

Civil society, donor dynamics, and climate justice in Jordan: Navigating aid for inclusive climate action

Hussam Hussein 

Department of Politics and International Relations (DPIR), University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Correspondence

Hussam Hussein, Manor Road, DPIR department, University of Oxford, OX1 4BJ, Oxford, UK.
Email: hh.hussam.hussein@gmail.com

Abstract

Motivation: Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are increasingly recognized as key actors in delivering inclusive climate action in the Global South. This article examines how Jordanian CSOs engage with climate policy through a justice-oriented lens while navigating donor priorities and dependencies.

Approach and methods: Drawing on 17 semi-structured interviews from the "SharaKa" initiative, the study analyses how CSOs frame climate justice, influence national policy, and adapt to the constraints of donor-driven agendas.

Findings: While donors promote inclusive participation, their funding modalities and reporting requirements often depoliticize climate action and limit grassroots influence. Jordanian CSOs, however, display significant agency by reframing donor discourse, building coalitions, and embedding justice concerns into local policy debates. The findings highlight the need for donor practices that recognize CSOs as strategic partners rather than serving contractors and for national climate governance frameworks that institutionalize justice-based approaches.

Policy implications: Donors should adopt flexible funding mechanisms that enable context-specific action; strengthen horizontal partnerships with CSOs; and support participatory policy processes that elevate marginalized voices in climate governance.

KEYWORDS

aid effectiveness, civil society, climate governance, climate justice, donor dynamics, Jordan

1 | INTRODUCTION

Jordan, one of the world's most water-scarce countries (Hussein, 2018a)—with only 61 cubic metres per capita in 2021 (MWI, 2023)—faces acute risks from climate change (MOE, 2022). Rising temperatures, declining rainfall,

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and extreme droughts compound long-standing pressures of rapid population growth, high energy costs, and the arrival of successive waves of refugees (Hussein, 2018a; Talazi et al., 2019). These challenges make climate governance an urgent national priority. Yet Jordan's heavy dependence on international aid (Schuetze, 2019), and the fragmented nature of its policy-making raise questions about how effectively local actors can shape climate action (Hussein, 2018b; Yorke, 2013, 2016).

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have become increasingly important in this context (Annex I provides a general background on the Jordanian CSOs evolution). They are expected to link communities with government, advocate for vulnerable groups, and support the implementation of global agendas such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Sémit, 2020). However, their effectiveness in advancing climate justice remains poorly understood. Existing scholarship on climate governance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has largely focused on state-level policy frameworks (Dimitropoulos & Lokhandwala, 2021), donor influence (Cooper, 2020), and the politics of energy transition (Sever, 2021). Much less attention has been paid to how CSOs articulate justice-oriented narratives, navigate aid dependency, and influence climate policy-making from below. Moreover, while climate change is becoming an urgent issue in Jordan, there is scant research on climate governance and policy instruments in Jordan (Al-Zu'bi, 2016; El-Anis & Poberezhskaya, 2025; Hussein, 2025; Poberezhskaya & El-Anis, 2024).

This article addresses that gap by asking: how do Jordanian civil society organizations advance justice-oriented approaches to climate action, and with what effect on national climate governance? To answer this question, this research draws on 17 semi-structured interviews with CSO representatives, donor staff, and government officials, supplemented by participant observation in stakeholder workshops. This provides empirical insights into the strategies and constraints of climate-oriented CSOs in an aid-dependent leaning context.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the analysis in the literature on social movement and governance theory. Section 3 outlines the methodology deployed. Section 4 presents the findings on CSO framings, donor-CSO dynamics, and policy influence. Section 5 discusses their implications for climate governance and development policy. Section 6 concludes with recommendations for strengthening justice-oriented climate action in Jordan and similar aid-dependent settings.

2 | DONORS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIONS IN JORDAN

Donors occupy a central position in Jordan's environmental and climate governance landscape, shaping both the priorities and the modalities of action. Their financial leverage, while indispensable in sustaining CSOs, also introduces structural asymmetries that influence how climate justice is defined and pursued. Development partners—such as the EU, USAID, and various UN agencies—often promote inclusive and participatory climate governance, yet their funding mechanisms tend to reproduce the very dependencies that constrain CSO autonomy. Project-based cycles, rigid reporting frameworks, and predefined indicators create a logic of compliance rather than co-production, narrowing the scope for transformative or locally grounded initiatives. As Schuetze (2019) shows in his analysis of Western democracy promotion in Jordan, external aid often consolidates rather than challenges centralized and non-participatory governance, reinforcing state control through the language of reform.

From a governance perspective, these dynamics illustrate how donor influence operates as a form of networked power: donors act as both enablers and gatekeepers, mediating CSO access to policy arenas and shaping the terms of participation. In centralized contexts such as Jordan, this duality reinforces a depoliticized form of environmental engagement—one where legitimacy is derived from alignment with donor discourse rather than from grassroots accountability. As the interviewees noted, donor-driven partnerships are often presented as regionally or nationally “owned,” yet key decisions on priorities, metrics and funding remain externally determined. This asymmetry blurs the boundary between collaboration and conditionality, transforming CSOs into intermediaries that implement, rather than shape, the national climate agenda.

