Research Paper

Middle East and North Africa Programme

December 2025

How the Middle East and North Africa can benefit from adaptive climate governance

Striking the balance between rights-based and technocratic approaches

Karim Elgendy

CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, is a world-leading policy institute based in London. Our mission is to help governments and societies to build a secure, sustainable, prosperous and just world.

Contents

	Summary	2
01	Introduction	4
02	Climate governance models	7
03	Adaptive climate governance in MENA	23
04	Policy recommendations	32
	About the author	36
	Acknowledgments	36

Summary

- Climate governance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) will have a lasting effect on the political and economic future of the region. At present, intensifying climate impacts and accelerating global energy transitions are forcing governments to act with urgency. The way these countries manage climate action – whether it is hierarchical or participative, and whether it is equitable – will reshape state–society relations in the region.
- Public buy-in is critical to sustainable climate action, as these policies reshape the everyday lives and economic choices of civilians. Policies that tend to lack popular acceptance – such as subsidy reforms, land-use changes or large infrastructure decisions – risk provoking a backlash or delaying and even reversing progress. Where people feel consulted, informed or at least acknowledged, governments are better placed to introduce difficult long-term measures. Meaningful engagement may enable access to local knowledge that can improve project design, strengthen trust in institutions and help ensure that necessary reforms are understood. For many countries, a participative process to conduct climate action can also unlock international climate finance, which increasingly requires stakeholder involvement.
- Countries in the MENA region face climate change and the energy transition from highly unequal starting points. Wealthy hydrocarbon exporters, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, can fund large-scale clean-energy projects, while resource-constrained economies, such as Egypt, Morocco and Jordan, depend on external finance and must prioritize affordability and the development of institutional capacity. These differences influence divergent governance models and shape what type of climate action is feasible.
- Two distinct governance models are prevalent in climate policymaking in the region:
  - Constitutional-participatory systems (e.g. Morocco) enshrine environmental rights and involve local authorities and civil society in climate action. This builds legitimacy but the countries that adopt this approach often struggle with delivery because of limited capacity.
  - Techno-investment systems (e.g. United Arab Emirates) rely on centralized authority and large-scale investment to deliver rapid results but limit broad participation, creating potential legitimacy gaps.

- Most MENA states now operate hybrid adaptive systems. Countries such as Jordan blend selective public and institutional participation with technocratic, investment-driven implementation. This has the benefits of meeting requirements for external climate finance, maintaining central control and securing public acceptance under tight fiscal and political constraints.
- Adaptive climate governance is emerging as the region's most pragmatic path. This approach acknowledges that both legitimacy (through inclusion and transparency) and capacity (through centralized coordination and expertise) are required to accelerate sustainable green investment, deliver projects and maintain stable social contracts.
- Regional leaders increasingly recognize that climate governance cannot be one-dimensional. Their attempts to blend technical planning with participatory or societal approaches reflect an understanding that climate change requires both credible technical capacity and broad social legitimacy. This paper assesses the effectiveness of different MENA climate governance models to highlight best practice in the region.
- Governance choices today will determine whether MENA countries can mobilize finance, deploy large-scale renewable projects at speed and avoid social unrest as climate policies reshape energy, water and economic systems. Without adaptive governance built on trust, the region risks stalled transitions and rising political fragility.
- The paper provides several key recommendations, including:
  - For governments: Identify the best time in the drafting of policy to engage stakeholders and the public. Allow structured, time-bound citizen-level participation in climate planning to minimize potential delays, while empowering specialized delivery units or regional agencies to authorize and implement priority climate action projects more effectively.
  - For civil society: Modify strategies to the political context, and use existing legal and policy frameworks to monitor implementation, explain climate plans for affected communities and provide technical input where civic space allows.
  - For international donors: Tailor climate finance to governance realities, linking support to improvements in transparency, coordination and institutional capacity rather than imposing uniform participation requirements.
  - For regional bodies: Support technical cooperation platforms such as the Regional Center for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency to encourage the sharing of practical lessons on water, energy and adaptation, including with civil society, and help normalize more inclusive and adaptive governance practices.

01 Introduction

Climate change is reshaping state–society relations across the MENA region. Growing climate risks and green-economy opportunities are pushing governments to act, making climate governance a critical vehicle for legitimacy, participation and long-term sustainability.

Why climate governance and social contracts matter in the MENA region

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is acutely vulnerable to the cascading impacts of climate change, but it is well placed to develop both green technology and related economic opportunities. Intensifying heatwaves, water scarcity and extreme weather in the region are pressuring governments to act with urgency.[1] At the same time, the global shift towards renewable energy presents a chance for MENA countries to diversify their economies, particularly away from fossil fuel exports, and create jobs. How governments respond to climate change – not only through policies and projects, but through the way they engage their citizens – is becoming a defining feature of state–society relations. In other words, climate action is now a core element of the region's evolving social contracts.

This paper uses the lens of the green economy to assess the effectiveness and best practice of different MENA climate governance models. Here the term 'green economy' refers to economic strategies and policies that support low-carbon resource-efficient growth – initiatives that advance climate mitigation while sustaining development objectives. The term 'climate governance', on the other hand refers to the processes, institutions and relationships through which public and private actors design, implement and coordinate climate-related policies. It includes decision-making authority, accountability mechanisms and the degree of participation across levels of government and society.

1 Eladawy, A. (2025), 'Climate Governance in MENA and Africa: Knowledge, Policies, and Cooperation', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, article, 27 February 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/02/climate-governance-mena-africa?lang=en.

The shift to renewables and sustainability is dependent on the integrity of social contracts: the implicit or explicit agreements that define state responsibilities and citizen expectations. Climate change is effectively stress-testing these agreements. Citizens across the MENA region are increasingly aware of and affected by environmental issues. A 2023 survey found three-quarters of young people in North Africa and the Gulf countries feel that climate change impacts their daily lives.[2] The response of states, whether by engaging or bypassing communities, and government delivery of climate action are reshaping trust in public institutions. This draws on the long-standing notion of social contracts in political-economy research[3] and recent arguments that environmental stress can reconfigure these implicit state–society bargains.[4]

The shift to renewables and sustainability is dependent on the integrity of social contracts: the implicit or explicit agreements that define state responsibilities and citizen expectations.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, it outlines the theoretical framework distinguishing a 'constitutional-participatory' governance model (an approach that embeds environmental rights in law and involves citizens and local authorities in shaping climate decisions) versus a 'techno-investment' one (a centralized, top-down approach that drives climate action through large-scale technology projects and state-led investment with limited public participation). The paper goes on to define the core characteristics of the models and explain what is meant by adaptive climate governance, a method that takes elements from both approaches in response to climate pressures.

Next, the paper presents a detailed comparative analysis of these models in practice, examining country case studies that represent different approaches to climate governance. Morocco and Tunisia are examples of constitutional-participatory frameworks, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia are illustrations of techno-investment models.

The paper then examines emerging adaptive approaches to climate governance in Egypt and Jordan, demonstrating how these countries are attempting to reconcile the legitimacy benefits of civic participation with the efficiency advantages of centralized delivery under fiscal and capacity constraints.

---

2 Shafi, N. (2025), 'Climate Activism and Civil Society Organizations in the MENA Region', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, article, 27 March 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/climate-activism-civil-society-mena?lang=en.
3 Loewe, L., Zintl, T. and Houdret, A. (2021), 'The social contract as a tool of analysis: Introduction to the special issue on "Framing the evolution of new social contracts in Middle Eastern and North African countries"', *World Development*, Elsevier, 145(C), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.104982.
4 Adger, W. et al. (2013), 'Changing social contracts in climate-change adaptation', *Nature Climate Change,* 3, pp. 330–333, https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate1751; O'Brien, K., Hayward, B. and Berkes, F. (2009), 'Rethinking Social Contracts: Building Resilience in a Changing Climate', *Ecology and Society*, 14(2), http://www.jstor.org/stable/26268331.

Finally, drawing on insights from all these case studies, the paper offers concrete, context-sensitive policy recommendations for governments, civil society organizations, international climate finance institutions and regional cooperation bodies to strengthen adaptive climate governance across the MENA region.

02 Climate governance models

MENA countries have adopted contrasting climate governance models. Understanding these models reveals how different governance choices shape investment flows, project delivery and public trust.

Constitutional-participatory vs techno-investment

Research on climate governance has emphasized that effective responses to climate change depend not only on policy instruments but on institutions and relationships that enable collective action.[5] Key elements for building resilience and sustaining legitimacy in the fight against climate change include adaptive climate governance frameworks (the notion that state–citizen relations can adjust and evolve in response to climate pressures and economic imperatives), as well as flexibility, the ability to learn and participation.[6] Comparative governance case studies in this paper demonstrate that current climate-policy regimes are on a continuum between participatory and technocratic decision-making.

5 Folke, C., Hahn, T., Olsson, P. and Norberg, J. (2005), 'Adaptive Governance of Social-Ecological Systems', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 30(1), pp. 441–73, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.energy.30.050504.144511.
6 Lebel, L. et al. (2006), 'Governance and the Capacity to Manage Resilience in Regional Social-Ecological Systems', *Ecology and Society*, 11(1), p. 19, http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol11/iss1/art19.

While much of the scholarship on climate-governance dynamics has focused on more democratic or decentralized contexts,[7] far fewer studies have tested these frameworks in the MENA region, where distinctive features such as varying state-capacity profiles, political systems, rentier economies and evolving social contracts shape how climate action is governed and its effectiveness.[8]

Although recent work has begun to examine climate-governance dynamics in individual MENA countries,[9] there remains no comprehensive, region-wide comparative analysis linking governance models to climate outcomes, such research would allow countries to share lessons and best practice from similar contexts. Existing regional studies tend to focus on economic adaptation and energy transition rather than on the governance mechanisms shaping implementation, investment or legitimacy.[10]

This paper seeks to address this analytical gap by linking research into both adaptive governance and social contracts to emerging climate-governance practices in MENA. The analysis here adapts the frameworks above to the MENA region, distinguishing a 'constitutional-participatory' model from a 'techno-investment' one. It also introduces 'adaptive climate governance', situating this notion in MENA's hybrid political orders, and demonstrating how differing governance models affect both climate outcomes and state–society trust.

