

Institutionalization and Evolution of Climate Migration Discourse in International Climate Policy¹

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Abstract

Population migration due to climate change is one of the most negative consequences of global climate change (GCC). Natural disasters, environmental changes and related economic and social losses force people to change their place of residence. The number of people displaced by natural disasters exceeds the number of people migrating due to armed conflicts. The increase in the number of “climate migrants” affects the socio-economic and political situation of the countries of emigration, transit and immigration, and requires immediate solutions from the world community. The purpose of the study is to analyse the evolution of the discourse of “climate” migration within the framework of global climate policy, determine the stages of its development and institutionalisation, characterise the spatial features of climate migration and identify strategies for counteracting forced displacement at the global, regional and national levels. In the evolution of the discourse of “climate migration, 4 periods of development can be distinguished. The expansion and deepening of the climate migration topic, its semantic transformation and diffusion from the plane of scientific discussion to the segment of international, regional and national policy are chronologically traced. The process of institutionalisation of the phenomenon of climate migration in world politics is not complete. The majority of climate migrants are noted in the least developed countries (LDCs). Strategies for adaptation and strengthening the climate resilience of LDCs are designed to minimise climate migration. Political tensions and conflicts are the main barriers to the implementation of climate policy goals as a tool for counteracting forced migration.

Keywords: global climate change, international climate policy, climate migration, UN

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Introduction

Global climate change (GCC) is one of the main challenges facing humanity. Its impact is total. All the geospheric structures, without exception, are involved in the transformation process under its influence. The socioeconomic consequences of climate changes are dramatic. The UN estimates the direct economic damage of global climate change for the period 2000-2019 at over \$2.8 trillion [News UN, 2024]. Climate-induced migration and displacement represent a forced and negative form of public response to global climate change. Over the past 20 years, natural disasters – hurricanes, floods, heat waves, droughts and wildfires – have increased in frequency, along with deteriorating of living conditions caused by slow climate changes, such as sea level rise, coastal erosion and groundwater salinisation. These processes intensify migration dynamics. According to IDMC, in 2013, more than half of the forced displacement cases (26.4 million) were caused by natural disasters, which is 7 million more than in 2014 [IDMC, n.d.]. The expected increase in the average annual air temperature leads to destabilisation of the planet's geosystems and contributes to the aggravation of the socioeconomic and political situation in many countries. This, in turn, stimulates a further increase in both internal and cross-border immigration. According to the World Bank's forecast, the number of displaced people could reach 260 million people by 2050 [World Bank, 2021].

International climate migration is characterised by a sharp disparity between the scales of its manifestation in the global North and the global South countries. Experts say that 9 out of 10 climate migrants live in developing countries, with 1 out of 4 living in the least developed countries [IDMC, n.d.]. It is the so-called global periphery countries, home for the world's poorest and most vulnerable populations, which bear the most devastating consequences of GCC, despite minimal contribution to its creation. According to the UN data, 70% of all victims of climate-related disasters over the past 50 years have been in the LDCs [UNDRR, 2025]. However, these countries account for only about 1.1% of global greenhouse gas emissions [Climate Policy Initiative, 2024], while their climate vulnerability index remains one of the highest in the world. Every year the LDCs are subject to catastrophic floods, hurricanes, droughts and wildfires, which exacerbate existing socioeconomic problems and stimulate an increase in forced migration.

The rise of the world's sea level destroys the coastlines, disturbs settlement patterns and undermines the economic and social infrastructure of a number of countries. Some of them (the so-called "sinking nations") face a real risk of their complete extinction by the end of this century. Humanitarian and economic losses, compounded by rapid population growth and the constant impact of natural disasters, significantly increase the conflict potential for these countries. By some estimates, global climate change increases the likelihood of armed conflict by approximately 20% [Oschika, 2025], which, in turn, exacerbates migration crisis. Thus, there appear a dialectical spiral of interrelated factors – climate change, demographic pressure, poverty, violence, degradation of the natural and social environment, and political instability. Without intervention, it could transform current migration flows from the Global South to the Global North into an uncontrolled "human tsunami". Without any urgent and coordinated measures to strengthen the adaptive potential of vulnerable countries – through financial, technological or expert assistance, the creation of national and regional planned resettlement programmes, and international protection for affected populations – stopping or even slowing down climate-induced migration will be impossible. Meanwhile, the problem of migration is becoming one of the most pressing issues in the political discourse of many countries. The rise of anti-

immigration sentiments strengthens the positions of right-wing, nationalist, neoconservative and neoliberal forces, supported by tech oligarchy. These political forces advocate for radical unilateralism and a course towards abandoning the system of international multilateral cooperation, particularly, in the executive orders issued by the 47th US President. Such a development creates the risk of destroying the global architecture of cooperation, intensifies block confrontation and increase the likelihood of escalation, including the threat of nuclear conflict.

