

Youth Climate Activism and Intergenerational Justice in Pakistan: A Review of Movements, Litigation, and Institutional Response

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Abstract

Pakistan is somewhere in the middle of a unique global narrative involving youth climate actions and intergenerational justice. It is where one of the first rights-based climate rulings in the world was given, *Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan* (2015), years before the school-strike wave that has traditionally been recognized as starting the field; it saw one of the most devastating climate disasters of the decade in 2022 when millions of children were displaced from school; and it was where the diplomatic coalition that secured the Loss and Damage Fund at COP27 began. This review brings together the literature on youth climate movements, climate litigation and intergenerational justice theory to analyze how these three aspects movement, litigation and institutional engagement have manifested in Pakistan and how they have developed in other countries such as Germany, Switzerland, South Korea and the United States. The review concludes that youth and citizen-led climate mobilization in Pakistan has had an impact despite its scale, even if not as strong as mobilizations in the Global North; it is an action that predates the wave of global Fridays for Future in its legal aspect, has influenced policy infrastructure in Pakistan through the courts, and has informed Pakistan's exceptional climate finance diplomacy. Meanwhile, other remarkable disparities also persist between formal policy achievements and the outcomes of everyday life, notably in rural areas facing floods, in the failure to adequately resource the nation's Ministry of Climate Change and, more obviously, in the urbanization and elite nature of the country's most visible protest movements. The review is concluded by a case-study of Pakistan, which provides a valuable, but under-explored, example of how intergenerational claims for climate justice are pushed from the Global South.

Keywords: Youth Climate Activism, Pakistan, Intergenerational Justice, *Leghari v. Pakistan*, Climate Litigation, Floods, Loss and Damage, South Asia

Introduction

Climate change is now recognized as a challenge of today's generation and the future generation; it becomes more clear in the case of Pakistan. In the past, Pakistan has emitted less than one percent of global GHG emissions but has always been at the bottom of the list of countries most vulnerable to loss and damage stemming from climate change, disproportionately affecting children and young people who will bear the brunt of the future impacts. The intergenerational climate injustice ravaged an estimated 33 million people in 2022, during the monsoon floods that flooded about a

third of the nation, with an estimated 50% of these affected being children, and 3.5 million more lost to schooling.

The watershed year for youth climate activism is usually considered to have been 2018, when a Swedish teenager initiated the school strikes that spread around the world and became the "Fridays for Future" movement (Neas et al., 2022). But things in Pakistan don't fit into that timeline quite so neatly. The most impactful youth-relevant climate action case that it engaged in, the Leghari litigation, was decided in 2015, three years before the world's first climate-action school strikes, and it had originated as a farmer's constitutional petition. Street-level youth mobilization in Pakistan came a little later in 2019 with Climate Action Pakistan and the newly formed Fridays for Future Pakistan organizing strikes in over 30 cities. This review does not consider Pakistan to be a late starter following a Northern blue print rather treats it as a unique story, with its own timeline, legal innovations and institutional agendas.

This review addresses three interrelated questions, relevant to the context of Pakistan and juxtaposed with relevant international comparisons. First, how has the theoretical literature on intergenerational justice been reflected in Pakistan's climate litigation and climate action? Second, what impact have youth and citizen-led climate mobilizations had on policies in Pakistan, specifically in the court and through international climate diplomacy? Third, what are the reactions of international, national and educational institutions in Pakistan to these claims, and what are the tensions in such a response?

Approach to the Review

This review is based on the literature generated through peer-review process, legal case documentation, government policy texts, and the reporting of climate movements and disasters in Pakistan, mainly during 2015 to 2026. Sources specific to Pakistan consist of the Leghari judgment and the legal commentary on it, as well as Pakistani and international news coverage of the 2019 climate strikes and Fridays for Future Pakistan and the assessments of the education sector conducted after the 2022 floods by UNICEF, Education Cannot Wait, the Pakistan Coalition for Education and academic researchers. They are supplemented by the general international literature on youth climate movements, intergenerational justice theory, and comparative climate litigation literature, which underpinned the initial ambit of this review, so as to place Pakistan's experiences within, not beyond, the general context. The paper is a review and does not claim to be a systematic review as such but a synthesis to outline the state of the field with the centre of Pakistan and not at the periphery.