At the same time, Jordanian CSOs exhibit agency within these constraints. Many strategically appropriate donor language—particularly around inclusion, equity, and participation—to advance their own priorities and expand political space for advocacy. Such practices reflect what social movement theory describes as frame adaptation: aligning rhetoric with dominant discourses while subtly embedding alternative meanings. Through this process, some CSOs are able to reframe donor narratives toward more context-sensitive interpretations of climate justice, linking technical interventions to issues of livelihood, gender, and local empowerment.

A more equitable donor–CSO relationship would therefore require a shift from transactional funding arrangements to genuine partnership models. This involves co-designing projects with local actors from inception, extending funding horizons beyond short-term cycles, and decentralizing decision-making authority. By recognizing CSOs not merely as service providers but as epistemic and political actors, donors can help transform climate governance from a model of dependency into one of co-ownership and mutual accountability.

2.1 | Guiding framework: Integrating social movement and governance theory

This article draws on two interrelated bodies of theory—social movement theory and governance theory—to analyse the strategies, constraints, and positionalities of CSOs engaged in climate justice advocacy in Jordan. Together, these frameworks provide conceptual tools to understand how CSOs operate in constrained environments, navigate relationships with the state and donors, and attempt to shape both discourse and policy in the climate space.

Alternative frameworks, such as political ecology and the advocacy coalition framework, were considered, but were found to be less suitable for the Jordanian case. Political ecology offers valuable insights into power and resource distribution but lacks the organizational-level focus needed to analyse CSO agency. Similarly, the advocacy coalition framework assumes pluralistic policy arenas, which contrasts with Jordan's centralized context. The combination of social movement and governance theory therefore provides the most appropriate balance between agency and structure for understanding civil society engagement in constrained environments.

2.1.1 | Social movement theory: Framing, resources, and coalitions

Social movement theory offers a robust analytical lens for understanding how collective actors mobilize around shared grievances and attempt to influence institutions, public opinion, and policy (van Dyke & Amos, 2017). While most commonly applied in contentious politics and democratic protest settings (Engels & Müller, 2019), this body of theory has been increasingly extended to environmental activism and climate justice movements (McAdam, 2017).

Three core concepts are particularly relevant to this article: frame alignment, resource mobilization, and coalition building.

Frame alignment refers to the process by which social movements construct and promote meaning that resonates with target audiences and aligns their goals with prevailing cultural or institutional discourses (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986). In the context of Jordan, CSOs engage in climate justice framing that links environmental issues to social and economic vulnerability—emphasizing the disproportionate impacts of climate change on marginalized populations such as refugees, rural farmers, women, and youth. These justice-oriented frames serve both to attract donor support and to connect with domestic concerns, and they are also shaped by the strategic need to remain within politically acceptable boundaries.

Resource mobilization theory focuses on how movements acquire and manage material, human, and organizational resources necessary for sustained action (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). In the case of Jordan, CSOs face a dual challenge: they are heavily dependent on international donors whose priorities may not fully align with grassroots

needs, and they lack access to consistent domestic funding due to limited philanthropic infrastructure and bureaucratic restrictions. This donor-driven resource environment affects not only what CSOs can do, but also how they frame their work, select target beneficiaries, and define success.

Coalition building and network formation are also key aspects of movement strategy, particularly for actors with limited individual capacity. The literature on coalition politics emphasizes that alliances among CSOs can amplify voice, pool resources, and enable policy influence (van Dyke & Amos, 2017). However, coalition building in constrained or competitive environments is often fragile, fragmented, or instrumental—particularly where funding mechanisms reward individual branding over collective action. This article examines how these dynamics unfold in Jordan, where CSOs frequently operate in silos and where attempts at coalition building are typically short-lived or event-driven (e.g., around UNFCCC Conferences of the Parties).

Together, these concepts help explain both the promise and the limitations of CSO engagement with climate justice in Jordan—not only in terms of activism and visibility, but also in terms of institutional access and political impact.

2.1.2 | Governance theory: Institutional barriers and networked interactions

To complement the actor-centred lens of social movement theory, this article also engages with governance theory, with a focus on hybrid regimes and networked policy-making. Governance theory helps conceptualize the structural conditions under which CSOs operate and the configurations of power, authority, and legitimacy that shape their role in climate governance.

Two core concepts are used here: institutional barriers and network governance.

Institutional barriers refer to formal and informal constraints that limit the ability of non-state actors to influence policy. These can include limited representation in decision-making forums, opaque approval processes, bureaucratic bottlenecks, or the absence of institutionalized channels for participation (Andrews & Edwards, 2004; Dryzek, 2013). In Jordan, the Ministry of Environment serves as the formal point of coordination for climate policy, but its authority is often overshadowed by more powerful ministries, and participatory structures such as advisory councils or multi-stakeholder platforms remain weak or ad hoc. As a result, even when CSOs are consulted in the drafting of reports or strategies, their input often carries limited weight in final decision-making.

Network governance refers to policy-making processes characterized by horizontal, flexible, and often informal interactions between state and non-state actors (Rhodes, 1996; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005). While Jordan lacks formalized participatory governance frameworks, there are instances of informal collaboration between government agencies and CSOs—particularly in donor-funded projects, technical consultations, and international representation at events such as Conferences of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COPs). However, this network governance is often asymmetrical, favouring government control over agenda-setting and framing. Moreover, in the absence of strong coordination platforms, interactions tend to be fragmented, event-based, and donor-driven.

