

## **Governing Inequality: A Socio-Legal and Environmental Justice Analysis of Flood Recovery in Pakistan**

**Farhana Naz<sup>1</sup>, Bedar Bakht Khan<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Ayesha Chaudhry<sup>3</sup>, Barira Khan<sup>4</sup>, Fatima Raza<sup>5</sup>, Huzaifa Khan<sup>6</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> LLB Graduate, Department of Law, International Islamic University Islamabad,  
Email: [fnaz8015@gmail.com](mailto:fnaz8015@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> MPhil Scholar, Department of Sociology, Government College University, Faisalabad,  
Email: [khanbedar@gmail.com](mailto:khanbedar@gmail.com) (Corresponding Author)

<sup>3</sup> Associate Professor, Faculty Department of Sociology, Government College University,  
Faisalabad, Email: [ayeshachaudhry@gcuf.edu.pk](mailto:ayeshachaudhry@gcuf.edu.pk)

<sup>4</sup> Graduate, Department of International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad,  
Email: [barirakhan699@gmail.com](mailto:barirakhan699@gmail.com)

<sup>5</sup> Graduate, Department of International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad,  
Email: [fatimarazaabbasi@gmail.com](mailto:fatimarazaabbasi@gmail.com)

<sup>6</sup> Institute of Agro Industry and Environment, Islamia University of Bahawalpur,  
Email: [HuzaiifaKhan.envir@gmail.com](mailto:HuzaiifaKhan.envir@gmail.com)

**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i4.1367>**

### **Abstract**

Pakistan's recent cycles of floods have made the unavoidable inequalities in disaster response visible; they have raised important questions on justice, governance and rights-based recovery. This research investigates unequal post-flood recovery after the 2022 and 2025 floods with the help of an integrated framework of environmental justice, governance theory, socio-legal analysis and recurrent disaster vulnerability. Using a qualitative research design, the study examines legal frameworks, institutional reports, and empirically based literature to examine the extent to which access to relief, compensation, and reconstruction is affected by systemic inequities. Findings show entrenched distributional, recognition, and procedural injustices, which are compounded by structural governance weaknesses and documentation barriers, with disproportionate impact upon marginalised groups. The recurrence of severe floods adds to existing vulnerabilities, causing cumulative disadvantage and institutional fatigue. The study argues that Pakistan's disaster governance needs to shift towards rights-based and equity-centered approaches, incorporating legal access to resources, inclusive participation by different people, and sustained rehabilitation. The paper ends with policy implications for promoting climate justice and building institutional resilience in the changing climate scenario of the country.

**Keywords:** Environmental justice; socio-legal analysis; climate governance; disaster recovery; Pakistan floods; inequality.

### **Introduction**

Climate-induced disasters have become one of the most defining governance issues of the twenty-first century, especially for developing countries, where social inequality, low institutional capacity, and poor governance intersect with increasing climate risks (Pelling, 2003; Tierney, 2014). Pakistan,

which is listed among the most vulnerable countries in the world, has seen a drastic increase in extreme events, such as heatwaves, glacial lake outburst floods, and monsoon abnormalities, which have been mostly due to the impact of climate change and structural exposure (Ullah & Nihei 2016; UNDRR 2021). The mega floods of 2022 destroyed almost 33 million people and caused unprecedented economic losses, and the flooding of 2025 subsequently struck communities that had not yet recovered from previous devastation (Zia, 2023). Together, these events revealed the nexus of recurrent disasters with chronic socioeconomic vulnerabilities such as landlessness, poverty, poor infrastructure, gender inequality, and spatial marginality (Mustafa et al., 2020; Ahmed & Rahim, 2021).

Even having a comprehensive legislative and institutional system, like the National Disaster Management Act (2010) and the Climate Change Act (2017), and a multi-tiered system of disaster management, the post-flood recovery outcomes in Pakistan are still incredibly uneven. Studies have repeatedly shown that after floods, ethnic minorities, women-headed households, landless agricultural workers, and informal or peripheral settlements bear disproportionate losses and also have slower recovery (Ali & Khan, 2021; Mustafa et al., 2020). These disparities continued and got worse over the flood cycles in 2022 and 2025, proving that vulnerabilities are structural and deeply rooted in Pakistan's system of climate governance rather than random or episodic (Rana & Sultana, 2022; Sayeed & Haq, 2020).

Research on environmental justice can provide a critical perspective for studying these trends. Bullard (1993) was the first to show how marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by environmental harms, and Schlosberg (2013) extended environmental justice to encompass three interrelated dimensions: distributional, recognition, and procedural justice. These frameworks aid in the explanation of why some groups routinely receive less aid, encounter obstacles to recognition, or are kept out of disaster governance decision-making processes. Although this corpus of theory is well-established worldwide, there is still little applicability of it to Pakistan's climatic disasters. The majority of current research ignores justice-based or socio-legal viewpoints in favor of concentrating on infrastructure, institutional fragmentation, or technology weaknesses (Gran Castro, 2019; Pelling & Dill, 2010).

Socio-legal approaches that emphasize the distinction between law-in-books and law-in-action are equally significant. Due to paperwork obstacles, gendered mobility restrictions, or unfair administrative practices, legal entitlements such as compensation, housing rebuilding, or livelihood support often fail to materialize (Halliday & Schmidt, 2009; Sayeed & Haq, 2020). Patronage politics, unequal land ownership, and low legal literacy all worsen the effects of these barriers in Pakistan, which determine who receives disaster aid and who does not (Ahmed & Rahim, 2021). These disparities are made worse by recurring disasters. For example, there were fewer legal visibility or opportunities to claim payments in 2025 for families who lost documentation during the 2022 floods and their family members.

The recurrence of severe floods brings in a temporal dimension that is often missed in disaster studies. Recurrent disaster vulnerability theory suggests that vulnerability is cumulative and increases as households experience successive losses, which result in weakening social resilience, livelihood capacity and institutional trust (Ullah & Nihei, 2016; Zia, 2023). In Pakistan's unfinished recovery from 2022, broken housing, increased debt, food insecurity and lost livelihoods left many people severely vulnerable. Failings of governance were intensified at the same time by institutional fatigue, budget reductions and reduced reaction times (Pelling & Dill, 2010).

