Regions4

Cultivating Just Resilience at the Subnational Level:

Principles, Partnerships, and Pathways for Implementation

Key Messages:

- Climate change and biodiversity loss disproportionately affect the most vulnerable communities and intensifies existing inequalities, making environmental justice and inclusion central to resilience strategies.

- Subnational governments[1] are close to their local populations and are uniquely positioned to translate international and national goals into territorially adapted, equitable, and sustainable solutions.

- This policy brief introduces the concept of Just Resilience, a framework that embeds equity, participatory governance, fair resource distribution, intergenerational justice, and ecological, economic and social balance into climate and biodiversity action at the regional level.

- By adopting these principles, subnational actors can design transformative strategies that address structural inequalities, empower communities, and unlock co-benefits for people and nature.

- Strengthening legal frameworks, mainstreaming equity, promoting participatory governance, and building local capacity are critical for effective implementation and to avoid maladaptation or environmentally harmful climate practices.

- The Just Resilience Checklist provides practical guidance for subnational governments to design, implement, and monitor equitable and sustainable strategies.

- International, national and financial partners play a key role by providing accessible funding, sustained capacity building, and supportive partnerships.

Regions4
Sustainable Development

conGope
Consorcio de Gobiernos
Autónomos Provinciales
del Ecuador

Introduction

Climate change and biodiversity loss are reshaping our planet –as well as the social and economic systems that depend on it– at an unprecedented pace. These crises disproportionately affect the most vulnerable (IPCC, 2023; IPBES, 2024), highlighting the importance of ensuring that resilience efforts are just and inclusive. It is no longer enough for policies or projects to reduce emissions or protect ecosystems. They also need to confront structural inequalities, redistribute resources fairly, and empower historically excluded communities to avoid maladaptation and enable long-term, transformative adaptation. These inclusive approaches must also be embedded in climate change adaptation measures.

Based on this rationale, subnational governments are uniquely placed to lead these efforts. Positioned between national leadership and local implementation, they act as innovation laboratories and key governance actors, making them essential partners in building resilience for both people and nature.

Recognizing that resilience cannot be achieved without environmental justice, Regions4 has chosen to advance the concept of **Just Resilience** to ensure that responses to climate change and biodiversity loss actively address inequalities and empower those most affected (Lager et al., 2023; Mikaelsson & Lager, 2024; O'Grady, 2025). The term has gained visibility in recent years, both in academic research and in global policy discussions— appearing, for instance, in initiatives promoted by UN-Habitat and the World Urban Forum—and reflects a growing commitment to linking climate and social justice. Building on this evolution, Regions4 contributes to operationalizing Just Resilience as a policy-oriented framework for subnational governments, rooted in public policy, territorial planning, and multi-level governance.

At the same time, there is a pressing need for coherence across interconnected agendas, which is why Just Resilience also serves as a way to integrate Regions4's climate, biodiversity, and SDG programs under a common vision. Rather than introducing a new framework, this approach brings together existing principles into a unified perspective and translates them into practice.

This policy brief is based on a collaborative process led by Regions4, informed by literature review, the development of a white paper, surveys, and regional consultations—including a workshop hosted with the Consortium of Provincial Autonomous Governments of Ecuador (CONGOPE), regional governments, international organizations, and Indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon—to ensure that its content reflects both evidence and the lived realities of territories on the frontlines of change.

Building on this foundation, it provides subnational governments as well as international, national and financial partners seeking to promote justice, resilience, and environmental integrity with principle-based, actionable recommendations to integrate Just Resilience into climate and biodiversity strategies. It responds to the growing demand for territorial approaches that bridge environmental ambition with social and economic transformation, grounded in the lived realities of communities on the frontlines of change. By integrating climate and nature responses, the Just Resilience framework helps unlock co-benefits and expand access to financing mechanisms that prioritize equity and sustainability.