In addition, Jordan's political context—as a centralized government—creates specific constraints for environmental governance. CSOs are permitted to operate and even to critique aspects of state policy, but overt political dissent or disruptive mobilization is discouraged. This shapes the tactical repertoire available to climate actors, pushing them toward institutionalized, technocratic, and internationally framed modes of engagement rather than grassroots mobilization or contentious protest.

2.1.3 | Synthesizing the framework

By combining social movement theory with governance theory, this article situates Jordanian CSOs within a dual structure of constraint. On the one hand, they must mobilize resources, frame justice claims, and build alliances

in a crowded and competitive civil society landscape. On the other hand, they must navigate a donor-dominated funding ecosystem and an institutional environment that limits participatory access and channels of influence.

This integrated framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of how CSOs operate within—and adapt to—political, discursive, and financial constraints. Rather than evaluating their effectiveness solely through policy outcomes, this article examines how CSOs construct legitimacy, seek relevance, and attempt to rework the boundaries of climate politics in a centralized, aid-dependent context.

3 | METHODOLOGY

This article is based on qualitative empirical research conducted between August and November 2024. The research design employed semi-structured interviews with key informants involved in climate policy, civil society, youth activism, and international development in Jordan. The goal was to capture the perspectives, strategies, and constraints of CSOs engaged in climate justice work, with particular attention to how they frame their interventions, mobilize resources, and interact with governmental and international actors.

3.1 | Data collection

Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of actors working at the interface of climate advocacy and policy-making. The sample included representatives from environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), youth-led organizations, international donor agencies, research centres, and advocacy platforms. The sample was designed to include both well-established national organizations and newer, more informal initiatives so as to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and positionalities.

The initial interviewees were identified through a mapping of prominent organizations and individuals involved in climate advocacy in Jordan. A snowball sampling technique was then used, in which interviewees were asked to recommend additional contacts within the climate space. This method was particularly appropriate given the relatively small and interconnected nature of the environmental civil society sector in Jordan.

All interviews were conducted in English or Arabic, either in person or via secure digital platforms, depending on the availability and preferences of the participants. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were guided by a thematic protocol covering five core areas:

1. Organizational history and climate-related activities
2. The frame of climate justice and target beneficiaries
3. Funding sources and resource mobilisation strategies
4. Relations with government institutions and international actors
5. Participation in global forums (e.g., UNFCCC COPs) and coalitions.

Interview data were anonymized to protect confidentiality, and all participants gave informed consent. A coding system was used to refer to interviewees in the analysis (e.g., Interviewee 1: youth activist; Interviewee 10: environmental NGO staff), with general identifiers included in a background table.

3.2 | Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a thematic coding approach informed by the theoretical framework outlined in Section 2. Initial codes were deductively derived from the literature on social movement

and governance theory—such as frame alignment, resource dependency, network *governance*, and *institutional barriers*. These were supplemented by inductive coding to capture emergent themes that surfaced in the interviews, such as visibility-driven activism, intra-CSO competition, or perceptions of tokenistic government engagement.

Coding and analysis were conducted using a spreadsheet-based matrix to allow cross-case comparison. Themes were grouped according to three main analytical axes:

- Discursive strategies: how climate justice is framed, to whom it is directed, and which populations are included/excluded
- Organizational strategies: how CSOs access funding, engage in coalition building, and manage relations with donors
- Institutional strategies: how CSOs interact with governmental structures, respond to policy opportunities, and engage in international advocacy

This structured thematic analysis made it possible to triangulate findings across interviewees while also attending to variation by actor type, sectoral affiliation, and scale of operation.

3.3 | Limitations and reflexivity

As with all qualitative research, this study carries certain limitations. First, the sample was not designed to be statistically representative, but rather to reflect the diversity of organizational strategies and perspectives within Jordan's climate-oriented civil society. Although the interviewees span different types of organizations and roles, the findings may underrepresent informal or grassroots actors who operate outside donor networks or lack visibility.

Second, several interviewees were affiliated with organizations that receive international funding or collaborate with governmental agencies. This may have influenced their responses, particularly on politically sensitive topics such as co-optation, fragmentation, or critical assessments of state climate policy. To mitigate this, the interviewer emphasized anonymity and probed for both achievements and challenges.

Third, the positionality of the researcher—as someone with familiarity with the Jordanian climate policy landscape as well as ties to international academic and donor networks—shaped both access and interpretation. While this insider-outsider positioning facilitated trust with some respondents, it may also have introduced biases in framing questions or interpreting responses. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process by iteratively reviewing interview transcripts and discussing interpretations with colleagues familiar with the regional context.

Despite these limitations, the interviews provide a rich and underutilized empirical window into the evolving dynamics of civil society engagement in climate policy in Jordan. The following section presents the core findings of the study, structured around the analytical categories introduced above.

4 | KEY FINDINGS AND ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES

4.1 | Framing climate justice: Inclusion, legitimacy, and strategic ambiguity

Jordanian CSOs increasingly invoke the language of climate justice to frame their advocacy, but this framing reflects a blend of local vulnerabilities, donor expectations, and political caution. Interview data suggest that “climate justice” is not a fixed or radical concept in the Jordanian context; rather, it is strategically articulated in ways that are both legible to donors and aligned with domestic priorities, particularly around inclusion and vulnerability.