Different MENA countries have adopted markedly different climate governance approaches, reflecting their varied political systems, resource endowments, administrative capacities and, in some cases, the influence of distinct legal and historical traditions. Some, like Morocco and Tunisia, have incorporated climate and environmental rights into constitutional or legal frameworks emphasizing transparency, decentralization and citizen participation (referred to here as the 'constitutional-participatory' model). Others, notably the Gulf monarchies, have pursued a highly centralized model, driving climate initiatives via top-down directives, technological projects and large-scale investments, while offering limited formal and curated avenues for public input (the 'techno-investment' model).

What makes this region unique globally is the coexistence of these models within a shared geographic, ecological and economic context – where countries face similar climate risks and rely heavily on public investment – yet diverge sharply in how authority and participation are structured. Unlike regions where governance patterns correlate more predictably with income level or regime type, MENA's mix of rentier states, reformist monarchies and young democracies allows for direct comparison of how different governance styles influence climate outcomes. As such, the region serves as a natural laboratory for testing the assumptions behind participatory, technocratic and hybrid governance models, offering lessons with both local and global relevance.

---

7 Fischer, H. (2021), 'Decentralization and the governance of climate adaptation: Situating community-based planning within broader trajectories of political transformation', *World Development*, 140(3): 105335, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105335.
8 Poberezhskaya, M. and El-Anis, I. (2023), 'Constructing climate change rentierism in Jordan', *Environmental Politics*, pp. 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2024.2427527.
9 Ibid.
10 Tagliapietra, S. (2019), 'The impact of the global energy transition on MENA oil and gas producers', *Energy Strategy Reviews*, 26, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esr.2019.100397.

This paper presents the idea that climate governance in MENA falls on a spectrum between constitutional-participatory and techno-investment governance. In a participatory model, governments enshrine environmental rights in law and involve the public or local authorities in decision-making. By adopting this approach, they aim to engender broader buy-in and improve accountability, which is crucial in a region where climate reforms can impose lifestyle changes, new costs or disruptive infrastructure. Furthermore, participation helps governments anticipate resistance, draw on local knowledge, strengthen trust, satisfy donor requirements and ensure that policies are not reversed when circumstances change. The downside is that without strong state capacity, these inclusive processes can lead to idealistic (sometimes impractical) plans and slow implementation on the ground.

This paper presents the idea that climate governance in MENA falls on a spectrum between constitutional-participatory and techno-investment governance.

At the other end of the spectrum lies a technology and investment-based climate governance model that centralizes climate action in the hands of a few experts or national leaders. Here the state drives grand climate and energy projects, and attracts big investments, all while keeping public participation minimal or channelled through legislative bodies or curated state-controlled forums. Proponents of this system believe that strong central coordination by an executive office or a royal commission cuts red tape and delivers quick results with direct impacts. For such an approach, there is the risk of a legitimacy gap, where policies may move fast but without wider societal support, to which the public might react negatively if action requires sacrifices that affect their lives (e.g. subsidy cuts or unfavourable land-use changes).

Many MENA governments are blending elements of both models, adapting their climate governance in response to existing resources and capabilities (availability of funding in state budget, foreign investments, skills and administrative capacity), internal pressures (economic troubles and youth demands) and external pressures (climate impacts and competition for green investment). A state that leans towards the participatory model might, for example, still centralize control to fast-track a flagship solar project, similarly a traditionally autocratic state might open limited consultations to gain some credibility for an energy subsidy reform.

Notably, a country's resource wealth shapes its climate strategy. Oil and gas exporting states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar can bankroll large-scale projects and attract partners more easily. By contrast, countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon with limited budgets or costly fuel imports depend on outside capital and donor finance, requiring that green projects demonstrate clear returns or align with lender conditions. In both cases, economic incentives are paramount. Fossil fuel producers aim to free up oil and gas for export to maximize revenue, while import-dependent economies seek to cut fuel import bills and subsidy costs. This

means that for many policymakers, climate projects are often judged by their return on investment and fiscal impact – for example, whether a renewable project attracts investors and yields long-term savings or profits – rather than on climate outcomes.[11]

A more accurate definition of successful climate outcomes is crucial for effective policy. For example, this may refer to economic efficiency (e.g. higher return on investment or cost-effectiveness of projects), effectiveness in cutting emissions, or social legitimacy (public buy-in and equity).

This paper uses a range of metrics in its analysis of climate governance, from dollars of green investment to projects completed and public trust. The analysis uses three indicators to assess these different governance models:

1. Investment: Are current policies encouraging climate finance and green investment to flow in? Are investments in clean technologies being made?
2. Project implementation: Are plans on paper turning into actual projects and infrastructure on the ground that reduce climate impacts?
3. Public trust: Does the public have confidence in the fairness and reliability of climate-related decision-making? Using indicators such as stakeholder participation, transparency mechanisms, risk communication,[12] and coordination across sectors and levels of government.[13]

Using these yardsticks, it is possible to compare a participatory approach like Morocco's with a technocratic one like Saudi Arabia's, not just in theory but through examining more tangible results. It also helps highlight trade-offs. Participatory governance can boost legitimacy and social support for green policies, as well as provide local authorities with a mandate and competence to facilitate investment, whereas techno-investment governance can push through construction and delivery faster.

While climate outcomes are influenced by broader structural variables, such as state wealth or the investment climate, governance practices – whether policies are co-developed with stakeholders, backed by legal mandates or supported by inter-ministerial coordination – remain decisive in shaping implementation. For instance, both Algeria and Jordan are lower-middle income countries, but their contrasting institutional approaches yield varying levels of policy coherence and stakeholder engagement due to their different governance practices.[14]

In the next section, this paper examines how these models play out in four MENA countries, two of which are governed by a participatory model (Morocco and Tunisia), while the other two take a more technocratic approach (UAE and Saudi Arabia). Each case shows the model's promise and pitfalls.

---

11 Haytayan, L. and Keskes, H. (2023), *Energy Transition in the Middle East and Africa: The Road to COP28*, briefing, Natural Resource Governance Institute, https://resourcegovernance.org/publications/energy-transition-middle-east-and-north-africa-road-cop28.
12 Sulaiman, K. (2025), 'Climate Information Transparency in the MENA Region', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, article, 30 January 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/01/climate-information-transparency-in-the-mena-region?lang=en.
13 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2024), 'Climate Governance Assessment in the MENA region: Methodology', https://carnegieendowment.org/programs/middle-east/mapping-climate-governance-in-the-mena-region-a-database-for-policy-and-research?lang=en.
14 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2024), 'Climate Governance Assessment in the MENA region: Methodology'.

Figure 1. A spectrum of climate governance models in MENA: From constitutional-participatory frameworks to techno-investment models

Constitutional-participatory model

Rights-based frameworks, decentralization and stakeholder engagement

Morocco

Approach
- Constitutional environmental rights
- Regional empowerment supported by government agencies
- Local investment and facilitation

Strengths
- Strong legal frameworks
- Attracts donations and investment, and facilitates implementation
- Local mandate and competence

Weaknesses
- Uneven regional capacity
- Poorer regions lack skilled staff

Tunisia

Approach
- Constitutional environmental rights
- Wide stakeholder consultation on green economic strategy
- Civil society-led monitoring and accountability

Strengths
- Relatively strong legal frameworks
- Active civil society and grassroots pressure
- Transparency mandate

Weaknesses
- Limited state capacity, political instability and fragmented coordination undermine delivery
- Underfunded local councils

Hybrid model

Blending participation and technocratic delivery

Egypt

Approach
- Constitutional environmental rights
- Limited public consultation and managed CSOs inclusion
- Top-down implementation of large-scale programmes

Strengths
- Attracts donations and investment
- Donor credibility via participation rhetoric and delivery

Weaknesses
- Limited public/civil society consultation
- Suppression of unsanctioned activism

Jordan

Approach
- Public consultation and civil society inclusion
- Donor-driven technocratic delivery

Strengths
- Attracts donations and investment
- Donor credibility via participation and delivery
- Legitimacy from input and output

Weaknesses
- Capacity and resource issues
- Extent of civil society influence can cause delays

Techno-investment model

Centralized, top-down, expert-driven with limited public input

United Arab Emirates

Approach
- Federal and Emirate level coordination and top-down planning
- National plans for green economic growth
- Large-scale state-backed projects
- Limited and curated public participation

Strengths
- Attracts investment and mobilizes resources quickly
- Efficient commercially viable delivery

Weaknesses
- Minimal public/civil society consultation
- Projects exclude local knowledge
- May underestimate social impacts

Saudi Arabia

Approach
- Centralized coordination and top-down planning
- Energy strategy part of economic diversification plan
- Large-scale state-backed projects
- Limited and managed public engagement

Strengths
- Rapidly growing renewable market
- Centralized pipeline for mega projects
- Long-term plans for decarbonization

Weaknesses
- Limited public input
- Mega projects often exclude input from local communities

Source: Compiled by the author.