As climate justice and finance gain prominence on the global agenda—including at UNFCCC COP30—this brief serves as both a guide and a call to action, positioning subnational governments as strategic partners in delivering equitable and effective solutions. It also invites technical and financial actors to collaborate with these governments, local and Indigenous communities, to advance a truly just and sustainable future.

Stories of Impact:

Zamora Chinchipe, Ecuador, incorporated gender equity into its REDD+ implementation plan, prioritizing women's leadership in conservation, access to land, and economic empowerment.

Read more

Cultivating Territorial Action for Just Resilience: The Role of Subnational Governments

Defining Just Resilience

Just Resilience is defined as a conceptual and operational framework that enables the development of climate change, biodiversity and sustainable development strategies in the face of social and ecological crises in an equitable and inclusive manner. Based on the principles of environmental justice, community participation and multi-level governance, Just Resilience seeks to ensure that climate and biodiversity responses not only integrate the needs and capacities of the most vulnerable communities, but also address the root causes of vulnerability addressed by the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, such as poverty, discrimination and lack of access to resources, creating just, inclusive and sustainable solutions (Regions4, 2025).

In practical terms, Just Resilience addresses two dimensions: First, distributive justice, by ensuring that the benefits and costs of climate and biodiversity action are shared equitably across communities, regions, and socioeconomic groups; Second, procedural justice, by promoting fair, transparent, and participatory decision-making processes that include all relevant stakeholders. It combines these two dimensions by ensuring fair outcomes alongside fair processes that promote transparent, participatory, and knowledge-based decision-making. Populations hold the power to transform their territories when provided with the right conditions—policies, resources, and spaces for participation.

This material considers the factors of importance for policymakers of subnational governments when designing a Just Resilience strategy, providing guidelines for incorporation into decision-making processes:

- **Equity and Inclusion:** Take into account historically marginalized and vulnerable groups through intersectional policies and accessible capacity building.

- **Participatory Governance:** Ensure meaningful involvement of local communities, indigenous peoples, and civil society in decision-making and policy co-creation.

- **Fair Distribution of Resources:** Direct investments and support to populations at risk with transparency and inclusive financing mechanisms, ensuring that actions reduce—rather than shift—vulnerabilities across groups, regions, or generations.

- **Intergenerational Justice:** Balance immediate adaptation and environmental needs with long-term sustainability by engaging youth and preserving ancestral knowledge.

- **Ecological, Economic, and Social Balance:** Integrate environmental protection with social welfare and promote regenerative, inclusive economic models grounded in ethical and ecological responsibility.

Implementation of these principles at the subnational level requires the use of clear design criteria to embed justice and sustainability in policy and project planning, alongside evaluation criteria to measure outcomes, ensure accountability, and strengthen the legitimacy and impact of resilience actions *(more details and a Checklist tool can be found here)*. Recognizing that uncertainty and trade-offs may still arise, it is essential to include mechanisms for continuous learning and adjustment, so that any unintended or regressive effects can be identified and corrected over time.

Why Subnational Governments are central to Just Resilience

Subnational governments are strategically positioned to bridge top-down policy mandates with bottom-up needs, enabling the translation of global and national objectives into territorially adapted and socially equitable outcomes (Regions4, 2023; European Environment Agency, 2023). Located between national leadership and local implementation, they are uniquely equipped to design and implement territorially adapted solutions that integrate equity, environmental protection, and social and economic well-being (García et. al., 2021; Martínez & Rodríguez, 2022; López, 2020).

With authority over land use, infrastructure, social services, and environmental management, subnational governments are able to catalyze systemic change, mobilize local knowledge, and institutionalize participatory governance. This intermediary role allows for long-term planning that addresses structural drivers of vulnerability, such as exclusion, inequality, and resource degradation, while integrating climate and biodiversity priorities into long-term development pathways. Such an expanding role on the Global Environmental Agenda- anchored by direct engagements and participation in global networks such as Regions4- represents a pivotal shift in global governance architecture, reflecting the growing recognition that territories are not merely implementers of global commitments, but essential partners in shaping a more inclusive, multi-level, and participatory governance architecture. For this reason, partnering with and supporting subnational governments in Just Resilience initiatives benefits all actors.

