
Climate Change and Religious Institutions in Kenya: Selected Research Findings

*This brief provides an overview of key findings from the research article “[What Stymies Action on Climate Change? Religious Institutions, Marginalization, and Efficacy in Kenya](#),” published in *Perspectives on Politics* (2021) by [Lauren Honig](#), [Amy Erica Smith](#), and [Jaimie Bleck](#). This brief was compiled by the authors with assistance from Patrick McCabe.*

Introduction

Addressing climate change requires coordinated policy responses that incorporate the needs of the most affected populations. Globally, communities that had little role in creating climate change are bearing the brunt of its effects. **Kenyans are highly vulnerable to climate change**; in recent years, the country has experienced many extreme weather events, from droughts to deadly floods. In addition, **Kenyans have an established repertoire of environmental activism** and progressive environmental policies, from Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt Movement to the 2017 plastic bag ban. However, even in a country with a long history of environmental activism and exposure to climate change, **some communities may remain on the sidelines if not actively engaged**.

This research examines Kenyans’ **perspectives on climate change and on their ability to combat it**. In particular, it focuses on the **connections between religious communities and climate change responses**. The findings reported here reflect insights shared in 16 interviews with religious leaders and 9 focus groups with 79 congregants in 2018. These religious communities include Muslim and Christian faith traditions in Kilifi and three neighborhoods in Nairobi – Dandora, Kileleshwa, and Westlands. In addition to these qualitative insights, the findings draw on analyses of a national public opinion poll of 1,599 Kenyans implemented by Afrobarometer in 2016. The research highlights seven key findings, summarized below with greater detail in the pages following.

Summary of Key Findings (details in pages following)

1. Kenyans have high beliefs in their ability to impact climate change
2. Scientific beliefs about climate change are similar across religious groups in Kenya
3. Urban and rural respondents reported experiencing a wide range of adverse climate impacts
4. Pastoralists as well as residents of Eastern, Northeastern, and Coast provinces report more severe climate impacts
5. Beliefs about the ability to combat to climate change differ across religious groups, and are lower among pastoralists
6. Feelings of disempowerment and marginalization within the state discourage environmental activism

