

Research Report

Montana MUN 2026



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Climate-Induced Displacement: Strengthening Civil Protection Systems for Global Resilience

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1. Introduction

Climate-induced displacement is one of the most urgent and complex challenges associated with climate change today. As global temperatures continue to rise, the impacts of climate change are becoming increasingly visible across all regions of the world. Rising sea levels threaten coastal settlements, while extreme weather events such as floods, hurricanes, and wildfires are becoming more frequent and severe. In addition, slow environmental changes such as droughts and desertification are gradually making certain areas uninhabitable. As a result, millions of people are forced to leave their homes each year.

Climate-induced displacement refers specifically to the forced movement of people due to environmental changes linked to climate change. It is important to distinguish this from climate migration more broadly, which can also include voluntary movement. Displacement can occur suddenly, for example after a natural disaster, or gradually, when environmental conditions deteriorate over time. However, people displaced by climate-related causes are not formally recognized under the 1951 Refugee Convention or most existing international legal frameworks. This creates significant protection gaps, as affected individuals often lack access to legal rights, humanitarian assistance, and long-term solutions.

The issue is particularly complex because climate change rarely acts as the sole cause of displacement. Instead, it interacts with factors such as poverty, political instability, and social inequality. This makes it difficult to clearly attribute migration to climate change alone. Furthermore, the impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed. Developing countries and small island states are often the most affected, despite contributing the least to global greenhouse gas emissions. Addressing climate-induced displacement therefore requires coordinated action at local, national, and international levels, combining humanitarian responses with long-term adaptation and resilience strategies.

2. Key Terms

Adaptation: Adjustments in human or natural systems that reduce the negative impacts of climate change.

Civil Protection Systems: Government systems designed to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters in order to protect populations.

Climate Migration: The movement of people due to environmental changes, which may be voluntary or forced.

Climate-Induced Displacement: The forced movement of people due to environmental changes linked to climate change.

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR): Strategies aimed at reducing the damage caused by natural hazards through prevention and preparedness.

Humanitarian Response: Actions taken to protect and assist people during and after crises.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): Persons who have been forced to leave their homes but remain within their own country.

Loss and Damage: The negative impacts of climate change that cannot be prevented by mitigation or adaptation. This includes irreversible harm, such as land lost to rising sea levels or destruction caused by extreme weather events.

Mitigation: Actions aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Planned relocation: The organized and proactive movement of communities or populations away from areas that face long-term, irreversible risks due to climate change such as rising sea levels or desertification to safer locations, with careful planning to protect their rights, culture, and livelihoods.

Resilience: The ability of communities to resist, adapt to and recover from disasters.

Slow-Onset Events: Gradual environmental changes such as sea-level rise, desertification and biodiversity loss.

Sudden-Onset Disasters: Rapid events such as floods, storms and wildfires that trigger immediate displacement.

Vulnerability: The degree to which individuals or communities are susceptible to climate impacts.

3. Background

History of the Topic

Human migration linked to environmental factors has existed for centuries. However, climate-induced displacement emerged as a major global concern in the late twentieth century. In the 1990s, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identified migration as one of the key human consequences of climate change.

In the early 2000s, policymakers began to recognize climate change as a “threat multiplier,” meaning that it intensifies existing challenges such as poverty, food insecurity and political instability. At the same time, it became clear that the vast majority of climate-related displacement occurs within national borders, with over 90 percent of affected people remaining in their own countries. This places significant pressure on urban areas, infrastructure and public services.

For example, countries such as Bangladesh frequently experience large-scale flooding and cyclones, leading to repeated internal displacement. Similarly, small island states such as Kiribati face the long-term threat of becoming uninhabitable due to rising sea levels, raising difficult questions about planned relocation.¹

A major challenge remains the lack of legal recognition. People displaced by climate change are not protected under existing international refugee law, which limits their access to formal protection mechanisms. Over time, the issue has evolved from a purely humanitarian concern to a broader governance challenge that intersects with development, security, and human rights.

Chronological Development

1990s – early 2000s: Scientific recognition of climate-induced migration by the IPCC

2010 (Cancún Adaptation Framework): First formal acknowledgment of climate-related displacement

2013 (Warsaw International Mechanism): Creation of a framework addressing loss and damage

2015 (Paris Agreement): Mandated the Task Force on Displacement under the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage

2018 (Global Compact for Migration): Recognition of climate change as a driver of migration

2020s: Increased focus on implementation, funding and international cooperation

¹ IDMC (2025): Strengthening disaster displacement data

4. Major Issues

Why is this topic controversial?

Climate-induced displacement is controversial primarily because international law has not yet adapted to this issue. There is no universally accepted legal definition of “climate refugees”, which creates uncertainty regarding who qualifies for protection and what rights they should have.

This leads to several key debates:

- **Legal responsibility:** Should states accept people displaced by climate change even if they are not fleeing conflict or persecution?
- **Burden-sharing:** Should countries that have contributed more to climate change take greater responsibility for displaced populations?
- **Sovereignty vs. humanitarian duty:** How should states balance border control with international humanitarian obligations?

The issue is further complicated by the fact that climate change is rarely the sole cause of displacement. It often interacts with economic hardship, weak governance and conflict, making it difficult to assign clear responsibility. Additionally, there are concerns, particularly in developed countries, about potential large-scale migration flows, even though most of the displacement occurs within countries rather than across borders.