Despite the relevance of the climate migration topic, the global community still lacks a unified legal framework for its regulations and a common understanding of its social phenomenon. “The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration” adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018, although it contains provisions on “migration in the context of natural disasters and climate change” [UNGA, 2018], it does not include the concept of “climate migrant”. The process of institutionalising and understanding the phenomenon of climate migration is not complete. Over more than 30 years of the existence of international climate policy, the efforts made by the global community to develop mechanisms for prevention, minimisation and regulation of climate migration are evident. Positive dynamics are observed in the discourse on “climate migration”, its transition from the realm of scientific analysis to the format of political discussions within the UN structures and its articulation into specific global, regional and local decisions, initiatives and projects. During this period of time, the ideas of causality, multifaceted nature and ambiguity of the phenomenon of international climate migration have been transforming, and it has been reassessed in the national development discourse. The purpose of this study is to identify the stages of development and the characteristics of institutional and contextual evolution of the discourse on “climate migration” in international climate policy, to characterise its current state of development, and to identify the strategies and dominant approaches to addressing the climate refugee problem at the global, regional and national levels. Particular attention is paid to examining the adaptation strategies of the LDCs, which are most affected by the climate crisis.

The methodological basis of the study is a retrospective and contextual analysis of the climate migration discourse in the global, regional and national declarations, decisions and programmes, in conjunction with the institutional development of structures to address this issue. The study of the reports of the UN IPCC², the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP)³ and other international organisations (IOM, OHCHR, UNDRR)⁴, as well as national programmes (NDCs, NAPs, LD-LEDs)⁵ and international statistics on climate migration, allow us to identify the features of institutional and contextual evolution of the discourse on “climate migration”, its spatial aspects, strategies and areas of international cooperation to prevent and minimise climate migration.

The Concept of “Climate Migration” and its Spatial Characteristics

The link between climate change and displacement of population is an undeniable fact.

² IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

³ UNFCCC – the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

⁴ IMO – International Organization for Migration; OHCHR – the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

⁵ NDCs – Nationally Determined Contributions; NAPs – National Adaptation Plans; LT-LEDs – Long-Term Low Emission Development Strategies

Throughout human history, climate fluctuations have directly influenced people's decisions to leave their familiar environment and change the place of residence. Archeological and paleoclimatic data indicate that for millennia, migration and displacement were perhaps the only means of survival in the face of abrupt environmental changes. The rhythm of the development and disappearance of ancient cultures often coincided with the cycles of climate change. Research by Yale University anthropologists led by Professor H. Weiss has shown that one of the causes of the collapse of the Akkadian civilisation (around 4200 years ago) was global cooling caused by a major volcanic eruption. The plummeting of temperature triggered drought, crop failures, famine and population migration from the northern, peripheral territories of the empire (the Upper Tigris and the Euphrates) to the capital region (the cities of Akkad, Kish and Nippur) [Weiss, 1993]. To contain them, a 160 kilometre long fortress was built between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers. But it failed to stem the flow of migrants, social chaos and the following gradation of the state. Five thousand years later, almost at the same location (Syria), drought and crop failures led to the migration of more than 800 thousand rural residents to cities, which strengthened Islamist sentiments in the country and ultimately provoked an armed conflict that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives [Mann, 2023]. Climate fluctuations were the main cause of the disappearance of Viking settlements in Greenland, of the migration and degradation of the Anasazi people in North America. However, according to the researcher F. Mauelshagen, the first officially recorded "climatic" migration took place in Europe between 1817 and 1820. It was caused by a sudden global cooling (the eruption of Mount Tambora) and the subsequent crop failures and famine that affected many countries around the world. According to the official data, more than 20,000 people emigrated from the region of southwestern Germany in the summer of 1817 [Mauelshagen, 2023]. Modern climate change, which humanity faces now, is only in its infancy and will lead to larger-scale migration and, perhaps, in response to it, to completely new forms of political organisations of society, unprecedented in history [Kaplan, 2024].

Climate, as a cause of migration, has been a subject of research and debate for a considerable time. As early as 1889, the German geographer E. Ravenstein considered changes in climatic conditions to be the cause of population migration [Tangemann, 2019]. In the late 1980s, the topic of "climate" migration acquires a special status in connection with the study of the catastrophic consequences of climate change. Since 2008, more than 100 scientific articles on this topic have been published every year [Ibid]. Despite the recognition of the fact of climate change, the international community has not agreed on the use of the single term to describe this phenomenon. The glossary of the latest IPCC report (6th) includes the concepts related to climate population mobility: "migrant", "displaced persons", "planned resettlement" and "human mobility" [IPCC UN, 2022]. However, the terms "climate migrant" or "climate refugee" are absent there. Some countries use the term "climate migrant" (Bangladesh) or similar concepts such as "environmental migrant" (Azerbaijan), "climate displaced person" (Mozambique), "internally displaced person due to climate change" (DRC), etc. in their climate policy programmes. Nevertheless, there is no officially approved term at the international level. Currently, there is only an informal definition used by the International Organisation for Migration (IMO). "Climate migration" is defined as "the movement, of a person or groups of people who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across and international border" [IOM UN Migration, 2024]. The lack of a single, international, generally accepted definition and a consistent understanding of this problem complicates the regulation of

migration processes due to global climate change. Countries are not obliged to provide asylum and protection to such persons on their territory since such provisions are not reflected in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its amendments [UN GA, 1951]. Climate migrants are not eligible for any form of international support in case of forced displacement. Despite several proposals to expand the convention by the “Nansen Initiative” and other NGOs, most countries currently do not want significant changes to it, as the ambiguity of the terms “climate” or “environmental” refugee could potentially encourage increased human mobility for other reasons and significantly increase migration flows to the countries of the Global North [Chazalnoel, Ionesco, 2022].