Despite the importance of these challenges, little scholarly work is done on the interaction between environmental justice, governance structure, socio-legal barriers, and recurrent vulnerability that leads to unequal recovery in flood-affected regions of Pakistan. Existing research tends to view disaster events as isolated phenomena instead of cyclical processes with a history of inequalities. This gap is especially notable for the 2022-2025 period, which offers a unique opportunity to look at how repeated disasters reveal and concentrate structural injustices.

This study fills these gaps by using an integrated socio-legal framework and environmental justice to study unequal recovery in Pakistan in the floods of 2022 and 2025. It argues that unequal recovery is not an ephemera or an incident of administrative failure but a systemic phenomenon that is embedded in political, legal, and governance structures. By analyzing the interplay between legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, and social hierarchies in the post-disaster processes, the study aims to highlight why certain groups continuously find themselves on the margins of the recovery process.

### **Research Questions and Contribution**

This study is guided by three central research questions:

- (1) How do environmental justice dynamics, governance structures, and socio-legal barriers interact to shape unequal post-flood recovery in Pakistan during the 2022 and 2025 flood events?
- (2) In what ways do recurrent disasters intensify pre-existing social, legal, and economic vulnerabilities, producing cumulative and cyclical forms of disadvantage?
- (3) How can a rights-based, equity-oriented framework improve the design and implementation of disaster governance in Pakistan?

The paper makes three key contributions to scholarship. First, it develops a novel integrated analytical model that combines Environmental Justice Theory, Governance Theory, Socio-Legal Theory, and Recurrent Disaster Vulnerability, an approach not yet applied to the Pakistani flood context. Second, it offers a theory-driven reinterpretation of existing empirical and institutional evidence, demonstrating that unequal recovery is not an episodic failure but a systemic and temporally cumulative governance problem. Third, by foregrounding legal accessibility, documentation barriers, and procedural inequities, the study advances a rights-based understanding of disaster recovery, providing insights relevant to climate justice debates in the Global South.

### **Literature Review**

The literature on disasters, climate governance, and social inequality has expanded significantly over the past two decades, particularly in the context of the Global South. Yet, scholarship still fails to conceptualize justice, failures of governance, socio-legal constraints and recurrent vulnerability. This review brings together four different but interrelated bodies of literature: environmental justice, disaster governance, socio-legal barriers during disaster recovery and recurrent vulnerability to disasters. Together, these fields enable the analytical scaffolding of understanding unequal post-flood recovery in Pakistan.

### **Environmental Justice and Unequal Disaster Outcomes**

Environmental justice (EJ) research was born out of social movements against the disproportionate burden of environmental exposures for marginalized communities in the 1980s (Bullard, 1993). Early EJ scholarship was concerned with spatial issues of toxic waste siting, but over time, the framework also broadened to include larger dimensions of justice. Schlosberg (2013) finds three interrelated components: distributional, recognitional, and procedural justice, each of which is important to understanding the realities of environmental inequality as experienced.

“Distributional injustice” is the disproportionate distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. In the case of disasters, this is manifest in unequal access to relief, compensation and safe housing. Davies et al. (2018). Studies from the United States, Bangladesh, Nepal and the Caribbean have found that marginalized groups such as racial minorities, low-income households and women-headed families routinely receive fewer resources or slower aid after disasters (Ikeada, 1995; Sultana, 2022). “Recognitional injustice” involves a lack of acknowledgment and respect for the identities, embedded vulnerability and cultural realities of the affected populations. Research in South Asia identifies the intersection of gender norms, caste hierarchies and land tenure systems to determine people's exposure to risk and their post-disaster marginalization (Sultana, 2014; Aryal and Gellert, 2020).

Women, in particular, are restricted in their mobility, have limited political representation, and have to depend bureaucratically on male family members, impacting their ability to access recovery resources (Enarson, 2012).

“Procedural injustice” has to do with inequitable engagement in decision-making processes and insufficient access to transparent and fair institutions. Several scholars assert that post-disaster planning is frequently technocratic and elite-driven and marginalizes grassroots perspectives (Gaillard et al., 2017; Pelling & Dill, 2010). This procedural exclusion contributes to continued disadvantage among the disadvantaged populations.

Although EJ research is strong worldwide, its use for addressing climate disasters in Pakistan is limited. Available studies document social inequalities in flood impacts (Mustafa et al., 2020; Ali & Khan, 2021), few, however integrate the EJ as a way of systematically evaluating recovery phase inequalities. The recurrence of floods in 2022 and 2025 in many of the same communities makes Pakistan a critical case of revisiting debates on EJ in disaster contexts.

### **Disaster Governance in the Global South**

Governance is one of the most important factors in determining the outcome of disasters, as it affects how institutions plan for, respond to and recover from hazards. Evidence from the governance literature has focused on institutional capacity, coordination, accountability and participatory mechanisms as key elements of equitable disaster management (Tierney, 2014; Boin et al., 2017).

### **Institutional Fragmentation and Capacity Constraints**

In many developing countries, the governance systems of disasters continue to be dispersed across multiple agencies and tiers of government (Cox et al., 2017). Pakistan's NDMA-PDMA model has similar weaknesses and has unclear mandates, overlap between responsibilities, and fluctuating coordination between the federal, provincial, and district levels of government (Rana & Sultana, 2022). Such fragmentation disrupts the efficient flow of information, delays help and leads to inconsistencies in recovery outcomes.

### **Elite Capture and Political Influence**

Elite capture, in which politically connected groups capture disproportionate access to public resources, is, however, well-documented in South Asian systems of governance (Luqman and Ghani, 2019). Much research has found that the distribution of disaster aid in Pakistan frequently favors influential families, landowners, and political actors who have privileged access to local administrators (Mustafa et al., 2020; Ahmed & Rahim, 2021). Patronage politics determine what is lost and what is considered legitimate.

