



Policy Brief

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Socioeconomic Integration, Livelihoods, and Climate Displacement: A Global Crisis

Introduction

Extreme weather events and environmental degradation have emerged as primary drivers of displacement worldwide. The figure of 376 million people displaced by climate-induced disasters as of 2023 underscores the magnitude of this crisis (Apap & Harju, 2023).

The global landscape of migration is rapidly evolving, with climate change becoming a key driver of displacement. Extreme weather events, environmental degradation, and the gradual transformation of ecosystems have all led to an increase in the number of people forced to flee their homes. Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence and growing urgency, global leaders have consistently failed to implement sufficient climate-resilient policies to mitigate these effects. This failure has left millions vulnerable, particularly in the Global South, where the impacts of climate change are most acutely felt. In this context, the issue of climate displacement is not only an environmental challenge but a socioeconomic one that demands urgent, inclusive, and systemic responses.

Although, the global response to this mounting crisis has been insufficient, particularly as countries in the Global South bear the brunt of the displacement. These

regions—where people contribute little to the problem of climate change—are disproportionately affected by its consequences. While international discourse surrounding migration often centres refugees from conflict zones, the climate refugee crisis remains under-discussed and under-addressed.

Here is analysed the issue of climate-induced displacement, highlighting the challenges faced by climate refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). It examines the socioeconomic dimensions into host communities, critiques the inadequacies of current global migration frameworks, and suggests both short-term and long-term policy solutions. Additionally, it touches on international efforts, including controversial schemes like the Rwanda plan, which, while not a solution to the root causes of climate displacement, reflect the complexities of addressing this crisis on a global scale.

We will connect these challenges to broader geopolitical and economic dynamics, illustrating how climate change intersects with existing global inequities and migration systems.



Understanding Climate Refugees and IDPs

The term "climate refugee," or "environmental refugee," refers to individuals forced to flee their homes due to the direct effects of climate change. These individuals are displaced by environmental disasters such as hurricanes, floods, droughts, and wildfires, which are becoming increasingly frequent and severe. While international law does not yet recognize climate refugees under the Refugee Convention, the term broadly applies to individuals displaced by environmental stressors (Concern Worldwide, 2024). The 1951 Refugee Convention, which defines the rights of refugees, does not account for climate-induced migration. As a result, climate refugees are left without legal protection or clear status, making them vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and marginalization.

IDPs, by contrast, are those who are displaced within their own country, still subject to national laws, but with no access to international refugee protections. This distinction between refugees and IDPs is primarily legal, but their experiences are nearly identical; they often endure the same hardships as climate refugees. Marked by loss of livelihood, safety, and security, both groups face the overwhelming task of rebuilding their lives in the face of profound displacement, while simultaneously navigating the complexity of global migration policies that often fail to accommodate their needs.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2024), there are currently more than 50 million IDPs worldwide, with a significant portion of them displaced by climate-related disasters. From the arid landscapes of the Sahel in Africa to the flood-prone areas of South Asia, climate-induced displacement has become a central global issue.

Projections are equally dire. The World Bank estimates that by 2050, up to 200 million people may be displaced by climate change (World Bank, 2021). This looming crisis will not only affect individuals but entire communities and nations, with ripple effects across borders, economies, and societies.

For many, climate change is more than just a "threat multiplier"—it is a direct cause of displacement. The wildfires in California, hurricanes in the Caribbean, and prolonged droughts in the Sahel serve as clear examples of how environmental changes force people from their homes (Siegfried, 2023). Evidence now suggests that as climate change accelerates, so too will the scale and intensity of displacement.

The Scale and Geography of Climate Displacement

The Institute for Economics and Peace (2020) forecasts that over 1 billion people are at risk of displacement due to climate-related disasters and conflicts. These projections serve as a stark reminder of the urgency of addressing climate-induced migration on a global scale.

The geographical distribution of climate displacement is uneven, with the Global South bearing the brunt of the crisis. These regions, which contribute a minuscule share of global greenhouse gas emissions, are often the most vulnerable to climate disasters. For example, the Horn of Africa, which has suffered devastating droughts and famine over the past few years, has seen millions displaced from their homes. In Kenya, regions such as Marigat and Kakuma refugee camps are experiencing overwhelming internal displacement, with tens of thousands fleeing famine and resource-based conflict (Tower & Plano, 2023). This crisis is further exacerbated by ongoing conflicts and political instability,

which often complicate humanitarian efforts.