The two most progressive international documents in this area – the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016) (UNGA Resolution 71/1, 2016) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018) (UNGA Resolution 73/195, 2018) – only indirectly address this issue and their decisions are advisory in nature. The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants identifies global climate change as the third cause of international migration [UN GA, 2016]. It recommends developing programmes to protect displaced persons in the context of disasters and climate change [Ibid]. The Global Compact for migration sets the goal (Goal 2) of “minimising the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin”, including “natural disasters, the adverse impacts of climate change and environmental degradation” [UNGA, 2018, p. 13]. They do not contain any other provisions for the protection of climate migrants. Protection for this category of migrants, granting them refugee status and providing legal assistance are only possible through the mechanism of humanitarian law, and only in specific, individual cases [Chazalnoel, Ionesco, 2022]. For example, the aftermath of a natural disaster can lead to violence and persecution when the state loses its security function, which may lead to social tensions and unrest. In such cases, refugee status may be acquired. Overall, however, there is currently no unified and comprehensive solution to protect migrants due to global climate change and natural disasters.

The lack of a clear international definition of this group of immigrants and international conventions to prevent and regulate climate migration has led to various organisations and countries using different criteria for classifying displaced persons as “climate” migrants. Currently, there is no unified database on cross-border “climate” migration. Annual data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) indicate the number of displaced persons due to natural disasters or hazardous events only at the national level. These data do not include persons who have voluntarily or involuntarily left their places of residence due to slow climate change, such as long-term droughts, floods or climate-related economic factors. Nevertheless, based on these data, it is possible to form a general understanding of the geography of global climate migration and its spatial patterns.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) uses two indicators in its statistics: 1) the number of displacements⁶ and 2) the number of internally displaced persons⁷. These indicators often do not coincide, as the same person can make several moves within the country in search of optimal accommodation. Therefore, the number of displacements exceeds the number of displaced persons. According to the Centre, more than 26.4 million displacements due to natural disasters were recorded in 2023 [IDMC, 2023]. The number of these displacements exceeded the number of those migrating due to

⁶ This indicator reflects the number of forced displacements of people within national borders recorded during the year and takes into account repeated and multiple movements.

⁷ Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are people who have been forced to leave their homes and places of residence within the borders of their country due to a conflict, natural disasters or other cause.

armed conflicts (20.5 million) Compared to 2014, the number of “climate-related” displacements has increased by more than 7 million [Ibid].

The analysis of the spatial structure of internal climate migration reveals a profound asymmetry in its scale between countries in the Global North and South. Significant differences are also observed between the regions. Countries in the Global South (developing countries) account for approximately 97% of all displacements, which was much higher than their share of the global population (70%). The least developed countries (LDCs), which account for about 14% of the world’s population, are the source of 36.5% of global internal displacements caused by natural disasters. This means that the LDCs suffer disproportionately from the effects of natural disasters, leading to significant population displacement within these countries. Among the regions, the highest rates of migration were observed in Asia, Africa and Latin America. These regions form the so-called “fatal ellipse” of global climate change, where the impacts of the climate change are most devastating [MacDonald, 2020]. According to the Indian researcher A. Ghosh, there the residents of the Global South are currently experiencing the future that soon awaits the citizens of the Global North [Ghosh A., 2016].

Table 1. Regional structure of internal displacement due to natural disasters in 2023

Region and country groupings	Number of displacements (thousands of people)	%
Asia	17692	67.0
Africa	6251	23.7
South America	1665	6.3
North America	394	1.5
Europe (excluding certain countries of the former USSR)	203	0.77
Australia and Oceania	111	0.43
Russia	15	0.07
Others	62	0.23
World (in total)	26393	100
Developed countries	680	2.6
Developing countries	25632	97.1
Least developed countries	9651	36.5

Source: compiled by the author and based on the data from [IDMC Data Portal, 2024].

Comparing the number of displacements since 2008 by country and region of the world, significant spatial discrepancies can also be seen: the share of developed countries in the total number of displacements for the period 2008-2023 was 4.3%, while developing countries accounted for 95.7%. Among developed countries, the United States (11.3 million) and Japan (4.7 million) had the highest rates. For comparison, in Bangladesh alone, the number of internal displacements during this period amounted to 18.8 million people, which exceeded the combined figure for similar displacements in all developed countries, including the United States, Australia and Japan (17.5 million). This demonstrates the scale of the problem and its pronounced concentration in the Global South. Particularly high rates in internal climate migration were recorded in large and

densely populated developing countries. The three global leaders were China (101 million), India (56.5 million) and Pakistan (25.5 million). These countries collectively accounted for approximately 50% of global displacements due to natural disasters.

Even more pronounced disparities between the Global North and South are evident when comparing the number of people displaced by hazardous meteorological and natural events. According to the International Migration Monitoring Centre (IDMC), approximately 7.7 million people were forced to abandon their places of permanent residence in 2023. The main causes of these displacements were floods (79%), wildfires (17%) and hurricanes (4%) [IDMC, 2024]. Moreover, more than half of all displaced people – 3.9 million people – were in the least developed countries (LDCs).

