The Psychoecological Dimensions of Intergroup Conflict in the African Context[1]

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Abstract:

Climate change and broader forms of environmental degradation act as a complex stressor contributing to political instability and conflict, particularly in vulnerable regions such as Africa. While political science has long explored links between environmental degradation and armed conflict, the psychological mechanisms remain underexamined. This paper introduces a "psychoecological" framework, emphasizing the interaction between psychological functioning and ecological conditions. Within this framework, psychoterratic emotions and processes such as identity threat, in-group bias, and resource competition can transform environmental concerns into conflict dynamics. Drawing on theories of intergroup conflict—including Social Identity Theory, Realistic Conflict Theory, and Terror Management Theory—we show how environmental insecurity reinforces in-group cohesion and fosters out-group hostility. Case studies from sub-Saharan Africa illustrate how climate variability intersects with ethnic, political, and historical fault lines. We also examine how climate change, psychological vulnerability, and migration interact under conditions of insecurity. Integrating psychological insights into climate-related defence and development strategies is crucial for resilience. The psychoecological lens highlights the human dimensions of climate change, urging interdisciplinary approaches to address its impacts on security and peace.

Keywords:
Psychoecology; Climate Change; Climate Migration; Intergroup Conflict; Collective Trauma; Africa.

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1. Introduction

We live in an era of polycrises — a period marked by multiple, interacting global stressors whose cumulative effects exceed the sum of their parts. Climate change and related forms of environmental degradation — such as global warming, increased climate variability, and more frequent extreme weather events — do not act in isolation (Lawrence et al., 2024). Instead, they amplify other destabilizing forces such as intergroup conflict, forced migration, and global health crises like pandemics. As part of these converging crises, the world also faces a mental health crisis linked to the ecological emergency (Kumar et al., 2023). Together, these processes generate what can be conceptualized as a form of *collective trauma* for humankind: humanity is simultaneously suffering the psychosocial consequences of escalating insecurity, while also contributing — whether actively or passively — to the environmental and geopolitical conditions that sustain it (Woodbury, 2019).

In security studies, climate change is widely described as a "threat multiplier" (CNA Military Advisory Board, 2007; Tesfaye, 2022) — a factor that heightens existing vulnerabilities, socio-political tensions, and resource inequalities, while also exerting psychological pressure at both individual and collective levels This is especially evident in Sub-Saharan Africa, where climate-sensitive livelihoods and histories of intercommunal tension create high exposure to risk (Treszkai, 2019). Farmland disputes have long fuelled communal tensions; climate change now intensifies these pressures, making instability more likely (Raleigh & Kniveton, 2012; Scheffran et al., 2019). Recent research and assessments (IPCC, 2018) conclude with medium confidence that climate change indirectly increases conflict risk by worsening known drivers of conflict such as economic shocks and resource competition. Thus, climate stress interacts with existing fault lines—undermining security, straining coping capacity, and fuelling identity threat and intergroup distrust that can escalate conflict.

While existing research has mapped climate–conflict correlations and material pathways (e.g., drought, livelihoods, governance) and documented mental-health impacts, the psychological conduits linking ecological stress to intergroup dynamics in Africa remain under-specified. In this article, the term *intergroup* refers broadly to relations between social groups defined by ethnicity, communal affiliation, political identity, or economic interests, which are often intertwined in the African contexts examined here. This paper addresses that gap by synthesizing the mechanisms through which climate stress can amplify grievance, ethnocentrism, and violence — or, alternatively, foster cooperation.

2.The Psychoecological Dimensions of Intergroup Conflict

2.2.Scope and Methodology

This section integrates insights from a range of psychological and structural theories that help explain how climate stress can shape intergroup conflict. Classic frameworks such

as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg, 2007), Realistic Conflict Theory (Sherif, 1966), and the General Aggression Model (Anderson, 2001) are complemented by other foundational and recent literature such as Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1997), the Social Identity Model of Pro-Environmental Action (Fritsche et al., 2018), and research on collective trauma (Hirschberger, 2018). Each of these frameworks offers a distinct lens on how ecological stressors may erode control, sharpen identities, or escalate grievances. *Figure 1.* provides a concise overview of these theories, summarizing their core mechanisms, relevance to climate–conflict contexts, and their role within the psychoecological synthesis. In the subsections that follow, we discuss them in more detail.

Theory / Model	Authors / Year	Core Mechanism(s)	Relevance to Climate–Conflict Context	Role in Psychoecological Synthesis
General Aggression Model (GAM), The heat Hypothesis	Anderson, 2001; Anderson & DeLisi, 2011	Environmental stressors (heat, noise, crowding) increase arousal and aggression; situational and individual factors interact to shape aggressive behaviour	Predicts that rising global temperatures will directly increase aggressive impulses and indirectly heighten aggression via displacement, poverty, and social strain	Connects climate-induced environmental stress (heat, discomfort) to micro-level aggression processes that scale up into intergroup violence, complementing SIT, RCT, and TMT in the psychoecological framework
Social Identity Theory (SIT)	Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg, 2007	Individuals derive self-concept from group membership; motivated to maintain positive in-group distinctiveness	Ecological threat strengthens in-group cohesion and fosters out-group bias or scapegoating	Explains how climate stress catalyzes identity protection → fuels palliative pathway
Social Comparison Theory (SCT)	Festinger, 1954	Individuals/groups compare themselves with others; relative deprivation fuels resentment	Under climate stress, intergroup comparisons sharpen grievances (e.g., who	Explains mediating role of perceived injustice → conflict escalation

			gets aid/resources)	
Theory of Relative Deprivation	Runciman, 1966; Stouffer et al., 1949	Individuals/groups assess well-being relative to others; perceived disadvantage fuels resentment and grievance rather than absolute deprivation.	Under ecological stress, relative deprivation sharpens perceptions of unfairness (e.g., who gains/loses resources, aid, or land access), intensifying intergroup resentment	Explains how subjective injustice and social comparisons mediate the link between climate stress and conflict → grievance amplification pathway
Uncertainty-Identity Theory (UIT)	Hogg, 2007; 2021	People reduce self-uncertainty by identifying with groups that provide clear norms.	Climate variability undermines predictability → drives individuals to seek security in cohesive groups	Shows how loss of control under climate stress promotes group entitativity and defensive responses.
Realistic Conflict Theory (RCT)	Sherif, 1966	Competition over scarce resources fuels intergroup hostility.	Climate stress intensifies competition over land, water, and food.	Links ecological scarcity to direct intergroup aggression (conflict over material resources).
Group Entitativity	Campbell, 1958; Gaertner & Schopler, 1998	Threat fosters group cohesion and uniformity; high entitativity also increases competitiveness and hostility toward out-groups	In climate crises, groups "close ranks," strengthening solidarity but also exclusionary tendencies	Explains both resilience (ingroup cohesion) and aggression (outgroup hostility)
Terror Management Theory (TMT)	Greenberg et al., 1997	Mortality salience increases defence of cultural worldviews and in-group values	Climate change evokes existential	Explains existential dimension of eco-anxiety → connects to