CSO leaders and activists commonly framed climate justice as a matter of equitable access to resources—particularly water and adaptation funding—for marginalized populations such as rural agricultural communities, refugees, Bedouin groups, and youth. For example, one interviewee described climate justice as “ensuring equal access to climate adaptation and mitigation resources,” explicitly linking environmental vulnerability to economic precarity and geographic marginalization (Interviewee 1, donor-funded NGO). Others emphasized the procedural dimension of justice, calling for the inclusion of historically excluded voices—particularly youth and refugees—in national climate decision-making.

This inclusive framing, while socially grounded, also reflects strategic adaptation to the discursive norms of international donors. Several interviewees acknowledged that the rise of climate justice discourse in Jordan is closely tied to the increased availability of donor funding for climate-related projects—particularly those that foreground equity, gender, or youth participation. As one CSO staff member put it, “climate justice has become a buzzword ... used to attract international funding” (Interviewee 2). While some saw this as an opportunity to align global agendas with local needs, others expressed concern that such a framing could become instrumentalized, diluting its political potential. “Nevertheless, given that funding comes to support this agenda, we often rephrase existing projects, ideas, and plans labelling them and repacking them under this new agenda in order to ensure access to its funding lines,” continued the interviewee.

Moreover, the framing often stops short of a direct critique of state policy or structural inequalities. Rather than challenging the political economy of water access or land use, CSO narratives tend to emphasize resilience, participation, and empowerment. This reflects the constrained political context in which Jordanian CSOs operate: environmental advocacy is permitted, but overt political or oppositional activism is discouraged. As a result, climate justice is framed in non-confrontational terms that emphasize partnership with the state rather than structural critique.

The interviews also highlighted generational differences in framing. Youth-led organizations were more likely to connect climate justice to broader issues of intergenerational equity and democratic inclusion. However, several interviewees noted a tension between visibility-driven activism—such as social media campaigns or participation in international events—and substantive engagement with climate policy. Some activists were described as prioritizing personal or organizational visibility over long-term advocacy strategies, leading to what one donor representative called “a performance of activism rather than a politics of transformation” (Interviewee 8).

Despite these challenges, the growing salience of climate justice discourse has created new openings for CSOs to position themselves as legitimate actors in the field of climate governance. By framing their work in inclusive and internationally legible terms, they gain access to both material resources and institutional spaces—albeit often on donor-defined terms.

4.2 | Resource mobilization: Donor dependency, proposal-driven agendas, and competitive fragmentation

The funding landscape for climate-focused CSOs in Jordan is characterized by heavy reliance on international donors, weak domestic philanthropy, and restrictive bureaucratic oversight. Interviews revealed a pervasive sense of resource dependency that shapes not only which projects CSOs pursue, but also how they frame their mandates, define their target constituencies, and organize their internal structures.

Virtually all interviewees described donor funding as the primary or exclusive financial lifeline for their organizations. Major funders included USAID, the European Union, UN agencies, and international NGOs. However, donor priorities often shifted quickly, creating a volatile environment in which CSOs had to continuously adapt their proposals to fit new calls for funding. As one respondent put it, “we spend more time writing proposals than doing the actual work” (Interviewee 4, local NGO). This dynamic has led many organizations to adopt project-based strategies that prioritize fundability over long-term vision or grounded community engagement.

Such patterns are emblematic of what resource mobilization scholars identify as agenda distortion—where organizational behaviour is driven less by internal mission than by external funding logics. Interviewees expressed concern that this had led to short-termism, loss of strategic coherence, and a growing disconnect between CSOs and the communities they claim to serve. For example, several youth-focused initiatives were said to organize awareness campaigns or tree-planting events not because of sustained grassroots demand, but because such activities were favoured by donors as tangible and easily reportable.

Moreover, the bureaucratic environment in Jordan constrains funding access. Interviewees mentioned that all international grants must be approved by multiple ministries, including the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Social Development. These procedures often result in delays and create an additional layer of state oversight over CSO agendas. One interviewee described losing access to a major grant because “the approvals came too late and the donor moved on” (Interviewee 10, environmental NGO). The interviewees noted that while these constraints are framed as regulatory safeguards, they also function as tools of informal political control, subtly curbing the autonomy of CSOs.

The funding landscape also fosters competitive rather than collaborative dynamics. Interviewees repeatedly described a sector in which organizations compete for the same limited pool of international funding, leading to a culture of branding, exclusivity, and reluctance to share resources or coordinate strategies. Coalition building is often limited to short-term, donor-mandated collaborations, and efforts to form durable national platforms have largely faltered. One youth activist observed, “we talk about climate justice, but we don't have justice among CSOs—we're competing, not cooperating” (Interviewee 7).

International NGOs, with their greater administrative capacity and donor connections, often outcompete local organizations for major grants, exacerbating asymmetries in capacity and visibility. Several interviewees noted that while local CSOs are expected to implement programmes, they are rarely entrusted with direct grant management, further reinforcing their subordinate role in the climate aid architecture.

Some interviewees raised the possibility of diversifying funding sources—through private sector partnerships, crowdfunding, or diaspora engagement—but most acknowledged that such efforts remain underdeveloped and unlikely to replace international aid in the near term. As one donor representative admitted, “we are part of the problem—we want local ownership, but we design the terms” (Interviewee 1).