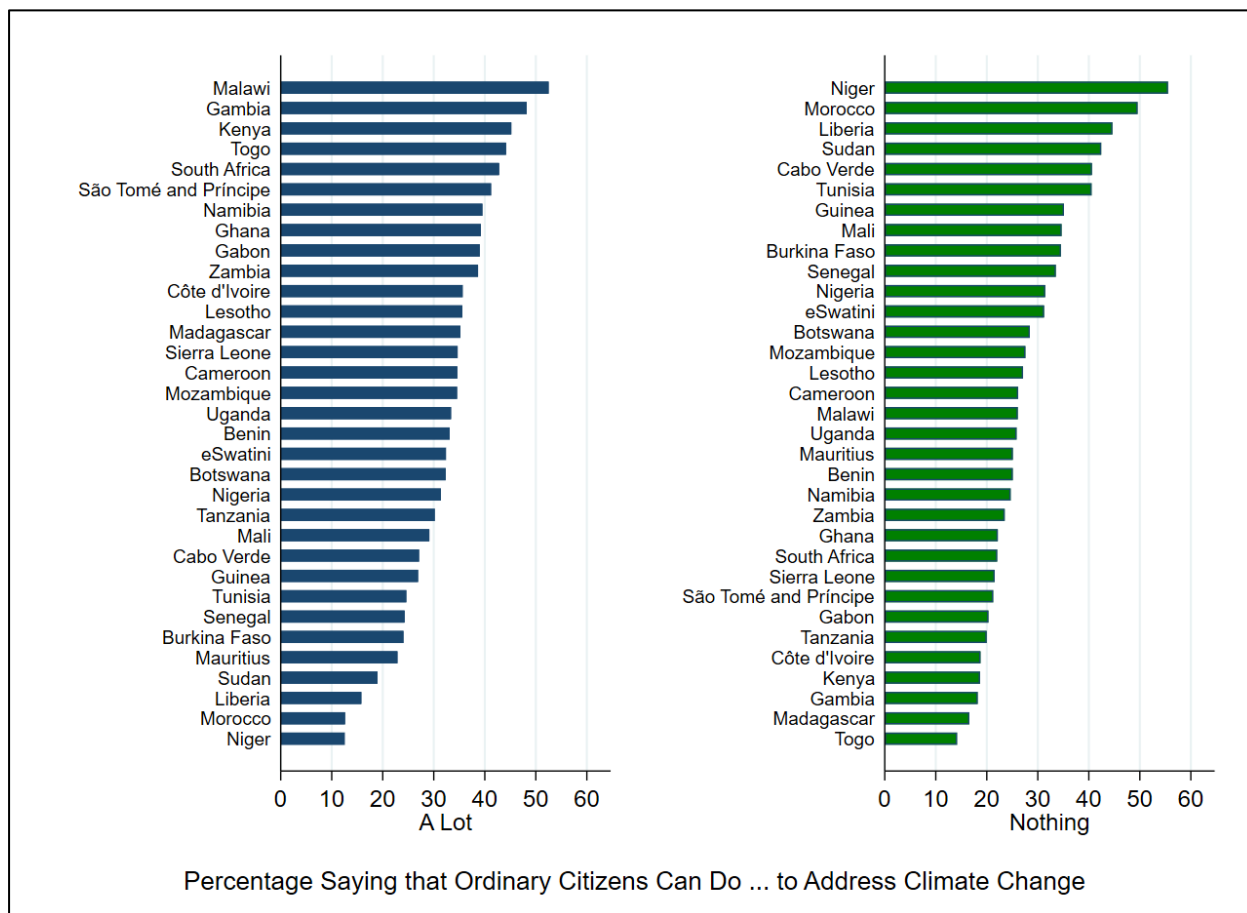
Conclusions

Policymakers, government, and NGOs should actively engage with marginalized communities in the design of climate change policy solutions. Our analysis suggests that groups that are highly concerned about climate change may remain on the sidelines because of their experiences of marginalization. In addition to members of Muslim religious communities, we also observe this result in the plight of pastoralists, who are highly impacted by drought and climate instability, but were significantly less likely to say that they could effect change. If the most vulnerable populations are less likely to organize collective action, climate change policy is unlikely to respond to their specific needs. In designing climate change solutions, it is critical to identify citizens who may be systematically less likely to engage.

More on the Research Findings

1) Kenyans have high beliefs in their ability to affect climate change

Kenyans are among the most environmentally efficacious citizens on the African continent; they have high beliefs that ordinary citizens can do a lot to combat climate change. The figure below compares responses regarding citizens’ beliefs that they can address climate change across African countries in the 2016 Afrobarometer survey. It reveals that Kenya has among the highest percentage of citizens saying that ordinary citizens “can do a lot” and the lowest percentage saying that ordinary citizens “can do nothing.” Among those who said that climate change should be stopped, only 19% believed that ordinary citizens could do “nothing at all,” while 46% were optimistic that ordinary citizens could do “a lot,” the third highest rate among African countries.



Source: Afrobarometer Round 7 (2016).

2) Scientific beliefs about climate change are similar across religious groups in Kenya

In qualitative interviews, religious leaders unanimously agreed, as did participants in eight of nine focus groups, that the weather was changing, interpreted as part of a broader pattern. There was no evidence of differences among Catholic, Pentecostal, and Muslim religious groups in their causal attributions for these changes in weather. Across religious groups, clergy provided strikingly consistent explanations of climate change. Every leader interviewed reported that changing weather resulted from human behavior, including phenomena such as

charcoal burning, deforestation, and air pollution. All clergy, including imams, pastors, and priests, said they talked about climate change with congregants.

In statistical analyses of the Afrobarometer survey of nearly 1600 citizens, 61% of respondents saw human behavior as the sole cause of climate change, and another 14% attributed climate change to both human and natural causes; just 25% attributed it to natural processes or other factors. There are no statistically significant differences between Christians, Muslims, and the non-religious in such beliefs. The question of whether climate change is anthropogenic or instead results from natural – or even supernatural – processes is a central divide in global public opinion on the environment. However, the qualitative and quantitative findings show that these beliefs do not differ among religious communities in Kenya. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Nairobi residents are more likely to agree that climate change has human causes than are residents of other regions.

3) Urban and rural respondents reported experiencing a wide range of adverse climate impacts

The qualitative sample of religious communities included the urban localities of Dandora, Kileleshwa, and Westlands (Nairobi) as well as the rural county of Kilifi. Across different livelihoods and socio-economic levels at these research sites, there was universal agreement that the weather has been changing. In the quantitative analysis, there was no difference between urban and rural respondents in beliefs that the climate is changing.