Morocco: Decentralization with a national vision

Empowered regions and investor confidence

Morocco has pursued a climate strategy that combines a national vision with empowered local institutions. Constitutional reforms in 2011 recognized the importance of sustainable development and decentralization: with Article 31 outlining the state's commitment to equal access to water, a healthy environment and sustainable development for all citizens, and Article 35 safeguarding natural resources for future generations.[15] To achieve these goals, authority and resources have been delegated to the regions, supported by oversight bodies such as an environmental police force and water basin agencies.[16]

Furthermore, regional climate committees, often part of broader regional councils, enable local officials, businesses and civil groups to plan and oversee climate projects. For example, rather than being micromanaged by central government in Rabat, the flagship Noor Ouarzazate solar complex – the MENA region's first mega solar array with a capacity of 580 megawatts (MW) – was facilitated by the local Regional Investment Center. This local body functioned as a one-stop shop streamlining permits, land acquisition and coordination with local agencies, thus facilitating investment.[17]

The effectiveness of this model depends on a combination of delegated authority and administrative capacity at the local regional level. In Morocco, it works because regional councils have both a legal mandate to approve investment projects and sufficient competence to coordinate among ministries and private actors. However, such arrangements may be harder to replicate in countries where central agencies are reluctant to cede control. For example, Algerian provinces remain constrained by limited authority and climate literacy.[18] Meanwhile, Morocco's streamlined decision-making procedures, combined with its more than 50 free trade agreements, have positioned the country as a manufacturing and export base for green technology.[19]

Local participation and resource management

Morocco's participatory ethos extends to critical resource sectors such as water. The National Climate Plan 2030 empowers basin-level water councils and regional committees to tailor adaptation measures – such as small dams and drought-resistant crops – to local needs. This decentralization enhances the scalability of investments, as regional committees manage local priorities and help align

---

15 Constitute (undated), 'Morocco 2011', Constitution of the Kingdom of Morocco of 2011, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Morocco_2011.
16 Madani, M., Maghraoui, D. and Zerhouni, S. (2012), 'The 2011 Moroccan Constitution: A Critical Analysis', assistance paper, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/the-2011-moroccan-constitution-critical-analysis.pdf.
17 World Bank (2023), *The World Bank Group's Engagement in Morocco, Fiscal Years 2011–21:* Country Program Evaluation, Independent Evaluation Group, Washington, DC: World Bank, https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/sites/default/files/Data/Evaluation/files/Morocco_CPE.pdf.
18 Arkeh, J. and Khalil, S. (2024), *Climate Governance in Algeria: Analyzing Institutional Capacities, Challenges, and Strategic Pathways*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Primer, 5 December 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/climate-governance-algeria?lang=en.
19 US Embassy in Morocco (2020), 'Perception Study of the United States–Morocco Free Trade Agreement', https://ma.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/153/USMFTA-Study_English_-Final-Version.pdf.

projects with on-the-ground realities.[20] This is reinforced by national legislation such as the National Charter for the Environment and Sustainable Development (2011), Environmental Assessment Law (2020), and Water Law (2016), all of which embed participation and sustainability into regional planning. National interventions such as the Agadir Declaration (2017) underscore the role of local and regional governments in climate action.

This decentralized approach that reduces the distance between decision-makers and local needs has yielded tangible regional successes. In Souss-Massa, beyond regenerating 10,000 hectares for the Argan biosphere reserve[21] and expanding drip irrigation,[22] the Regional Climate Plan allocated over 507 million dirhams ($52.5 million) in 2016 to priority climate projects, including integrated coastal management and fisheries-focused ocean monitoring.[23] The region also implemented World Bank-backed structural flood protection works.[24]

Lessons from Morocco

While Morocco's governance model balances ambition and participation, not all regions of the country have the same capacity. Poorer regions such as Drâa-Tafilalet may lack skilled staff or budget, slowing project roll-out. Furthermore, while municipalities have strong regulatory frameworks in waste management, they often lack sufficient technical expertise to enforce them effectively. Strengthening local governance capacity could ensure that ambitious plans translate into consistent delivery nationwide.

It is important to note that major initiatives still must align with King Mohammed VI's strategic direction, meaning local plans operate within the parameters set out by royal priorities.[25] While this may seem to constrain local activities, the 2011 constitution's enshrining of the right to sustainable development provides civil society a legal hook to hold government accountable, though public climate litigation remains rare.

Overall, Morocco demonstrates how a decentralization framework, anchored in constitutional rights and backed by investor-friendly facilitation, can make climate action both participatory and competitive. The challenges ahead lie in increasing local capacity and ensuring all regions can deliver to the same standard, so that climate benefits and economic opportunities are shared across the country.

---

20 Quinn, T. (2025), 'Morocco's Integrated Regional Development Strategy: A New Era for Emerging Market Investors', AInvest, 29 July 2025, https://www.ainvest.com/news/morocco-integrated-regional-development-strategy-era-emerging-market-investors-2507.
21 UNESCO (2025), 'Arganeraie', https://www.unesco.org/en/mab/arganeraie.
22 Seif-Ennasr, M. et al. (2022), 'Towards more sustainable and climate-smart water and agricultural systems: Study case of the Souss Massa Basin in Morocco', *Frontiers in Science and Engineering*, 11(2), https://doi.org/10.34874/IMIST.PRSM/fsejournal-v11i2.29003.
23 Hasegawa, K. and Lehr, U. (2024), *Climate Change Impacts on the Blue Economy in Morocco: Prospects for Jobs in Coastal Tourism*, Maghreb Technical Note, Number 12, Washington, DC: World Bank, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/59806cead42a777c62a754cb703d0c18-0280012024/original/Morocco-Technical-Note-12.pdf.
24 Partnership on Transparency in the Paris Agreement (2020), *Driving Subnational Climate Action in Morocco: The Innovative Example of Souss Massa's Territorial Plan*, https://transparency-partnership.net/system/files/document/190113_GPD_Morocco-Sous-Massa_RZ.pdf.
25 Kingdom of Morocco Ministry of Youth, Culture and Communication (2025), 'Morocco's Royal Priorities put Ecological Transition From and Center', press release, 23 July 2025, https://www.maroc.ma/en/news/moroccos-royal-priorities-put-ecological-transition-front-and-center.

Tunisia: Progressive reforms, practical hurdles

Climate rights and decentralization on paper

Tunisia took a bold participatory turn after the Arab Spring. Its 2014 constitution is one of the region's greenest, explicitly mentioning that 'the state guarantees the right to a healthy and balanced environment and the right to participate in the protection of the climate' (Article 45, 2014 Tunisian Constitution).[26] This laid the foundation for laws to empower local governments and elected municipal councils, aiming for bottom-up climate action. In theory, Tunisia has covered all good governance requirements with strong environmental rights, transparency mandates and the decentralization of authority.

Furthermore, Tunisia's long-term green economy strategy, formulated in the mid-2010s, was developed through broad consultations with ministries, local authorities, private sector actors and civil society organizations (CSOs), and is now embedded in sectoral plans for energy, transport and water. Such integration reflects how participatory climate governance can align economic diversification – particularly towards a more sustainable economic model – with public engagement and support.[27]

Beyond consultation, CSOs help sustain climate governance by monitoring state performance and translating complex policies for vulnerable communities. In Tunisia, several climate-focused CSOs have piloted local accountability tools, such as citizen audits and participatory feedback mechanisms, to track municipal adaptation plans and service delivery.[28] National non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Al Bawsala have strengthened accountability through initiatives like Marsad Baladia, which tracks municipal budgets, transparency and service performance across the country. By making data public and exposing gaps in local delivery, these monitoring tools have compelled some municipalities to adjust practices and improve responsiveness. Together, these forms of civic participation show how Tunisian civil society can generate pressure for corrective action and strengthen governance outcomes, even in a challenging institutional environment.[29]

Gap between promise and implementation

In practice, however, Tunisia has struggled to turn its progressive laws into tangible results due to lack of state capacity. Government coordination is fragmented and, due to a culture of ministerial silos, climate change has not been fully embedded

26 Constitute (undated), 'Tunisia 2014', Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia (2014), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Tunisia_2014?lang=en.
27 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (2022), *Updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC): Tunisia*, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/NDC/2022-08/CDN%20-%20Updated%20-english%20version.pdf.
28 Madhi, M. (2025), 'Tunisia's Climate Justice Movement', Arab Reform Initiative, 30 April 2025, https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/tunisias-climate-justice-movement.
29 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019), *Open Government in Tunisia: La Marsa, Sayada and Sfax*, Paris: OECD Publishing, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/08/open-government-in-tunisia-la-marsa-sayada-and-sfax_g1g9c42d/9789264310995-en.pdf.

into all ministries' agendas.[30] As of 2025, only the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries employed a coordinator for climate change.[31] The Ministry of Environment, which in principle should lead on climate, saw frequent changes in leadership and has limited political sway in government.[32]

Tunisia has struggled to turn its progressive laws into tangible results due to lack of state capacity. Government coordination is fragmented and, due to a culture of ministerial silos, climate change has not been fully embedded into all ministries' agendas.