Overall, the resource mobilization environment in Jordan severely limits CSOs' ability to pursue independent agendas, build sustainable institutional capacity, or invest in long-term movement building. Instead, the funding logic reinforces a fragmented, short-term, and donor-oriented form of environmental civil society, where visibility, compliance, and responsiveness are rewarded over coherence, autonomy, or rootedness.

4.3 | Institutional engagement and policy influence: Marginal access, siloed advocacy, and informal networks

While Jordanian CSOs have expanded their presence in the climate policy space, their actual influence over decision-making remains limited. Interviews revealed a pattern of ad hoc consultation, fragmented engagement, and symbolic inclusion rather than meaningful participation in climate governance. This reflects the constrained nature of policy access in Jordan's centralized governance system and the weak institutionalization of participatory mechanisms in the environmental sector.

CSOs often participate in workshops, consultations, and awareness events organized by government agencies—particularly the Ministry of Environment—but few interviewees described these engagements as substantively impactful. Instead, many characterized them as performative or extractive: government officials “invite us to tick the box,” as one environmental consultant put it, “but our feedback rarely changes the final outcome” (Interviewee 11). Such interactions are largely one-directional, with CSOs expected to support outreach and implementation rather than contribute to agenda-setting or regulatory oversight.

The weakness of formalized participatory mechanisms, such as advisory councils or seats of civil society in national climate committees—was a recurring theme. The interviewees noted that while the Ministry of Environment engages CSOs in drafting strategy documents, including Jordan's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), these processes remain top-down, with limited transparency and no institutional guarantees of inclusion. For example, Jordan's updated NDCs (2021) referenced youth and gender, but interviewees noted that these references were largely cosmetic, lacking the corresponding mechanisms for representation or accountability. "It is nice to see them mentioned, but what action plans are associated with them? How is Jordan planning to include them in practical terms? There are no details about this", mentioned Interviewee 11.

Moreover, CSOs often find themselves marginalized within the broader climate governance landscape. Key ministries such as Agriculture, Energy, and Water hold greater influence over climate-related policy decisions, yet they maintain limited engagement with civil society actors. As one academic observed, "the Ministry of Environment is the door we're allowed to knock on—but the real decisions are made elsewhere" (Interviewee 12). "The Ministry of Environment is relatively new when compared to the Ministry of Water and Irrigation or the Ministry of Agriculture, and several times it was suggested to close it down," continued the interviewee. This marginalization is exacerbated by the relatively weak institutional standing of the Ministry of Environment itself, which struggles to coordinate across more powerful line ministries.

Despite these constraints, CSOs have found some room for manoeuvre through informal networks and technical expertise. Several interviewees described instances where CSOs or research centres were invited to provide technical input into policy drafts, contribute data for national reporting, or support ministerial delegations to international events. However, these forms of influence are often dependent on personal relationships or donor pressure rather than institutionalized access.

The reliance on informal channels also reproduces exclusivity. Well-connected or donor-backed CSOs are more likely to be consulted, while smaller or grassroots groups are left out. This has led to a form of elite circulation within civil society itself, where the same actors repeatedly represent the sector in national and international spaces. As one youth activist remarked, "you see the same faces at every COP, but they don't speak for all of us" (Interviewee 14).

Efforts to build collective platforms or coalitions for advocacy have been sporadic and largely ineffective. CSOs tend to operate in silos, pursuing individual branding strategies and avoiding collaboration unless donor-mandated. Even when CSOs do come together—for example, in advance of international conferences like the UNFCCC COPs—coordination is often superficial and short-lived. Attempts to create national climate coalitions have faltered due to competition for funding, lack of trust, and inadequate institutional support. This fragmentation limits the sector's bargaining power, leaving CSOs vulnerable to tokenistic inclusion or co-optation.

A similar pattern emerges at the international level. Jordanian CSOs have increased their presence at global climate forums—particularly COP27 and COP28, held in the region—but their participation remains fragmented and underleveraged. Only a few organizations hold observer status with the UNFCCC, and national coordination around climate diplomacy is weak. The government provides limited pre-COP briefings, and CSOs are rarely included in negotiation teams. Participation at COPs is often driven by visibility goals or donor-funded side events rather than coordinated policy advocacy. As one international NGO staffer noted, "Jordanian CSOs attend the party, but they're not really at the table" (Interviewee 15).

Nonetheless, interviewees expressed aspirations for more institutionalized engagement and offered concrete proposals: establishing a CSO–government climate council, integrating civil society into national delegations, and creating shared platforms for strategic coordination. Some saw these as necessary steps to transition from project-based advocacy to structural influence. Others cautioned that unless coupled with reforms to the funding environment and political openness, such mechanisms risk becoming performative.

In sum, Jordanian CSOs face substantial institutional barriers to climate policy influence. While they are increasingly present in policy spaces—both domestic and international—their engagement is often symbolic,

fragmented, or externally mediated. Without structural changes to how participation is institutionalized and re-sourced, CSOs are likely to remain peripheral actors in Jordan's climate governance landscape.