Causes of the Problem

Climate-induced displacement results from a combination of environmental, social and political factors:

- **Extreme weather events:** Floods, storms and wildfires force people to leave their homes suddenly.
- **Slow-onset environmental changes:** Sea-level rise, desertification and water scarcity gradually make areas uninhabitable.
- **Climate change as a risk multiplier:** Climate change worsens existing issues such as poverty, food insecurity and conflict.
- **Lack of resilience and infrastructure:** Many countries lack strong civil protection systems, including early warning systems, evacuation planning and emergency shelters.

Over the past decade, more than 200 million disaster-related internal displacements have been recorded globally, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. It is important to note that these figures refer to displacement events rather than individual people.²

² IDMC (2025): Preserving data and evidence amid growing uncertainty

5. Important Parties Involved

BRICS: The BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) emphasize climate justice and argue that developed countries should take greater responsibility for climate change and its consequences, including displacement, while promoting stronger cooperation with the Global South.

Developing Countries: These countries are disproportionately affected despite contributing the least to global emissions. They emphasize climate justice, financial assistance and stronger adaptation measures.

European Union: The European Union views climate change as a driver of displacement and supports adaptation and resilience measures. However, it lacks a unified approach to legally recognizing climate-displaced persons due to internal political differences.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Organizations such as the Red Cross, Oxfam and Amnesty International focus on humanitarian assistance and human rights advocacy, although they do not have the power to enforce policies.

Regional Organizations (e.g. African Union, ASEAN): Regional organizations coordinate disaster response, migration management and climate adaptation efforts within their regions, but their effectiveness is often limited by varying levels of political commitment among member state.

Small Island Developing States (SIDS): These states are among the most vulnerable to climate change and advocate strongly for international recognition, financial support and relocation strategies.

United Nations (UN, UNHCR, IOM): These organizations recognize climate-induced displacement as a major humanitarian issue and focus on strengthening protection, resilience and international cooperation. However, their ability to enforce solutions is limited by the absence of binding legal frameworks.

United States: The United States acknowledges climate change as a contributing factor to displacement and supports humanitarian aid and international cooperation. At the same time, it prioritizes national security and migration control.

World Bank and International Financial Institutions (IFIs): Institutions such as the World Bank focus on funding climate adaptation, resilient infrastructure and development projects, although their approaches may not always fully address urgent humanitarian needs.

6. Previous Attempts to Address the Issue

International efforts to address climate-induced displacement are largely embedded within broader climate governance frameworks.

The Cancún Adaptation Framework (2010) marked the first formal recognition of displacement in international climate policy. The establishment of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage in 2013 created a structure for addressing climate impacts, including human mobility. The Paris Agreement further strengthened this approach by mandating the creation of the Task Force on Displacement.

Additional initiatives include the Nansen Initiative, which produced a Protection Agenda outlining best practices and its successor, the Platform on Disaster Displacement. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018) also recognizes climate change as a key driver of migration.

However, most of these frameworks are non-binding, meaning that states are not legally required to implement specific measures.

Current Approaches

Current strategies focus on prevention, adaptation and cooperation:

- Strengthening disaster preparedness and civil protection systems, including early warning systems and emergency planning
- Integrating migration into national adaptation plans
- Supporting planned relocation in high-risk areas
- Facilitating safe and legal migration pathways as a form of adaptation
- Improving data collection and international coordination

Despite progress, significant gaps remain in legal protection, funding and policy coordination.

7. Possible Solutions

Strengthening Civil Protection Systems

- Governments can invest in early warning systems for floods, storms and droughts.
- Authorities can improve evacuation planning and disaster response training.
- States can build climate-resilient infrastructure such as housing, roads and flood defenses.
- ➔ Developed countries often emphasize national responsibility, while developing countries require financial and technical support.

Increasing International Funding and Cooperation

- The international community can expand climate adaptation and resilience funds.
- Countries can provide financial support for disaster recovery and planned relocation.
- States can strengthen cooperation through international organizations.
- ➔ Vulnerable countries support mandatory contributions, whereas some developed countries prefer voluntary funding mechanisms.

Legal Recognition of Climate-Displaced Persons

- States can develop international definitions for climate-induced displacement.
- Policymakers can expand legal protection frameworks beyond traditional refugee law.
- Governments can improve access to rights, housing and humanitarian assistance.
- ➔ Humanitarian organizations strongly support legal recognition, while some governments are concerned about increased migration pressures.

Climate Adaptation and Prevention

- Governments can invest in sustainable agriculture and water management systems.
- Coastal protection measures such as sea walls and mangrove restoration can be expanded.
- Planned relocation can be implemented for high-risk communities where necessary.
- Countries can reduce greenhouse gas emissions to address long-term risks.
- ➔ Small island states prioritize immediate adaptation and relocation, while industrialized countries often emphasize mitigation efforts.

8. Sources & Recommended Further Reading

European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA): [Climate-induced displacement](#)

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): [First Assessment Report Climate Change](#), [Third Assessment Report Climate Change](#)

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC): [Strengthening disaster displacement data](#), [Preserving data and evidence amid growing uncertainty](#)

International Organization for Migration (IOM): [Glossary on Migration](#)

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC): [COP16](#) (Cacun), [COP18](#) (Doha), [Warsaw International Mechanism](#), [Paris Agreement](#), [Task Force on Displacement](#)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): [Climate change and displacement](#), [On the frontlines of climate change, conflict and forced displacement](#), [Law and policy for protection and climate action](#)

United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR): [Transforming Governance for a Resilient Future](#), [Disaster Risk Reduction Terminology](#)

World Bank: [Acting on Internal Climate Migration](#)