### **Gender- and Governance-Blind Spots**

Governance literature is increasingly raising the issue of intersectional inequalities. Disaster policies usually look at households as a homogeneous unit and overlook internal power dynamics and gender hierarchies (Enarson, 2012; Zia, 2023). Reports from UN Women (2020) document that Pakistani women are challenged in documentation, mobility, and exclusion from local committees which are some of the factors that systematically disadvantage women in post-disaster settings.

### **Global Shifts Toward Rights-Based and Inclusive Governance**

The Sendai Framework and UN climate resilience guidelines focus on good governance of participative, inclusive and equitable disaster recovery (UNDRR, 2021). However, implementation is still uneven especially in fragile or resource-constrained states. The processes of recovery in Pakistan frequently focus on rebuilding infrastructure instead of social equity, which also reflects criticism of "build back better" approaches where physical assets are rebuilt rather than community resilience (Davies et al., 2018).

While the topic of governance frameworks is widely studied, less focus is given to the interactions between governance failures and socio-legal constraints, particularly in the context of multi-disaster situations within situations where institutional stress is mounting.

### **Socio-Legal Barriers in Accessing Disaster Recovery**

Socio-legal scholarship is essential to better understand why official entitlements guaranteed by law are frequently not translated into realities. Halliday and Schmidt (2009:10) suggest the law works in terms of both legal texts and social practices and they may be quite different in the kinds of rights that are accessible in a particular situation especially where there is bureaucratic discretion, political power or documentation regimes that influence the access to rights.

### **Documentation, Identity, and Legal Visibility**

Documentation such as national identity cards, land titles or damage assessment certificates is very central to accessing relief and compensation. Yet for many rural and marginalized populations, documents are often lost, damaged or not obtained at all due to cost, limitations in mobility or bureaucratic complexity (Sayeed & Haq, 2020). After the 2022 floods, many Pakistani households had no valid documentation and started 2025 with reduced legal visibility which makes them victims of exclusion.

### **Administrative Discretion and Unequal Implementation**

Research indicates that frontline bureaucrats frequently have a lot of discretion in validating losses and including households in beneficiary lists (Pelling & Dill, 2010). This can sustain local power relations and enable powerful actors to exploit lists or claim higher remuneration whilst marginalized groups have a hard time getting their claims acknowledged (Ahmed & Rahim, 2021).

### **Legal Consciousness and Rights Mobilization**

Studies on legal consciousness hint that marginalized communities may not see disaster relief as a legal entitlement but as a matter of state favor, which may be extended or denied (Merry, 1990). In Pakistan, there is often a lack of legal literacy, gender norms, and distrust of authorities to discourage the process of making formal complaints, appealing, or rights-claiming behavior (Sayeed & Haq, 2020).

### **Barriers Faced by Women and Vulnerable Groups**

Socio-legal research in South Asia shows the patriarchal structures of women's access to disaster services, legal documents, public spaces, and administrative procedures (Ikeda, 1995; Sultana, 2022). Women-headed households in Pakistan are faced with compounded vulnerabilities in terms of mobility restrictions, lack of property ownership and male guardianship at the verification processes (UN Women, 2020).

### **Recurrent Disaster Vulnerability and Cumulative Impacts**

While disaster studies have been focused on a single event, it is increasingly being recognized by scholars that many communities suffer from recurrent disasters, which generate cumulative and compounding vulnerabilities (Ullah & Nihei, 2016). Recurrent flooding is unstable to livelihoods, generates cycles of indebtedness, destroys savings and undermines local resilience.

### **Cumulative Losses and Long-Term Deprivation**

Repeated disasters are added to pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities. Households partially recovered from one flood experience "perpetual recovery" never able to get stable livelihoods before the next disaster strikes (Zia, 2023). This has long term effects on education, food security and intergenerational wellbeing.

## **Institutional Fatigue and Declining Governance Capacity**

Institutions are also fatigued when disasters strike too often. Budgetary constraints, the burning out of staff, and the politicization of allocating resources diminish the quality and fairness of recovery programs (Pelling & Dill, 2010). Evidence from the flood cycle in Pakistan from 2022 to 2025 indicates slower verification and lower amounts of compensation as well as greater administrative inconsistency.

## **Climate Change as a Risk Multiplier**

Climate change makes extreme weather events more frequent and extreme. The IPCC is warning that South Asia will be exposed to accelerated cycles of heatwaves, floods and glacial melt and it will affect countries with governance constraints and high social vulnerability disproportionately (IPCC, 2021). Pakistan's rapidly changing climate coupled with weak institutional resilience is a key factor in creating a need to examine the recurrent disaster impacts.

## **Integrative Gap in Existing Scholarship**

While there are important contributions from each of the various bodies of literature on environmental justice, governance, socio-legal studies and recurrent vulnerability, these are little brought together. Environmental justice scholars tend to ignore institutional fragmentation; studies on governance are likely to ignore socio-legal barriers; and disaster studies tend to treat disasters as isolated rather than cyclical events.

This study addresses these gaps by presenting an integrated, multi-theoretical analysis that examines:

- How governance failures shape Environmental Justice outcomes
- How socio-legal barriers prevent rights-based recovery
- How recurrent disasters magnify structural inequities

Such integration is essential for understanding the persistent exclusion of marginalized populations in Pakistan's flood recovery processes.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Environmental Justice Theory**

Environmental Justice (EJ) offers the framework upon which to determine the forms of inequality that arise in the process of disaster recovery. Schlosberg's (2013) tripartite model of distributional, recognitional, and procedural justice provides clear forms of analysis.

- **Distributional justice** evaluates how compensation, reconstruction assistance, and aid are allocated across social groups (Bullard, 1993; Walker, 2012).
- **Recognitional justice** assesses whether marginalized communities, such as women, landless households, and informal settlers, are acknowledged within institutional rules and damage assessments (Schlosberg, 2007).
- **Procedural justice** examines participation, documentation requirements, appeals, and verification processes that determine who can successfully claim support.