5 | DISCUSSION: CLIMATE ADVOCACY IN CONSTRAINED SPACES

The findings presented in this article illustrate a civil society sector that is active, rhetorically adaptive, and increasingly present in national and international climate arenas—but one that remains structurally constrained and politically peripheral. Drawing on the integrated framework of social movement theory and governance theory, this section interprets these patterns and situates them within broader debates on environmental activism, donor-driven development, and policy influence in centralized systems.

5.1 | Framing justice without confrontation

Jordanian CSOs have adopted a climate justice framing that emphasizes inclusion, equity, and protection of vulnerable populations. This aligns with global discourses, resonates with donor priorities, and allows for broader social legitimacy. However, as social movement theory suggests, frame alignment is not only a tool of resonance—it is also a mechanism of constraint. In Jordan, justice framing tends to be strategically ambiguous, avoiding direct political critique and emphasizing empowerment, resilience, and procedural inclusion rather than redistributive or structural demands.

This reflects the tactical calculations of actors operating in politically sensitive environments. Environmental discourse, particularly when framed in technical or participatory terms, provides a low-risk channel for activism—but this also limits its disruptive potential. What emerges is a domesticated form of justice advocacy, oriented toward donor expectations and policy inclusion rather than contentious politics or social mobilization.

These findings echo other studies of civil society, where activists often trade radicalism for access and where advocacy becomes a “soft” form of politics mediated by international partnerships and bureaucratic language (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014). In this context, climate justice becomes less a mobilizing frame for social transformation and more a strategic vocabulary for negotiating visibility and funding.

5.2 | Donor logics and organizational behaviour

Resource mobilization theory highlights how movements depend on—and are shaped by—their access to material and institutional resources. In Jordan, CSOs are overwhelmingly dependent on short-term international donor funding, which creates a projectized, proposal-driven logic of activism. This limits the ability of organizations to define long-term agendas, build strategic coalitions, or engage in sustained policy influence.

In addition, donor conditionality often privileges measurable, technocratic, and apolitical interventions, reinforcing surface-level engagement over structural critique. As shown in the findings, the imperative to remain “fundable” encourages CSOs to align with donor discourse and reporting requirements, even when this departs from community needs or political realities. This echoes critiques of “NGO-ization” in the development literature, where civil society becomes an implementing arm of external agendas rather than an autonomous sphere of collective action (Jad, 2007; Roy, 2010).

Importantly, donor-driven competition also undermines coalition building, a key mechanism through which civil society actors amplify their policy influence. In Jordan, CSOs operate in a fragmented landscape where coordination is weak, alliances are transactional, and branding is paramount. This dynamic reflects what governance scholars describe as a thin form of network governance where interaction exists but collective strategy is absent.

5.3 | Informal access, symbolic inclusion

Governance theory emphasizes the importance of institutional access and the forms of power that shape participation. In Jordan, the climate governance landscape features limited and selective access: CSOs are invited into policy processes in symbolic or instrumental ways but are rarely involved in agenda-setting or decision-making. Formal participatory mechanisms are weak or absent, and informal access depends on personal relationships, donor pressure, or technical credentials.

This mode of engagement, which some scholars term invited spaces (Cornwall, 2002), can expand participation, but often does so underpredefined institutional terms. In Jordan, this means that CSOs may contribute to awareness raising or technical consultations, but not to strategic policy design or inter-ministerial coordination. Their inclusion is real, but hierarchically structured and politically delimited.

The result is a paradox: Jordanian CSOs are increasingly visible in climate policy arenas, both domestically and internationally, but their ability to shape those arenas remains marginal. They are present, but not powerful; recognized, but not central.

5.4 | Bridging theory and findings

Taken together, the findings both substantiate and challenge the explanatory potential of social movement and governance theories in the Jordanian context. Social movement theory helps elucidate how CSOs strategically align their frames with donor and state discourses to maintain access and legitimacy, yet it offers limited traction in explaining the absence of collective mobilization under restrictive political conditions. Similarly, governance theory captures the structural constraints and asymmetrical power relations that define donor–state–civil society interactions, but it underestimates the micro-level agency and adaptive strategies that CSOs employ within these constraints. The intersection of these frameworks thus reveals a productive tension: while governance theory explains why participation remains limited, social movement theory illuminates how actors nonetheless navigate and reconfigure these limitations. Acknowledging this partial fit is central to understanding the dynamics of climate justice advocacy in centralized, aid-dependent settings such as Jordan.

6 | CONCLUSION

For readers less familiar with Jordan, the analysis underscores that the country's climate policy operates within an aid-dependent, centralized system. This duality of reliance and restriction explains why CSOs often engage in non-confrontational advocacy strategies even as they advance justice-oriented discourses.

This study has examined how CSOs in Jordan frame climate justice, mobilize resources, and seek to influence policy within a donor-dependent and politically centralized system. Drawing on 17 semi-structured interviews and informed by theories of social movements and governance, the analysis reveals a sector that is rhetorically aligned with global justice discourses and increasingly active in climate debates yet structurally constrained in its ability to effect systemic change.