Theorizing Intergenerational Justice and Youth Political Agency

Intergenerational justice is a normative concept that has been around before the youth climate movement, but the movement, and Pakistan's litigation in particular, has infused new empirical and political power into this concept. Kotzé and Knappe (2023) claim that the current governance structures are inadequate in recognizing the responsibility they have towards the unborn, and that young activists are social vectors of alternative visions of justice in time as well as space. The Leghari case brings this abstraction to life: While arguing the government's neglect in enacting its

own climate policy, Asghar Leghari, a farmer and law student from Punjab, among other arguments, explicitly invoked the principle of “intergenerational equity”, which means “fairness towards the coming generations” alongside the public trust doctrine and the precautionary principle. The Lahore High Court's ruling that the “delay and lethargy of the State” violated the fundamental rights of citizens gave judicial backing to a demand, which was just now being pressed by youth activists in other parts of the country through protests.

Claims on related issues are now being tested empirically by experimental social psychology. Structural inequalities in climate impact amplify the sense of future victimization among younger generations and enable them to be more willing to engage in intergenerational reconciliation than to engage in oppositional relationship with older generations, Stollberg, Bogdan and Jonas (2024) found. This is in line with the students' own framing, which is that Fridays for Future Pakistan protesters were not skipping school, but instead were organizing around a weekly non-disruptive event such as a protest in a university to make them both more accessible and more engaging to students, and to ensure that the climate literacy in Pakistan remained low.

One of the major theoretical evolutions found in the literature is the transition from a problem of individual responsibility to a problem of structure in the context of climate responsibility. In the Pakistani context this reframing is particularly salient as responsibility for climate harm is generally interpreted as being overwhelmingly that of historically high-emitting countries, and not that of Pakistani households, to which Pakistan's own climate diplomats have repeatedly pointed in loss-and-damage negotiations. Researchers warn against interpreting this as generational struggle; the conflicts in Pakistan have usually not been as much between the generations as between the young activists' demands and the existing institutional capacity, particularly with regard to the under-resourcing of the Ministry of Climate Change.

Pakistan's Youth Climate Movement: Emergence, Practice, and Its Limits

Climate action in Pakistan started to coalesce in 2019, when a youth group named Climate Action Pakistan organized marches on 20 and 27 September, coinciding with the climate strikes of 20 and 27 September around the world. Students from school and university participated in the protests, along with environmentalists, celebrities and politicians, in over three dozen cities and towns, including Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, Peshawar, Quetta, Gilgit, Mardan, Sukkur and Thatta (Dawn, 2019a, 2019b; Gulf News, 2019b; The Express Tribune, 2019). The marches were explicitly about “youth-led because they are the most affected generation,” said one organizer to reporters, while a 15-year-old marcher in Karachi spoke of “the injustice of the consequences falling on the shoulders of children who had nothing to do with the decisions made.”

At the same time, a parallel branch of the movement was started at Iqra University in Islamabad, which within a span of about two months expanded to approximately fifteen colleges and universities and was responsible for close to sixty separate protest events in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Karachi, Peshawar, Sargodha and Gilgit. Iqbal Badruddin Jamal, Saad Kamran, Rozina Ahmad, and Kamran Ali, the founders of the movement, clearly linked local complaints, persistent flooding, glacial melting, drought, urban air pollution to the worldwide movement inspired by Greta Thunberg and adapted its methods to the Pakistani context. In particular, in

contrast to the northern model of "walking out of class," Pakistani student organizers indicated that with low levels of baseline climate literacy, it was better to engage, rather than disrupt, the education system so as to ensure that some learning took place; organizers also reported working directly with schools to integrate climate content into non-formal education and summer programs (Gulf News, 2019a). This pattern of sustained, locally organized activity continued in the years that followed, with youth groups organizing further demonstrations and campaigns beyond the initial 2019 wave (The News International, 2021).