By taking as its basis for understanding inequities the theory of EJ, the study pays attention not only to outcomes, but also to the institutional logics through which injustice is reproduced.

### **Governance Theory**

Governance Theory describes the reasons why environmental justice assertions often do not work in practice. Disaster governance scholarship has focused on the importance of institutional arrangements, power relations and administrative capacity in influencing risk and recovery outcomes (Pelling & Dill, 2010).

Three analytical components are central:

### 1. **Institutional Fragmentation:**

Overlapping mandates within NDMA, PDMA and DDMA result in inconsistent implementation and coordination failures (Pelling & Dill, 2010).

### 2. **Administrative capacity:**

Limited staffing, bureaucratic bottlenecks and inconsistent verification procedures impact on the speed as well as the fairness of aid distribution.

### 3. **Local power dynamics:**

Governance studies point to elite capture, patronage networks and political influence in determining who deserves to be a legitimate "victim" (Mustafa et al., 2020).

Governance theory, therefore positions institutions as active producers of inequality, not neutral administrators.

## **Socio-Legal Theory**

Socio-Legal Theory offers the means of connection between formal legal entitlements and lived recovery experiences. The distinction Galanter (1983) makes between law in books and law in action is used for analyzing the gap between policy promises and practical access.

This lens is applied to examine:

- How documentation requirements operate as gatekeeping tools.
- How mobility restrictions, gender norms, or lack of legal identity documents shape the ability to claim rights;
- How the everyday practices of street-level bureaucrats influence inclusion and exclusion (Lipsky, 1980).

Socio-legal theory reveals the interpretive and discretionary nature of disaster governance and the subtle mechanisms through which vulnerability is reproduced.

## **Recurrent Disaster Vulnerability**

Recurrent Disaster Vulnerability theory introduces a temporal dimension to deepen the explanatory model. Vulnerability is conceptualized as cumulative and increases with additional shocks (Wisner et al., 2004; Cutter, 2016).

This framework is used analytically for the interpretation of:

- How incomplete recovery from previous disasters increases exposure during subsequent disasters.
- What are the repeated administrative burdens and institutional fatigue that weaken coordination? (Tierney, 2014)
- How the erosion of assets, documentation, and social networks works to enhance long-term marginalization.

By combining recurrent vulnerability, the study shows that unequal recovery is cyclical and self-reinforcing and not episodic.

## **Integrated Analytical Model**

Taken together, the four frameworks create a coherent analytical model:

- **Environmental Justice** identifies the forms of injustice.
- **Governance Theory** explains the institutional mechanisms that generate them.
- **Socio-Legal Theory** reveals practical and interpretive barriers to accessing rights.
- **Recurrent Disaster Vulnerability** shows how injustices compound over time.

This integrated model helps to guide the thematic analysis and interpret why unequal recovery is still going on despite formal legal guarantees.

The conceptual framework diagram mentioned here is a visual summary of the way the four lenses interrelate to yield disparate recovery outcomes in the 2022 and 2025 Pakistan floods

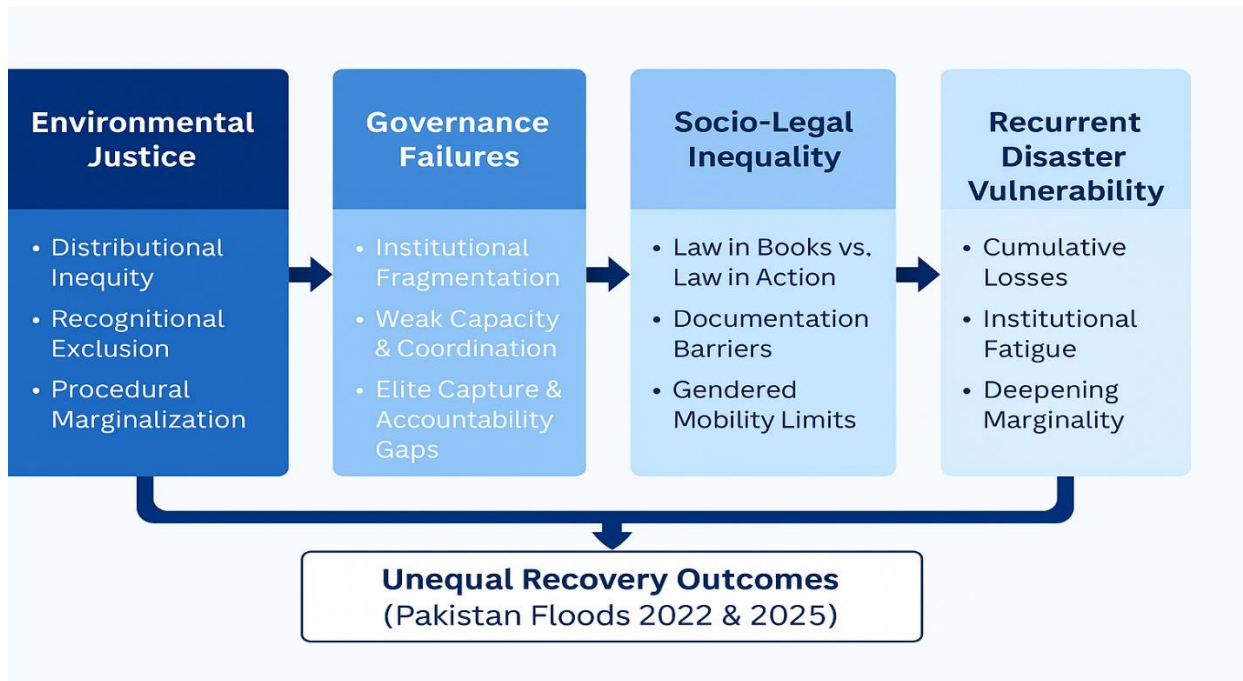


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework of Unequal Flood Recovery

## Methodology

### Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative, socio-legal research approach to understand the unequal recovery in the 2022 and 2025 floods in Pakistan. Qualitative inquiry is especially fruitful in understanding governance failure, institutional activities, and socio-legal obstacles that influence disaster outcomes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Because this research explores structural inequalities, constraints on access to justice, and procedural injustices phenomena that are deeply embedded in social relations and not directly observable using quantitative indicators, a qualitative strategy allows a more interpretive and theoretically informed examination of how institutions and communities are experiencing recovery. This approach also fits in with the multi-layered theoretical framework used in this study, requiring close engagement with texts, policies, and narratives, to identify the way in which environmental justice, governance, and socio-legal dynamics interact.