Evidence from multi-level governance studies and papers[2] show that coordinated support for subnational climate and biodiversity action can significantly increase the likelihood of achieving national goals, creating a "force multiplier" effect for national and international mandates. Projects that embed justice and local ownership are more resilient over time, enabling national and international actors to meet requirements with greater certainty.

Successful Subnational Just Resilience initiatives can also serve as pilots or models for scaling, informing national strategies or global best practices, and providing tested approaches that are easier and more cost-effective to replicate than top-down interventions. By embedding justice and territorial leadership at the core of climate and biodiversity action, Just Resilience ensures interventions are not only ethical but also efficient, durable, and high-impact.

With the right tools, resources, and support, subnational governments can become engines of transformative resilience that delivers both environmental and social justice.

Stories of Impact:

In Yucatán, Mexico, efforts to strengthen and adapt the Mayan milpa system promote both biodiversity and cultural resilience, emphasizing sustainable agriculture, ecosystem stewardship, and community empowerment.

Read more

Gaps and Opportunities

Despite their critical role, subnational governments face a number of persistent challenges in implementing Just Resilience strategies, many of which are systemic and interrelated.[3] Limited technical capacity, financial dependency, and restricted access to international climate finance constrain long-term planning and equitable resource distribution. These challenges are compounded by fragmented data systems, a lack of standardized monitoring frameworks, and institutional silos that weaken coordination across governance levels. Top-down and overly technical approaches often fail to reflect the lived realities of communities, especially in the Global South, while social complexity and structural inequalities continue to exclude vulnerable groups from shaping solutions.

Subnational governments, a testing ground for just resilient projects and policies

Despite these challenges, subnational governments are already advancing grounded justice-oriented solutions. In early 2025, a collaborative week of activities in the Ecuadorian Amazon, organized by Regions4, Nature4Climate, and Wiñak - with support from partners such as CONGOPE, the Scottish Government, Nature and Culture International and the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities- brought together provincial leaders, local communities, and international experts to explore pathways for Just Resilience and to support Indigenous Economies. These exchanges helped surface the common barriers regions and communities face and identified several practical solutions,[4] highlighting the enabling conditions needed to move from vision to implementation. Crucially, the long-term success of these efforts will depend not only on identifying individual actions or leadership, but on strengthening the capacity to scale and replicate successful practices, connecting actors and initiatives across territories and governance levels to drive systemic change.

In this context, Regions4 identified a clear need for platforms that can channel technical and financial assistance, provide actionable guidance, and build capacity in a way that is accessible and context-responsive. More specifically, to advance effective, equitable action, regions need:

- Simplified pathways to channel financial and technical support
- Practical tools to embed Just Resilience into planning and monitoring
- Peer-learning opportunities and sustained capacity building
- Platforms to amplify territorial leadership in global forums

To address these needs, Regions4 has launched the Just Resilience Action Platform: a mechanism that supports subnational governments through project implementation, capacity exchange, planning tools, and international advocacy.

Inspired by promising regional initiatives—such as those led by Ecuadorian provinces—the platform offers a practical mechanism to scale subnational Just Resilience actions and projects, and connect them to knowledge and opportunities, in collaboration with local communities, where it is most urgently needed.

Stories of Impact:

In Paraná, Brazil, the Metropolitan State Forest co-management agreement between the Instituto Água e Terra and the local indigenous community supports sustainable use and conservation of the Atlantic Forest, combining reforestation, education, tourism, and community policing to enhance ecological and social resilience while respecting indigenous rights and knowledge.