Global youth movements scholarship can be divided into two main eras: the first consisting of survey and media analysis of the school-strike movement; and the second of qualitative, voice-based research (Neas et al., 2022), in which environmental justice is one of the roots of youth activism, especially among historically marginalized communities. This is an issue that was explicitly expected in comments made by Pakistanis regarding the 2019 marches. This was an admission by one organizer of Lahore, who was writing just before the strike, that the movement was being called by privileged and urban residents, and that a rich man residing in the Defence Housing Authority, Lahore would not be affected by climate change as much as a farmer in rural Badin. This self-critical awareness has been a feature of the Pakistani movement since the beginning, which is what makes it anticipated by issues raised by the international literature that do not come until much later, such as those distinguishing transformational collective agency from other less transformative, more individual and/or disempowering forms of engagement (Malafaia & Fernandes-Jesus, 2025) and by calls to an intersectional approach that critiques the use of youth as a single category (Tafon & Saunders, 2025).

The nature of youth involvement in Pakistan has also evolved in 2022, after the floods, from protest to disaster response and advocacy. Fridays for Future Pakistan shifted the focus of its public advocacy to flood relief fundraising and technical support to affected communities, while maintaining its demand for policy-makers to listen to climate science and to make climate education a normal part of formal education. As documented in other literature less frequently, the activism of the youth in the scenario of climate change and disaster can seamlessly switch between advocacy, mutual aid and institutional pressure, to the extent that they are not limited to the protest repertoire which is used to describe youth climate change movements in Europe and North America.

From the Streets to the Courtroom: Leghari v. Pakistan and the Global Litigation Wave

It is not a protest but a lawsuit that is the most significant development in the climate justice movement in Pakistan. Asghar Leghari, a farmer and lawyer from Punjab, challenged the federal and Punjab governments for their failure to enact the National Climate Change Policy of 2012 and the National Climate Change Framework for Implementation (2014-2030). Leghari contended that this failure posed a threat to water, food and energy security, which violated the right to life (Article 9) and human dignity (Article 14) of the constitution. On 4th September, 2015 the Lahore High Court gave its consent, stating that "the delay and lethargy of the State in implementing the Framework is an affront to the fundamental rights of the citizens and it has ordered twenty ministries and departments and authorities to establish climate change focal points and submit their reports to a newly formed Climate Change Commission." From 2015 to 2018, the Commission

held 12 sessions, during which it organized the 734 actions identified in the Framework, of which 232 were prioritized, into a four-year timeline for implementation, from immediate actions up to 20 years' long-term actions.

Leghari's impact goes beyond the Pakistani context. It is widely recognized as the first “rights-based” climate litigation to come from and gain international scholarly focus from—the Global South, and has been referenced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as a key case of a state's failure to develop adaptation policy (IPCC, 2022). Legal commentators celebrating the 10th anniversary of the decision in 2025 observed that it helped launch a wider wave of climate litigation, with an estimated 3,000 climate cases worldwide by mid-2025 (International Bar Association, 2025), including nearly 120 that specifically attack the ambition or implementation of climate policies by governments, and almost 60 percent of all climate cases filed in the Global South since 2020. Leghari's reasoning is years before the German, Swiss, and South Korean decisions discussed below, and it makes an account of the phenomenon of climate litigation – or youth-adjacent rights-based climate claims – as a process that began in the Global North, and spread out from there, more complicated. If anything, the tenets of a normative architecture (later to be used by courts), intergenerational equity, public trust, and precautionary are already robustly present in the reasoning from the Lahore High Court in 2015.