The top five countries with the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) were Afghanistan, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Myanmar and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), accounting for 43% of the global total. According to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) report in 2024, it is the group of the least developed countries that is the most vulnerable to climate change. For example, between March and September 2024 alone, floods across the African continent resulted in over 2 million internal displacements [WMO, 2024]. The largest scale of displacements was observed in such countries as Chad, Somalia, Burundi, Mali, Nigeria and Tanzania.

Thus, despite the recognition of climate change as one of the key negative consequences of global climate change, international law currently lacks a clear definition of the term “climate migrant”, nor unifies mechanisms for legally regulating this phenomenon at the global level. The scale of climate-induced displacements can be gauged, in particular, by the number of internal migrations caused by natural disasters, the vast majority of which occur in the countries of the Global South. These regions, being the most vulnerable to climate risks, objectively require priority attention from international climate and migration policies. However, the interaction between these two areas of international regulation is unstable and characterised by a high degree of discursive volatility, reflecting both institutional and politico-ideological transformations on the global agenda.

The Formation and Development of Climate Migration Discourse on the International Climate Agenda

In the late 20th century, the topic of “climate” migration was closely intertwined with the development of political discourse on the causes and consequences of global climate change. In the late 1970s, the scientific community began to recognise the scale of the threats posed by global warming. An analysis of the dynamics of institutional development and transformation of the climate migration discourse in the international climate policy allows us to identify four historical stages:

- 1) 1990-2008 – the beginning of the formation of the scientific discourse on climate migration, without its integration into the international political agenda;
- 2) the period 2008-2010 – recognition of the topic of climate change migration as part of global climate policy;
- 3) 2010-2015 – implementation of the topic of climate migration in the decisions of the Conference of the Parties (COP) and other international acts;
- 4) 2015-present – formation of structures, programmes, strategies, expert

commissions and groups for the prevention and regulation of climate migration at the global, regional and national levels.

At the first stage, the topic of climate migration was reflected only in the publications of the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC-FCCC), founded in 1988 under the UN. Already in the first report of the group in 1990, a separate paragraph in Chapter 5 entitled “Migration and Displacement” (2.2.3) was devoted to climate change and migration [IPCC UN, 1990]. It noted that “migration and displacement may be the most dangerous short-term impacts of climate change on human settlements” [Ibid]. The report identified the following as the main reasons for displacement:

- 1) loss of shelter (floods, landslides);
- 2) loss of vital resources (water, energy, food, work);
- 3) loss of social and cultural resources (loss of cultural sites, neighborhood or community networks, especially in the case of devastating floods) [Ibid].

The text does not use the term “climate migrant”; instead, they are referred to as “environmental refugee” and “people displaced by land degradation, floods or drought” [Ibid]. The IPCC supplementary report (1992) points to the danger of rising sea levels for settlements and the migration it causes [IPCC, 1992]. The danger of rising sea levels and the displacement of people due flooding is emphasised. Large-scale migrations are likely to happen in the future in the island states of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and the delta regions of China, India and Egypt [Ibid]. The Second IPCC Report (1995) expands the list of negative consequences of climate change forcing population displacement (Chapter 6, Working Group 3) [IPCC UN, 1996]. These include coastal erosion, river and coastal flooding, severe drought and prolonged temperature anomalies. A hypothesis is put forward about an increase in illegal immigration by 25% and legal immigration by 10% as a result of global warming by 2050 [Ibid].

The analysis of the contents of the third and the fourth IPCC report (2001 and 2007) reveals a trend in the scientific discourse on migration away from a monocausal view of its drivers and an increased role for the indirect influence of climate change on migration. For example, the third report emphasises the importance of migration as a tool for population adaptation to climate change. Prolonged drought in certain regions of the world leads to crop failures of essential food crops, forcing the population to migrate to cities in order to earn additional income [IPCC UN, 2001]. These migrations are not simply one-sided; the population returns to their places of origin when economic risks decrease. In this case, it is difficult to distinguish economic causes of migration from climatic ones.

The fourth report (2007) places even greater emphasis on the multicausal nature and ambiguity of the socioeconomic and political consequences of migration due to climate change. The report summarises the development of the climate migration discourse over this period and highlights the relativistic nature of the dominant knowledge about it. It notes;

“Estimates of the number of people who may become environmental migrants are guesses at best because (a) migrations in areas affected by climate change are not one-way and permanent, but multidirectional and often temporary or episodic; (b) the causes of migration are often multiple and complex and not directly related to climate variability and change; (c) in many cases, migration is a long-standing response to seasonal variability in environmental conditions, it also represents a strategy for accumulation wealth or finding a way out of poverty, a strategy with benefits for both the receiving and the originating country or region; (d) in many key parts of the world there are few reliable censuses or surveys on which to base such estimates (e.g. Africa); and (e) there is no agreement on what constitutes an

environmental migrant” [IPCC UN, 2007, 365].