Read more

Recommendations
Moving from Commitment to Implementation

Coordinated action is needed across all levels of government and sectors in order to promote Just Resilience. The following recommendations outline practical steps for subnational governments, as well as for technical and financial actors:

For Subnational Governments:

For subnational governments to make meaningful progress in building Just Resilience, it is essential that public policies do more than respond to climate and environmental challenges—they must also address the structural inequalities that amplify the vulnerability of certain populations. Just Resilience policies must be designed under a comprehensive, participatory, and transformative approach. One that enables continuous learning and adjustment in response to change, incorporating lessons from past experiences for enhanced resilience, and aligned with the fundamental principles of equity and inclusion, participatory governance, fair distribution of resources, intergenerational justice, and ecological and social balance (Juhola et al., 2022; Béné et al., 2018).

These principles cannot be understood in isolation but must be integrated in a cross-cutting manner throughout the entire public policy cycle, spanning policy formulation, planning, implementation, financing, evaluation, adjustment of resilience strategies and followed by post-policy monitoring and rectification to review and reassess outcomes over time.

This structured approach enables the design of integrated policies that cut across environmental, social, and economic domains, strengthening capacities to adapt to and mitigate climate change while transforming governance, financing, and territorial planning systems to ensure sustainable and inclusive responses in the long term (IPCC, 2022).

Building on this foundation, we propose the following recommendations for advancing Just Resilience at the subnational level:
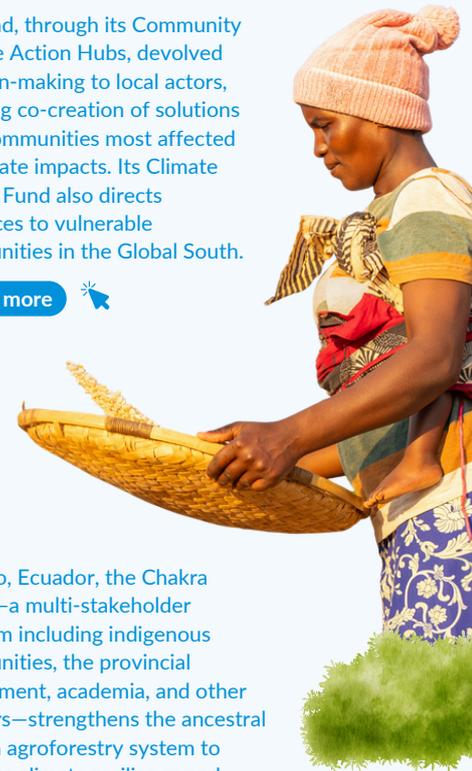
Stories of Impact:

Scotland, through its Community Climate Action Hubs, devolved decision-making to local actors, enabling co-creation of solutions with communities most affected by climate impacts. Its Climate Justice Fund also directs resources to vulnerable communities in the Global South.

Read more

In Napo, Ecuador, the Chakra Group—a multi-stakeholder platform including indigenous communities, the provincial government, academia, and other partners—strengthens the ancestral Kichwa agroforestry system to promote climate resilience and food security through public policies, training, and certification schemes that enable producers to access fair markets.

Read more

Recommendations For Subnational Governments

Governance & Policy

- Develop and enforce legal frameworks that require Just Resilience, equity, and social inclusion in all spatial and environmental planning.

- Commit to regular updates of laws and regulations to expand environmental rights and protections over time.

- Take into account vulnerable groups affected by inequalities related to poverty, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, etc.

- Incorporate biodiversity conservation and ecosystem restoration into resilience or adaptation planning, especially for communities dependent on natural systems.

- Incorporate intergenerational justice by ensuring the needs and rights of future generations are reflected in policies, and by recognizing and protecting ancestral knowledge.

- Apply intersectional approaches by carrying out equity and inclusion impact assessments (e.g. gender, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status) for new resilience projects.

- Recognize traditional and local knowledge in decision-making processes.

- Balance climate and biodiversity goals with sustainable livelihoods, food security, and green job creation by embedding these objectives in regional development plans and policies.

Finance & Resource Distribution

- Establish transparent criteria to direct a fixed share of mitigation, adaptation and biodiversity funds to vulnerable communities and publish regular allocation reports.

Capacity & Knowledge

- Conduct vulnerability and exposure assessments to identify who is most at risk, how they are affected, and use results to guide planning, budgeting, and project design.