			threat → motivates in-group defence and out-group derogation	defensive/palliative pathway.
Theory of Group-Based Control	Fritsche et al., 2011; Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016; Scheffran et al., 2019	When personal control is undermined, individuals seek collective agency through stronger group identification	Ecological stress undermines personal control → boosts identification with powerful or entitative groups, armed groups may restore a sense of agency and identity	Shows how climate stress shifts locus of control to collective → intensifies group-based coping responses, pushes individuals toward collective responses, sometimes violent, to regain a sense of control
Anxiety-to-Approach Model	Jonas et al., 2014	Anxious uncertainty can motivate both avoidance (ingroup bias) and approach (constructive action).	Climate threat induces uncertainty → can trigger either antisocial defences or prosocial collective action.	Provides micro-level psychological pathways (approach *vs.* palliative) for climate-induced emotions.
Dual-Pathway Model of Climate Threat Responses	Stollberg & Jonas, 2021	Existential threats elicit either approach-oriented (direct) or palliative (symbolic) regulation strategies.	Climate threat → triggers eco-anxiety → responses may either mitigate conflict (collective action) or exacerbate it (ingroup defence)	Forms the core of the psychoecological synthesis; integrates psychological regulation with climate–conflict pathways

Existential Threat & Collective Trauma Frameworks	Jonas & Fritsche, 2013; Hirschberger, 2018	Threat and trauma can escalate violence (grievance/victimhood) or foster resilience and solidarity (shared fate, meaning-making)	Climate change as collective trauma in Africa: can fuel anti-Western resentment or rally communal coping	Highlights dual trajectories of grievance vs. resilience; critical mediator in psychoecological synthesis
Climate–Conflict Framework	Scheffran et al., 2019	Climate stress interacts with socio-political mediators (poverty, governance, migration) to shape conflict risk.	Climate stress is a "threat multiplier" that exacerbates vulnerabilities in fragile contexts	Provides macro-level structure; combined with psychological pathways to explain escalation/resilience dynamics.
Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM)	Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; see also IPCC, 2022; Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016	Reframing "us" vs. "them" as a superordinate "we" reduces intergroup bias and hostility	African adaptation strategies (water-sharing, regional solidarity) show inclusive identities can reduce climate–conflict risk	Highlights cooperative framings as buffers: reframing threat in terms of shared humanity promotes resilience over division
Social Identity Model of Pro-Environmental Action (SIMPEA)	Fritsche et al., 2018	Ingroup identity, efficacy beliefs, and norms guide whether ecological threat leads to collective action	Explains variation: climate threat can mobilize pro-social cooperation if efficacy and inclusive norms are salient, or defensive exclusion if norms stress	Bridges identity processes with pathways of action, clarifying why similar threats yield divergent collective outcomes

			ingroup closure	

Figure 1: Summary of psychological and structural theories integrated into the psychoecological synthesis.

The above outline sets the stage for our inquiry. In what follows, we undertake to explore how climate change functions not only as an environmental and economic challenge but also as a psychological stressor that shapes intergroup dynamics. To address this, we review key themes at the climate–psychology nexus. We examine the psychological impacts of climate stressors on individuals and communities, focusing on emotions[3] and states such as eco-anxiety, uncertainty, and loss of control. We then draw on social psychology theories — including Social Identity Theory, Realistic Conflict Theory, and Terror Management Theory — to explore how climate stress catalyses intergroup conflict. Subsequent sections consider entitativity, identity protection, and group cohesion under threat, before turning to climate migration and collective trauma, illustrated with African case studies. Together, these themes provide the basis for a *psychoecological framework*[4] of how ecological stress shapes intergroup dynamics.

The methodology follows a qualitative desk review approach, synthesizing peer-reviewed research, case studies, and policy analyses from international organizations (e.g., IPCC, UNHCR), regional bodies, and independent research institutes. Sources published between 2000 and 2025 were prioritized to balance foundational theory with contemporary evidence. A desk review was chosen because the paper is conceptual and integrative rather than empirical. The aim is to collate, compare, and connect existing strands of evidence into a psychoecological framework that can guide both future research and policy.

2.2.Psychological Impacts: Emotions and Existential Threat

In recent years, the mental health impacts of climate change and related environmental stressors have garnered increasing scholarly attention, as the threats posed by a warming world become ever harder to ignore. Climate change—particularly in its human-driven dimensions—is not only an environmental or economic problem; it is fundamentally a psychological stressor, and as such, has become a major focus in psychological and public

[3] The article uses "emotions" as an umbrella term for related affective phenomena (cf. Izard, 2010; Russell, 2003), specifying more narrowly where needed.

[4] "Psychoecology" was introduced by Greenway to describe psyche–ecology interdependence (Greenway, 1995). While the term "ecopsychology" has since become more widely used (Roszak, 1992; Roszak et al., 1999), here, the term denotes the multi-level integration of psychological processes with ecological stressors and conflict dynamics, moving beyond the therapeutic or spiritual connotations of ecopsychology. Although it could more precisely be called "socio-psychoecology," we adopt the simpler "psychoecology."

health research over the past decade (Clayton et al., 2021). The escalating frequency and intensity of extreme weather events have rendered the once abstract notion of climate change far more tangible: while gradual increases in global temperature may be imperceptible, catastrophic hurricanes, destructive floods, prolonged droughts, and intensified wildfires are acutely experienced (Scheffran et al., 2019). Scientific projections, such as those of the IPCC (2018), and rising alarm about future risks exert an increasing toll on mental well-being. To describe this disruption, scholars have introduced the concept of psychoterratic emotions (Albrecht, 2005, 2011): forms of ecological distress including eco-anxiety, eco-grief, eco-guilt, solastalgia, helplessness, and anger. These emotions articulate experiences of uncertainty, loss, and disruption that threaten human needs for safety, predictability, and control.

Eco-anxiety[5] has received particular attention, defined as persistent worry and dread about environmental collapse (Ágoston et al., 2022a; Pihkala, 2020b). It is increasingly understood within an eco-existential perspective (Rehling, 2022), as it amplifies fundamental existential concerns—mortality, meaning, and control (Passmore et al., 2023). Eco-anxiety often co-occurs with grief, helplessness, guilt, and anger at perceived responsibility (Ágoston et al., 2022b; Clayton, 2020; Pihkala, 2018).[6] While not diagnostic categories (cf. Kőváry, 2019), these phenomena are valuable lenses for understanding ecological stress. Defensive responses also arise: *climate denial* (Cipriani et al., 2024) may buffer distress but delay adaptation (Norgaard, 2011), while *eco-apathy* reflects disengagement under overwhelm, reducing short-term anxiety but undermining long-term cooperation (Clayton et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2020a).

