

**CLIMATE JUSTICE IN NIGERIA THROUGH MARTHA
NUSSBAUM'S CAPABILITIES APPROACH:
ADDRESSING FLOODING, DESERTIFICATION, AND
DISPLACEMENT IN NIGERIA FROM THE STANDPOINT
OF HUMAN DIGNITY AND JUSTICE**

Chinedu S. Ifeakor, PhD.

*Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
cs.ifeakor@unizik.edu.ng*

&

Anthony U. Ufearoh, PhD.

*Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
au.ufearoh@unizik.edu.ng*

Abstract

Nigeria is presently plagued by record-breaking environmental challenges such as flooding, desertification, and population displacement. The above precarious condition partly occasioned by climatic change (CC) endangers not only the environment itself but also the lives, livelihood and general well-being of millions of people. In search of an adequate theoretical framework for addressing the above predicament, the present work sets out to examine the Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach in order to determine its suitability in providing an effective theoretical tool that can ameliorate the above ugly situation. The work adopts the philosophical method of analysis. Nussbaum's capability approach anchors on the human capability-and-dignity versus deprivation calculus. Accordingly, it interprets the impacts of climatic change primarily from the perspective of concerns for human capability and dignity. It further draws normative thresholds. This equally extends to non-human entities around us nay, the natural environment including plants and animals. Baring the constraints of difficulties in measurability of the abstract concepts in Nussbaum's capabilities theory, it can serve to provide a more humane reconceptualization and approach to addressing the ravaging environmental disasters. The paper submits.

Keywords: *Climate Justice, Capabilities Approach, Martha Nussbaum, Nigeria, Human Dignity, and Deprivation.*

Introduction

Despite its great potentials and the most recent acclamation as West Africa's climate action leader following its submission of the region's first 3rd National Determined Contribution (NDC 3.0) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Stanley Nkwocha, 2025), Nigeria continues to grapple with a host of challenges emanating from climate change. These challenges have much impact on the lives of the people and the environment. The menace of massive erosion and flooding ravaging different parts of the country easily come to mind here. Recent statistics indicate that the rise in sea level displaced 27-53 million people in areas close to the coast, and 70 million Nigerians suffered because of desertification which threatens the lives of 75 million hectares of land (Okon et al., 2021; Climate Change Writers, 2024). The phenomenon of flooding is not exclusive to Nigeria as similar occurrences are recorded in developed countries including USA where over 70564 hectares of agricultural land and 89348 properties were destroyed, and more than 2 million people displaced by floods took place in 34 states in 2022 in the USA alone (Stromsta, 2024). This partly underscores magnitude of the problem at hand. The search for the framework for addressing the above precarious conditions calls for a balanced approach that would take into consideration not only the economic import of the devastations but also human dignity of the people affected and the healing of the environment.

In the attempt to tackle the environmental disasters occasioned by climatic change, the economic impact often seems to gain more attention whereas the impact on the human person and the condition of the environment seem to gain less attention. The above criterion is no doubt not only narrow but also utilitarian in approach. The capabilities approach by Martha Nussbaum which the present work proffers presents a novel way of re-conceptualizing climate change as not just environmental or economic issues but also as challenges

to human dignity and justice (Nussbaum, 2011a). The capabilities approach is concerned with what people require to live fully human lives of dignity and blossoming as opposed to utilitarian approaches that tends to be exploitative and over-looks both human and non-human negative impact of environmental degradation. This article evaluates the situation of the climate crisis in Nigeria by applying the core ten central capabilities of human capabilities developed by Nussbaum. This is because environmental degradation is here conceived as a systematic diminution of threshold conditions in human dignity. The argument here is that negative impacts of climate change on the ecosystem are considered as forms of injustices which, beyond physical losses, jeopardize human values. The capabilities theory provides a novel way of relating environmental justice with human dignity and thus can provide policy advice based on ethical theory as opposed to solely economic factors.

Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach

The capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum is a conceptual breakthrough in the understanding and assessment of human development, justice, and the general living condition in the society. Without prejudice to Amartya Sen, just as the Copernican Revolution shifted attention from geocentric to heliocentric model of universe, Nussbaum shifted attention from material and economic parameters of measuring development through the old gauges such as GDP to the people themselves and their existential ability to live and act freely. Nussbaum argues that the essence of development is to create enabling environment that offers people long, healthy and creative lives (Nussbaum, 2011). At the core of this approach is the idea of human dignity, which Nussbaum believes can provide foundations in determining capabilities that should form the basis of human live and existence in the society. The capabilities approach subdivides into actual and the potential conditions of people: functionings (actual achievements) and capabilities (opportunities of achievement) (Kleist, 2024). This

difference is significant to the understanding of climate justice since it recognizes that different individuals require different resources to achieve the same functioning levels, and that functioning is a valuable capability, even without its utilization.