Decentralization too has been nominal. Local councils exist but often lack the funding and technical expertise to implement plans.[33] A review of Tunisia's climate institutions concluded that climate action 'is not being mainstreamed' across ministries, a gap exacerbated by insufficient capacity, institutional fragmentation and poor local resources.[34] Additionally, Tunisia's subnational governance struggles, where local authorities are underfunded and face inconsistent guidance, further explain the gap between national plans and current outcomes. The share of subnational government expenditure on climate has in fact dropped from 7.8 per cent of general government expenditure in 2016 to 3.8 per cent in 2020.[35]

With fragmentation between ministries, insufficient funding at the local council level and wider political turbulence all delaying renewable energy projects,[36] the challenge here is not participation, but the absence of clear authority to implement decisions and limited capacity for civil society engagement to influence delivery.[37]

Tunisia's renewable energy roll-out exemplifies the tension between participatory frameworks and effective delivery. In 2019, the government awarded contracts for 500 MW of solar power, but political instability and fragmented authority meant many of these projects stalled for several years without approval for financial

---

30 World Bank (2023), *Tunisia Country Climate and Development Report*, Washington DC: World Bank Group, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099112723090114652/pdf/P1791300b52c2a0b00b7bd07899c171db5b.pdf.
31 Knaepen, H. (2021), *Climate risks in Tunisia: Challenges to adaptation in the agri-food system*, Research Paper, European Centre for Development Policy Management, https://www.cascades.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Climate-risks-in-Tunisia-Challenges-to-adaptation-in-the-agri-food-system.pdf.
32 Kardous, M. O. (2024), 'Political Instability and Environmental Politics in Postrevolutionary Tunisia', Center for Strategic and International Studies, commentary, 9 April 2024, https://www.csis.org/analysis/political-instability-and-environmental-politics-postrevolutionary-tunisia.
33 Ben Youssef, A. (2024), 'Climate change in the Tunisian cities: lessons learned and best practices', *Environmental Economics and Policy Studies*, 26, pp. 145–164, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10018-022-00353-x.
34 Knaepen (2021), *Climate risks in Tunisia: Challenges to adaptation in the agri-food system*.
35 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and United Cities and Local Governments (2022), 'Tunisia – Unitary Country', World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment (SNG-WOFI), https://www.sng-wofi.org/country_profiles/tunisia.html.
36 African Development Bank (2021), *Country Priority Plan and Diagnostic of the Electricity Sector – Tunisia*, https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/2021/11/22/tunisia.pdf.
37 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019), *Open Government in Tunisia: La Marsa, Sayada and Sfax.*

investment.[38] By late 2023, however, momentum began to build with 200 MW under construction and another 300 MW close to being confirmed.[39] In 2022, Tunisia also launched a 1,700 MW renewable energy tender (1,100 MW solar and 600 MW wind), which is still ongoing.[40] By early 2025, licences were granted to four international firms for the solar component – Qair International (300 MW), Voltalia (100 MW), Scatec (100 MW), and Aeolus (100 MW) – which confirms some progress in project delivery.[41]

Civil society and public pressure

Civil society remains a bright spot in Tunisia's climate governance. Local organizations and community groups have played an important role in exposing environmental and service-delivery failures, particularly around water access. Across interior regions such as Kairouan, frequent community mobilization – including more than 150 protests recorded in June 2020 alone[42] – has drawn public and governmental attention to failing water systems, underscoring how grassroots activism can surface climate-linked vulnerabilities and pressure institutions to act.[43] NGOs and grassroots movements regularly invoke Article 45 of the 2014 constitution when pressing authorities on other matters such as water mismanagement, even if much of this pressure happens outside formal courts.

Lessons from Tunisia

Tunisia's climate governance highlights the importance of institutional capacity and local delivery. While national frameworks like the 2014 Constitution and updated nationally determined contributions (NDCs) commit to ambitious goals, implementation is hampered by a culture of silos, weak local funding and poor coordination.[44] It demonstrates that strong participatory guarantees and vocal civil society can elevate climate issues. However, without functioning institutions and resources to support such participation, intentions under this model do not necessarily translate into results. Participatory frameworks need to be underpinned by coherent institutions and economic stability. For Tunisia, this may mean reinforcing its participatory model with a central climate authority and streamlined approval for priority projects, while also ensuring local councils and civil society have the resources to contribute effectively.

---

38 World Bank (2025), *Tunisia Energy Reliability, Efficiency, and Governance Improvement Program: Program Information Document*, 15 March 2025, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099031525065039924/pdf/P507304-161c6028-502c-4281-85b6-9e7f219973d9.pdf.
39 Ahmed, N. (2024), 'Tunisia's Renewables Ambitions Pick Up Pace As 500MW+ Solar Advances', MEES, 24 May 2024, https://www.mees.com/2024/5/24/power-water/tunisias-renewables-ambitions-pick-up-pace-as-500mw-solar-advances/0cbd39c0-19d8-11ef-86d3-6d7c2f41f6c0.
40 World Bank (2025), *Tunisia Energy Reliability, Efficiency, and Governance Improvement Program: Program Information Document*.
41 Reuters (2025), 'Tunisia taps four international firms to build 500 MW of solar projects', 25 March 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/tunisia-taps-four-international-firms-build-500-mw-solar-projects-2025-03-25.
42 Jouini, Y. (2020), 'Water Scarcity in Tunisia: Environmental Activism, Sustainable Development and Technology' in *Global Information Society Watch 2020: Technology, the environment and a sustainable world*, https://www.giswatch.org/node/6262.
43 Foroudi, L. (2019), 'Thirsty crops, leaky infrastructure drive Tunisia's water crisis', Thomson Reuters Foundation News, 1 November 2019, https://news.trust.org/item/20191101003202-8y8vv.
44 Wehrey, F. and Fawal, N. (2024), 'Cascading Climate Effects in the Middle East and North Africa: Adapting Through Inclusive Governance', article, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/02/cascading-climate-effects-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-adapting-through-inclusive-governance?lang=en.

UAE: Technology driven climate action

Central coordination with clear lines of authority

Climate governance in the UAE runs through a federal coordination structure: the UAE Council on Climate Change and Environment aligns ministries and emirates on strategy and delivery,[45] and has appointed the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment (MOCCAE) as the lead institution. The National Climate Change Plan of the UAE 2017–2050 provides the overarching framework for mitigation, adaptation and green economic growth, guiding implementation across government.[46] The UAE's Energy Strategy 2050 complements this by aiming to increase the country's installed clean energy capacity to almost 20 gigawatts (GW) – accounting for 30 per cent of the energy mix – by 2030.[47] These strategies were prepared within the federal government and announced as national visions rather than co-produced through broad public consultation.

Large-scale projects with rapid gains

Implementation has centred on the rapid establishment of state-backed utility-scale renewable energy assets. The Al Dhafra Solar project (2 GW) became operational in 2023,[48] Noor Abu Dhabi (1.2 GW) has been online since 2019,[49] and Dubai's Mohammed bin Rashid Solar Park is scaling towards 8.1 GW by 2030.[50] When fully operational, the Barakah Nuclear Plant will have a baseload generation capacity of 5.6 GW, which will enable it to play a significant role in both diversifying the energy mix and increasing energy security.[51] These projects were developed through government-to-government and corporate tenders, not public consultation, and stakeholder input was limited to industry players, financiers and selected research institutes.

From projects to regulations

In 2024, the UAE enacted Federal Decree Law No. 11 on the Reduction of Climate Change Effects, introducing mandatory measurement and reporting of greenhouse gas emissions across all companies and the requirement for adaptation planning.[52] Consultation for this law has been limited to federal–emirate coordination and structured workshops with companies and agencies, rather than open citizen

---

45 Gulf News (2018), 'UAE forms council for climate change and environment', 16 September, https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-forms-council-for-climate-change-and-environment-1.1951444.
46 United Arab Emirates Government (2024), 'National Climate Change Plan of the UAE 2017–2050', https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/environment-and-energy/national-climate-change-plan-of-the-uae.
47 United Arab Emirates Government (2024), 'UAE Energy Strategy 2050', https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/environment-and-energy/uae-energy-strategy-2050.
48 Masdar (2025), 'Al Dhafra Solar PV', https://masdar.ae/en/renewables/our-projects/al-dhafra-solar-pv.
49 Noor Abu Dhabi (2025), 'Noor Abu Dhabi solar plant completes second year of commercial operation', https://noorabudhabi.ae/news/noor-abu-dhabi-solar-plant-completes-second-year-of-commercial-operation.
50 Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) (undated), 'Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park', https://www.dewa.gov.ae/en/about-us/strategic-initiatives/mbr-solar-park.
51 Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation (2025), *The UAE Peaceful Nuclear Energy Program*, https://www.enec.gov.ae/doc/the-uae-peaceful-nuclear-energy-program-in-brief-eng-623c244ee9843.pdf.
52 United Arab Emirates Government (2024), 'Federal Decree-Law No. (11) of 2024 On the Reduction of Climate Change Effects', https://uaelegislation.gov.ae/en/legislations/2558/download.

participation. Broader public consultation could have strengthened the law by identifying local implementation barriers, incorporating community knowledge into adaptation planning, and reducing compliance burdens for smaller actors. Engagement with the UAE's diverse municipalities, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), sectoral associations and civil society organizations would have revealed practical local constraints that federal–emirate coordination alone may overlook. Early dialogue with affected groups could have also informed phased implementation or targeted support mechanisms.

At the emirate level, Abu Dhabi's Climate Change Strategy 2023–2027 – which sets a target of reducing emissions by 22 per cent by 2027, compared to a 2016 baseline – was coordinated by the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi in partnership with government entities and selected private stakeholders,[53] but not through broad citizen consultation.

The UAE couples its green growth story with industrial diversification. This is exemplified by Masdar City, which functions as a clean-tech hub.[54] Meanwhile, the UAE's Hydrogen Roadmap (2021) and National Hydrogen Strategy 2050 chart long-term industrial pathways.[55]

This close alignment between state institutions and major national energy companies, has enabled swift mobilization of large-scale climate investments. However, it also risks reinforcing incumbent interests and limiting space for structural energy reform.

The strong relationships between these emerging industries and incumbent oil industries should not be underestimated as fossil fuel companies play a role in shaping national policies. Sultan Al-Jaber, the CEO of Masdar (Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company), one of the world's largest renewable energy companies, is simultaneously the president of ADNOC, one of the region's largest national oil companies. He also served as the president of COP28, which was hosted in Dubai. This close alignment between state institutions and major national energy companies, has enabled swift mobilization of large-scale climate investments. However, it also risks reinforcing incumbent interests and limiting space for structural energy reform.

---

53 Abu Dhabi Environment Agency (undated), *Climate Change Strategy in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi: 2023–2027*, https://www.ead.gov.ae/-/media/Project/EAD/EAD/Documents/EAD6750_CLIMATE-CHANGE-BROCHURE-ENGLISH_v5.pdf.
54 Masdar City (undated), 'Innovation Ecosystem', https://masdarcity.ae/tech-and-innovation/tech.
55 United Arab Emirates Government (undated), 'National Hydrogen Strategy', https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/environment-and-energy/national-hydrogen-strategy.