These emotions are not only private experiences; they reverberate socially. Eco-anxiety and eco-anger can mobilize activism (Stanley et al., 2021; Hickman, 2020), while solastalgia or helplessness may foster withdrawal. Guilt can promote reconciliation but may also trigger defensive denial when group identities are implicated (Fritsche et al., 2018).

In African contexts, such emotions intersect with material vulnerabilities: grief over lost lands can intensify migration pressures, while anger at perceived injustices may heighten intergroup hostility. Psychoterratic emotions thus mediate the link between ecological stress and collective dynamics, sometimes fuelling cooperation, at other times escalating conflict. *Figure 2*. provides an extended overview, grouping these processes by psychological function to highlight their ambivalent roles in vulnerability and resilience.

[5] Climate (or eco-) anxiety has been interpreted by some scholars as a contemporary form of well-known anxieties, such as separation or death anxiety. What distinguishes it, however, is that neither the persistence of the world nor cultural resources that typically sustain meaning (e.g., religion, science, art) can fully mitigate the threat, since they are themselves implicated in the crisis. Stolorow (2013) refers to this as "apocalyptic anxiety," framing climate anxiety as an emotional response arising from our "ecological unconscious" (Roszak, 2019) to the destruction of the natural environment (Kőváry, 2019).

[6] Such reactions are not necessarily pathological. Clinicians increasingly emphasize that anxiety or grief in response to real ecological threats is a rational response, and that coping involves finding meaning and agency despite looming risks (Kőváry, 2019).

Category	Emotion / Process	Valence	Definition	Nuanced Role	Key References
Affective bonds	Biophilia (ecophilia)	Positive (affinity)	Innate emotional affiliation with life and ecosystems.	Motivates care, stewardship, and restoration of nature.	Albrecht, 2005; Pihkala, 2020a; Wilson, 1984
	Topophilia	Positive (belonging)	Affective bond between people and place.	Provides belonging and resilience but may increase vulnerability when places are lost.	Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Tuan, 1974
Distress responses	Solastalgia	Negative (loss, sadness)	Distress when one's home environment is degraded without leaving it ("homesickness without leaving home").	Signals environmental loss; can foster awareness and political mobilization.	Albrecht, 2005; Pihkala, 2020a
	Eco-anxiety	Negative (fear, worry)	Chronic worry/dread about climate and ecological collapse.	Distressing, but can motivate collective action if channeled constructively.	Ágoston et al., 2022a; Clayton et al., 2017; Pihkala, 2020
	Eco-grief / Ecological grief	Negative (grief, mourning)	Grief in response to ecological losses (species, ecosystems, landscapes).	Can paralyze, but also catalyze activism, rituals, and solidarity.	Ágoston et al., 2022b; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Pihkala, 2020
	Environmental melancholia	Negative (inhibition, unresolved grief)	A form of unresolved mourning in response to ecological loss, marked by paralysis, guilt, and difficulty translating	reflects deep care for the environment, but can inhibit adaptive coping or activism. May also foster denial or	Lertzman, 2015

			concern into action.	disengagement if unresolved.	
	Eco-guilt	Negative (guilt) / ambivalent	Guilt over one's environmental footprint or complicity in degradation.	May lead to paralysis or blame, but also motivates sustainable behavior.	Ágoston et al., 2022b; Fritsche et al., 2018; Pihkala, 2020;
	Eco-anger / Climate anger	Negative (aggression), can be adaptive, "fight"(engagement) reaction	Emotional response to perceived injustice, irresponsibility, or harm to the environment.	Can escalate into hostility or aggression, but also fuel climate activism and collective mobilization.	Contreras et al., 2023; Hickman, 2020; Stanley et al., 2021;
	Ecoparalysis	Negative (helplessness), "freeze" reaction	Feeling helpless to respond to environmental problems.	Risk of inaction; can be reframed into collective efficacy.	Albrecht, 2011; Pihkala, 2020
Coping mechanisms	Eco-coping	Mixed (adaptive)	Strategies to regulate eco-anxiety, grief, and guilt (problem-focused, emotion-focused, meaning-focused).	Critical for transforming distress into resilience and pro-environmental behavior.	Ágoston et al., 2022a; Kőváry, 2019; Pihkala, 2020
Cognitive shifts / defensive processes	Generational/ Baseline amnesia / Shifting baseline syndrome	Neutral (cognitive bias)	Each generation normalizes current degraded environmental conditions as the "new normal."	Masks cumulative ecological loss; reduces urgency of response.	Pauly, 1995; Pihkala, 2020
	Eco-apathy / Disengagement	Typically negative (avoidance, passive defence)	A psychological state of indifference or detachment toward environmental problems, often arising from overwhelm, perceived helplessness, or habituation to	While disengagement can reduce immediate distress, it undermines collective efficacy and civic action, reinforcing vulnerability to ecological risks.	Clayton et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2020

			constant climate threat messaging.		
	Climate denial	Typically framed as negative (distortion of reality), "flight" (avoidance, active defence)	The refusal to accept or minimize the reality, severity, or anthropogenic causes of climate change, often as a defence against anxiety or guilt.	While denial can delay adaptive responses and fuel polarization, in the short term it may reduce existential distress and preserve psychological functioning.	Björnberg et al., 2017; Cipriani et al., 2024; Mendy et al., 2024; Norgaard, 2011; Fritsche et al., 2018
	Meaning-making, eco-cultural identity	Positive (growth, resilience)	Reframing ecological disruption into meaningful narratives or identities.	Expands self-concept, fosters resilience, solidarity	Clayton et al., 2017; Hirschberger, 2018
	Nature-Deficit Disorder	Negative (deprivation, alienation)	Reduced psychological and developmental well-being linked to diminished direct contact with nature.	Highlights costs of disconnection from natural environments; though not a clinical category, has raised awareness of the developmental and ecological value of nature contact.	Louv, 2005
	Anthropocene disorder	Negative (syndrome, existential malaise)	Broad psychological syndromes linked to living under human-driven global disruption.	Frames diffuse ecological stress as a chronic, epochal condition.	Albrecht, 2011; Rehling, 2022

Figure 2: Psychoterratic Emotions and Related Processes in the Context of Climate Change. Building on Albrecht's (2005, 2011) original notion of psychoterratic emotions and subsequent extensions that introduced eco-anxiety, eco-guilt, eco-grief, and eco-coping (e.g., Pihkala, 2020; Ágoston et al., 2022), we systematize these phenomena into four functional categories:

affective bonds, distress responses, coping mechanisms, and cognitive shifts. While earlier accounts often described these experiences in terms of positive or negative valence (Clayton et al., 2017; Koger, 2011), such dichotomies risk obscuring their ambivalent and sometimes adaptive roles (Pihkala, 2020; Ágoston et al., 2022a). For example, emotions such as eco-anxiety or eco-guilt can be distressing, yet they may also serve as catalysts for collective action or sustainable behaviour. This functional reframing clarifies how climate-related psychological phenomena can exacerbate vulnerability or foster resilience within a psychoecological framework of climate–conflict dynamics.