The following IPCC reports (the fifth in 2024 and the sixth in 2022) further depart from the monocausal and negative view of human displacement due to climate change. Migration processes are driven by multiple and intertwined factors, often forming a complex causal chain. Moreover, most displaced persons eventually return to their previous place of residence, gaining new social and professional experience. Migration can also be a significant advantage for host countries. Some even argue that climate change, through its impact, could lead to reduction in migration flows [IPCC UN, 2014]. Thus, the evolution of scientific discourse on population migration associated with climate change is characterised, firstly, by a broadening of understanding of the causes and consequences of this phenomenon. There is a shift away from a categorically negative, alarmist and monocausal interpretation towards a more comprehensive, multicausal and balanced approach that allows for ambiguity in assessments and recognises both the risks and potential opportunities of climate migration at the national, regional and global level.

The transformation of scientific discourse on climate migration into political decisions began only in 2008. Prior to this, this issue had not been discussed at the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC. The impetus for the discussions came from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). IOM first advocated for the recognition of climate-related aspects of migration and displacement at the Conference of the Parties in Poznan, Poland, in 2008 (COP-14) [IOM, 2008]. That same year, the organisation initiated the creation of the Climate Change, Environment and Migration Alliance [CCEMA, 2008]. The Alliance became the first multilateral global discussion platform on migration, environmental change, and climate. Currently, in addition to IOM, the alliance includes such structures as UNEP, the United Nations Office for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS), the Stockholm Environment Institute, the University of Sussex, the Munich Re Foundation (MRF) insurance company and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The goal of the alliance is to promote the issue of migration on the political agenda on environmental change, climate, and development [SEI, 2009].

"Invisible" on the political agenda until 2008, the problem of migration and population displacement under the impact of climate change has since become a subject of discussion and specific decisions within the framework of global climate policy. In 2010, climate migration was already directly reflected in the decision of the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP-16) in the section on adaptation to climate change. In Paragraph 14 of the so-called "The Cancun Agreements" the parties commit to "take steps to enhance understanding, improve coordination and strengthen cooperation regarding climate-induced displacement, migration and planned resettlement of people, as appropriate, at the national, regional and international levels" [UN FCCC, 2010, 5]. At the Conference of the Parties in Doha, Qatar, in 2012 (COP 18), this topic was reflected in Decision 3/CP, "Approaches to addressing loss and damage associated with climate change impacts in developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, with a view to enhancing their adaptive capacity." It refers to enhancing understanding "of how climate change impacts affect patterns of migration, displacement and mobility of people" [UN FCCC, 2012, p. 28].

Finally, in 2015, the topic of climate migration was formally recognised as part of the climate agenda at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC in Paris (COP21), being explicitly reflected for the first time in the text of the Paris Agreement. It notes that

"recognising that climate change is a common concern of humankind. Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and take

into account their respective human rights obligations, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and those in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, women's empowerment and intergenerational equity” [UN FCCC, 2015, UN GA, 2016, p. 1].

At this conference, a task force of experts was also established under the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage to develop recommendations for comprehensive approaches to preventing, minimising, and addressing displacement associated with the adverse impacts of climate change. Since then, climate-related displacement has become a topic of discussion at all Conferences of the Parties to the UNFCCC. At COP-29 in Baku in the fall of 2024, the topic of climate migration was actively and comprehensively discussed. A special information pavilion, "Climate Change and Human Mobility," was set up in the conference's "Blue Zone" to draw the attention of conference participants to this issue [IOM, 2024].

The Paris Agreement has provided impetus for the implementation of climate migration in National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)⁸. A 2016 analysis of NDCs from 162 countries shows that 33 reflect the topic of climate mobility. This represents 20% of the registered contributions. Of these, 46% are located in Africa, 33% in Asia-Pacific and Oceania, and 21% in Latin America. These regions are the most affected by climate change, as confirmed by the statistics on climate-related displacement. Fifty percent of the countries that mentioned climate migration were the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) [IOM, 2016].

After 2015, the climate migration discourse began to expand and be implemented into other international documents: the global community adopted the “Sustainable Development Goals 2030” (2015), “The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction” (2015), “The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants” (2016), and, finally, “The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration” (2018). In addition, in 2015, at the initiative of the UNFCCC and IOM, “The Task Force on Displacement” (TFD) was established. The adopted documents outline the fundamental principles for developing comprehensive approaches to preventing and minimising migration while simultaneously expanding channels for legal movement and protecting the rights of migrants due to climate change. Since 2015, “The Task Force on Displacement” (TFD) has developed specific recommendations on climate migration management, managed resettlement, local adaptation to climate change and its impacts, promoting safe migration as an adaptation strategy, and including migrants and other vulnerable groups in disaster risk reduction efforts. These recommendations are reflected in national adaptation plans and in regional agreements between countries in the Global South. Thus, in 2022, the countries of East Africa and the Horn of Africa adopted “The Kampala Ministerial Declaration on Migration, Environment and Climate Change”, and in 2023, they signed “The Ministerial Declaration on Migration, Environment, and Climate Change” by Member States and “Associate Members of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States”, as well as “The Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility” [IOM, 2023]. Regional cooperation between countries aims to facilitate the movement of people within vulnerable regions, provide them with financial and legal support, and jointly advance climate migration issues on the international political agenda. Such coordination is particularly important for

⁸ Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) are countries' plans to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement. They represent countries' efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions at the national level and adapt to the impacts of climate change (author's note).

countries in the Global South, where the need to strengthen the climate resilience of the most vulnerable territories is particularly acute. The most striking example is the Pacific island states, where over 50,000 people are forced to leave their homes every year due to natural disasters [Ibid.].