Lessons from the UAE

Centralized investment has yielded rapid renewable energy roll-out and commercially viable projects, but the narrow nature of consultation – limited largely to ministries, emirate-level agencies and selected private partners – reduces the system's ability to anticipate social or local impacts, build public buy-in or incorporate community knowledge into adaptation planning.

While there are examples of public consultation, these have also tended to not take full advantage of the benefits of broader discussion. For instance, during the early stages of the UAE's nuclear energy programme, Emirates Nuclear Energy Company (ENEC) and the Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation (FANR) included stakeholder consultation components as part of the environmental impact and licensing process for the Barakah nuclear plant.[56] These sessions included local and national stakeholders, and followed formal review procedures and were disclosed under environmental licensing requirements. However, publicly accessible reports illustrate that such consultations as part of a structured regulatory framework are seen as a way of communicating climate risk to stakeholders rather than broad avenues for civic debate and public deliberation.

For other climate action, MOCCAE's National Dialogue for Climate Ambition runs industry-specific sessions with key economic sectors.[57] Similarly, the Climate-Responsible Companies Pledge involves corporate commitments to net zero, with 131 UAE firms signed up by late 2023.[58] On adaptation, MOCCAE partnered with the Global Green Growth Institute for technical workshops to validate climate-risk assessments with invited agencies and partners.[59] However, civil society groups or independent NGOs are not part of formal policymaking, and participation is tightly circumscribed. While the UAE's centralized model has delivered rapid progress, the absence of broader civil-society input can limit the system's ability to detect social or local impacts early, incorporate community perspectives into adaptation planning, and communicate trade-offs in ways that build long-term public support. In many climate adaptation domains – such as water management and labour conditions under extreme heat – civil society actors hold knowledge and perspectives that can complement expert-led planning, improve the durability, equity and public acceptance of climate initiatives.

---

56 UAE Government (2020), *UAE National Report For the 8th Review Meeting of the Convention on Nuclear Safety*, Abu Dhabi: Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation, https://www.fanr.gov.ae/en/Lists/Reports/Attachments/20/CNS%20UAE%20National%20Report%202020.pdf.
57 Emirati Times (2022), 'Climate Change and Environment Ministry reveals NDCA sessions for key sectors', 23 May 2022, https://emiratitimes.com/climate-change-and-environment-ministry-reveals-ndca-sessions-for-key-sectors.
58 OGN News (2023), '131 UAE businesses sign Climate Responsible Companies Pledge', 25 October 2023, https://ognnews.com/ArticleTA/414934.
59 UAE Ministry of Climate Change and Environment (2019), *UAE Climate Risk Assessment & Adaptation Measures in Key Sectors Health, Energy, Infrastructure & Environment*, https://gggi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/uae-climate-risk-assessment-and-adaptation-measures-in-key-sectors.pdf.

Saudi Arabia: Ambition at the centre with accelerated delivery

Central coordination, targets and framing

Saudi climate policy is guided from the top through the kingdom's Vision 2030 programme, which is part of a series of announcements on sustainability including the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI) and the broader regional Middle East Green Initiative. The SGI commits Saudi Arabia to planting 10 billion trees domestically and achieving net zero emissions by 2060. Strategic coordination and progress tracking are overseen by the SGI secretariat, which operates under the Royal Court to align ministerial and state-owned-company initiatives with the kingdom's Vision 2030 framework. Ministries lead on implementation (e.g. the Ministry of Energy on net zero and renewables, and the Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture on afforestation and biodiversity) while the SGI secretariat primarily ensures cross-sectoral reporting and public communication.

Renewable energy delivery is managed under the National Renewable Energy Program (NREP) by the Ministry of Energy and the Saudi Power Procurement Company (SPPC). Parallel delivery channels operate through the Public Investment Fund (PIF), the country's sovereign wealth fund. In 2024, the Ministry of Energy pledged to issue 20 GW of renewable tenders annually. Saudi Arabia plans to tender between 100 GW and 130 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030, as announced under the SGI, in line with the national goal of sourcing 50 per cent of the power mix from renewables by that date.[60]

Large projects and a fast-filling pipeline

The kingdom's green drive began with the 300 MW Sakaka solar project and 400 MW Dumat Al-Jandal wind farm becoming operational in 2021. In 2023, expansion accelerated with the Sudair solar project (1.5 GW) and the Rabigh 300 MW solar station. June 2024 saw a significant scaling with 5.5 GW of solar power purchase agreements signed across Haden, Muwayh and Al-Khushaybi solar photovoltaic projects.[61] In 2025, Riyadh finalized one of the world's largest renewable energy deals, committing $8.3 billion to develop 15 GW of new solar and wind projects in a single package.[62] Almost all renewable energy projects planned under Saudi Arabia's NREP and the PIF are designed to be commercial, revenue-generating projects.

Saudi Arabia's plans also include developing civil nuclear power, ostensibly to diversify energy sources and free up more oil for export. The official logic is that atomic energy could displace the 1.4 million barrels of crude burned for power

60 Saudi & Middle East Green Initiatives (2024), 'SGI target: reduce carbon emissions by 278 mtpa by 2030', https://www.sgi.gov.sa/about-sgi/sgi-targets/reduce-carbon-emissions.
61 ACWA Power (2024), 'Major milestone in KSA renewables programme as 5,500 MW power purchase agreements signed', press release, 27 June 2024, https://www.acwapower.com/news/major-milestone-in-ksa-renewables-programme-as-5500-mw-power-purchase-agreements-signed-en.
62 ACWA Power (2025), 'In the Presence of HRH Minister of Energy: ACWA Power, Badeel and SAPCO to invest approximately $8.3 billion to develop 15,000 MW of renewable energy projects in Saudi Arabia', press release, 14 July 2025, https://www.acwapower.com/news/in-the-presence-of-hrh-minister-of-energy--acwa-power-badeel-and-sapco-to-invest-approximately-83-billion-to-develop-15000-mw-of-renewable-energy-projects-in-saudi-arabia.

during peak months, instead allowing those barrels to be sold abroad for profit.[63] However, analysts question the economic viability of Saudi nuclear plans. Given the kingdom's vast solar resources and cheap domestic gas, nuclear-generated electricity would likely be more expensive than either renewables or gas-fired power under current conditions. In fact, one study found nuclear only becomes economical if gas prices rise above about $13.6 per million British Thermal unit (MMBtu),[64] far above Saudi Arabia's prevailing gas costs of $2.15 per MMBtu.[65] This suggests that the push for nuclear may be motivated less by near-term return on investment and more by strategic factors. Riyadh's quest for nuclear technology appears driven by an energy security calculus – due to the more reliable nature of nuclear compared to solar or wind power – the desire for technological parity and geopolitical rivalry, rather than purely profit.

Hydrocarbons alongside the transition

Saudi Arabia's energy and climate strategy is part of the country's economic diversification plan. The aim is to decarbonize the nation's economy, releasing more oil and gas for export and generating revenues that can be used to invest into new economic sectors before the world's demand for oil starts to dwindle. Saudi Arabia also has a vision for global decarbonization based on the circular carbon economy framework, where fossil fuels remain, but carbon emissions are to be reduced, reused, recycled and removed.[66] This framework, which was endorsed during Saudi Arabia's 2020 G20 presidency,[67] guides the kingdom's climate policy, and justifies its green hydrogen projects, and its carbon capture and storage projects including for enhanced oil recovery via carbon dioxide injection.

From programmes to procurement, and the limits of consultation

Saudi Arabia's central government is the main driver in translating policy into project procurement. The official process has certain stages including Request for Proposals, Request for Clarification, and Power Purchase Agreements, but not public deliberation. Environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs) are required for lenders, and these occasionally contain invited stakeholder sessions. Climate and large-scale clean energy policies also appear absent from *Istitlaa,* a government platform that seeks the opinions of the public, government entities and the private sector on laws and regulations issued by government entities prior to approval.[68]

---

63 Saba, Y. (2025), 'Explainer: Why does Saudi Arabia want a civil nuclear deal with the US?', Reuters, 8 May 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/why-does-saudi-arabia-want-civil-nuclear-deal-with-us-2025-05-08.
64 Ahmad, A. (20221), 'Economic Considerations of Nuclear Power Deployment in Saudi Arabia', in Sokolski, H. D. (2021), *Avoiding a Nuclear Wild, Wild West in the Middle East*, Working Paper 1801, Arlington: Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, https://npolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/1801.pdf.
65 Intratec (2025), 'Track Natural Gas Prices in Saudi Arabia', 5 November 2025, https://www.intratec.us/solutions/energy-prices-markets/commodity/natural-gas-price-saudi-arabia.
66 Saudi and Middle East Green Initiatives (2024), 'Global energy leader championing climate action', https://www.sgi.gov.sa/saudi-climate-vision.
67 Schröder, P., Bradley, S. and Lahn, G. (2020), 'G20 Endorses a Circular Carbon Economy: But Do We Need It?', Chatham House Expert Comment, 27 November 2020, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/g20-endorses-circular-carbon-economy-do-we-need-it.
68 National Competitiveness Center (2025), 'Public Consultation Platform', https://istitlaa.ncc.gov.sa/en/Pages/default.aspx.

Limited and managed public engagement

Citizen participation in climate governance is tightly controlled in Saudi Arabia. Broad policy design is not opened to NGOs or elected bodies, but the state promotes controlled avenues of involvement. For example, the SGI forum, held annually since 2021, convenes ministers, business leaders and selected climate experts to highlight progress and announce new environmental programmes, rather than serving as a forum for open policy debate.