Note. Adapted from Albrecht (2005, 2011), Pihkala (2018, 2020), Ágoston et al. (2022a, 2022b), Clayton et al. (2017), Hirschberger (2018), Rehling (2022), and others. This table summarizes climate-related emotions and defensive processes (e.g., denial, apathy) grouped by psychological function rather than valence.

2.3.Aggression, Uncertainty, and Intergroup Responses

Importantly, social reactions to environmental change often depend less on the objective causes of ecological disruption than on how affected communities perceive these changes and attribute responsibility for them. Ecological stresses that heighten uncertainty, fear, or loss of control can lead to more *ethnocentric attitudes and behaviours*. These, in turn, often spur intergroup tension and aggression. Evidence across psychology, sociology, and political science shows that global warming heightens the incidence of violent behaviour. Laboratory and field studies demonstrate that stressors such as extreme heat, cold, crowding, noise, and poor air quality increase aggressiveness (Berkowitz & Harmon-Jones, 2004; Graham et al., 2006), and violent crime rises during hot periods (Anderson, 2001).[7] This micro-level evidence is reflected in Anderson's General Aggression Model, which Anderson and DeLisi (2011) extend to climate change: warming amplifies aggression both directly (via discomfort) and indirectly through processes such as displacement, poverty, and resource strain, which may intensify social tensions. These mechanisms connect environmental stress not only to individual aggression but also to intergroup conflict, situating climate change as a potential systemic catalyst for violence.

At the macro level, climate stress intensifies resource competition and exacerbates social divisions. As Xie et al. (2024) summarize, climate stress can shape conflict risk through multiple pathways, a pattern echoed in African studies (Burke et al., 2015; Raleigh & Kniveton, 2012). Realistic Conflict Theory (Sherif, 1966) predicts that scarcity pushes groups into rivalry, as, for instance in Africa, where prolonged droughts and shifting rainfall have sparked farmer–herder conflicts over land and water (Mertz et al., 2016). In the Sahel, desertification and erratic rains have intensified clashes in Nigeria, Mali, and Sudan—a classic setup for intergroup rivalry. [8] A meta-analysis estimates that

[7] Additional evidence includes Ranson (2014) and Bushman et al. (2005), who confirm increased violent offenses during hotter periods.

[8] In Nigeria, desertification and drought have driven herders south into farming zones, intensifying clashes that since 2011 have caused over 10,000 deaths (Eboreime et al., 2025). Similar dynamics occurred in

deviations from typical historical climate conditions (e.g., drought, heat) increase intergroup conflict risk by about 11% (Burke et al., 2015).[9]

Psychological processes mediate these dynamics: *Social Identity Theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg, 2007, 2021) reminds us that people derive a sense of self from group memberships, and they are motivated to maintain a positive distinctiveness for their in-group. In times of crisis or insecurity, group boundaries often harden: individuals latch onto group identity more tightly as a source of certainty and support. Environmental threats can heighten an "us vs. them" mindset, especially if another group is seen as the cause of or competitor in the crisis. For example, if a devastating drought strikes and one ethnic community suffers more, its members might blame neighbouring groups (or the government, or foreign countries) for their plight, rather than attributing it purely to natural forces. This search for *scapegoats* is a common psychological defence when faced with hardship — it externalizes the threat and provides a target for frustration. Unfortunately, scapegoating often aligns with pre-existing social fault lines (ethnicity, religion, nationality), thereby inflaming intergroup animosities. In addition, *Social Comparison Theory* (Festinger, 1954) and the *Theory of Relative Deprivation* (Runciman, 1966; Stouffer et al., 1949) emphasize that perceptions of relative disadvantage under climate stress intensify resentment and salient injustice rather than absolute conditions as the driver of grievance and conflict.

Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1997) offers another lens for understanding climate-era aggression and defensiveness. It proposes that *mortality salience* (reminders of human mortality) leads individuals to cling more firmly to cultural worldviews and in-group identities, which function as psychological buffers against existential anxiety. In laboratory experiments, making death salient has led participants to show greater prejudice toward out-groups and more defence of in-group values, as a way to attain symbolic immortality through one's group or culture (Fritsche et al., 2012) and fostered ethnocentric attitudes (Uhl et al., 2017).[10] These outcomes show how climate threat can activate *symbolic defences* — nationalism, group pride — rather than direct problem-solving, thereby fuelling group biases. Climate change, while distinct from immediate personal death, represents a diffuse *existential threat* — it portends the possible demise of entire communities or even humanity. Thus, climate threats can evoke a kind of mortality salience on a collective scale. People fearful of climate-driven apocalypse may, consciously or unconsciously, seek refuge in worldview defence:

Darfur, where reduced vegetation forced nomadic herders into conflict with settled farmers. Across the Sahel, access to land and water remains a frequent trigger of disputes (Climate Diplomacy).

[9] While correlations between climate variability and violence in Africa are well documented, causation remains debated. In Lake Chad, environmental decline disrupted livelihoods, but Boko Haram's rise also reflected governance deficits and political violence (Okpara et al., 2015; Raleigh & Urdal, 2007). In Ethiopia's Somali and Oromia regions, recurrent drought contributed to clashes, but land policies and ethnic federalism shaped conflict intensity (Kefale, 2013; Meier et al., 2007). Climate change is thus best seen as a *threat multiplier*, interacting with social and political vulnerabilities (CNA, 2007).

10 Uhl et al. (2017) found that participants exposed to alarming climate reports showed greater ethnocentrism and less willingness to act pro-environmentally, with stronger effects in Austria than Argentina—highlighting the role of cultural context.

doubling down on ideological commitments, idealizing their in-group, and devaluing those who seem outside or opposed to that in-group. In essence, the looming spectre of environmental collapse can activate the same defences as any life-and-death threat. It leads individuals to "circle the wagons" around their group identity.

These processes intersect with *honour-based cultures*, where approach-oriented norms of retaliation legitimize aggression as reputation defence. Although widely documented in the U.S. South (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996), honour-based logics also shape African pastoralist and clan societies, where defending group pride and reputation can escalate local disputes into cycles of intergroup violence (Blench, 2004).