According to Nussbaum, there are ten central human capabilities that are essential to human dignity, which are: Life (living normal human lifespan), Bodily Health (good health including reproductive health, sufficient nourishment, sufficient shelter), Bodily Integrity (freedom of movement, security against assault and reproductive choice), Senses, Imagination, and Thought (access to education, freedom of expression, religious freedom), Emotions (having attachments, not a blighted life by fear), Practical Reason (planning one's own life, political choices), Affiliation, Other Species (being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature), Play, and Control over one's Environment. These are the ten tentacles of Central Capabilities according to Nussbaum.

The capabilities are interrelated such that, when considered vis-à-vis the climate change in Nigeria and its effects, becomes a concatenation. In other words, a threat to one central capability systematically affects the rest in an inter-connected manner. The capabilities approach provides analytic techniques of understanding impacts not as discrete or atomized evils but rather as coordinated threats to human dignity requiring comprehensive policy responses that cut across the different aspects of human prosperity. An excursus on some of the core human capabilities will illuminate the above claim.

Dignity and the Threshold Approach: Determining the Normative Red Line

Nussbaum anchors her theory on the concept of *sufficientarian* justice that is focused on achieving a minimum of each core competence- levels below which the lives can be deemed unworthy

of human dignity (Caney, 2020). Justice calls for all individuals to at least attain a threshold level of the key human capabilities that is a *conditio sine qua non* for a life of human dignity. This is far better than focusing on exclusively on equal distribution and redistribution of resources. This threshold method can be particularly applicable to climate justice since it establishes minimum standards of functioning of humanity which governments have to follow in spite of inherent constraints on resources or other priorities.

Meanwhile, the cultural relativism dilemmas are addressed in the dignity-based approach since the capabilities approach believes in core capabilities *per se*, but they are expressed differently across different cultural contexts (Nussbaum, 2011b). This gives the ability to use culturally sensitive applications whilst maintaining universal human dignity standards.

Climate Impacts and Capability Deprivation in Nigeria

Nigeria is prone to climate change which often comes with enormous consequences. The temperature has been increasing over the past decades between 22.78C and 33.07C, and precipitation patterns have become more and more unpredictable (Aborode et al., 2025). Such changes pose real problems to the human ability in many aspects as they most often compel to conditions below the expected threshold. The ugly consequences of such disasters as flooding, desertification include displacement and denial of opportunities for self-actualization. The predicament of the Internally Displaced People is always pathetic. In 2024, there were more than 200,000 affected by flooding in Borno State, 30 killed and 50,000 displaced (Aborode et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the Sahara Desert is moving southwards at a 0.6 kilometers/year rate, threatening 75 million hectares of land and reducing northern rainy seasons, which are more than 150 days long to 120 days in the past three decades (Climate Change Writers, 2024e). How do the above scenario impact or intersect on the human capabilities threshold of Nigerians?

Life and Bodily Health Capabilities

In one way or another climate change constitutes threats to most basic human capabilities. According to estimates made by World Health Organization, there are at least 150,000 deaths in Nigeria that can be attributed to the effects of climate change, and the number is set to increase to 200,000 by 2030 due to the impact of flooding and water-borne illnesses (Okon et al., 2021). Borno floods of 2024 exemplified these risks, as they create breeding grounds of cholera, malaria, and diarrheal diseases and destroy healthcare facilities and access to medical services by people affected by floods. The phenomenon of internally displaced people has become a prevalent problem today.

Another significant pathway in which climate change undermines the bodily health capabilities is malnutrition. A 20-percent contraction in rainy seasons and desertification in the northern parts of Nigeria, as well as an enormous disruption in the livelihoods of fishing communities through changes in water systems, have destroyed agriculture and fisheries (Okon et al., 2021; Akinkuolie et al., 2025). Food insecurity caused by climate needs all-encompassing adaptation tools to counter both the results of floods and droughts (Akinkuolie et al., 2025). The effects are felt particularly among the vulnerable populations of children, pregnant women and elderly people who require additional nutritional support to have their basic health functions.

Affiliation and Social Cohesion

Climate has systematic degradation impacts on the social connection and society systems which are paramount to human dignity. Uprooting destroys the past social networks, divides families and breaks down the institutions in the community that offer social support and identity. The 2022 floods, which displaced more than 2 million people, showed that disasters may destroy social infrastructures of self-respect and mutual recognition as

pillars of human dignity that Nussbaum refers to as key points of human dignity (Stromsa, 2024).

Farmer-herder tensions have also intensified particularly in the Middle Belt, as a result of resource struggles. The number of people killed in these conflicts is higher than that of Boko Haram insurgency wars, which means that climate stress can transform the traditional resource allocation patterns to competitive violence patterns (Humanitarian Practice Network, 2024).