- Invest in permanent technical teams within regional administrations, with multi-year training for staff and communities on Just Resilience, climate justice, nature-based solutions, participatory governance, and inclusive finance.

- Ensure these efforts strengthen and empower local communities by building lasting knowledge and capacity.

- Strengthen data systems by setting up regional observatories or similar mechanisms to collect and analyze information on vulnerabilities and resilience outcomes.

- Report progress and impacts annually, especially on vulnerable populations, and gather community feedback to adjust actions.

Partnerships & Cooperation

- Engage proactively with international donors and multilateral mechanisms (e.g. Green Climate Fund, Global Environment Facility, Inter-American Development Bank) to secure funding and technical support, while advocating for the integration of equity and inclusion criteria in project design and evaluation processes.

- Negotiate cooperation agreements that guarantee local ownership, involve communities directly in planning, and include clear benefit-sharing arrangements.

Use the Regions4 Just Resilience Checklist for project development and assessment:

Apply the Subnational Just Resilience checklist as a practical tool for policy design, implementation, and monitoring. Developed by Regions4, this checklist outlines key principles and criteria for Just Resilience and equitable climate and biodiversity actions.

Checklist here

Recommendations for international, national and financial partners

Governance & Policy

- Ensure that cooperation frameworks explicitly include objectives of Just Resilience, social inclusion, biodiversity conservation, and multi-level engagement.

- Embed adaptive monitoring and accountability mechanisms that go beyond procedural oversight to ensure policiesand funds effectively reach vulnerable populations, remain responsive to evolving circumstances and scientific knowledge, and foster transformative, sustainable development.[5]

Finance & Resource Distribution

- Establish and fund dedicated resilience mechanisms and subnational projects that prioritize groups and territories at risk, taking into account marginalized and vulnerable populations, with simplified and accessible application processes.

- Apply social and environmental justice criteria for project selection to ensure fair distribution of benefits.

- Decentralize financing instruments to give direct access to subnational governments and communities, especially in highly centralized countries.

- Develop tailored financial products suited to territorial needs, such as results-based payments, grants (rather than loans), microcredits, investment guarantees, or concessional loans.

Capacity & Knowledge

- Invest in permanent technical teams within regional administrations, with multi-year training for staff and communities on Just Resilience, climate justice, nature-based solutions, participatory governance, and inclusive finance.

- Support the development of knowledge sharing, innovative tools, and technologies that help subnational governments build equitable resilience.

- Support the creation of regional platforms for South-South and triangular decentralized cooperation to foster Just Resilience and peer learning.

Partnerships & Cooperation

- Increase funding and technical support to subnational governments through partnerships with the Green Climate Fund (GCF), Global Environment Facility (GEF), Multilateral Adaptation Fund (MAF), World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), United Nations agencies, and philanthropic actors.

- Involve local and Indigenous communities as well as subnational governments in financial planning and project implementation through transparent and inclusive governance structures.

Stories of Impact:

In Sud Comoé, Côte d'Ivoire, the creation of a community-managed voluntary nature reserve showcases how local communities' leadership and biodiversity conservation can reinforce each other.

Read more

Acknowledgements:

Regions4 extends its sincere appreciation to CONGOPE for its support in the preparation of this policy brief, and to the Government of Scotland for championing our work on Just Resilience. We also thank the Government of Québec and Fernando Rei, Professor in International Environmental Law at the Catholic University of Santos, Brazil, for their valuable peer review and insights, and acknowledge the work of Alejandro Callejas, Project Director at GIZ in Mexico, for his contributions to the development of the white paper on Subnational Just Resilience.

Regions4 further acknowledges the contributions of Jordan Harris, Regions4 Executive Director; Gabriela Carrera, Regions4 Biodiversity Programme Officer; and Ana Dias, Regions4 Biodiversity Programme Support, for their support in drafting and contributing to this policy brief.