In fragile African contexts, where colonial-era divides and ethnic tensions sometimes persist just beneath the surface, the addition of climate stress can be particularly combustible. Imagine a scenario of prolonged drought in a fragile state: herders and farmers skirmish over a shrinking water source (a realistic conflict over resources), politicians exploit the crisis by blaming a rival ethnic group for mismanaging relief efforts (scapegoating and ethnopolitical manoeuvring), and rumours spread that "outsiders" (perhaps refugees or a neighbouring country) caused or are taking advantage of the disaster (an anxiety-driven conspiracy). All these narratives feed into intergroup fear and aggression. Militant groups and extremists can also capitalize on climate chaos: for example, non-state armed groups in the Sahel have recruited disenfranchised youths by playing on their grievances over resource scarcity and government neglect, effectively channelling climate anxiety into violent action. (Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016; Scheffran et al., 2019; Tesfaye, 2022).[11] In Nigeria, analysts have linked worsening desertification in the Lake Chad region to the rise of Boko Haram insurgency, as traditional livelihoods collapsed and young men faced existential insecurity, although multiple factors are at play, including ideology and state failures (Serdeczny et al., 2017).

To summarize: under ecological threat, aggression is driven not only by material scarcity but also by psychological reactions to that scarcity and uncertainty. The convergence of Realistic Conflict Theory's resource competition, Social Identity Theory's ingroup bolstering, and Terror Management Theory's existential defence creates a "perfect storm" where climate stress acts less as a root cause and more as a *psychological accelerant of existing conflict dynamics.* These outcomes, however, are not inevitable. They depend on how threats are appraised and what coping avenues exist. As later sections show, inclusive framings of *common humanity* or cooperative problem-solving can mitigate conflictual responses (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Fritsche et al., 2018). African examples demonstrate that adaptation strategies and regional solidarity can reduce climate-related conflict risk (IPCC, 2022; Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016).

2.4.Identity Processes Under Climate Stress

Particularly relevant in African contexts is how climate stressors undermine a *sense of control and stability* for communities dependent on natural resources. Repeated

[11] For a recent overview on climaSte-related security risks in the Sahel, see Bonner (2025).

droughts, erratic rainfall, or advancing desertification introduce *chronic uncertainty* into daily life – farmers do not know if rains will come, pastoralists must range farther for grazing, and families wonder if the next season will bring hardship. Such climatic instability not only threatens agricultural yields and pastoral livelihoods but also erodes the predictability that underpins social and economic planning. This fosters pervasive uncertainty in rural communities (IPCC, 2022; World Bank, 2021), which in turn fuels psychological stress and a search for ways to regain control. Social psychologists note that when personal control is undermined, people often turn to collective structures for support.

For example, *Uncertainty-Identity Theory* (Hogg, 2007) posits that under self-uncertainty, individuals more strongly identify with distinctive groups, as shared identity reduces ambiguity. A farmer facing climate-induced chaos may find security in tighter-knit community or religious groups that offer meaning amidst upheaval. Climate change also erodes *place-based identity*: many African cultures link identity to ancestral lands and ecosystems (Nyong et al., 2007). As these degrade, people may experience *solastalgia* (Albrecht, 2011)— the emotional distress of witnessing one's home environment deteriorate while remaining physically in place. The loss of farmlands to drought, or villages to encroaching deserts or sea-level rise is not merely an economic loss but a psychosocial one, disrupting residents' sense of continuity and belonging. Such loss of place can be deeply destabilizing: it threatens cultural practices, community cohesion, and individual identity, all of which depend on the continuity of place and environment (Niang et al., 2014; Serdeczny et al., 2017). In Africa, where identity and livelihood are often closely tied to the land, the trauma of environmental loss can reverberate through generations.

One striking social consequence of perceived threat is the tendency for groups to become more cohesive, uniform, and tightly bound. Under such conditions, individuals often set aside internal differences and increase *group entitativity* — perceiving and behaving as part of a unified whole with a common purpose (Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000). Crucially, higher perceived entitativity not only strengthens cohesion but also heightens competitiveness and hostility toward out-groups (Gaertner & Schopler, 1998; Rutchick et al., 2008). In the context of climate stress, this dynamic can enhance solidarity within groups while sharpening boundaries toward outsiders. The same cohesion that offers certainty and belonging under threat can simultaneously raise the risk of intergroup aggression. Environmental threats can indeed trigger such "closing of ranks." Barth et al. (2018), for example, found that exposure to information emphasizing climate change threats increased conformity to in-group norms and more punitive attitudes toward deviants. In other words, climate threat reduced tolerance for dissent within their own group — a hallmark of heightened cohesion. Strikingly, this effect occurred even in politically left-leaning groups, showing that climate threat does not induce a uniform conservative shift. Instead, it amplifies whatever values are salient within the in-group. Thus, environmentalist groups may double down on egalitarian values, whereas nationalist groups may intensify exclusionary norms (Jonas & Fritsche,

2013; Fritsche et al., 2018). Overall, climate threat appears to magnify "groupness" itself — fostering conformity and homogeneity — which can strengthen resilience internally but also sharpen intergroup divisions.

Belonging to a strongly entitative group can also restore a sense of collective control that offsets personal helplessness. *Group-based control theory* (Fritsche et al., 2011) argues that when individuals feel a lack of personal control, they may compensate by identifying more with groups that offer a sense of agency and order. Fritsche and colleagues (2011, 2012) presented evidence that threats to personal control lead people to seek greater group identification and display more ethnocentrism, as the group allows them to feel efficacious again. Climate change, being a global force beyond any one person's control, can easily induce such feelings of helplessness. Joining a powerful in-group (be it a militant movement, a fundamentalist sect, or even an authoritarian political party) might psychologically function to *regain a feeling of control* in turbulent times. For example, youths facing joblessness due to climate-related economic hardship may be drawn to armed groups that offer not only material rewards but also a sense of identity and agency — a way to flip the script from victim to actor, albeit through violence (Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016; Scheffran et al., 2019).