Project developers such as ACWA Power are required to conduct ESIAs, which include formal stakeholder engagement processes. The ESIA for the Haden solar project, for example, included a dedicated stakeholder engagement plan featuring consultations with local municipalities, regulatory agencies and landowners, consistent with both national rules and international lender standards.[69]

In late 2020, Saudi Arabia launched the 'Let's Make It Green' campaign to plant 10 million trees nationwide by mid-2021, mobilizing schools, volunteers, NGOs and the private sector in a campaign branded as a patriotic mission.[70]

Lessons from Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has shifted from slow beginnings to become one of the fastest-growing global renewable energy markets, supported by a centralized pipeline of multi-gigawatt auctions and PIF-spearheaded mega projects. Yet even in this highly coordinated model, long-term success depends on increasing transparency and broadening participation. This is not because of public pushback on renewable energy itself, but because greater openness can boost the success rate by accurately identifying local impacts of projects, anticipating local implementation barriers and allowing public contribution to ESIAs.

---

69 Environment Consulting Office (2024), *Environmental and Social Impact Assessment for "Haden Solar Power Plant"*, https://www.acwapower.com/media/342187/haden-pv-ipp-esia_r01.pdf.
70 Saudi Arabia Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture (2020), 'MEWA launches green campaign to plant 10 million trees in 165 sites', press release, 10 October 2020, https://www.mewa.gov.sa/en/MediaCenter/News/Pages/News10102020.aspx.

03 Adaptive climate governance in MENA

Hybrid climate governance is emerging across the region as MENA governments blend participation with technocratic delivery. These adaptive approaches seek to balance legitimacy and project implementation.

Hybrid models for legitimacy and capacity

Most MENA countries do not fit neatly into either a purely participatory or purely techno-investment climate governance model. Instead, many adopt evolving hybrid approaches to varying degrees of success. These adaptive climate governance models selectively blend elements of public participation with top-down, expert-driven decision-making. Leaders of these countries recognize that tackling climate change in the long term requires both public legitimacy and effective implementation capacity.

In this paper, adaptive climate governance success is defined as the ability of institutions to design flexible, inclusive and durable policies that secure long-term investment, accelerate the energy transition and maintain public trust.

This section examines two country cases, Egypt and Jordan, where such hybridization is evident. The official rhetoric of each country initially favoured public participation in climate action, but under pressure from economic constraints, both have since leaned on technocratic, investment-centric methods to get things done.

Egypt: From participatory overtures to techno-investment delivery

Egypt's climate governance journey has mirrored its political transitions. After the 2011 revolution, there were hints of greater openness. Notably, Article 46 of the 2014 Egyptian Constitution enshrined environmental rights, acknowledging the rights of every individual to a 'healthy, sound and balanced environment'.[71] This created a legal basis for public expectations on climate and the environment. In practice, however, climate change remained a low priority in the country through the 2010s. That began to change in 2022 as Egypt was preparing to host the UN's COP27 climate summit, when both international and domestic pressures forced the government to give climate issues a higher profile.

Inclusive rhetoric around COP27

In the lead-up to COP27, Egypt announced a broad national dialogue on climate change.[72] By signalling an inclusive approach to climate policy, Cairo aimed to bolster its legitimacy at home and its image abroad.[73] Indeed, around COP27 the government hosted youth groups, development NGOs, academics and private companies to discuss priorities like renewable energy and adaptation funding.[74] Some civil society representatives were even included in Egypt's official delegation to COP27, and the summit in Sharm el-Sheikh featured side events with Egyptian NGOs and youth groups.[75] Egypt also introduced avenues for youth and academic engagement in climate discourse, and established a permanent 'Youth Climate Change Committee' with UN support.[76]

Techno-investment reality of implementation

However, when it comes to implementing climate and clean energy projects at home, Egypt remains largely technocratic. The same government that invites NGOs to consultations will also clamp down on unsanctioned activism, as authorities arrested dozens of people for attempting climate-related demonstrations.[77] In effect, the national dialogue and other participatory processes were carefully managed to avoid challenging the regime's authority.[78]

---

71 Constitute (undated), 'Egypt 2014', https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Egypt_2014.
72 Federation of Arab Journalists (2022), 'البيئي عن التغيرات المناخية تطلق الحوار الوطنى للتغيرات المناخية وتعلن جائزة للصحافة و الإعلام' [It launches the National Dialogue on Climate Change and announces an environmental journalism and media award on climate change', 7 May 2022, https://faj.org.eg/7984.
73 Embassy of Egypt Washington D. C. (2022), 'Empowerment of Civil Society Tops COP27 Agenda', press release, 15 November 2022, https://egyptembassy.net/news/cop_27/empowerment-of-civil-society-tops-cop27-agenda.
74 Zayed, D. (2024), 'On the Margins: Civil Society Activism and Climate Change in Egypt', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, article, 2 May 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/05/on-the-margins-civil-society-activism-and-climate-change-in-egypt?lang=en.
75 Journalists and Writers Foundation (2022), '27th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt', JWF 2022 Events, 6 January 2022, https://jwf.org/27th-united-nations-climate-change-conference-cop27/jwf-2022-events.
76 UNDCO (2023), 'Let the #YouthLead: Lessons from UN Resident Coordinators and Country Teams', 11 August 2023, https://un-dco.org/stories/let-youthlead-lessons-un-resident-coordinators-and-country-teams.
77 Reuters (2022), 'Egyptian security arrests dozens ahead of COP27 climate summit- rights group', 1 November 2022, https://www.reuters.com/business/cop/egyptian-security-arrests-dozens-ahead-cop27-climate-summit-rights-group-2022-11-01.
78 Zayed (2024), 'On the Margins: Civil Society Activism and Climate Change in Egypt'.

After the fanfare of COP27, Egypt moved to deliver concrete initiatives, most notably the Nexus of Water, Food and Energy (NWFE) programme, the country's flagship package of projects to transition away from gas-fired power plants towards renewables, backed by Western donors.[79] To execute NWFE, the government empowered a high-level taskforce spanning the Ministry of International Cooperation and the Ministry of Electricity, both of which worked directly with international partners and investors. The approach has been to agree deals with multilateral development banks and foreign governments to secure funding and technology, then push projects through via government agencies. Decisions on which solar farms or irrigation projects to prioritize are made by small inner-circle technocrats and external consultants, with local communities having a minimal role in the planning.

To its credit, this top-down strategy has had some successes. Within a year of COP27, Egypt locked in about $15 billion in financing agreements for its NWFE climate portfolio.[80] Major renewable energy installations are underway as a result, including the Benban Solar Park in Aswan, one of the world's largest solar complexes with 1.6 GW of generation capacity, developed by dozens of companies under government coordination.[81]

Participatory in narrative, selective in practice

The strategy has been less successful in relation to public participation. Though, Cairo does retain inclusive aspects in its approach when it bolsters outcomes. For example, the Egyptian government uses participation to build international trust and unlock donor funds that often require stakeholder input – in a manner that is not too dissimilar from other donor-dependent economies[82] – or to improve technical design through the advice of external experts. Yet, the main aspect of the country's climate action is a tight circle of government officials that makes decisions and implements projects.

The Egyptian government uses participation to build international trust and unlock donor funds that often require stakeholder input. Yet, the main aspect of the country's climate action is a tight circle of government officials that makes decisions and implements projects.

The government believes that tangible results will legitimize its climate efforts in the long term more than broad-based deliberative processes would. Indeed, Egypt has been able to kick-start several major green projects post-COP27 and trumpets

79 Al-Mashat, R. and Neo, G. H. (2023), 'Egypt's Nexus for Water, Food and Energy programme – the blueprint to fight climate change?', World Economic Forum, article, 18 September 2023, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/09/egypt-water-food-and-energy-nexus-programme-blueprint-fight-climate-change.
80 Ibid.
81 Africa Energy Portal (2019), 'Egypt to inaugurate world's biggest solar project', press release, 28 November 2019, https://africa-energy-portal.org/news/egypt-inaugurate-worlds-biggest-solar-project.
82 Zayed (2024), 'On the Margins: Civil Society Activism and Climate Change in Egypt'.

these as national achievements. The state tells people about projects once the decision has already been made, and, given Egypt's current economic conditions, many Egyptians seem willing to accept this if it delivers more jobs, more reliable electricity and less pollution. The implicit bargain is that legitimacy from delivery is a suitable substitute for legitimacy from public participation, but it remains to be seen if this will work in the long term.

Jordan: Aspirational participation meets hard constraints

Unlike Egypt, Jordan has a reputation for relative openness and reformist rhetoric. Its form of governance is widely seen as participatory, with an elected parliament, active civil society and consultation mechanisms. In climate policy, Jordan has made efforts to involve a range of stakeholders. For example, the National Climate Change Policy of 2013 was formulated through a 'transparent and participatory manner', bringing together representatives from ministries, NGOs, academia and the private sector.[83] On paper, Jordan demonstrates many of the key elements of participatory governance. The country has decentralized institutions, such as municipalities that could play roles in climate adaptation, it has developed green growth plans with input from development partners, and it encourages public–private partnerships in renewable energy and other sectors.

Progress and constraints

In the 2010s, these policies bore fruit in terms of infrastructure. Jordan had a renewable energy boom, and by 2022 renewable energy represented 23 per cent of its total power generation capacity,[84] reducing Jordan's fuel import dependence and the marginal cost of electricity generation. This was a remarkable achievement for a resource-poor country. Crucially, this expansion was driven by a strong top-down push as the energy ministry set ambitious targets, offered fixed tariffs to attract investors and streamlined approvals for projects. The process involved some stakeholder engagement with industry investors and international donors as a requirement to receive project financing, but the government's main priority was to make progress in these projects.