Concern for other Species

The above capability draws attention to the relationship between human and non-human entities in the society. Nussbaum argues that the human mindset should be oriented towards “being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature” (Nussbaum, 2011). To drive home the above point, Nussbaum categorically states that, “I am concerned with the capabilities of non-human animals as well as human beings” (Nussbaum, 2011). The above line of thinking implicitly imposes obligation of caring for animals, plants and other non-human entities. In the light of the above submission, the present paper has some reservations for the verbal outburst of the Nigerian Senate President Godswill Akpabio who, as reported by Suyi Ayodele (2024) had asserted that, “Cows are not citizens of Nigeria”. Such unguarded manifestations of speciesism can negatively influence policies against not only cows but also other animals.

Control over Environment

Devastating effects of climate change renders people powerless to take proper care of the physical and political worlds as Nussbaum considers the same as a source of human pride. The communities that are affected become helpless and powerless to act against situations that they cannot control and are unable to make any deliberate decisions regarding their lives and livelihoods. A good example of a loss of environmental control is the collapse of Alau

Dam in Borno State. The infrastructural neglect and absence of maintenance culture led to the collapse whose consequences included drowning houses and destruction of livelihoods. This trend of environmental neglect is also seen in the area of resource extraction. Such phenomena cause environmental harm that exposes the masses great danger.

Intersectional Vulnerability

Climate change does not equally affect different parts of Nigerian in the same manner. In northeastern Nigeria, there are 1.9 million people displaced due to conflict, 60 per cent are children, and more than 800,000 people displaced by 2022 flooding alone (Stromsa, 2024). The level of vulnerability to the effects of climate change also differs according to age, gender, and economic conditions. Climate change has particular ability deprivation on women. When homes and infrastructures are destroyed by floods, women are left with the responsibility of maintaining the homes in increasingly demanding conditions with less resources and support.

Towards a Capability-Centered Climate Policy via Reforms and Community-Centered Interventions

The capabilities approach demands that the Nigerian policy on climate change should guarantee the threshold of human functioning levels and not focus solely on the economic indicators. Such reorientation would involve major alterations of policy such as thorough vulnerability assessment, participative policy formulation, and resource allocation using thresholds. Compliance to the threshold or dignity standard should not be negotiable. Participatory policy formulation should also ensure that the communities affected take considerable control on issues that concern them and their surroundings. Effective community participation in the planning, implementation and evaluation procedures should be part of climate policies, not consultation, but real shared decision-making power.

Threshold based allocation implies that allocation of resources to climate adaptation should be done only to attain greater functioning or economic efficiency once the minimum thresholds of each central capability are reached. This would entail redistributive policies that are mostly focused on most vulnerable groups and communities.

There is also the imperative of institutional reforms so as to fecundate capability-friendly climate policy changes. The capability-based criterion would definitely entail the introduction of issues of dignity in the structure of governance. Some of the crucial reforms are the incorporation of the capability assessment in the government agencies on environmental impact assessment, budgetary allocations, and policy monitoring systems. This would require the development of new metrics and data collection systems used to measure functioning levels at large numbers of different dimensions, not just economic indices.

Similarly operative legal models should provide relevant legal frameworks to recognize capability deprivation in climate change as denial of human dignity. This will not only remedy but also prevent capability deprivation. Finally, cross-sectoral coordination is a *conditio sine qua non* for the implementation of the capability-based measures. This entails the need of more coordinated planning and responses that bring several agencies (health, education, agriculture, infrastructure, and social protection) to respond to the demands on climate-related capabilities.

Conclusion

The present work has examined the possibility of addressing the precarious problems of flooding, desertification and displacement through the framework of Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach; a normative approach to human welfare. The work did a brief expose of Nussbaum's capability approach, sieving out the

core ten central human capabilities as enunciated by Nussbaum. Nussbaum's theory no doubt, is down to earth. It captures the human condition in its existential reality. The capabilities approach extends its tentacles to non-human entities- animals, plants and other existing entities. The work examined the intersection between the theory and the ugly phenomena of environmental disasters occasioned by climate change.

Nussbaum theory anchors on the human capabilities-*cum*-dignity versus deprivation calculus in its diagnosis of the problem at hand. This attempt reinforces the ongoing paradigm shift from solely economic indices more humane criteria. Understandably, practical issues such as resource limitation, measurement challenges, and political economy constraints are real life problems in the implementation of the capability-based climate policy solutions in Nigeria. Although capabilities approach offers simple normative advice as to what passes as minimum dignity requirements, it offers less specific advice on what competing needs to be given priority in the event that available resources do not meet all the capability requirements. There are also issues of measurement since the abstract concept of human dignity and capability functioning are difficult to translate into measurable policy goals. The existing data regimes in Nigeria do not help to work on different capability dimensions, so it is hard to create the baselines, track the progress, and assess the policy effectiveness.