Collective action research in social psychology emphasizes the role of perceived collective deprivation and disadvantage — often attributed to crises such as climate change (Fritsche et al., 2018) or unjust intergroup relations — as a driver of efforts to improve the ingroup's situation. While traditional approaches focus on how collectives explicitly address problems, *threat-and-defence research* offers a broader perspective by examining how individuals respond to crises at both personal and collective levels of the self. These responses often bear no direct relation to solving the crisis; for example, climate crisis information can trigger hostile intergroup attitudes (Uhl et al., 2017; Uenal et al., 2021). *Threat-and-defence theory* explains such reactions through *palliation* — defences that alleviate threat-induced anxiety without addressing the root cause (Stollberg & Jonas, 2021). The existential threat posed by climate change does not simply trigger practical responses like material adaptation or migration — it also activates powerful emotional and cognitive mechanisms that shape intergroup dynamics. According to Stollberg and Jonas's (2021) *dual pathway model*, people respond either through emotionally charged *approach-oriented* direct *engagement* (e.g., collective action spurred by emotions such as guilt, anger, or moral elevation) or through *palliative, symbolic strategies* that offer short-term relief, like in-group defence or identification with nature.[12] Indeed, climate threat has been shown to heighten ethnocentrism and racism, especially among those with nationalist worldviews (Uenal

[12] These pathways parallel classic distinctions in coping research: approach-oriented responses resemble *problem-focused or proactive coping*, while palliative strategies mirror *emotion-focused or avoidant coping* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Heppner & Lee, 2002). This analogy highlights that groups, like individuals, can regulate existential threat through either adaptive engagement or defensive avoidance (Stollberg & Jonas, 2021; Fritsche et al., 2018).

et al., 2021). While palliation reduces distress, it can block problem-focused coping and collective action.

Fritsche et al.'s (2018) *Social Identity Model of Pro-Environmental Action* emphasizes that collective responses to ecological crises depend on perceived efficacy and salient group norms. While developed in the context of environmental behaviour, its principles apply more broadly to collective mobilization under climate stress, clarifying why some groups engage in cooperative adaptation while others turn defensive: Groups cooperate when they feel capable and when cooperation is normative; they turn defensive when efficacy is absent or exclusionary norms dominate.

Together, these theories clarify how climate stress reshapes identity processes—sometimes bolstering solidarity and resilience, sometimes fuelling hostility and division. *Figure 1.* summarizes their contributions to the psychoecological framework.

2.5.Migration and Collective Trauma

Climate change is uprooting millions worldwide, with Africa among the most affected regions (IPCC, 2022). Droughts, desertification, floods, and other disruptions force people to abandon ancestral lands (Niang et al., 2014). Climate migration is not only a humanitarian and developmental challenge (Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016) but also a psychological and sociopolitical one — a phenomenon with deep historical antecedents, not merely a contemporary challenge (Rácz, 2019). It also intersects with broader migration dynamics, including the risks of exploitation and insecurity along migration routes (Prantner, 2019) and reshapes identities and intergroup relations on both sides—among migrants and hosts.

For migrants, the psychological toll is profound. Leaving one's ancestral land is fraught with trauma: it entails the loss of home, community, and identity (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). Migrants often carry a sense of loss, survivor's guilt, and anxiety about uncertain futures, while struggling with marginalization in refugee camps or urban slums. Such conditions can foster collective frustration, which, especially among youth, can fuel radicalization, as in Somalia and Kenya, where climate-linked displacement has been tied to recruitment by militant groups offering identity and redemption (Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016).

Hosts also face pressures. Sudden influxes strain resources and heighten perceptions of threat—competition for jobs, rising prices, and fears of instability. These perceptions can spark xenophobia, especially when politicized. Migration can fragment communities, upset ethnic balances, or revive old feuds (Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016; Charlson et al., 2021).[13] Narratives matter: empathy and solidarity foster acceptance, while scapegoating fosters hostility (Esses et al., 2013). Terminology also shapes

[13] In Darfur, desertification pushed nomadic herders into farming lands, intensifying inter-ethnic tensions that later escalated into the 2003 conflict (Raleigh & Kniveton, 2012). In the Lake Chad Basin, the lake's 90% shrinkage displaced livelihoods and indirectly contributed to Boko Haram's rise (von Uexkull et al., 2016). In West Africa, coastal erosion and flooding drive relocations to cities such as Accra and Lagos, straining infrastructure and ethnic relations (Serdeczny et al., 2017).

reactions. Research shows that the term *"refugee"* can elicit greater compassion but also more fear than *"migrant,"* as refugees are often viewed as victims carrying trauma or foreign politics (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). For climate migrants, terminology remains contested— "climate refugees," "environmental migrants," or otherwise—and the lack of official recognition in international law[14] leaves many without protection, reinforcing both vulnerability and perceptions of illegitimacy (Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016).

Africa provides a paradoxical case of climate migration: it is simultaneously a major *point of origin* and a key *destination*. Countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Malawi illustrate how recurrent droughts, cyclones, and agricultural collapse undermine livelihoods and food security, driving outward migration (IPCC, 2022; FAO, 2019), while South Africa—less climate-vulnerable in relative terms—functions as a regional pole of attraction. Yet this dynamic also produces acute tensions: migrants escaping environmental insecurity encounter xenophobia and precarious livelihoods in the host society (Bamidele, 2025). Thus, the continent exemplifies both the drivers and the challenges of climate-induced displacement.

Divisions also arise *within* migrant groups. Diasporas may develop new identities abroad, sometimes financing rebel movements back home, as in Somali and Sudanese cases (Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016). Displacement abroad may reinforce victimhood narratives that feed homeland conflicts. Conversely, inclusive narratives and strong institutions can mitigate tensions. Traditional mechanisms, such as elders' councils in the Sahel, or pan-African solidarity, have supported peaceful integration (Adepoju, 2010).

From a psychological standpoint, migration challenges *social identity boundaries*. Interventions that foster *shared in-group identity*—as members of a nation, a region, or humanity confronting climate change—can reduce bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Joint farming projects between South Sudanese refugees and Ugandan hosts illustrate how cooperation can transform relations (Betts et al., 2017).

These dynamics unfold within what scholars describe as a *global collective trauma* (Woodbury, 2019). Unlike a discrete event such as a war or disaster, the climate emergency is a slow-moving, pervasive process that humanity experiences together, though unevenly. In Africa, communities on the frontlines of climate change—from villages losing land to desertification to coastal towns facing rising seas—are undergoing upheavals that leave lasting psychological scars (Hirschberger, 2018; Alexander, 2012). Viewing these experiences through the lens of collective trauma illuminates how environmental insecurity is processed and shared within groups. Repeated droughts in Kenyan pastoralist communities devastate cattle herds and cultural practices, weakening identity transmission and fostering hopelessness (Augustinavicius et al., 2021). Unresolved trauma can entrench grievances and cycles of violence, while meaning-making and solidarity can foster resilience (Jonas & Fritsche, 2013; Hirschberger, 2018).

[14] The 1951 Geneva Convention does not cover climate-displaced persons; refugee status applies only to persecution for race, religion, nationality, group, or political opinion (McAdam, 2012). The UNHCR (2020) confirms that "climate refugees" lack legal recognition under current law.

