

Climate-Induced Displacement And The Politics Of Environmental Justice

Suresh. K

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Panampilly Memorial Government College, Chalakudy, Thrissur,
Kerala, India.

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Abstract

Climate change is rapidly emerging as one of the most significant drivers of human displacement in the twenty-first century. The World Bank estimates that by 2050, over 216 million people could be forced to migrate within their own countries due to slow-onset climate impacts including sea-level rise, water scarcity, and declining agricultural productivity. Yet climate-displaced populations occupy a precarious legal and political space: they are excluded from the 1951 Refugee Convention's definition of refugees, and no binding international framework addresses their protection. This article examines climate-induced migration through the lens of environmental justice theory, arguing that climate displacement constitutes a form of structural injustice in which the populations least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions bear the greatest burden of displacement. Drawing on case studies from Bangladesh, Pacific Island states, and sub-Saharan Africa, the article analyzes the intersection of climate vulnerability with pre-existing inequalities of race, class, gender, and colonial history. It concludes by evaluating emerging governance frameworks and proposing principles for a justice-centered approach to climate mobility.

Keywords: - Adaptation, Climate Migration, Climate Refugees, Displacement, Environmental Justice, Vulnerability

Introduction

In November 2017, the government of Tuvalu made an extraordinary announcement: it would begin purchasing land in Fiji as a contingency against the existential threat of sea-level rise. This small Pacific Island nation, with a population of approximately 12,000 and a maximum elevation of 4.6 meters above sea level, faced the prospect that within decades, its territory could become uninhabitable (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012). Tuvalu's situation, while extreme, is emblematic of a broader phenomenon: the accelerating displacement of human populations by the impacts of anthropogenic climate change.

The scale of projected climate-related displacement is staggering. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC 2022) recorded 32.6 million new internal displacements associated with weather-related events in 2022 alone. The World Bank's Groundswell report (Clement et al. 2021) projected that without concerted action, 216 million people across six regions could be internally displaced by 2050 due to slow-onset climate impacts. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2022) confirmed that climate change is already driving displacement and migration patterns worldwide, with impacts expected to intensify significantly under higher warming scenarios.

Despite the scale and urgency of the issue, climate-displaced populations exist in a governance vacuum. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the cornerstone of international refugee law, defines refugees solely in terms of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group. Environmental factors are excluded, leaving climate-displaced persons without the legal protections afforded to conventional refugees (McAdam 2012). This article examines this governance gap through the lens of environmental

justice, arguing that climate displacement is not merely a humanitarian challenge but a profound injustice rooted in global inequality.

Theoretical Framework: Environmental Justice and Climate Displacement

Environmental justice theory, which emerged from the environmental racism movement in the United States in the 1980s, provides a powerful lens for analyzing climate-induced displacement. The foundational insight of environmental justice scholarship is that environmental harms are not randomly distributed but systematically concentrated among marginalized populations defined by race, class, and geographic location (Bullard 1990; Schlosberg 2007). This distributive dimension of environmental justice—who bears the burdens and who receives the benefits of environmental processes—is directly applicable to climate displacement, where the populations most affected have contributed least to the emissions driving climate change.

Schlosberg (2007) expanded environmental justice beyond distributive concerns to encompass procedural justice (meaningful participation in decision-making) and recognition justice (acknowledgment of affected communities' identities, cultures, and knowledge systems). These dimensions are critical for climate displacement: affected communities are typically excluded from the international negotiations and policy processes that shape climate governance, and their experiences and perspectives are often marginalized in dominant framings of climate migration (Barnett and Campbell 2010).

The concept of 'climate debt' further enriches this framework. Historically industrialized nations in the Global North have been responsible for the vast majority of cumulative greenhouse gas emissions, while the most severe impacts of climate change fall disproportionately on low-income countries in the Global South (Roberts and Parks 2007). This asymmetry between causation and impact constitutes what scholars have termed a 'carbon injustice' that creates moral obligations on the part of high-emitting nations toward climate-vulnerable populations (Gardiner 2011). When climate impacts force displacement, this injustice is compounded by the loss of home, community, cultural heritage, and self-determination.

Patterns and Drivers of Climate-Induced Displacement

Climate displacement is driven by two broad categories of environmental change: sudden-onset events (storms, floods, wildfires) and slow-onset processes (sea-level rise, desertification, changing precipitation patterns, glacial melt). While sudden-onset events tend to produce temporary displacement from which affected populations may eventually return, slow-onset processes can render territories permanently uninhabitable, creating what has been termed 'climate exile' (Berchin et al. 2017).

Bangladesh exemplifies the intersection of climate vulnerability and socioeconomic marginalization. With approximately 17 million people living in low-lying coastal areas vulnerable to sea-level rise and cyclone storm surges, and an economy heavily dependent on climate-sensitive agriculture, Bangladesh is consistently ranked among the world's most climate-vulnerable nations (Eckstein et al. 2021). Research by Rigaud et al. (2018) projected that internal climate migration in Bangladesh could reach 13.3 million people by 2050 under a pessimistic emissions scenario. Already, millions of Bangladeshis have migrated from rural coastal and riverine areas to Dhaka and other cities, contributing to rapid, unplanned urbanization and the growth of informal settlements with inadequate infrastructure and services (Ahsan et al. 2016).