At the same time, human displacement does not guarantee migrants safety or decent conditions for personal and social development in their new place of residence. Both internal and external climate migrants often find themselves in marginal, disadvantaged areas exposed to natural hazards, lacking necessary infrastructure, and extremely limited resources for establishing a living. In most cases, resettlement means not so much an improvement in living conditions as basic survival. Access to healthcare, education, and other basic social services remains minimal, and employment opportunities are extremely limited. At the same time, the protection of humanitarian rights and freedoms in many affected countries remains at the level of declarations, unsupported by real protection mechanisms. The development of legal mechanisms for the protection of climate migrants is in its infancy. In 2018, the UN Commission on Human Rights recommended that national governments refrain from arbitrary expulsion of people who cannot return to their homes as a result of climate change and facilitate their integration into the societies of host countries [OHCHR UN, 2018]. However, the practical implementation of such recommendations is difficult. At the national level, a pronounced anti-immigrant narrative prevails in many countries.

One of the alternative ways to regulate climate migration could be through bilateral agreements between countries. In the event of a natural or humanitarian disaster, unaffected states could provide entry to the affected population by issuing a special humanitarian visa. For example, Brazil granted such a visa to the residents of Haiti after the catastrophic 2010 earthquake [The Nansen Initiative, 2018]. Furthermore, bilateral agreements could facilitate migration through educational and labour exchanges. For example, the Australian government launched the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) labour migration programme with Pacific island states in 2021 [The Australian Government, 2025]. Currently, the mobility programme involves Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, East Timor, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Almost all of these countries have high rates of climate migration. Most of them are the so-called "sinking nations," requiring massive financial and technological assistance to fight the flooding. Unfortunately, Australia's migration policy limits migrants' employment primarily to the agricultural sector, and their length of stay in the country to four years. Nevertheless, even such measures can, to a certain extent, strengthen the adaptive capacity of sending countries through financial transfers sent by workers to their families.

Thus, several stages can be identified in the evolution of the climate migration discourse, distinguished both by the level of institutionalisation of the issue and its contextual richness. Overall, a progressive development of this discourse is observed, accompanied by its shift from the periphery of the climate agenda to its centre. At the same time, international institutions and a legal framework aimed at preventing and deterring climate-induced migration have been established. Furthermore, UNFCCC decisions have been gradually implemented into regional, national and local strategies. This development is particularly significant for the least developed countries (LDCs), which are the most vulnerable to the devastating effects of global climate change.

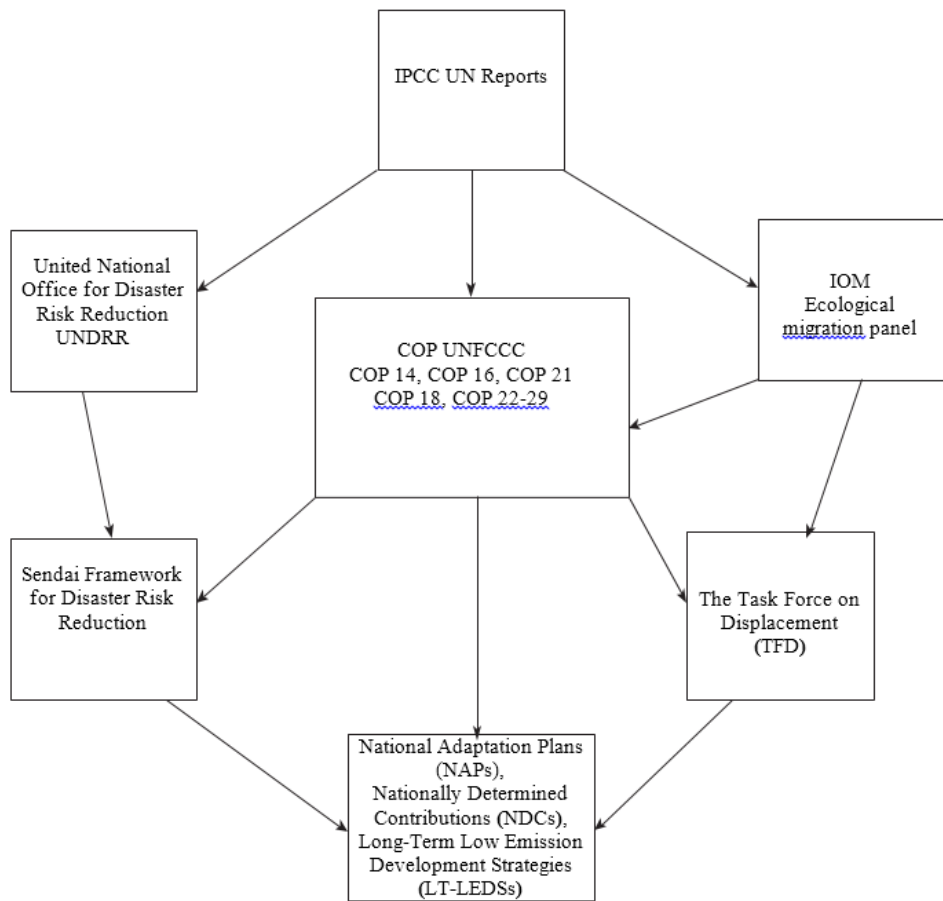


Figure 1. Dynamics of Discursive "Impulses" on Climate Migration in UN Structures