Three key dynamics stand out. First, Jordanian CSOs strategically adopt inclusive framings of climate justice that emphasize participation, vulnerability, and equity—particularly for youth, refugees, and rural communities. These narratives resonate with donor priorities and national development goals, but often sidestep structural critique, reflecting the limits of advocacy in centralized contexts. Second, the resource environment, dominated by short-term, project-based international funding, narrows CSOs' autonomy and fosters competition rather than coalition building. Donor conditionality shapes organizational practices and circumscribes the ways justice can be articulated. Third, while CSOs have gained visibility in policy consultations, strategies, and global forums such as

the UNFCCC, their influence remains largely symbolic, constrained by weak participatory mechanisms and marginal institutional standing.

Together, these findings contribute to two sets of debates. For climate governance scholarship, they show how justice discourses travel into aid-dependent contexts, and can become reshaped by donor priorities and state control (Kim et al., 2023). For development policy, they highlight the unintended consequences of prevailing aid modalities, which risk marginalizing the very actors best placed to connect global agendas with local needs. By foregrounding the experiences of CSOs, this study underscores the importance of enabling participatory, justice-oriented approaches to climate action in fragile governance settings.

For policy-makers and donors, the implications are clear. Inclusive climate action requires more than awareness campaigns or token consultations. It involves reforming funding modalities to enable long-term, flexible strategies; institutionalizing representative mechanisms for participation; and fostering horizontal platforms for coordination rather than competition. Donor-CSO relations should evolve from transactional service delivery arrangements toward more equitable partnerships that recognize CSOs as policy actors in their own right (Hustad, 2023). Justice-oriented framing must also be embedded through the integration of equity, livelihood, and inclusion metrics into donor-funded projects. Finally, greater knowledge exchange between local CSOs and international actors is essential to ensure that global climate agendas reflect lived realities on the ground.

By foregrounding the Jordanian case, this article contributes to wider debates on aid effectiveness and the localization of climate action in the Global South. It demonstrates that just climate governance is not achieved by merely inserting civil society into existing structures, but by reshaping the relationships, incentives, and institutional arrangements that underpin climate policy. Recognizing and amplifying the strategic agency of CSOs is therefore crucial to translating global climate commitments into locally grounded and socially just outcomes.

Ultimately, this analysis reflects a conviction that climate justice in Jordan cannot be externally prescribed or technocratically managed. While donor support remains vital, meaningful transformation requires redistributing not only resources but also authority—allowing local actors to define priorities and shape the narratives of change. The persistence of fragmented, donor-driven interventions is not inevitable; it is a political choice sustained by the architecture of aid itself. Recognizing this reality and engaging with it critically rather than deferentially is essential if climate governance in Jordan and similar contexts is to move beyond procedural inclusion toward genuine empowerment and social justice.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Hussam Hussein  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1238-1715>

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ANNEX I

A.1 | GENERAL BACKGROUND

A.1.1 | Jordan's climate actors, their evolution, and the role of youth

The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) has played a pivotal role in shaping Jordan's environmental and climate movements. Initially, the RSCN led efforts focused on environmental conservation, particularly in areas such as biodiversity protection and natural resource management (interviews 2 and 10). Its advocacy was instrumental in the establishment in 2003 of the Ministry of Environment, which serves as the focal point for addressing environmental issues, including climate change. The focus of the RSCN shifted over the years to include climate change, which is closely related to issues of nature conservation, biodiversity and protection of natural resources.

However, over the past decade, the focus of climate movements in Jordan has evolved significantly. As Interviewee 1 noted, “initially, movements focused on preserving nature, but now there is a significant emphasis on how climate change impacts the most vulnerable. This shift reflects broader global trends but also Jordan's unique needs, like water scarcity.” This transition highlights how Jordan's climate discourse has expanded beyond conservation to address more complex issues of climate justice (around access to natural resources, inclusion of the most marginalised, etc.), influenced by global discussions on equity and the country's growing environmental

challenges, such as water scarcity and desertification. The RSCN's early work laid the foundation for this evolution, demonstrating how local initiatives can adapt to align with national priorities and global climate agendas.

The key demands of Jordanian CSOs tend to prioritize focus areas that reflect both national climate challenges and broader regional concerns. Key issues include advocating for climate adaptation funding, emphasizing the urgency of water scarcity, and supporting the establishment of mechanisms for climate loss and damage compensation. Given Jordan's vulnerability to water shortages and desertification, adaptation funding is particularly crucial, with Jordanian CSOs—such as RSCN—emphasizing the need for international support to address climate adaptation challenges, or the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature (APN) (APN, 2015), which frequently urges developed nations in conferences and events to increase financial and technical support for adaptation measures.

In fact, key events, such as regional droughts and water scarcity crises, have served as catalysts for expanding these movements. The impact of these issues on Jordan's communities has amplified CSO demands for policies that prioritize vulnerable groups and emphasize adaptation over mitigation, aligning with Jordan's need to secure resources to address local climate impacts. As Interviewee 4 observed, while “climate change is a global issue, Jordanian priorities need to be focused locally,” a sentiment that highlights the development of CSOs that specifically advocate for regional environmental needs.

A.1.2 | Key actors, groups, and their evolution

Numerous organizations have emerged as leaders in Jordan's climate movement, each with their unique perspective and expertise. There are NGOs, youth initiatives, royal societies, think tanks, and research centres; these actors and groups have been focusing on different topics and have started including also issues around climate change and justice in recent years, as further discussed below. The interest in climate issues has been driven primarily by funding for this topic rather than by a genuine interest in climate issues. Consequently, the relation between groups and organizations working also on climate issues has been more of a competitive rather than of a cooperative nature, as further elaborated in Section 3.