Pacific Island states face the most extreme form of climate displacement: the potential loss of entire national territories. For nations like Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands, sea-level rise threatens not only physical displacement but the dissolution of sovereign statehood and the destruction of cultural identities deeply connected to place (McNamara and Gibson 2009). The existential nature of this threat has led Pacific Island leaders to frame climate change as a security issue and to demand recognition of loss and damage in international climate negotiations (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the interaction between climate change, conflict, and displacement is particularly pronounced. The Lake Chad Basin, where the lake has shrunk by approximately 90 percent since the 1960s, illustrates how environmental degradation can compound existing social tensions. The loss of water resources and agricultural land has intensified competition among pastoralists, farmers, and fishing communities, contributing to displacement, food insecurity, and vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups (Vivekananda et al. 2019). While monocausal explanations linking climate change directly to conflict are oversimplistic, the evidence increasingly supports the view that climate stress acts as a 'threat multiplier' that exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities (Hsiang, Burke, and Miguel 2013).

Gender, Intersectionality, and Climate Displacement

Climate displacement is a deeply gendered phenomenon. Women and girls in developing countries are disproportionately affected by climate-related displacement due to pre-existing gender inequalities in access to resources, mobility, decision-making power, and legal rights (Alston 2015). During and after displacement, women face heightened risks of gender-based violence, loss of livelihoods, and exclusion from assistance programs (Neumayer and Plümper 2007). A landmark study by Neumayer and Plümper (2007) demonstrated that natural disasters lower female life expectancy relative to male life expectancy, with the effect strongest in countries with the lowest levels of gender equality. Indigenous communities represent another population facing acute climate displacement risks. Indigenous peoples often have deep spiritual, cultural, and economic connections to specific territories that cannot be replicated through relocation

(Whyte 2017). For Arctic Indigenous communities facing permafrost thaw and coastal erosion, or for Pacific Islander communities whose identities are inseparable from their marine environments, displacement represents not only a physical but an ontological disruption. Whyte (2017) has argued that for Indigenous peoples, climate change constitutes a form of 'd  j   vu'—a repetition of the colonial dispossession that their ancestors experienced—highlighting the deep connections between climate injustice and historical injustice.

The Governance Gap: Legal Frameworks and Their Limitations

The absence of a dedicated international legal framework for climate-displaced populations represents one of the most significant gaps in global governance. The term 'climate refugee,' while widely used in public discourse, has no legal standing under international law, and many scholars and practitioners caution against its use, arguing that it conflates fundamentally different forms of displacement and may undermine the existing refugee protection regime (McAdam 2012). The Nansen Initiative on Disaster-Induced Cross-Border Displacement, launched in 2012, produced a Protection Agenda that identified principles and best practices but fell short of creating binding obligations (Nansen Initiative 2015). The Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2018, represented a step forward by explicitly recognizing climate change as a driver of migration and committing signatory states to develop adaptation and resilience strategies. However, the Compact is non-binding and was rejected by several major countries, limiting its practical impact (Guild, Basaran, and Allinson 2019). The Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage, established under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), created a task force on displacement in 2015 but has struggled to move from research and dialogue to concrete action (Mayer 2017).

The landmark 2020 decision by the UN Human Rights Committee in the case of *Ioane Teitiota v. New Zealand* represented a significant, if limited, legal development. While declining Teitiota's individual asylum claim, the Committee held that climate change-related conditions could trigger non-refoulement obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, meaning that states could not return individuals to countries where climate impacts posed a threat to their right to life (McAdam 2020). This decision established an important precedent but left many questions unresolved regarding the scope and application of climate-related protection obligations.

Toward a Justice-Centered Framework for Climate Mobility

Addressing climate-induced displacement requires a framework that integrates the distributive, procedural, and recognition dimensions of environmental justice. At the distributive level, this means ensuring that the costs of climate displacement are borne primarily by those most responsible for causing climate change. The establishment of a Loss and Damage Fund at COP27 in 2022 was a significant step in this direction, acknowledging the responsibility of high-emitting nations to provide financial support for climate-vulnerable countries (UNFCCC 2022). However, the fund's initial capitalization fell far short of estimated needs, and questions about governance, eligibility, and funding mechanisms remain unresolved.

Procedural justice requires that affected communities have meaningful participation in decisions about adaptation, relocation, and migration governance. Too often, planned relocation programs have been implemented in top-down fashion without adequate consultation with affected communities, resulting in outcomes that fail to meet community needs and preferences (Piggott-McKellar et al. 2019). Community-led adaptation and locally managed migration strategies that respect the agency and knowledge of affected populations offer a more just alternative (Farbotko et al. 2020).

Recognition justice demands acknowledgment of the cultural, spiritual, and identity dimensions of climate displacement. For many affected communities, displacement entails the loss of places that are constitutive of their identities, histories, and ways of being in the world. A justice-centered approach must go beyond material compensation to recognize and respond to these non-material losses, supporting the preservation of cultural practices, languages, and community bonds even in the context of relocation (Tschakert et al. 2019).

Conclusion

Climate-induced displacement is not a future threat but a present reality that is accelerating with each increment of global warming. As this article has argued, it constitutes a profound injustice: the populations forced to move are overwhelmingly those who have contributed least to the emissions driving climate change and who have the fewest resources to adapt. Addressing this injustice requires a fundamental reorientation of climate governance, from a framework centered on mitigation targets and market mechanisms to one that foregrounds the rights, needs, and agency of affected populations. The governance gap surrounding climate displacement is both a legal and a moral failing. As climate impacts intensify, the international community must move beyond non-binding compacts and voluntary frameworks to establish robust protections for climate-displaced populations. This requires not only new legal instruments but also the political will to implement them a will that has been conspicuously lacking in the decades since the climate crisis was first identified. The voices of those most affected—Pacific Islanders watching their homelands disappear beneath rising seas, Bangladeshi farmers displaced by saltwater intrusion, African pastoralists driven from desiccated rangelands—must be placed at the center of this effort. Their displacement is not a natural disaster; it is a consequence of political and economic choices that can and must be changed.

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