In Dandora, respondents reported experiencing and observing climate change through: earlier cold seasons, colder cold seasons, extreme heat during dry seasons, less sunlight, stronger sunlight, early rains, heavy (or “too much”) rains, flooding, drought, dying wildlife, landscape changes, and uneven seasons. They connected these changes to: more illness, more malaria, air pollution/difficulty breathing, and less food.

In Kilifi, respondents reported experiencing and observing climate change through: drought, flooding, insect pests, unpredictable amounts of rain, changes in the direction of rainfall, unusually high and low temperatures, less water access, changes in air quality, increased wind, poor agricultural harvests, increases in fish diseases and stocks, dying wildlife and livestock, and changes in the timing of planting seasons.

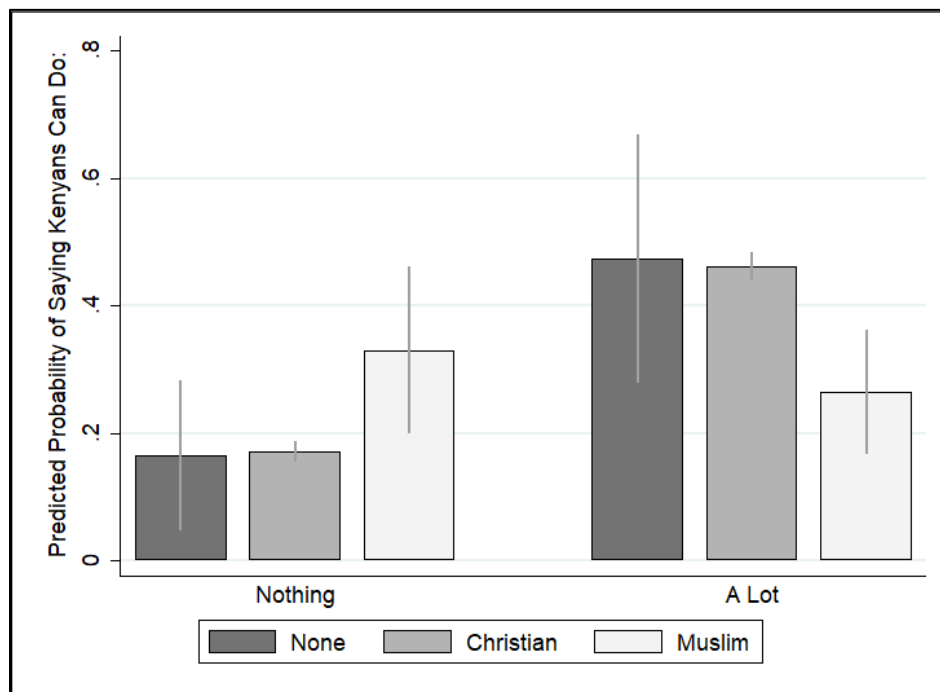
In the Nairobi estates of Westlands and Kileleshwa, respondents reported experiencing and observing climate change through: drought, extreme heat, flooding, heavy rain, abnormal rain patterns, dry lakes, unusual bird migrations, irregular sun, increased temperatures, decreases in fish stocks, changes in sunlight, extreme temperature decreases, unpredictable seasons, short growing seasons, wildlife dying, air pollution, mosquitos, water and food shortages, and less fruitful land.

In the quantitative analysis, pastoralists and those with lower levels of education expressed greater concern about a worsening climate and climate-related impacts. Residents of Eastern, Northeastern, and Coast provinces also reported more severe climate impacts.

4. Beliefs about the ability to combat to climate change differ across religious groups, as well as other demographic traits

Although scientific beliefs about climate change do not differ across religious groups, beliefs about the ability to combat climate change (“environmental efficacy”) do differ. In multivariate statistical analyses, non-religious and Christian respondents have identical levels of environmental efficacy: nearly half said that ordinary Kenyans could do a lot to impact climate change, and about a third thought they could do nothing. Muslims, however, are twice as likely as other groups to say that they could do “nothing” about climate change, and half as likely to say that they could do “a lot,” even after controlling for a wide range of demographic factors including ethnicity, region, urban/rural, wealth, and education. These analyses reveal that Muslims express much lower belief in their ability

to address climate change than other religious groups. This difference cannot be explained by differences in science beliefs, issue concern, ethnicity, or demographics.