The RSCN, one of the longest-standing environmental organizations, has focused on conserving Jordan's natural resources, including initiatives aimed at biodiversity and environmental protection (interviews 1, 2, 6, 10). Other prominent groups include the Green Generation Foundation (GGF), a youth-focused organization that leads initiatives such as the annual Climate March, which aims to raise climate awareness by engaging communities across Jordan. Several interviewees identified GGF as a significant and authentic climate movement in Jordan, especially noted for community engagement (interview 6). Other newer initiatives are ActionAid International-funded “We for Climate,” which focuses on climate activism through events like the Climate Festival, and includes awareness-raising activities in Amman, Zarqa, and Mafraq (interview 3); Generations for Peace, although initially focused on peacebuilding, has expanded into climate-related programmes, especially involving youth at international events such as the COP; “Dibeen Association for Environmental Development,” very active in raising awareness and climate advocacy, amplifying the voice of Jordanian youth (Weldali, 2023). Experts from local NGOs and research institutions also provide support to different ministries, contributing to drafting national reports and strategies such as the NDCs.

These organizations have shifted from solely addressing environmental issues to incorporating broader social justice and climate equity concerns, which resonate more with Jordan's younger population. Interviewees mentioned that while the shift toward climate change took place in the past 10 years, mainly driven by new international funding opportunities, the inclusion of justice elements is more recent, mainly in the past five years. This evolution has expanded the scope of climate activism beyond environmental conservation. Interviewees highlighted the importance of CSOs in local engagement, with Interviewee 7 describing how CSOs “empower communities by involving them directly in climate action,” thereby building a more sustainable grassroots movement that can address specific local issues. Another example is the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature (APN), which has been engaging local communities and youth, centring their work on the need to actively make a difference,

for instance by planting trees as a way of strengthening the relation between local communities/people and their land and as a form of resistance in places like Palestine. The GGF has also engaged thousands of Jordanian youth in tree-planting and awareness campaigns, highlighting the power of grassroots efforts.

A.1.2.1 | Youth activism and its growing role

Youth activism has significantly shaped Jordan's climate justice movements. With 63% of the population under the age of 30, Jordan has one of the youngest populations in the world, making youth engagement in climate action crucial (UNDP, 2022). However, despite this, young Jordanians remain underrepresented in formal climate policy-making structures. The National Climate Change Policy (2013–2020) made only limited references to youth, and the National Committee on Climate Change (NCCC) does not include youth representation, limiting young people's ability to influence national climate policies. Furthermore, the National Youth Strategy (2019–2025) completely omits climate change, highlighting a major gap in integrating youth into climate action at the policy level (UNDP, 2022).

To deepen youth engagement, initiatives should focus on capacity building programmes that combine climate science with advocacy skills. Many youth activists view climate justice as a way to create equitable opportunities and ensure that their voices are part of the policy conversation. Organizations such as the Arab Youth Climate Movement and initiatives like the Local Conference of Youth on Climate Change (LCOY) provide platforms for youth to actively engage in advocacy, network with regional peers, and participate in international forums, including the COP (UNDP, 2022).

Several interviewees mentioned the Sawn Programme for Youth Climate Action initiative, launched by UNICEF Jordan and Generations For Peace (GFP) in 2022. Sawn—which means “preservation”—focused on raising youth awareness on climate and environmental issues at different levels and increasing their participation in mitigating climate change impacts. Additionally, four participating youth were nominated to attend COP27 in Egypt.

However, while participation in high-profile events is valuable, more structured engagement is needed at the national level. The UNDP (2022) policy brief highlights that Jordan's NDCs 2021 reference youth, but do not provide a structured mechanism for their involvement in decision-making. Therefore, it is essential to develop mentorship programmes, such as pairing youth activists with experienced climate advocates and organizing policy advocacy workshops. Such initiatives would equip young people with the skills necessary to navigate climate governance structures and increase their effectiveness in shaping climate policy.

However, despite the high enthusiasm among young people, the interviewees noted that young activists in Jordan may lack depth in their understanding of climate issues. Interviewee 3 observed that some youth activists—as well as some climate activists—might be “promoting themselves more than truly increasing awareness,” suggesting that youth involvement in the climate movement might sometimes be driven by a desire for visibility rather than substantive engagement. This aligns with findings in the UNDP policy brief, which notes that many young people in Jordan perceive climate change as a distant issue (sometimes framed as “psychological distance”) and are often disengaged from mainstream political processes due to distrust in political institutions (with 72% of Jordanians expressing no confidence in parliament).

Nevertheless, interviewees also noted that this phenomenon extends beyond youth activism and applies to environmental initiatives led by CSOs, where leadership visibility sometimes takes precedence over institutional impact. While some argue that this affects the legitimacy of these initiatives, others contend that, if visibility is coupled with meaningful action, it can drive real change. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure the sustainability of youth-led initiatives beyond the presence of individual activists.

Despite these challenges, the involvement of youth in Jordan's climate movement is growing. Like the global Fridays for Future movement, Jordanian youth activists are increasingly pushing for policies and actions that address their concerns about the future of the country's environment and economy. However, to sustain and institutionalize their engagement, Jordan must take policy-driven steps to include youth in climate governance.