### Research Design

The study follows an exploratory and interpretive design, which is suitable for research where the empirical evidence is still fragmented and where there is rapid change in institutional processes. The recurrence of severe floods in 2022 and 2025 created a fluid governance environment with which state institutions, humanitarian actors, and communities grappled with shifting responsibilities and resource constraints. In such settings, we can say that exploratory design enables the researcher to trace the development of new themes such as barriers to documentation, elite capture, institutional fatigue, and cumulative vulnerability, that are not sufficiently documented in academic literature.

The interpretive dimension of the design points to the need to understand the way legal provisions, administrative decisions and recovery mechanisms take on meaning in practice. Sociological concepts such as vulnerability, rights, accountability, gendered constraints, and recognition are not regarded as generic principles, but as social forces that influence people's interactions with state institutions. This complements socio-legal scholarship, which differentiates between law in books and law in action and focuses on the difference between legal entitlements and lived experience.

## **Data Sources and Corpus Selection**

Because the study focuses on the governance processes and socio-legal inequalities instead of the narratives at a community level, it relies on a document-based corpus of legal frameworks, institutional reports, policy documents and secondary empirical studies. The corpus contains materials from:

- Legal and institutional documents (e.g., National Disaster Management Act 2010, Climate change Act 2017, NDMA, PDMA, and DDMA guidelines, Damage assessment criteria)
- Government assessments of the 2022 floods (e.g., PDNA reports, provincial summaries, reconstruction frameworks).
- Emerging documentation from the 2025 floods, such as rapid assessments, early humanitarian briefs, and initial provincial reports available during the study period.
- Peer-reviewed research of previous disasters in Pakistan (2010, 2011, 2022), environmental justice, governance and socio-legal inequalities.
- NGO and UN agency reports, which provided detailed field-based reports on recovery and barriers to access

## **Inclusion criteria**

Documents were included if they:

1. Directly addressed the issues of disaster response, compensation, governance processes or inequalities;
2. Were produced from 2010 to 2025 to reflect the institutional evolution of disaster governance in Pakistan;
3. Provided evidence in relation to distributional, recognitional or procedural justice; and
4. Contained information on recovery patterns or lives constrained by marginalized groups.

## **Exclusion criteria**

Highly technical engineering assessments, financial audits not related to community-level impacts and documents not relevant to the governance or socio-legal processes were excluded. This transparent selection strategy is used to ensure that a diverse yet coherent set of materials with relevance to the theoretical aims of the study will be used in the corpus.

## **Analytical Strategy**

The method of analysis used in this study was thematic analysis, which enabled concepts in the theoretical framework to be used to guide interpretation but remain open to emergent concepts from the data. The analytical process went through three stages:

### **1. Initial Coding (Deductive + Inductive):**

Deductive codes were drawn from the theoretical framework of distributional injustice, recognitional injustice, procedural barriers, institutional fragmentation, law-in-action gaps, documentation constraints and cumulative vulnerability. Inductive coding picked up on unanticipated themes such as "institutional fatigue," "digital verification barriers," "compensation politics," and "gendered mobility restrictions."

### **2. Theme Development:**

Codes were grouped into higher-order themes that were congruent with the research questions of the study. Examples include:

- Access to compensation and documentation regimes
- Local power dynamics and elite influence
- Fragmented institutional mandates
- Temporal layering of vulnerability in recurrent disasters

- Gaps between formal rights and practical entitlements

### 3. **Analytical Integration:**

The themes were then understood within the framework of the four theoretical lenses. For example:

- Environmental Justice Theory clarified how procedural and distributional injustices manifested in compensation processes.
- Governance Theory illuminated how fragmented mandates and weak coordination enabled inequities.
- Socio-Legal Theory explained the persistence of documentation and access barriers.
- Recurrent Disaster Vulnerability Theory contextualized why communities entered 2025 with depleted resilience.

This structured yet flexible process ensured analytical rigor while allowing theoretical depth.

### **Positionality and Reflexivity**

As a researcher with a socio-legal inequality perspective in Pakistan, my positionality always influences how I interpret the behavior of the institutions, legal processes, and the vulnerability of the communities. Whilst I do not profess to have any direct lived experience in the affected regions, my knowledge of the South Asian governance framework and socio-legal system does give me a sense of contextual sensitivity. Reflexive awareness informed efforts to be cautious about generalizations, to focus more on gathering evidence of multiple kinds, and to make sure that the voices and experiences of others, as documented in good empirical studies, were used as a starting point rather than as a basis for imposing external assumptions.

### **Addressing the “2025 Flood Data” Challenge**

Due to the recent occurrence of the 2025 floods, the documentation is still preliminary. To combat this, the study was carried out using:

- Early humanitarian assessment briefs.
- NGO situation updates.
- Provisional provincial impact reports.
- Initial policy responses by NDMA/PDMA.

These were considered as emergent evidence, rather than final and comprehensive accounts. Their inclusion makes the case for recurrent vulnerability and institutional fatigue stronger but is taken with caution in order to avoid overstating conclusions. This transparency is what ensures methodological credibility.

### **Limitations**

This research is subject to several limitations:

#### 1. **Absence of primary fieldwork:**

The analysis is based on documents and secondary studies instead of direct interviews and ethnographic observation. This restricts the availability of real-time experiences from the community

#### 2. **Uneven quality of available reports:**

Institutional documents are not all detailed and accurate, and some of the data have gaps, particularly for 2025, due to the early stage of reporting.