But read with this forebear, the next generation of famous foreign cases appears more like a series of parallel and, at times, overlapping successes. Germany's Federal Constitutional Court in *Neubauer and Others v. Germany* (2021) ruled that Germany's 2030 emissions target was inequitable in its imposition on future generations, as it left the scope of emission reductions largely to a short window after 2030, and required the legislature to introduce higher targets, which were subsequently approved as sixty-five per cent by 2030 and eighty-eight per cent by 2040, respectively. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in the above case (*Verein Klima Seniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland*, 2024) has applied rights-based reasoning to another group of plaintiffs, and determined that Switzerland has breached its obligations in relation to these. In *Do-Hyun Kim and Others v. South Korea*, which was decided in the same year, the Constitutional Court in South Korea held that the lack of a mandatory emissions framework past 2030 was unconstitutional, citing the reasoning of the German and Swiss cases. Not all claims have been successful: In the United States, after years of litigation, the case of young plaintiffs suing for a right to a stable climate system (*Juliana v. United States*) was dismissed on procedural grounds, and the U.S. judicial system remains very receptive to climate-related claims.

Table 1 summarizes these cases, with Leghari positioned as the earliest and, on several measures, most structurally significant of the group.

Table 1. Rights-Based Climate Litigation Cases and Outcomes, 2015 to 2025

Case	Year	Jurisdiction	Core Claim	Outcome
Asghar Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan	2015	Pakistan, Lahore High Court	Government failed to implement the 2012 National Climate Change Policy and its Framework, violating the	Claims granted; Climate Change Commission created to monitor implementation; first rights-based climate ruling from the Global South

Case	Year	Jurisdiction	Core Claim	Outcome
			constitutional right to life and dignity	
Juliana v. United States	2020	United States, 9th Circuit	Asserted a constitutional right to a stable climate system	Dismissed on procedural and standing grounds
Neubauer and Others v. Germany	2021	Germany, Federal Constitutional Court	2030 emissions target deferred an unfair burden to future generations	Government ordered to set more ambitious post-2030 targets
Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz v. Switzerland	2024	Switzerland, European Court of Human Rights	Inadequate national climate policy violates human rights	Switzerland found in violation; NGO standing for climate claims affirmed
Do-Hyun Kim and Others v. South Korea	2024	South Korea, Constitutional Court	Absence of binding post-2030 targets breaches rights of future generations	Provision found unconstitutional; National Assembly ordered to amend law by February 2026

Other scholars argue that legal innovations in this area, such as obligations toward future generations, the recognition of Indigenous and agrarian environmental stewardship, are taking place in multiple directions, and that the North-South axis is no longer the sole site of legal innovation (Ohdedar, 2021). The constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment in Leghari has formed a precedent for other domestic cases, such as *Ali v. Federation of Pakistan*, within Pakistan (Barritt & Sediti, 2019).

Institutional Response: International, National, and Educational Levels in Pakistan

However, as in other parts of the world, the response of institutions to climate mobilization in Pakistan has been uneven, ranging from international diplomacy, domestic courts and legislatures, and the education sector.

The most significant diplomatic role Pakistan has played in recent years at the international stage has been more significant than judicial. Pakistan has taken the lead on Loss and Damage finance at COP27 in 2022, chairing the G77-plus-China group of 134 developing countries (Arab News, 2022), and in the immediate wake of the World Bank's estimate that approximately thirty billion dollars in combined damages and economic losses were caused by the flooding which affected 33 million people (World Bank, 2022), Pakistan helped secure the historic decision on a dedicated

Loss and Damage Fund in Sharm el-Sheikh. In Pakistan, the foreign minister and leading climate negotiators did not describe the progress merely in terms of intergenerational and international justice, but also the right to development. In Pakistan, the foreign minister and the key climate negotiators also talked about the right to development and the intergenerational and international justice of such a result. However, getting the fund in principle does not mean getting it in operation, and Pakistan's ability to access and deploy loss and damage financial resources effectively is still a live issue in future COP cycles, analysts have warned (The Express Tribune, 2023).

The most visible and lasting institutional reaction at the national level has been judicial through the Leghari judgment and the Climate Change Commission it created not legislative pro-activeness. The Commission had laid the groundwork for the Climate Change Act (2017) which created a statutory Climate Change Authority, Council, and Fund, but the implementation of the Act has been heavily reliant upon the threat or reality of further litigation. It has been repeatedly reported that the Ministry of Climate Change is under-funded and under-staffed compared to the opportunities that it faces for the country and, in previous years, that its officials have been openly skeptical of the scientific basis of the policies that it was supposed to be implementing.