Yet the very speed of this roll-out exposed capacity issues. The national grid struggled to handle the influx of intermittent renewable power, and the National Electric Power Company (the state-owned utility) fell into deeper financial strain, unable to integrate all the new energy supplies.[85] By 2019, the government had to impose a freeze on further large renewable projects over 1 MW in capacity, halting new solar and wind tenders until grid upgrades and storage solutions

83 Jordan Ministry of Environment (2013), *The National Climate Change Policy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan 2013-2020: Sector Strategic Guidance Framework*, https://globalnaps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/climate-change-policy-of-jordan.pdf.
84 International Energy Agency (2025), 'Jordan', https://www.iea.org/countries/jordan.
85 Quilliam, N. and Obeid, J. (2023), 'How to unlock the potential of Jordan's renewable energy sector', Chatham House Kalam, 27 September 2023, https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/how-to-unlock-the-potential-of-jordans-renewable-energy-sector.

could catch up.[86] This moratorium, which lasted until 2022,[87] underscored the fact that a technocratic, investment-driven approach can overshoot if not accompanied by adequate planning and consultation across sectors.

Jordan's resource and fiscal constraints often force it into this kind of pragmatic centralization. The country is energy-poor, one of the most water-scarce in the world and fiscally burdened by debt and a large refugee population. Jordan's updated emissions reduction target of 31 per cent by 2030, as part of its NDCs, is largely conditional on external support, including projects aligned with green growth national action plans and public–private partnerships embedded in the kingdom's Economic Modernization Vision.[88] When funding comes through from external donors or multilateral banks, Jordan feels pressure to deliver results to secure future support. This dynamic has at times driven more top-down implementation of projects, particularly those backed by concessional finance, and may reduce the scope for broader public consultation and local stakeholder input.[89]

Donor-funded programmes such as the Water Sector Efficiency Project and the Red Sea–Dead Sea conveyance (before it was abolished) have relied on highly technocratic planning that largely excluded local communities and CSOs. This is especially significant because many local groups possess deep, location-based knowledge of the fragile Dead Sea and Red Sea ecosystems, including long-term observations about groundwater, biodiversity stressors, pollution sources, and the social-ecological dynamics affecting coastal and desert communities. By not drawing on this expertise, project design processes have often missed important environmental sensitivities or underestimated the ecological risks associated with proposed interventions. Similarly, concessional loans from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Green Climate Fund have played a central role in expanding Jordan's renewable energy sector. Yet these initiatives have also tended to depend on a narrow network of national agencies and a small group of recurring consultants, rather than drawing on broader public engagement or diverse local expertise

Participation and pragmatism

Politically, Jordan's monarchy and government remain keenly aware of maintaining public support, given the country's economic hardships and its high unemployment levels. The leadership frequently uses participatory rhetoric to strengthen the social contract, promising to be responsive to citizens' needs. A number of projects and policies (e.g. the Red Sea–Dead Sea Conveyance Project, net metering and renewable energy fee reforms) have been revised, delayed, scaled back, or halted as a result of a public backlash.

---

86 Bellini, E. (2019), 'Jordan suspends renewables auctions, new licenses for projects over 1 MW', *PV Magazine*, 28 January 2019, https://www.pv-magazine.com/2019/01/28/jordan-suspends-renewables-auctions-new-licenses-for-projects-over-1-mw.
87 Quilliam and Obeid (2023), 'How to unlock the potential of Jordan's renewable energy sector'.
88 El-Sharif, S. and Muasher, M. (2024), 'Vulnerability and Governance in the Context of Climate Change in Jordan', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, article, 16 May 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/05/jordan-climate-change-adaptation-commitments?lang=en.
89 Ibid.

In climate policy, the participatory approach is reflected in frequent references to inclusion. Jordan's climate change committees and policy taskforces typically include some NGO representatives and academics. Civil society groups in Jordan are regularly invited to participate in national climate consultations, including those tied to strategies like the National Climate Change Adaptation Plan. Yet, while their presence signals openness to dialogue, many advocates note that this involvement rarely shapes final decisions in a meaningful way, leaving a sense that while participation is encouraged, key choices are often already set.[90]

Civil society groups in Jordan are regularly invited to participate in national climate consultations, yet, while their presence signals openness to dialogue, many advocates note that this involvement rarely shapes final decisions in a meaningful way.

Jordan tends to leverage its limited capacity by concentrating efforts on a few critical initiatives. Water policy is a prime example. Facing a severe water crisis exacerbated by droughts and population growth, Jordan has taken bold actions like instituting strict rationing, reducing water losses and pursuing a large desalination and conveyance project from the Red Sea. These are tough measures, but the public largely endures them because the alternative is existential scarcity. In emergencies, Jordanians have shown willingness to accept decisive top-down action as long as it is communicated as necessary and is implemented with some fairness.

This implies a kind of adaptive social contract where in normal times the government promises inclusion and dialogue, but in a crisis, it expects citizens to trust its technocratic decisions for the greater good even at the expense of long-term sustainability. So far, that trust has held in cases like water management, perhaps because the consequences of inaction are so evident to people. The Jordanian experience highlights a central lesson of adaptive climate governance, namely that inclusive policy development followed by firm, expert implementation can achieve a lot. However, due to its less obvious consequences, climate action is unlikely to have the same level of support as efforts to manage water resources, and thus the balance of the approach must be continually adjusted based on feedback.

How adaptive approaches reconcile legitimacy and capacity

The cases of Egypt and Jordan illustrate how MENA governments in different political and economic contexts are converging on adaptive models to address the twin challenges of legitimacy (public trust and buy-in) and capacity (effective

90 Hussein, H. (2025), *Toward Inclusive Climate Action in Jordan*, report, Arab Reform Initiative, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/393121828_Toward_Inclusive_Climate_Action_in_Jordan.

delivery and problem-solving). By infusing participation – even if selectively – governments aim to gain legitimacy for climate actions. While the majority of the public is often most concerned with the impacts of policies on their livelihoods, many are more likely to accept policies, and even change their behaviour, if they feel a sense of involvement or at least see that their concerns are acknowledged.[91] For instance, Egypt's emphasis on a national dialogue and Jordan's inclusion of NGOs in policy committees are attempts to shore up what political scientists call 'input legitimacy' (the legitimacy a policy gains from inclusive, transparent and participatory decision-making processes). These initiatives signal that the public's voice matters, which can strengthen the social contract around climate action. Inclusivity also helps align policies with societal needs. Civil society can act as a bridge between the public and the state, holding governments accountable and ensuring policies reflect realities on the ground.

However, participatory climate governance is not a panacea and 'output legitimacy' (the legitimacy a policy gains from the quality of its results) is equally important. The effectiveness of climate governance depends on how institutions are organized and coordinated. For example, Algeria's climate system is highly centralized under the Ministry of Environment but suffers from fragmented mandates and limited cross-ministerial planning.[92] In contrast, Morocco's inter-ministerial commission and subnational councils allow for horizontal and vertical alignment, enhancing both delivery and legitimacy.

What adaptive governance offers is not simply more participation, but enough inclusion to confer legitimacy and local ownership, without compromising delivery timelines or policy coherence. Consultation can build buy-in, but may slow decisions, whereas centralized projects can be delivered faster but risk public backlash or unforeseen problems. The optimal path lies somewhere in the middle, and this may vary between countries and their different contexts, combining the efficiency of decisive government action with the legitimacy of stakeholder engagement. In MENA, this balance is particularly important given the fragility of implicit social contracts and uneven institutional capabilities.

As a concept, adaptive governance assumes that states have the institutional capacity to adjust course when needed, an assumption that may not hold in fragile or under-resourced settings. The case studies reflect this complexity. Tunisia, for instance, has robust legal frameworks for participation, but weak institutions have limited their practical effect. In contrast, Saudi Arabia has made significant progress on renewable energy through top-down control, yet the civil society space remains limited.

In addition, many MENA region local governments lack the technical or financial capacity to manage climate responsibilities. In Algeria, for example, provincial-level authorities have unclear mandates and limited climate literacy, which impedes regional adaptation planning.

---

91 Bicket, M. and Vanner, R. (2016), 'Designing Policy Mixes for Resource Efficiency: The Role of Public Acceptability', *Sustainability*, 8(4), p. 366, https://doi.org/10.3390/su8040366.
92 Arkeh and Khalil (2024), *Climate Governance in Algeria: Analyzing Institutional Capacities, Challenges, and Strategic Pathways*.

Furthermore, in fragile political contexts – such as Lebanon, Libya or post-revolution Tunisia – climate policy often takes a backseat to immediate fiscal and security concerns. This deprioritization weakens institutional memory and coordination, making it harder to sustain climate strategies over time. Adaptive governance in such settings requires integration into broader development or service delivery agendas to maintain salience.

In fragile political contexts – such as Lebanon, Libya or post-revolution Tunisia – climate policy often takes a backseat to immediate fiscal and security concerns.

By retaining technocratic control and focusing on performance, governments can address the capacity and efficiency problems that often plague fully participatory systems. Complex projects such as solar parks, water infrastructure, or climate finance deals require technical expertise and swift coordination, which top-down governance can provide. This delivers visible improvements that can, in turn, enhance results, or public trust in the government because it delivers tangible benefits.

Adaptive governance can also create a virtuous cycle with early stakeholder inclusion building support, which smooths implementation. Successful implementation then reinforces public confidence, making citizens more willing to engage constructively the next time they are consulted for a project.

Understandably, achieving this is far from easy. More often, trade-offs are made. Some degree of participation is sacrificed for efficiency, or some efficiency is slowed down to gather broader buy-in. The Egypt and Jordan examples show trade-offs in action. Egypt leans heavily towards efficiency and political control, completing projects but arguably missing deeper public endorsement. Jordan leans towards consultation in principle, but when urgent action is required, it centralizes decisions to get things done, risking disillusionment among those who feel their input is unimportant. Yet the very fact that both are striving for a mix indicates a recognition by some regional leaders that climate governance cannot be one-dimensional. Climate change poses a significant challenge that demands societal transformation, legitimacy, technical solutions and capacity.