Responses depend on framing. Trauma cast as *victimhood* entrenches conflict; trauma framed as *challenge* can rally resilience (Serdeczny et al., 2017; Niang et al., 2014).[15] *Eco-cultural identities*, where communities reframe themselves as "guardians of nature," can empower activism (Clayton, 2003; Clayton et al., 2021). African youth movements exemplify this resilience. Yet drought-exacerbated cattle raids also perpetuate intergenerational grievances (Mkutu, 2008; Witsenburg & Adano, 2009). Breaking such cycles requires peacebuilding, trauma healing, and psychosocial support, blending traditional rituals with therapy. Resilience depends on *collective efficacy*: groups with stronger trust and organizational experience recover more effectively and are less prone to conflict (Norris et al., 2008).[16]

In sum, migration and trauma illustrate how ecological stress reshapes not only material conditions but also *identity, belonging, and intergroup relations*. When internalized as hopeless trauma, insecurity fosters grievance and division. When reframed through meaning-making, solidarity, and collective efficacy, it can cultivate resilience.

2.6. Toward a Psychoecological Synthesis

While existing research has examined the psychological consequences of identity threat (Lüders et al., 2016), the emotional regulation of climate threat (Stollberg & Jonas, 2021), and the systemic pathways from climate stress to conflict (Scheffran et al., 2019), these perspectives have rarely been integrated. We propose a *psychoecological synthesis* that connects *micro-level affect regulation* with *macro-level conflict dynamics*, illustrating how existential ecological threats translate into intergroup outcomes. These outcomes—cooperation or conflict—are mediated by social-psychological factors such as group efficacy and norms (Fritsche et al., 2018) (see *Figure 3.*).

[15] Li et al. (2023) show that framing past trauma as a challenge fosters constructive outlooks, while framing it as threat entrenches mistrust and aggression.

[16] Local peace committees and early-warning systems in the Sahel mediate disputes before escalation (Issifu, 2016). Regional initiatives, such as African Union adaptation strategies, extend this sense of efficacy continentally (Niang et al., 2014).

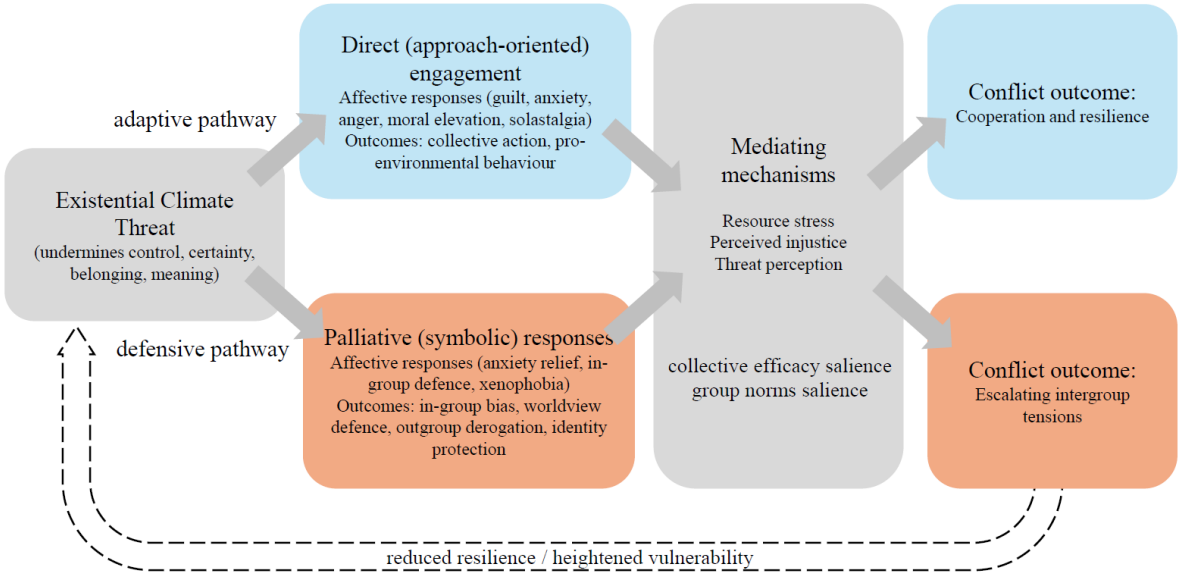

Figure 3: Psychoecological Pathways from Climate Threat to Conflict
Conceptual model of existential climate threat and intergroup conflict outcomes. Adaptive (approach-oriented) engagement fosters cooperation and resilience, whereas palliative (defensive) responses escalate intergroup tensions. Mediating mechanisms include resource stress, perceived injustice, and group norms. The dashed feedback loop indicates reduced resilience and heightened vulnerability to renewed climate stress. Adapted from Stollberg & Jonas (2021), Jonas et al. (2014), Lüders et al. (2016), Fritsche et al. (2018), and Scheffran et al. (2019); expanded by the author.

Conceptual model of existential climate threat and intergroup conflict outcomes. Adaptive (approach-oriented) engagement fosters cooperation and resilience, whereas palliative (defensive) responses escalate intergroup tensions. Mediating mechanisms include resource stress, perceived injustice, and group norms. The dashed feedback loop indicates reduced resilience and heightened vulnerability to renewed climate stress. Adapted from Stollberg & Jonas (2021), Jonas et al. (2014), Lüders et al. (2016), Fritsche et al. (2018), and Scheffran et al. (2019); expanded by the author.

In this synthesis, *existential climate threats* undermine needs for control, certainty, belonging, and meaning. Individuals and groups regulate distress along two pathways. *Approach-oriented responses* (e.g., guilt, anger, moral elevation, solastalgia) can foster collective action and pro-environmental behaviour, while *palliative (symbolic or defensive) responses* (e.g., anxiety relief, in-group defence, xenophobia) may restore short-term control but heighten exclusion and hostility. These pathways shape *mediating mechanisms* that link micro-level emotions to systemic conflict: resource stress, perceived injustice, distrust, and the salience of collective efficacy and norms (Fritsche et al., 2018). In turn, they feed into *conflict outcomes* identified by Scheffran et al. (2019): cooperation and resilience, or escalation of intergroup tensions. The *feedback*

loop underscores that violent conflict reduces resilience, leaving communities more vulnerable to future climate stress.

This integrative perspective highlights climate change as both a *psychological stressor* and a *systemic risk factor.* The synthesis highlights that pathways from climate stress to conflict are non-linear and are shaped by the interplay of emotions, identity processes, and structural vulnerabilities.

3. Discussion

The psychoecological lens developed in this paper highlights that climate–conflict linkages are not simply material or structural, but also deeply psychological. By foregrounding processes such as identity threat, meaning-making, and collective efficacy, we can see how ecological stressors are translated into either cooperative or conflictual social dynamics. This section discusses the theoretical contributions of this approach, its implications for resilience and adaptation strategies, and the limitations and avenues for future research.