Environmental Efficacy, by Religious Affiliation

Notes: Estimates from Model 1 of the research article. 90% confidence intervals shown.
Source: Afrobarometer Round 7 (2016).

In addition, pastoralists express somewhat lower levels of environmental efficacy. Controlling for other variables, the predicted probability of pastoralists saying that ordinary Kenyans can do “a lot” is 32%, as opposed to 46% for non-pastoralists. Similarly, the predicted probability of saying that ordinary Kenyans can do “nothing” is 28% for pastoralists, as opposed to 18% for other respondents.

5. Feelings of disempowerment and marginalization within the state discourage environmental activism

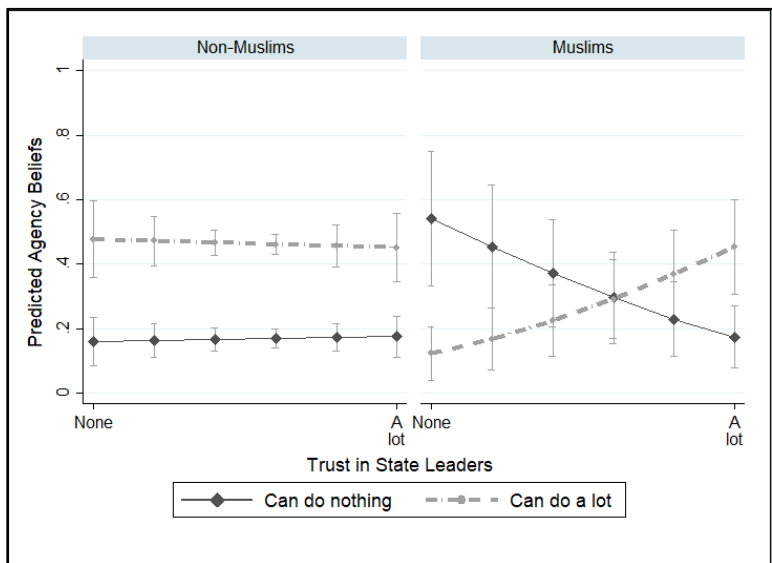
The religious differences between Muslim and Christian respondents in their beliefs about their ability to combat climate change result from Muslims’ feelings of disempowerment within the state. Membership in religious institutions does not impact environmental efficacy through doctrinal and ideological persuasion alone, but through the specific political context in which a religious group operates.

In interviews, both Catholic and Pentecostal leaders expressed comparatively strong ties to politicians. They described the ease of contacting MCAs and collaborative initiatives with the government. Congregants described the state being responsive to the Catholic Church. Others saw their churches as partners with the government on climate change issues.

These insights from members of Christian churches differed from Muslim communities. Every Muslim leader interviewed expressed alienation and distance from politicians; this was a constant across ethnic groups and locations in urban Nairobi or rural Kilifi. They described the challenges of contacting state leaders and having their voices heard. Members of Muslim focus groups could not envisage collaborative or responsive state actors. As further detailed in the research article, perceived oppression and state neglect seems to erode Kenyan Muslims’

sense of environmental efficacy, as individuals rationally expect the state to stymie or be unresponsive to their activism.

The statistical analysis of survey data supports the claim that a group’s relationship with the state could impact their beliefs in their ability to combat climate change. The analysis shows that moving from the minimum to the maximum level of trust in the state raises Muslims’ predicted probability of reporting high environmental efficacy from .12 to .45, and it is associated with a drop in the probability of reporting low efficacy from .54 to .17. However, attitudes toward the state only matter for Muslims. A respondent’s relationship with the state does not impact beliefs in the ability to combat climate change for other religious groups.



Trust in State Leaders Boosts Environmental Efficacy Among Muslims

Notes: Estimates from Model 4 of the research article. 95% confidence intervals shown.

Source: Afrobarometer Round 7 (2016).

References:

Afrobarometer Data, Kenya, Round 7, 2016, available at www.afrobarometer.org

This research would not have been possible without the support of the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) and the National Commission for Science, Technology & Innovation (NACOSTI). This research was funded by a Project Launch Grant from the Global Religion Research Initiative of the University of Notre Dame and was reviewed by NACOSTI as well as the IRBs of Iowa State University and Boston College. Mercy Ngao and Melda Munyazi provided excellent translation support and research assistance. The authors are grateful to the religious clergy and congregants who shared their perspectives on climate change, their experiences, and their time for this research.