The adaptive model is emerging by necessity rather than choice. MENA countries face urgent climate threats, but any action to tackle these issues that is perceived as illegitimate or unfair could trigger a social backlash – as was seen in Jordan in response to energy subsidy reforms, water tariff reforms and metering polices, the Red Sea–Dead Sea Conveyance Project, and Amman's Bus Rapid Transit – while any action that is too timid or slow could be ineffective and a backwards step for development.

An adaptive approach is about guiding climate governance with pragmatism. The process aims to be inclusive enough to harness society's support and knowledge, and executive enough to actually implement solutions at scale. This approach is already visible in Egypt and Jordan's adaptations.

Ultimately, these adaptive approaches may also be setting the stage for long-term evolution in governance. Small experiments with participation could gradually expand the democratic space in some countries. Meanwhile, successful techno-investment climate initiatives could strengthen state institutions and public faith in expertise. In the best-case scenario, today's adaptive models could guide MENA climate governance towards a future where states are both responsive and effective, a social contract that citizens believe in because they have both a voice and positive outcomes.

Adaptive governance is not presented as universally superior without acknowledging trade-offs. Instead, the case studies suggest that blending participatory and technocratic approaches can help capture the strengths of both. Jordan and Egypt, for example, opened dialogues to build public support while using specialized agencies to deliver priority projects. This hybrid model attempts to maintain rapid implementation where necessary while incrementally broadening inclusion to build legitimacy.

04 Policy recommendations

Strengthening climate governance in MENA requires tailored, context-sensitive policy measures that enhance participation, bolster institutional capacity and improve transparency.

Of the dominant approaches to climate action in the MENA region, an adaptive climate governance model has the potential to be most effective, particularly when considering the individual circumstances of each country. This approach balances the two imperatives highlighted throughout this paper: securing legitimacy through participation and ensuring the capacity to act effectively. The policy recommendations below focus on practical, near-term measures that can be integrated into existing institutions, aiming to improve implementation while strengthening public trust.

For MENA governments

These recommendations are designed to be adaptable to diverse governance contexts across the region. While participatory climate governance is a desirable goal due to its legitimacy benefits, its form and timing should reflect each country's political system, level of decentralization and institutional capacity.

- Assess the political and institutional fit of participatory approaches. Participation is not a one-size-fits-all system. Governments should seek consultants to help identify where in the policy cycle engagement with stakeholders and the public is most beneficial. For example, in centralized systems, upstream consultation between policymakers and farmers on water plans can build legitimacy. This can include consultation on crop changes and irrigation methods to address increasing water scarcity and rising temperatures. In more decentralized systems, empowering municipal actors may be more effective.

- Structure participation to support implementation, not delay it. Governments should ensure that engagement is time-bound and focused to avoid policy paralysis. Once agreement on a particular project is reached, governments should streamline execution by empowering public delivery units, public–private partnerships or regional agencies through funding or terms of authority.
- Adapt transparency and communication strategies to the political context. Develop freedom of information regulations to allow access to climate-related performance metrics. Even in systems with limited civic space, governments can foster public understanding by explaining climate goals, trade-offs and implementation plans, regardless of whether public input is formally solicited. This can take the form of unidirectional communication plans to explain risks and drivers for policy action.
- Invest in capacity-building where decentralization is part of the strategy. In systems with local government mandates, central governments should train and resource local authorities to enable effective support for mitigation and adaptation plans.
- Institutionalize climate policy review mechanisms appropriate to governance capacity. Where feasible, establish annual or biennial reviews of climate implementation with participation from civil society, and independent technical experts. In more controlled environments, begin with technical monitoring and expand inclusion over time.

For CSOs and climate activists

In countries with participatory frameworks, CSOs already contribute to public outreach, policy monitoring and small-scale project implementation. The challenge in these contexts is often one of scale and sustainability, which requires political recognition and sustained domestic and international funding.

- Tailor strategies to the political context. In more participatory environments, CSOs should leverage legal pathways, use litigation and parliamentary lobbying to uphold environmental rights and influence legislation. Demonstrating constructive partnerships can also build trust with government. In more restrictive contexts, CSOs should focus on developing and utilizing their technical expertise, public education and on framing recommendations in alignment with national goals or development plans.
- Strengthen regional coordination. CSOs should participate in one of the two existing MENA-wide civil society climate networks (Climate Action Network Arab World and the Arab Network for Environment and Development – RAED) in order to share tactics, coordinate advocacy and amplify their collective voice.
- Engage public awareness through media and education. Raising citizen understanding of climate science and solutions can help sustain informed public pressure for action. Past efforts by CSOs in Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan should be expanded and amplified.

- Maintain informal channels with government. Building relationships with mid-level officials through semi-formal events and offering technical or implementation support can yield long-term influence, even in less participatory systems.
- Advocate for systemic support. CSOs with institutional access should collectively push for legal protections, formal inclusion in national planning cycles and reliable budget allocations. CSOs need to prioritize and lobby for reform of NGO laws, environmental litigation rights and CSO funding mechanisms that are not donor dependent.

For international climate finance institutions and donor agencies

Climate finance strategies should be adapted to the region's diverse political and institutional contexts. Donors, mostly European institutions and foundations, should avoid one-size-fits-all conditionalities and instead use governance-sensitive incentives that promote delivery, transparency and inclusion.

- Use tailored funding criteria to encourage governance improvements. In participatory states, link funding to implementation milestones. In more technocratic contexts, prioritize transparency measures, fund projects with tangible public benefits and include components that engage local actors.
- Support institutional and civic capacity-building. Invest in programmes that enhance both state capacity and civic engagement, such as strengthening national climate coordination units (beyond existing programmes in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco), municipal training for climate planning, training on how to design climate projects to access climate finance (based on existing programmes by EBRD), building CSO technical capacity (along the lines of EU and UNDP programmes in Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt, or university-based climate research centres already strong in Saudi Arabia and the UAE).
- Fund and showcase participatory pilot projects. Use grants to support local demonstrations of participatory design and implementation. Highlighting successes can influence national agendas and inform other local authorities in other countries.

For regional cooperation bodies and initiatives

Regional forums have an important role in fostering inclusive climate action while accommodating different governance models. Flexibility, knowledge sharing and norm setting are key.

- Design collaborative platforms that bridge governance styles. The Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, and initiatives like the Middle East Green Initiative, the Regional Center for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency, and the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East Climate Change Initiative (EMME-CCI) should create technical working groups on issues such as water, energy and agriculture. These groups should include government officials, technical experts and, where possible, civil society observers. They can jointly develop regional guidelines (e.g. on drought management) that states adapt locally via either participatory or technocratic means.

— Normalize inclusive governance practices. Regional initiatives should explicitly promote adaptive climate governance and encourage states to report not only on emissions or projects, but also on how they engage citizens and businesses. Norm-setting actions – such as requiring multi-stakeholder representation in national delegations to regional meetings – can gradually institutionalize inclusive practices.

Taken together, these actionable steps aim to fortify climate governance in MENA to deliver on the twin goals of green economy transition and social contract renewal. Empowered with this roadmap, MENA policymakers, civil society and international partners can move from understanding climate governance challenges to surmounting them.

In implementing these recommendations, it is important that each actor remains flexible and ready to adjust. Climate change itself is dynamic and as impacts worsen, even resistant governments may find they need more citizen cooperation. Conversely, some participatory systems may face stability tests that require efficient top-down action. All stakeholders should adopt a learning mindset, monitor what works in governance adaptations, and be prepared to change direction, replicate or scale up.

There is no single climate governance model that all countries can adopt to take successful climate action. The constitutional-participatory approach excels in building public trust and aligning climate action with societal needs, but it can falter if institutions lack capacity or if consensus-building stifles urgent action. The techno-investment approach can deliver rapid projects and mobilize vast resources, yet in some contexts it risks public pushback and policy reversal if citizens feel alienated. The paper argues, however, that an adaptive governance model, one that engages stakeholders enough to confer legitimacy yet empowers authorities to implement green policies decisively, has the highest chance of successful climate action. Countries that iteratively adjust policies based on feedback (from investors, local communities and experts) are more likely to secure sustained green investments, ensure projects' long-term viability and maintain public support.[93] In other words, the most 'adaptive' states are better able to navigate the inevitable trade-offs between speed and public buy-in. Despite this lack of a perfect formula, embracing adaptive climate governance offers a pragmatic path forward. It acknowledges the economic realities and urgency of climate action, while grounding policy in the consent and confidence of the public.

93 Haytayan and Keskes (2023), *Energy Transition in the Middle East and North Africa: The Road to COP28*.

About the author

Karim Elgendy is an associate fellow with the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme. He is an expert on energy transitions and climate policy in the Middle East and North Africa. He is also the executive director of the Carbon Institute, a think-tank focused on energy and climate in the MENA region.

Elgendy's research examines the intersection of climate diplomacy, energy geopolitics and sustainable development across the region. He focuses on how this region navigates energy transition and climate change impacts within the shifting geopolitical landscape.

Elgendy regularly advises policymakers, diplomatic services and international organizations on climate policy and sustainability strategies specific to MENA countries. He is a prolific author, with publications in leading outlets addressing topics such as Eastern Mediterranean energy geopolitics, Gulf transitions and regional climate governance,

Acknowledgments

The author would like to extend his thanks to all participants to the social contract workshops in London and Beirut, and to all the blind reviewers who took the time to provide valuable feedback for this paper. The author would also like to thank Michael Tsang for his valuable editorial support on this paper.

This publication was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

Cover image: A solar energy system set up by a farmer in Madinat al-Sadat district of Monufia, in the north of Egypt, 4 March 2023.

ISBN 978 1 78413 668 0
DOI 10.55317/9781784136680

Cite this paper: Elgendy, K. (2025), *How the Middle East and North Africa can benefit from adaptive climate governance: Striking the balance between rights-based and technocratic approaches*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136680.

This publication is printed on FSC-certified paper.
designbysoapbox.com

Independent thinking since 1920

The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700
contact@chathamhouse.org | chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223