The third and most highly challenged place of institutional response is the educational institution. Unfortunately, the 2022 floods also affected the education of an estimated 3.5 million children, which was already affected by low enrollment and outcomes in the worst-hit districts, especially in rural areas of Sindh and Balochistan. As of January 2023, the Pakistan Coalition for Education (2023) estimated that only approximately 200,000 of the affected children had been targeted through targeted education interventions. UNICEF and Education Cannot Wait (2024), in turn, introduced a five-million-dollar package for anticipatory-action financing to pre-position emergency learning supplies, flood-proof school buildings and deploy early-warning systems in advance of future climate hazards, while other organizations like The Citizens Foundation advocated for teachers' trainings on trauma responsiveness and for more structured disaster-preparedness planning. The educational consequences of the disaster have been evaluated in academic studies, which argue that the educational landscape and curriculum need to be refocused to embed climate education and disaster-management skills in the learning process, instead of making them an optional component (Sujaya, Abdul-Haq, & Imran, 2023), a call to action that is very similar to the one that Fridays for Future Pakistan activists have been demanding since 2019. Table 2 synthesizes this pattern of institutional response across the three levels discussed above, and Table 3 places Pakistan's principal movement, legal, and policy milestones on a single chronological timeline.

Table 2. Levels of Institutional Response to Youth and Citizen-Led Climate Activism in Pakistan

Level	Examples	Nature of Response	Key Limitation
International	G77-plus-China chairmanship at COP27; Loss and Damage Fund (2022)	Diplomatic leadership securing a dedicated global finance mechanism	Fund agreed in principle; disbursement and domestic absorptive capacity remain unresolved
National, judicial	Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan; Climate	Binding order to operationalize existing	Remedies set intermediate duties requiring ongoing

Level	Examples	Nature of Response	Key Limitation
	Change Commission (2015 to 2018)	climate policy and framework	monitoring rather than a final resolution
National, legislative and executive	National Climate Change Policy (2012); Climate Change Act (2017)	Framework legislation and a statutory Climate Change Authority and Fund	Ministry of Climate Change historically under-funded and under-staffed relative to its mandate
Educational	Post-2022-flood anticipatory action financing; school curriculum and disaster-preparedness reform proposals	Emergency learning-continuity investment and calls to embed climate education in curricula	Reach remained limited relative to need; structural, climate-resilient rebuilding still lags recognition of the problem

Table 3. Timeline of Pakistan's Youth and Rights-Based Climate Milestones, 2012 to 2025

Year	Milestone
2012	National Climate Change Policy adopted, later central to the Leghari litigation
2015	Lahore High Court decides Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan; Climate Change Commission ordered
2017	Climate Change Act passed, establishing a statutory Climate Change Authority, Council, and Fund
2019	Climate Action Pakistan and Fridays for Future Pakistan mobilize school and university strikes in more than 30 cities
2022	Catastrophic monsoon floods affect roughly 33 million people and disrupt schooling for 3.5 million children; Pakistan chairs the G77-plus-China
2022	COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh agrees to establish a Loss and Damage Fund under Pakistan's G77 chairmanship
2023 to 2025	Post-flood education-recovery and anticipatory-action programming; continued youth digital advocacy and curriculum-reform campaigns

Persistent Tensions: Representation, Co-optation, and Implementation Gaps

The Pakistani case provides a particularly stark illustration of some of the tensions that the wider literature finds to be typical of youth and rights-based climate action. First representation. From the first wave of the marches since 2019, Pakistani organizers themselves recognized that the marches were largely by privileged households in cities in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad even as the country's most extreme climate impacts were experienced by the rural, agrarian, and flood-prone communities, the very communities represented in the courtroom and not the streets by Asghar Leghari himself. The concentration of visible climate activism and the concentration of climate harm have resulted in the population most vulnerable to loss and damage being the least visible in the country's own protest movements, and the general literature on youth climate action in the Global South has identified this split between exposure to loss and damage and exposure to protest between the very young and the older generation.

