, environmental and climate justice.

To achieve this, the **global and national climate finance architecture** needs to be **democratised** by promoting flexible, accessible and locally-adapted instruments. Resources need to be channelled using criteria of equity and co-responsibility, giving priority to projects emerging from the territories and which strengthen community networks, women and youth leadership, and the resilience of cities in the face of multiple crises.

4. Knowledge, skills and partnerships for transformation

Objective: To foster collective awareness, recognise local and community knowledge, promote collective learning and scale up solutions.

Recognising community and women’s situated knowledge as pillars of urban climate action is essential if we are to move towards a just and contextualised transformation. Promoting collective awareness and social protection requires a strengthening of community leadership –especially that of women and youth–, ensuring safe conditions for the participation of environmental defenders and activists.

Co-production of knowledge must be a central practice: incorporating local, technical and scientific knowledge into participatory decision-making processes, taking into account the realities, timeframes and dynamics of each group. This means creating accessible and diverse spaces for participation that recognise the different ways of inhabiting and knowing the territory.

The generation and circulation of data that highlights the unequal impacts of climate change on poor neighbourhoods also needs to be improved, along with access to information, shared in accessible languages and formats in order to facilitate informed participation (I/A Court of H.R., 2023). Solutions that connect nature and city must also be promoted, expanding and caring for urban green spaces as areas of well-being, social cohesion and climate adaptation.

Efforts should focus on systematising and scaling up successful experiences, transforming community practices into policies and programmes that can be replicated in other contexts. Finally, the urban parameters of sustainability and resilience must be continuously updated as a priority, ensuring that interventions respond to ongoing social, environmental and climatic transformations.

Priority guidelines for delivering climate justice

- **Ensure human rights, inclusion and climate justice**, demanding international commitments be translated into actions in order to reduce inequalities, bearing in mind the diversity of contexts.
- **Strengthen multi-scale governance** between communities, local and national governments.
- **Incorporate social justice into all climate action**, avoiding policies that reproduce inequalities.
- **Recognise and finance** community-based solutions that are already reducing urban climate risks, ensuring mechanisms for direct access to financial resources on the part of communities, organisations and local governments.
- Recognise **loss and damage that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups** –including those living in poor neighbourhoods and informal settlements– ensuring that associated resources and policies promote climate justice and effective redress.
- **Ensure participation and transparency when defining urban priorities**, based on the recognition of **pluriversal, local and urban knowledge** in constant dialogue, as a fundamental pillar of climate action.

- Promote **regional cooperation** in order to share learning, methodologies and adaptive financing, consolidating **coalitions, public-community partnerships and/or collaborative networks** aimed at promoting, replicating and scaling up solutions.

Urban climate justice is not decreed from above: it is built from below, with organised communities reinventing their neighbourhoods as resilient, supportive, collectively caring, anti-racist and inclusive spaces, from a decolonial approach. States, multilateral agencies and local governments have the opportunity to recognise and strengthen these initiatives, providing adequate resources, capacities and governance frameworks multiplying them. Building a sustainable and just urban future from the cities and neighbourhoods of Latin America means placing human rights, life, dignity and justice at the heart of climate action, coordinating science, politics and community in processes of profound transformation that strengthen the territories in the face of the climate crisis.

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