#### 3. **Challenges of triangulation:**

Although a variety of sources were used, differences among institutional and NGO assessments can limit the conclusions that can be drawn.

#### 4. **Temporal proximity of the 2025 floods:**

Findings related to that event should be interpreted as early patterns and not outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the methodology is strong for a socio-legal and governance-oriented study. Its strength is both the combined use of themes and an analytical framework, and the systematic use of documentary evidence, and a theoretically based interpretation of institutional practices.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The present study is based entirely on documents that are publicly available and secondary data. No human subjects were interviewed, or any personal or identifiable information collected. Ethical considerations therefore, are concerned with responsible interpretation, reflecting accurately what is found in the sources, and being sensitive to those affected by it.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This section presents key findings through the use of an integrated analytical framework. Five patterns were consistently shaping unequal recovery in the 2022 and 2025 floods: distributional inequities, recognitional exclusions, procedural barriers, governance failures, and cumulative vulnerability across recurrent disasters. Together, these dynamics help us to understand the role of environmental injustice, institutional arrangements, socio-legal practices and historical processes in the reproduction of inequality.

### **Distributional Inequities in Relief and Compensation**

#### **Uneven Allocation of Resources**

Distributional injustice existed almost from the beginning in the relief phase. Landless workers, informal tenants, and households in peripheral villages fell short in terms of resources and faced major delays as compared to landowners and politically affiliated groups (Ahmed & Rahim, 2021; Mustafa et al., 2020). Compensation schemes were associated with eligibility based on land ownership or other formal documentation which excluded households in informal settlements or on communal land. Homes along riverbanks were frequently classified as "non-compensable" and this had a disproportionate impact on the poorest residents.

#### **Prioritization of Infrastructure Over Livelihoods**

Recovery programs focused on physical infrastructure, roads, bridges and electricity and were underfunded in livelihood restoration. Daily-wage laborers, small farmers, fisherfolk, and women agricultural workers did not receive much support despite drastic economic losses. This reflects evidence globally that disaster recovery almost always favors physical assets over socio-economic wellbeing (Davies et al., 2018; Tierney, 2014).

### **Discussion**

Environmental Justice Theory exposes distributional outcomes to structural inequalities and not administrative errors (Schlosberg, 2013). Households living with formal titles or with political visibility are those that are more easily recognized by the institutions, while those on the margins, land-poor workers, informal tenants, residents of the hazard zone, and so on, remain systematically excluded. Distributional injustice, therefore, mirrors pre-existing class, land and spatial hierarchies.

### **Recognitional Exclusions and Social Marginality**

#### **Gendered and Cultural Barriers**

Women often had no access to independent documentation, mobility constraints, and were excluded from the verification process. Many women-headed households were unable to queue up for registration because of cultural norms where a male must accompany the female (UN Women, 2020). Recovery programs rarely consider the needs of pregnant women, widows or women with disabilities.

### **Ethnic and Caste Marginalization**

Low caste Hindu communities, Bheel communities and ethnic minorities in Sindh and South Punjab reported discriminatory treatment by officialdom and landlords. Such patterns are indicative of broader regional structures where caste and ethnic hierarchies are the determining factors in terms of access to public services (Aryal & Gellert, 2020).

### **Informal and Peripheral Settlements**

Settlements along riverbeds or informal colonies would often be termed "encroachments" and make one less eligible for assistance. Their vulnerability represents being excluded for a long time from participating in the formal planning and land rights.

### **Discussion**

The concept of recognitional justice demands that institutions acknowledge the role of gender, caste, ethnicity and land tenure in vulnerability. (Walker, 2012). Pakistan's recovery mechanisms considered households as homogenous, while ignoring intersecting disadvantages. This failure created interventions that reproduced and did not mitigate marginalization.

### **Procedural Barriers and the Law-in-Action Gap**

#### **Documentation and Verification Barriers**

Relief access required CNICs, Land records and official proof of damage. Families who did not have these documents, either because they did not have them or they had lost them in the floods, became "legally invisible." Women, elderly persons and disabled people were under increased difficulties. This documentation regime acted as a structural filter as to who was entitled to claim rights (Galanter, 1983).

#### **Administrative Discretion and Local Power Structures**

Damage assessment teams exercised a lot of discretion. Verification is selective, favoritism, and political pressure-these are the reports of NGOs. Communities allied with the local elites were often assigned a "fully damaged" home that was compensated at a higher rate. Such patterns are consistent with socio-legal literature which highlights the discretionary power of the street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980; Halliday & Schmidt, 2009).

#### **Limited Appeals and Legal Awareness**

Appeals procedures were often not publicized and rarely available. Many affected people understood assistance as a matter of favor rather than a right and it was rooted in past patterns of patronage and dependency.

### **Discussion**

Procedural injustice is the process by which distributional and recognitional iniquities become realized. Although formal laws do ensure relief, rules governing documentation under the socio-legal environment, bureaucratic discretion and political influence leave a gap between law in books and law in action that is perennially present.

### **Governance Failures and Institutional Fragmentation**

#### **Coordination Challenges and Mandate Overlaps**

Pakistan has an NDMA-PDMA- DDMA structure with overlapping mandates and poor vertical coordination. Federal agencies rely on the provinces for the damage data, and the districts are responsible for the verification. The result is inconsistent assessments, delays and conflicting instructions. In the 2025 floods, mismatched reports and shortfalls in budgets further delayed response efforts.

## **Resource Constraints and Capacity Gaps**

DDMAs lack trained staff, digital tools and often sufficient budgets. Field teams are subject to manual verification and this increases the number of errors and opportunities for manipulation.

## **Political Influence and Elite Capture**

Patronage-based governance impacts all stages of recovery. Political affiliation greatly increased the chances of getting faster or more compensation (Rana & Sultana, 2022). These findings are indicative of broader research on the governance of disasters, which has shown the influence of political networks in the implementation of disaster policy (Pelling 2010, Dill 2010).