The second tension is the danger of co-optation by formal institutional access instead of substantive influence. Pakistan's evolving participation in international climate diplomacy, particularly by chairing the G77 and promoting the Loss and Damage Fund, has enabled it to gain access to the international negotiating table through a process of consultation, but has been noted by critics that this has not been accompanied by sufficient resources within its own national climate policy mechanisms to translate this access into deliverable programmes. The same can be said for the access of ordinary citizens to the Climate Change Commission and Authority structures established by Leghari and the Act of 2017, which are formalized channels of oversight, but for which monitoring, and continued public pressure, is needed so that the Framework's 734 action points result in tangible adaptation measures and not administrative categories.

A third tension is between legal and diplomatic wins and on-the-ground results. The authors who made the Law for Leghari 10 years ago highlighted that judicial remedies of this nature create intermediate obligations to review and monitor, but also an obligation to continue review and monitoring to ensure that the implementation proceeds at the pace of need. The same threat applies to the Loss and Damage Fund, which was agreed to during COP27; it was a real breakthrough, which was helped in part by Pakistan's advocacy, but without the technical capacity and institutional arrangements in the country, Pakistan could be in a similar scenario as it moves towards the realization of the fund.

Discussion

Taken together, the evidence reviewed here supports three broad conclusions about Pakistan's place within the global story of youth climate activism and intergenerational justice. First, Pakistan's contribution to this field is not derivative of the post-2018 school-strike wave but substantially predates and, in important legal respects, anticipates it; Leghari established the normative vocabulary of intergenerational equity, public trust, and precaution in Pakistani courts years before youth movements in Europe would popularize similar claims in the street and, later, in their own litigation. Second, Pakistan's most measurable policy influence has again come through institutional and diplomatic channels rather than through protest visibility alone, whether via the Climate Change Commission that Leghari produced or via the Loss and Damage Fund that Pakistan's COP27 diplomacy helped secure, though the durability of both gains depends on

implementation capacity that remains uneven. Third, and most consistently across the sections above, a persistent gap separates Pakistan's formal legal and diplomatic achievements from the lived experience of the rural, flood-exposed communities on whose behalf those achievements are nominally made, a gap most starkly visible in the aftermath of the 2022 floods and in the continuing under-resourcing of the country's principal climate institutions.

This case carries broader significance for the wider literature on youth climate activism, which has historically concentrated its empirical attention on movements based in Europe and North America. Pakistan's experience suggests that in acutely climate-vulnerable, disaster-prone settings, the meaningful unit of intergenerational climate justice mobilization may not be the school strike, though Pakistan has had those too, but the combination of strategic rights-based litigation, international diplomatic leadership, and locally organized post-disaster response and advocacy. Future comparative research would benefit from documenting these locally rooted forms of engagement, in Pakistan and across similarly exposed regions of South Asia, on their own terms, rather than measuring them primarily against a template established by movements originating in wealthier, less climate-exposed countries.

Conclusion

Pakistan offers one of the clearest illustrations available of what intergenerational climate justice looks like when advanced from a position of acute vulnerability and minimal historical responsibility. A decade before the global youth climate strikes began, a Punjabi farmer's constitutional petition produced one of the world's first rights-based climate rulings and a lasting institutional mechanism for oversight; seven years later, the same country experienced floods that displaced tens of millions of people and disrupted the education of millions of children, and went on to lead the diplomatic effort that secured the international community's first dedicated fund for climate loss and damage. Set against this backdrop, the school and university strikes organized by Climate Action Pakistan and Fridays for Future Pakistan since 2019, though smaller in scale than their counterparts in wealthier countries, form part of a much longer and, in key respects, more consequential national engagement with intergenerational climate justice than the international literature has generally recognized. The most urgent task for both policymakers and researchers going forward is closing the distance between Pakistan's formal legal and diplomatic achievements and the material conditions of the rural and flood-exposed communities that those achievements were meant to serve, and ensuring that the young people who will inherit both the institutions and the risks are given a genuine voice in doing so.

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