Similarly, in countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan, frequent flooding and rising sea levels have displaced millions, pushing them into overcrowded urban slums where access to basic services is limited. For these communities, climate displacement is not just a matter of survival—it's a fight for dignity and future opportunities in an increasingly uncertain world.

The Global North: A Different Narrative

While the Global South disproportionately suffers from the consequences of climate-induced migration, the Global North is not immune to the phenomenon. However, the response to displacement in wealthier nations often diverges from that in the Global South. In the United States, for instance, the term "climate migration" is frequently used to describe displacement caused by extreme weather, but the conversation rarely centres around the same scale of humanitarian crisis that is seen in poorer regions. When climate displacement happens in wealthier nations, such as the 2025 wildfires in Los Angeles, it is often framed as a "natural disaster" with temporary effects rather than as an ongoing crisis (Georgetown University, 2025; World Vision, 2025). The displaced residents, although facing enormous losses, are rarely labelled "climate refugees," a term reserved primarily for those in the Global South.

This disparity in language reflects a larger issue: systemic biases and inequalities that persist in how climate displacement is understood and addressed. Bandera (2024) argues that this difference in framing is a form of "climate colonialism," where the severity of climate displacement is minimized in wealthier countries while it is portrayed as an existential emergency in poorer, more vulnerable regions.

The discourse surrounding migration in wealthier countries often frames the issue in a different light. For example, in the United States, climate migration is often linked to domestic environmental disasters like wildfires, hurricanes, and floods. These events displace residents, but they are typically presented as short-term crises rather than long-term shifts in human mobility. This narrative obscures the scale of the climate migration crisis, especially as it pertains to displaced people from the Global South.

While climate displacement is a global phenomenon, it disproportionately impacts the Global South. In regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, people are forced to flee due to increasingly frequent and severe natural disasters. In countries like Bangladesh and the Philippines, rising sea levels and stronger cyclones have displaced hundreds of thousands annually. These regions, which have contributed little to the global carbon footprint, are bearing the brunt of the crisis, yet international support and adaptation efforts remain inadequate.

For example, Kenya has been experiencing record levels of internal displacement, with over 500,000 people displaced due to drought and conflict in 2023 alone (Tower & Plano, 2023). Similarly, the situation in Bangladesh is critical, with millions of people displaced by regular flooding. This trend is expected to worsen as the country's coastline is eroded by rising sea levels. These displaced populations face an uncertain future as they move into urban slums, competing for already scarce resources and struggling to find opportunities in an increasingly hostile environment.

The international community's response to climate displacement has been fragmented and insufficient. Even though there have been initiatives aimed at providing aid, the sheer scale of the crisis outpaces existing efforts. Furthermore, the lack of a clear

legal framework leaves displaced people vulnerable to exploitation, with limited access to social services, legal protections, and employment opportunities.

The Rwanda Scheme: A Contradictory Response

While the Global South faces the most severe effects of climate-induced displacement, the Global North has not been exempted.

The disparity in response and language surrounding climate displacement is highlighted by controversial schemes such as the Rwanda plan. In 2022, the UK government signed a deal with Rwanda to send asylum seekers to the country attempting to curb illegal immigration, including climate migrants (The Guardian, 2022). While the program is presented as a solution to "illegal" migration, it raises critical questions about the treatment of displaced people and the moral implications of outsourcing migration management to a third party.

While the Rwanda plan is not a direct response to climate-induced migration, it reflects broader global patterns of refusing to address the root causes of displacement. By focusing on limiting access to asylum rather than addressing the structural factors driving migration, wealthy nations sidestep their responsibility to provide support and integration pathways for vulnerable populations. Rather than investing in climate resilience and proactive measures in host countries, policies like the Rwanda plan focus on containment and deterrence.

This approach not only fails to address the scale of the problem but also risks further marginalizing climate migrants, stripping them of their rights and dignity in the process. Rather than adopting punitive measures, it is critical that the international community moves toward inclusive and

sustainable solutions that prioritize long-term adaptation, integration, and human rights protection.