## **Discussion**

Governance failures increase environmental injustice by generating inconsistent, politically mediated recovery outcomes. Fragmented institutions, lack of capacity and elite influence make disasters opportunities for inequality; they actually entrench it in the governance structures themselves.

## **Recurrent Disaster Vulnerability: Cumulative and Intensifying Inequality**

### **Incomplete Recovery from 2022**

The 2025 floods hit communities still grappling with the 2022. Many homes were still partially repaired, livelihoods were shaky and debts were high. The second calamity brought socio-economic precarisation to a deeper level.

### **Institutional Fatigue in 2025**

Repeated crises put NDMA and PDMAs under strain. Staff shortages, cutbacks in budgets and verification backlogs resulted in slower and less effective responses. This speaks to global findings that finding recurrent disasters erode institutional capacity over time (Cutter, 2016; Tierney, 2014).

## **Psychological and Social Impacts**

Recurrent losses spawned general distress, in loss of confidence in state institutions, and out-migration from high-risk areas. Households began to see flooding as an inevitable cycle.

## **Discussion**

Recurrent Disaster Vulnerability Theory focuses on the fact that when households or institutions are not able to recover from disasters, this increases their vulnerability. The short period of time between 2022 and 2025 resulted in layered and compounded losses that created greater inequality. Short-term recovery programs were inadequate in dealing with long-term vulnerability.

## **Synthesizing the Findings Through the Integrated Framework**

These four theoretical lenses explain why unequal recovery persists:

### **Environmental Justice**

- Distributional: Uneven relief and compensation.
- Recognitional: Gendered, ethnic, and caste-based exclusions.
- Procedural: Documentation regimes and bureaucratic barriers.

### **Governance**

- Fragmented institutions.
- Limited administrative capacity.
- Patronage and elite capture.

## **Socio-Legal**

- Gaps between formal rights and practical access.
- Discretionary enforcement by frontline officials.
- Documentation as a determinant of legal visibility.

## **Recurrent Vulnerability**

- Cumulative losses from 2022 to 2025.
- Institutional fatigue.
- Deepening social and economic fragility.

A combination of these trends reveals that inequality of recovery is not sporadic, but structural, systemic, and time-compounding. Embedded power relations, institutional weaknesses, and socio-legal barriers are the outcomes of recovery, which become evident in a series of disasters. This combined explanation reinforces the argument of the rights-based, multi-year, and equity-based climate governance.

## **Conclusion**

The paper analyzed disparate recovery efforts in the 2022 and 2025 Pakistan floods with an integrated approach that incorporates Environmental Justice, Governance Theory, Socio-Legal Theory and Recurrent Disaster Vulnerability. Analysis indicates that relief and reconstruction inequalities are not accidental but also based on structural inequalities that have long been held. The exclusions based on the ownership of land, gender, caste, and settlement status created distributional and recognitional injustices, and the restrictions on access to state support were further imposed by the procedural barriers, especially by the documentation regimes and the bureaucratic discretion. These inequities were worsened by governance failures such as overlapping of mandates, insufficient administrative capacity and political pressure which resulted in disparities in institutional response among the districts and provinces.

These processes were further enhanced by the frequent occurrence of big floods over a period of time. The scale of the disaster entering 2025 was that many households who had not yet fully recovered in the post-2022 disaster were exhausted, and had reduced resilience, and state institutions stretched their budgets, were exhausted, and had poor coordination. This time aspect shows the cumulative aspect of vulnerability: in case disasters follow each other immediately, individuals and institutions become unable to absorb shocks. Consequently, unequal recovery is established as a continuous process instead of a sporadic one.

These findings demonstrate that there is an urgent need to change the short-term and event-based recovery strategies to long-term and rights-based climate governance. The equitable recovery must be enhanced in terms of stronger documentation systems, the creation of transparent systems of verification, the enhancement of the administrative capacity, and the creation of mechanisms of participation. Stable funding, institutional learning and accountability arrangements can be used to help in breaking cycles of recurring vulnerability through multi-year reconstruction planning.

## **Contribution to Scholarship:**

By showing that disparate post-flood recovery in Pakistan is not an administrative failure that exists in a vacuum, this study contributes to the socio-legal and environmental justice literature by revealing that this phenomenon is structural, having reached compounding consequences over time. The paper provides a new analytical framework revealing interactions between documentation regimes, bureaucratic discretion and institutional fragmentation to reproduce inequity across a series of disasters by utilizing Environmental Justice, Governance, Socio-Legal Theory and Recurrent Disaster Vulnerability. Theoretically, the research adds to a theoretically-informed reinterpretation of the recovery cycle in Pakistan of 2022-2025, presenting the pattern of accumulated losses, institutional burnout, and inflexible power relations, which increase vulnerability with time.

Theoretically, it prefigures the primary role of rights, recognition and procedural access in climate governance discussions, and has implications in disaster-prone areas of the Global South.

### **Policy Implications**

Based on the findings of the study, a number of policy measures are required to ensure equitable, accountable and resilient disaster recovery in Pakistan.

#### **Strengthen Documentation and Legal Access**

- Deploy mobile NADRA units during and after floods to replace lost identity documents.
- Establish community-based verification systems for landless households and informal settlers who lack formal records.
- Simplify documentation procedures by providing other forms of proof of residence, loss and eligibility

These measures would help minimize procedural barriers and ensure that legal identity will not be a determining factor when accessing relief.

#### **Improve Governance Coordination**

- Clarify mandates between NDMA, PDMA and DDMA to avoid overlap and ensure consistent responsibilities.
- Develop integrated digital platforms for the real-time assessment of damages and registration of beneficiaries and tracking of resources.
- Strengthen district level capacity (add staff, specialised training and recovery dedicated budgets) Better coordination would help minimize delays and inconsistencies that are currently working against equitable recovery.

#### **Reduce Bureaucratic Discretion and Enhance Accountability**

- Standardise the criteria used to assess damage on a district-by-district basis to minimise subjective interpretation.
- Introduce third-party surveillance and social audits of compensation processes.
- Establish clear appeals and grievance redress mechanisms available to all different people affected.