3.1. Contributions to Theory

The central contribution of this paper is to *conceptualize climate change as a psychoecological stressor*: a force that destabilizes basic needs for control, certainty, belonging, and meaning, and channels these insecurities into intergroup relations. This reframing highlights that climate–conflict linkages are not only material or structural but also *symbolic and emotional*.

By integrating theories of *social identity*, *group-based control*, *terror management*, *and collective trauma,* the psychoecological perspective shows how climate stress can lead either to grievance-driven conflict or resilience-based cooperation. *Meaning-making* emerges as a crucial mediator, shaping whether insecurity is experienced as hopeless trauma or reframed as solidarity and agency.

This synthesis extends climate–conflict research by bridging *micro-level affect regulation*, *meso-level narratives*, and *macro-level resource dynamics.* It therefore connects environmental psychology and conflict studies, offering a holistic account of how climate stress can both fuel instability and inspire resilience. In doing so, it positions climate change not only as an environmental or political challenge, but as a *psycho-social phenomenon at the heart of intergroup relations.*

3.2.Policy and Resilience Integration

The psychoecological lens highlights that climate change in Africa is not only an environmental or economic issue but also a *psychological and social one*. Droughts, floods, and heatwaves unsettle minds and communities, fuelling anxiety, threatening identities, and reshaping intergroup relations. Left unaddressed, these responses can drive conflict: eco-anxiety may push people toward narrow identities, helplessness may

morph into aggression, and unresolved trauma may harden into cycles of violence or radicalization. Yet these same dynamics create opportunities for *intervention and resilience*. Recognizing the psychological dimensions of climate stress opens new avenues for prevention and peacebuilding. The following implications for security, defence, and resilience strategies build directly on this theoretical exploration:

- *Integrate Mental Health into Adaptation*. Climate stress fuels anxiety, depression, and trauma. Adaptation policies should include psychosocial support, trained facilitators, and post-disaster counselling to channel emotions constructively (Clayton et al., 2021).

- *Foster Inclusive Identities and Narratives*. Unity narratives and cooperative projects expand the circle of "us," countering scapegoating and ethnocentric bias under stress (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Fritsche et al., 2018).

- *Promote Conflict-Sensitive Resource Management*. Anticipate flashpoints in water, grazing, and fisheries. Transparent sharing and local mediation prevent scarcity rivalries from escalating (Sherif, 1966; Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016).

- *Address Grievances and Justice*. Climate stress magnifies injustices over land, governance, and exclusion. Fair processes and acknowledgement of past harms prevent grievances from becoming conflict drivers (Serdeczny et al., 2017; Hirschberger, 2018).

- *Train Security Actors*. Security forces should recognize that climate-related violence may stem from trauma and fear. Culturally sensitive, de-escalatory training avoids heavy-handed responses that deepen mistrust (Clayton et al., 2021).

- *Facilitate Collective Healing*. Rituals, memorials, and shared histories can transform trauma into solidarity. Emphasizing collective loss reduces segmented victimhood and cycles of retribution (Hirschberger, 2018).

- *Support Climate-Resilient Meaning Systems*. Preserving cultural anchors and eco-cultural identities enables communities to reframe loss as guardianship of nature, fostering resilience (Albrecht, 2011; Hirschberger, 2018).

- *Engage Youth as a Psychoecological Resource*. Eco-anxiety can mobilize. Empowering youth leadership in adaptation and peacebuilding channels this energy toward resilience rather than radicalization (Hickman, 2020).

3.3.Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this paper advances a psychoecological framework for climate–conflict linkages, several limitations warrant mention. First, the analysis is largely theoretical: although supported by empirical illustrations, systematic testing of the proposed pathways is limited. Future studies should operationalize constructs such as eco-anxiety, collective trauma, and group-based control in relation to climate stressors and intergroup outcomes, employing both qualitative and quantitative designs across African contexts.

Second, much of the psychological evidence cited here derives from laboratory experiments or Western samples. More cross-cultural research is needed to assess whether frameworks like Terror Management Theory, Social Identity Theory, or the Common Ingroup Identity Model apply under African sociocultural conditions, where indigenous coping strategies and collective spiritual frameworks may shape responses differently.

Third, the model presented here highlights dual trajectories of grievance versus resilience, but the boundary conditions remain underexplored. When does collective trauma fuel violence, and when does it foster solidarity? Longitudinal, community-based studies could clarify how leadership, meaning-making, and institutional trust shape these divergent outcomes.

Finally, while this paper foregrounds psychological mediators, it does not suggest that structural and material factors are secondary. Future work should integrate psychoecological insights with political economy, security studies, and development research to capture the full complexity of climate–conflict dynamics.

4.Conclusion

This paper has argued that climate change must be understood not only as an environmental and economic challenge but also as a *psychological and social one*. Ecological stressors reshape African intergroup dynamics, driving both conflict and cooperation. Crucially, outcomes are not predetermined by climate pressures but mediated by how individuals and communities *interpret, regulate, and respond* to them.

Scheffran et al. (2019) remind us that climate–conflict linkages are not simple cause–effect chains but complex, indirect pathways. Human psychology animates these patterns: perceptions of threat, feelings of injustice, and tightening group identities can steer communities toward either cooperation or confrontation. Research shows that perceived threat and relative deprivation (Barth et al., 2018; Brzoska & Fröhlich, 2016) often emerge before material scarcity reaches crisis levels. In other words, *interpretations of environmental change may be as decisive as the changes themselves.*

Psychology can do more than describe the problem. Building resilience at individual and community levels can weaken the pathways from climate stress to conflict (Clayton et al., 2021). Strengthening collective efficacy redirects existential anxiety into constructive engagement (Stollberg & Jonas, 2021), while fostering trust, empathy, and fairness prevents adaptation measures such as migration or resource-

sharing from becoming flashpoints. Inclusive, culturally sensitive adaptation reinforces cohesion, whereas imposed measures risk hardening group boundaries (Leidner et al., 2010). Linking *psychological resilience with structural adaptation* reframes climate policy as both an environmental necessity and a peacebuilding strategy.

As climate change unfolds across Africa, intergroup conflict is not inevitable. Outcomes hinge on *psychological and social mediators* — how threats are perceived and how leaders frame them. African traditions of resilience, solidarity, and spiritual connection to nature can be harnessed to foster peace under new climatic conditions. If climate change is a *threat multiplier*, human empathy and collective wisdom can serve as *response multipliers*. A psychoecological approach shows where to intervene: reduce existential threat, strengthen collective efficacy, and steer adaptation away from conflict toward resilience.

Notes on Contributors

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Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

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