Source: Created by the author

Climate Migration and Its Prevention Strategies in the LDCs

Adaptation of territories to global climate change and the development of local climate resilience are the primary strategies of the countries in the Global Periphery to prevent and minimise population displacement. Without strengthening local resilience to the various consequences of climate change, stable socioeconomic and political development, and therefore normal life, is impossible. In all the LDCs, adaptation ranks higher in climate policy than mitigation of anthropogenic impacts on climate, although many countries' NDCs point to synergies between these climate policy areas. Adaptation of territories and strengthening climate resilience are seen as methods for countering the negative impacts of climate change that trigger migration. Natural disasters, in particular, pose a huge challenge for the least developed countries, causing enormous economic, social and humanitarian losses. For example, in 2008 Cyclone Nargis caused devastation in Myanmar

for two days, resulting in the deaths of 138,000 people, the displacement of approximately 800,000 people and the loss of 20% of the country's annual GDP. Hurricane Dorian's economic damage to the Bahamas in 2019 exceeded 1% of the country's GDP, while Cyclone Idai in Mozambique cost 5% of GDP (PPP) and Timor-Leste lost 11.5% of its GDP in 2021 due to "climate losses"⁹. Without exception, every LDC is forced to invest already meagre financial resources annually to restore economic and social structures. National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and Long-Term Low Emission Development Strategies (LT-LEDs) are designed to define goals, objectives and methods for strengthening national climate resilience.

As of January 2025, all 45 LDCs had submitted their updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to the UNFCCC, 22 of which had registered national adaptation plans, and eight had registered low-carbon development strategies. Among these countries there are six of the world's leading countries in terms of the number of people displaced by natural disasters. A number of these countries (e.g., Myanmar, Bangladesh, Chad, Somalia, and the DRC) have, in addition to the aforementioned documents, also adopted national disaster risk reduction plans and strategies, and established relevant bodies. For example, Chad has approved four such policy documents since 2015 [Global Center on Adaptation, 2023].

The data in Table 2 demonstrate a high correlation between national risk indicators and the number of internal displacements (Table 2). Of the ten countries with the largest number of climate migrants, eight are characterised by extremely high levels of both natural and political risks. Countries such as Myanmar, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Ethiopia are regularly hit by hundreds of life-threatening meteorological and natural phenomena. At the same time, most of them are experiencing a deteriorating political situation.

The intensification of interrelated natural and political crises is creating a desperate situation in a number of LDCs: in the context of conflict, building resilience to climate change becomes virtually impossible. In such circumstances, migration often becomes the only option. Therefore, the key task for many LDCs is to break the vicious cycle of double violence, build capacity for adaptation to global climate change and sustainable development, attract international financing, and thereby minimise forced population outflow.

Measures to prevent and minimise climate migration are reflected in the national adaptation plans, NDCs and low-carbon development strategies of nine countries (see Table 2). Despite differences in approaches, their analysis allows us to identify a number of common areas aimed at strengthening adaptive capacity and increasing climate resilience:

1. Implementing early warning systems for the population about impending natural disasters.
2. Building or expanding life-support infrastructure in emergency situations: providing the population with medical services, food and access to safe drinking water.
3. Developing plans for the resettlement of residents from regions prone to regular flooding, flash floods, landslides, forest fires, as well as from areas irreversibly lost as a result of flooding.
4. Protecting coastal zones, including the construction of dams, engineering structures, and other infrastructure solutions to counter sea level rise.
5. Strengthening critical infrastructure – energy networks, transportation arteries, and settlement and life support systems.

⁹ According to the NDCs and NAPs of these countries submitted to the UNFCCC.

6. Greening and adapting cities to climate change, developing a network of protected natural areas and implementing nature-based solutions to increase the resilience of ecosystems and communities.

Table 2. Risks, climate-induced displacement and climate policies of individual LDCs

Country	Level of natural and political risks	Number of displacements 2008-2023, million people	Number of hazardous events 2008-2023, units	Implementation of the climate migration topic in adaptation programmes (NDC, NAP, LTS)	The country's financial needs for climate action (decarbonisation and adaptation) \$ billion	Investments in adaptation and climate resilience of the State Investment Committee in 2022 \$ million
Bangladesh	High (5.8)	18.8	117	+	5.7	228
Myanmar	Very high (7.2)	7	354	+	3.1	85
Somalia	Very high (8.9)	6.7	277	+	5.4	118
Ethiopia	Very high (7.1)	4.3	105	+	31	869
South Sudan	Very high	2.7	91	+	1.035	142
The DRC	Very high (8.0)	2.5	201	+	4.8	608
Mozambique	Very high (6.9)	2.2	42	+	0.615	412
Malawi	Medium (4.3)	1.6	60	+	1.8	200
Afghanistan	Very high (7.7)	1.5	381	-	1.7	-
Chad	Very high (7.7)	1	38	+	1.1	145

Source: compiled by the author based on [Climate Policy Initiative, 2024; IDMC Data Portal, 2024]; NDCs, NAPs and LT-LEDs of the countries.