Notwithstanding these constraints, capabilities approach offers convenient instruments of reformulating climate policy such that it is based on human dignity rather than exclusive economic or technical parameters. The case of the climate crisis that affects millions of people in Nigeria shows that the capability approach can provide access to viable, positive policy reactions that, in fact, have the potential to improve human well-being. The recent inclusion or integration of health into the Nationally Determined

Contributions (NDC 3.0) is a sign of big hope in the direction of enhancing human conditions and capabilities. As Varsha Redkar - Palepu, UNDP Deputy Resident Representative – Programme remarked,

For the very first time, Nigeria has also *integrated health into the NDC*, committing to improve *climate resilience in health services*, such as *achieving sustainable, reliable clean energy access in 44 government tertiary care hospitals by 2030 and delivering 2,000 climate-resilient primary healthcare facilities by 2030. In line with the COP 28 UAE Consensus Deal, Nigeria has also placed Just Transition at the core of its interventions to ensure fairness and equity, addressing the needs of vulnerable populations.*

The ultimate challenge is whether the climate policy will empower the people of Nigeria to achieve the levels of capability functioning where they can have a life worthy of human dignity. To overcome this challenge, it calls for technical, financial, material as well as critical thinking or perception of justice that considers and incorporates human dignity while making environmental policies. This is what Nigeria presently needs and to a great extent, Nussbaum's capabilities approach offers this conceptualization.

References

- Aborode, A. T., Otokpa, O. J., Abdullateef, A. O., Oluwaseun, O. S., Adegoye, G. A., Aondongu, N. J., Oyetunji, I. O., Akingbola, A., Scott, G. Y., Kolawole, B. O., & Komakech, J. J. (2025). Impact of Climate Change-Induced Flooding Water Related Diseases and Malnutrition in Borno State, Nigeria: A Public Health Crisis. *Environmental Health Insights*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11786302251321683>
- Akinkuolie, T. A., Ogunbode, T. O., & Adekiya, A. O. (2025). Resilience to climate-induced food insecurity in Nigeria: a systematic review of the role of adaptation strategies in flood and drought mitigation. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2024.1490133>
- Ayodele, Suyi (June 11, 2024). "Distinguished Senator Cow and His Human Rights". *Tribune onlineng.com*. <https://tribuneonlineng.com/distinguished-senator-cow-and-his-human-rights/>
- Caney, S. (2020, June 4). *Climate Justice* (E. N. Zalta, Ed.). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-climate/>
- Humanitarian Practice Network. (2024, March 13). When climate change and conflict collide: The need for localisation amid Nigeria's protracted crises. <https://odihpn.org/publication/when-climate-change-and-conflict-collide-the-need-for-localisation-amid-nigerias-protracted-crises/>
- International Organization for Migration. (2024). Nigeria --- Impact of climate change and environmental changes on displaced households (June 2024). Displacement Tracking Matrix. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/nigeria-impact-climate-change-and-environmental-changes-displaced-households-june-2024>
- Kleist, C. (2024). *Global Ethics: Capabilities Approach* | *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/ge-capab/>
- Nkwocha, Stanley, (Senior Special Assistant to The President on Media & Communications). 2025. "Nigeria Leads West

- Africa in Climate Commitment, Eyes Investment Boost At Cop30". Presidential Villa State House' Press Release, 6th November, 2025. <https://statehouse.gov.ng/nigeria-leads-west-africa-in-climate-commitment-eyes-investment-boost-at-cop30/>
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2011, September 23). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/creating-capabilities-the-human-development-approach-2/>
- Okon, E. M., Falana, B. M., Solaja, S. O., Yakubu, S. O., Alabi, O. O., Okikiola, B. T., Awe, T. E., Adesina, B. T., Tokula, B. E., Kipchumba, A. K., & Edeme, A. B. (2021). "Systematic review of climate change impact research in Nigeria: implication for sustainable development." *Heliyon*, 7(9), e07941. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07941>
- Robeyns, I. (2020). *The Capability Approach (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*. Stanford.edu. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/>
- Schlosberg, D. (2012). Climate Justice and Capabilities: A Framework for Adaptation Policy. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 26(4), 445–461.
- Stromsta, R. (2024, May 30). *Climate Change, Disasters, Insecurity, and Displacement*. Environmental Migration Portal. <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/blogs/climate-change-disasters-insecurity-and-displacement-impact-flooding-youth-marginalization-and-human-mobility-nigeria>
- Wikipedia. (2025, January 14). Climate change in Nigeria. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate_change_in_Nigeria