Thanks to all Regions4 members who have engaged through surveys, dialogues and discussions, and to our partners - Nature4Climate, Nature & Culture International, the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities, and Wiñak—for their collaboration on advancing the intersections between Indigenous Economy and Just Resilience.

References:

European Environment Agency (2023) Climate change, impacts and vulnerability in Europe 2023: An indicator-based assessment.
García, J., Pérez, M., & Sánchez, R. (2021). Resilience and governance in local contexts: Strategies for sustainability. Editorial Universitaria.
IPBES (2024) *Summary for Policymakers of the Thematic Assessment Report on the Interlinkages among Biodiversity, Water, Food and Health.* Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), Bonn, Germany. Available here.
IPCC (2023) *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.* IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland. Available here.
IPCC (2022) Sixth assessment report: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. Available here.
Lager, F., et al. (2023) Just Resilience for Europe: Towards measuring justice in climate change adaptation. European Environment Agency - EEA. ETC-CA Technical Paper Vol. 2023 No. 1. Available here.
Martínez, A., & Rodríguez, P. (2022) Inclusive policies for regional sustainability: Approaches and challenges. Journal of Subnational Studies, 15(2), 45-67.
Regions4. (2023) Regions Adapt Progress Report 2023 - Addressing Climate Justice in Regional Adaptation Planning and Actions.
Regions4. (2025) Defining Subnational Just Resilience: Principles & criteria for regional government action.

Footnotes:

1 For the purposes of this document "subnational governments" refers to states, provinces, domains, devolved governments and regional governments.

2 For further details, consult:

Edinburgh Process. Dialogue with 18: From National to Local Implementation. Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework.

UNFCCC. Thematic Paper 5: From National to Local Implementation – A Collaborative, Multi-Level Effort to Achieve Joint Climate and Biodiversity Goals. 2022.

OECD. Enhancing the Effectiveness of Subnational Biodiversity Policy. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020.

3 Information gathered from the consultation process conducted by Regions4, including a survey and a virtual workshop with breakout discussions held on March 26th 2025 (which in total counted with the contributions of 26 regions including Andalucía, Basque Country, California, Campeche, Catalonia, Climate Trends/Assam State, CONGOPE, Cusco, Département de Saint-Louis, Flanders, Gauteng, Hauts-Bassins, Jalisco, KwaZulu Natal, Lombardy, Louga, Navarra, Paraná, Québec, Rabat Salé Kenitra, Rio de Janeiro, Santa Fe, Scotland, Wales, Western Province and Yucatán).

4 Find complete case studies about the solutions identified in the Case Study Database: Integration of Cultural and Ancestral Knowledge into Biodiversity Plans (Pastaza, Ecuador); The Chakra Group as a Community Mechanism for Sustainable Conservation (Napo, Ecuador); A Gender Approach in the REDD+ Plan (Zamora Chinchipe, Ecuador); Collective Creation of the Tarímiat Pujutaí Nunka Reserve (Morona Santiago, Ecuador), and Shared Management of the Metropolitan State Forest (Paraná, Brazil).

5 The complexity of formulating multisectoral public policies presents significant challenges, requiring adaptable policy structures that can evolve with changing circumstances and the advancement of scientific knowledge. Therefore, continuous monitoring of the impacts of these policies is not merely a procedural formality, but a fundamental requirement to ensure effectiveness and avoid unintended consequences.

Photos Credits:

Cover: © Christian Lamontagne, 2009. Winning photo of the Regions4 Just Resilience Photo Contest, 2025 submitted by the Government of Québec
Page 3: ©Government of the State of Campeche (2023)
Page 4: ©State of Yucatán
Others: ©Regions4

Designed by:

©Soraia Ribeiro, Regions4 Communications Manager

At Regions4, we act, we connect, we transform. We act by staying close to the territories we serve, embodying transformative change on the ground. We connect regions to each other and to the UN, ensuring their voices are heard in global discussions. We transform by driving real, localized progress in climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development.

Regions4
Sustainable Development

CONGOPE