The implementation of national adaptation plans, as well as the overall climate policy of LDC countries, faces the acute problem of chronic underfunding. Low levels of economic development and high external debt seriously limit the ability of states to implement measures to adapt to global climate change. In 2022, the total expenditure of all LDC countries on adaptation measures – including domestic financing, grants from climate funds and loans from multilateral development banks – amounted to USD 14.5 billion, or only 19% of the total global adaptation financing [Climate Policy Initiative, 2024]. According to expert estimates, this volume was at least four times lower than the annual needs of the countries in this group [Climate Policy Initiative, 2023]. The situation remains particularly acute in the countries with the largest number of climate migrants, where the gap between needs and actual investments in adaptation is even more pronounced (see Table 2).

The bulk of funding comes through multilateral and bilateral development banks (around 70%), while the share of the UN climate funds in Africa is only around 3% [Global Centre on Adaptation, 2023]. Budgetary allocations from the states themselves do not exceed 20% of the total adaptation funding. However, for poor states facing multiple social, economic and infrastructural challenges, even hundreds of millions of dollars invested in climate action are significant. Among climate funds, the UN Green Climate

Fund (GCF) plays a key role in strengthening adaptive capacity and climate resilience – as the primary strategy for curbing climate migration. It provides grant assistance for the implementation of climate projects, with the least developed countries (LDCs) being one of its priority areas of activity. Of the 286 projects financed by the fund, 122 are being implemented in this group of states [GCF, 2025]. For example, in Timor-Leste, GCF funds are aimed at combating the impacts of global climate change and reducing climate-induced migration. One example is the \$60 million "Safeguarding Rural Communities and Their Physical Assets from Climate Induced Disasters" project, which has benefited more than 522,000 residents of the island state [NDC, Timor, 2021]. This is just one example of effective targeted financing. However, the countries most affected by climate migration often have limited access to international climate assistance due to ongoing armed conflicts and instability [Climate Policy Initiative, 2024]. In the face of natural disasters and forced displacement, such countries receive support primarily through the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), which is aimed not so much at developing adaptive capacity as at urgent humanitarian response and saving lives. In 2024, the fund allocated approximately \$400 million to support LDC populations affected by natural disasters, including displaced persons [CERF, 2025]. Moreover, nine countries – the largest in terms of climate migration (see Table 2) – received more than half of this amount (\$203 million) [Ibid].

Thus, political conflicts are becoming a serious barrier to developing sustainable adaptive capacity at both the local and national levels. This applies not only to the LDCs. There is a growing understanding that, at the global level, ongoing geopolitical tensions, hybrid wars, sanctions policies, and bloc-based thinking are among the main obstacles to addressing humanity's key challenges. The future of the planet is only possible through collective efforts and international consensus.

Conclusion

Global climate change is one of the key triggers for mass migration. The destruction of the natural and social environment due to both sudden climate catastrophes and slow climate processes forces significant numbers of people to leave their places of permanent residence. This problem is particularly acute in countries of the Global South, where the number of climate-related displacements is increasing annually. These processes destabilise national and regional political systems, increasing the level of conflict in the affected territories.

The world's least developed countries (LDCs) are the most vulnerable to the impacts of global climate change: one in four climate migrants worldwide is from one of these countries. Low funding for climate initiatives, poverty, political instability and armed conflict are key factors driving forced migration in the LDCs. Political stability is a crucial prerequisite for building the adaptive capacity of territories and minimising the scale of climate migration.

Four main phases can be identified in the discursive evolution of climate migration. These phases were accompanied by increasing institutionalisation of the topic of climate migration – its integration into international, regional, and national strategies, programs and decisions. Specialised structures and bodies were established to study and manage climate migration. At the same time, a contextual transformation of the discourse has also occurred: from an alarmist, unambiguously negative and monocausal interpretation of migration to a more balanced and multi-causal approach, taking into account both the negative and potentially neutral or positive consequences of migration processes.

However, the process of institutionalising this discourse remains incomplete. To date, there is no generally accepted definition of the term "climate migrant", and existing international documents

in this area are primarily advisory rather than mandatory. The current stage of global development is characterised by a shift from universal, international mechanisms for addressing climate and migration issues to national and corporate approaches, accompanied by a decline in global solidarity.

Profound disagreements between the countries of the global North and South, particularly on climate finance, were clearly evident at the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties in Baku (COP 29). However, without technological, financial and political support from developed countries, the scale of climate migration could reach unprecedented levels. The countries in the Global North need to recognise that their impact on migration flows is possible not so much through tightening borders, but rather by creating legal channels for resettlement and strengthening the adaptive capacity and climate resilience of the most vulnerable territories. This directly impacts not only the stability of the Global South, but also global social and political stability as a whole.

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