The Path Forward: Policy Imperatives and the Need for Global Action

The growing scale of climate displacement demands urgent global action. Governments and international organizations must adopt comprehensive policies that not only address the immediate humanitarian needs of displaced persons but also ensure their long-term integration into host communities. The World Bank's projections make it clear that climate displacement will be a global issue by 2050, affecting regions from Sub-Saharan Africa to Latin America, East Asia, and even Europe (Clement et al., 2021). In response, we need legal frameworks, economic strategies, and resilient infrastructure designed to integrate climate migrants in ways that are both equitable and sustainable.

The urgent need for a global response to climate displacement cannot be overstated. A key starting point must be the formal recognition of climate refugees under international law. Such recognition would provide displaced individuals with legal protections, ensuring their right to seek asylum and access basic services. It would also offer a framework for resettlement and integration, allowing countries to prepare for and manage the influx of displaced people in a sustainable manner. The lack of legal status leaves climate refugees vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination, particularly in labour markets where they often find themselves relegated to informal, low-wage work with no access to healthcare or social services (ILO, 2023).

In addition to legal recognition, countries must invest in infrastructure and policies

that support the integration of displaced populations. Host communities need resources to cope with the pressures of increased migration, including access to healthcare, education, housing, and employment. For example, Uganda's Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework has been a model for providing land and services to refugees, helping integrate them into the local economy, resulting in a 15% increase in host community incomes (World Bank, 2022). Such initiatives must be expanded globally.

Such initiatives should be scaled up and replicated in other regions, particularly in countries most affected by climate-induced displacement.

Beyond, host countries must invest in programs that support the socioeconomic integration of displaced persons. This includes providing access to education, vocational training, and employment opportunities, as well as ensuring that communities are equipped with the resources necessary to facilitate cultural integration.

The global community must also prioritize international cooperation, particularly in terms of climate financing and adaptation efforts. The financial burden of climate adaptation should not fall solely on the countries most affected by climate change. Wealthier nations must step up their financial commitments, ensuring that climate resilience is embedded into all levels of governance. In addition to direct climate finance, this cooperation should include technology transfer, capacity building, and joint efforts to mitigate the root causes of displacement, such as deforestation, land degradation, and water scarcity.

The Role of Global Cooperation and Infrastructure Investment

International cooperation is also crucial. Wealthier nations must commit to increased climate financing, supporting adaptation efforts in the Global South to mitigate the root causes of displacement. Collaborative initiatives—such as cross-border policies to manage climate-induced migration and the creation of climate-resilient infrastructure in vulnerable regions—can reduce future displacement risks. Investment in flood-resistant housing, better drainage systems, and sustainable agriculture is essential to prevent displacement in the first place. By building resilient infrastructure and promoting community-based adaptation, governments can protect vulnerable populations from the worst effects of climate change.

Finally, we must recognize that the challenges posed by climate displacement are inherently intersectional. Women, girls, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized groups face disproportionately high risks during displacement. Gender-based violence, lack of access to healthcare, and exploitation in labour markets are just some of the realities faced by displaced people, particularly in host communities where they have little recourse to justice (HRW, 2023). Policies must address these vulnerabilities through inclusive and intersectional frameworks that prioritize the needs of these groups.

Conclusion

Climate displacement is an escalating crisis with profound humanitarian, social, and economic implications. It is not a future problem—it is happening right now, affecting millions of people across the globe. From the Horn of Africa to the flooded regions of Central Africa and the wildfire-stricken areas of California, the



scale of the crisis is undeniable. Governments, international organizations, and communities must act urgently and decisively. The time for bold, coordinated, and inclusive action is now. Only by expanding legal protections for climate refugees, investing in socioeconomic integration, and building climate-resilient infrastructure can we ensure that the millions displaced by climate change have a chance at rebuilding their lives in dignity and security.

While the Global South bears the brunt of this crisis, the Global North must not shy away from its responsibility. International responses, such as the controversial Rwanda plan, highlight the inadequacy of current measures to address the root causes of displacement.

What is needed is a comprehensive and compassionate approach to climate migration. This means recognizing climate refugees under international law, investing in the integration of displaced populations, and fostering global cooperation to tackle the underlying issues of climate change.

If we fail to act, the consequences will be felt by generations to come, in the form of deeper inequalities, social unrest, and geopolitical instability.

The future of millions depends on the policies we implement today. If we fail to act, climate displacement will continue to deepen global inequalities, leaving millions without protection or opportunity. The global community must come together to address this crisis—not as a distant issue, but as a central challenge to global stability and justice, with solutions that are just, sustainable, and grounded in human dignity.

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