These steps would reduce the gap between law in books and law in action by limiting frontline discretion.

#### **Address Gendered and Intersectional Vulnerabilities**

- Priorities support of women-headed households and other at-risk groups.
- Create safe and culturally appropriate spaces for registration of women.
- Incorporate gender sensitive design in shelters and sanitation facilities as well as in livelihood programs.

The importance of recognizing intersecting vulnerabilities is critical to equitable recovery planning.

#### **Incorporate Long-Term, Multi-Year Recovery Planning**

- Shift from event-specific relief to sustained, multi-year reconstruction strategies.
- Establish budgetary reserves and risk financing mechanisms that acknowledge recurrent disasters.
- Strengthen community-based recovery committees to support local decision-making as well as long-term monitoring.

This approach deals with the cumulative vulnerability and avoids repetitive cycles of loss.

#### **Prevent Elite Capture and Promote Inclusive Decision-Making**

- Insist on good representation of women, poor people, and minorities in local disaster committees.

- Regulate political interference through clear oversight and audit mechanisms.
- Encourage civil society participation in monitoring, evaluation, and social accountability processes.

Inclusive governance to reduce the imbalances of power that distort the outcomes for recovery.

### **Build Adaptive Capacity for Recurrent Disasters**

- Promote climate-resilient housing and settlement planning in high-risk areas.
- Support livelihood diversification to reduce dependence on climate-sensitive economic activities.
- Provide psychological and psychosocial support processes as part of recovery frameworks.

Building adaptive capacity is critical to resilience in an age of rising climate volatility.

Collectively, these policy measures represent a move away from reactive and uneven approaches to disaster recovery in favor of a more equitable, rights-based, and adaptive model of governance that will be able to address the existing and future risks.

### **References:**

- Ahmed, S., & Rahim, S. (2021). Disaster governance and community vulnerability in Pakistan: A post-flood assessment. *Journal of South Asian Public Policy*, 12(2), 45–62.
- Ali, F., & Khan, N. (2021). Climate vulnerability and governance challenges in rural Pakistan. *Asian Journal of Environmental Change*, 5(1), 22–39.
- Aryal, K., & Gellert, P. (2020). Inequality and vulnerability in South Asian environmental governance. *Development and Change*, 51(6), 1551–1572.
- Boin, A., Ekengren, M., & Rhinard, M. (2017). *The politics of crisis management: Public leadership under pressure*. Cambridge University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Bullard, R. D. (1993). *Confronting environmental racism: Voices from the grassroots*. South End Press.
- Cox, R., Hamid, S., & Ali, T. (2017). Disaster management frameworks in South Asia: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, 8(3), 234–245.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Cutter, S. L. (2016). The landscape of disaster resilience indicators in the USA. *Natural Hazards*, 80(2), 741–758.
- Davies, T., Barrios, R., McClintock, N., & Walsh-Dilley, M. (2018). Recovery as a political process: Disasters, development, and the dynamics of inequality. *Progress in Human Geography*, 42(2), 185–203.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Enarson, E. (2012). *Women confronting natural disaster: From vulnerability to resilience*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Flick, U. (2014). *An introduction to qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Gaillard, J. C., Mercer, J., & Kelman, I. (2017). Participatory disaster risk reduction: A framework for engagement. *Environmental Hazards*, 16(1), 1–12.
- Galanter, M. (1983). Reading the landscape of disputes: What we know and don't know about our allegedly contentious and litigious society. *UCLA Law Review*, 31, 4–71.
- Halliday, T. C., & Schmidt, P. (2009). *Globalizing law and socio-legal studies*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ikeda, K. (1995). Gender differences in human loss and vulnerability in natural disasters. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 2(2), 171–193.
- IPCC. (2021). *Climate change 2021: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability*. Sixth Assessment Report.

- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Luqman, M., & Ghani, E. (2019). Patronage, politics, and public service delivery in Pakistan. *South Asian Studies*, 34(2), 311–325.
- Merry, S. E. (1990). *Getting justice and getting even: Legal consciousness among working-class Americans*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mustafa, D., Ahmed, S., & Rathore, M. S. (2020). Disasters and inequality in Pakistan: A political ecology perspective. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 110(5), 1505–1521.
- Pelling, M. (2003). *Natural disasters and development in a globalizing world*. Routledge.
- Pelling, M., & Dill, K. (2010). Disaster politics: Tipping points for change in the adaptation of sociopolitical regimes. *Progress in Human Geography*, 34(1), 21–37.
- Rana, I. A., & Sultana, H. (2022). Disaster risk governance in Pakistan: Institutional challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, 15(4), 612–629.
- Sayeed, A., & Haq, R. (2020). Legal exclusion and social vulnerability: A socio-legal study of flood-affected populations in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Legal Studies*, 8(1), 45–67.
- Schlosberg, D. (2013). Theorizing environmental justice: The expanding sphere of a discourse. *Environmental Politics*, 22(1), 37–55.
- Sultana, F. (2014). Gendering climate justice: Power, vulnerability and impact. *Geoforum*, 54, 235–245.
- Sultana, F. (2022). Climate disasters and gendered vulnerability in South Asia. *Progress in Development Studies*, 22(3), 223–240.
- Tierney, K. (2014). *The social roots of risk: Producing disasters, promoting resilience*. Stanford University Press.
- Ullah, A., & Nihei, T. (2016). Recurrent flooding and household vulnerability in Pakistan. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 19, 21–31.
- UNDRR. (2021). *Global assessment report on disaster risk reduction*. United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.
- UN Women. (2020). *Gender and disaster risk reduction in Pakistan*. UN Women Pakistan.
- Walker, G. (2012). *Environmental justice: Concepts, evidence and politics*. Routledge.
- Wisner, B., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., & Davis, I. (2004). *At risk: Natural hazards, people's vulnerability, and disasters* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Zia, A. (2023). Lessons from Pakistan's 2022 floods: Climate governance and resilient recovery. *Asian Journal of Environmental Research*, 12(1), 89–108.