



Climate-Induced Displacement in the Middle East and North Africa

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Introduction

Climate change and environmental disasters are increasingly prominent drivers of migration and displacement. They often amplify other factors that cause individuals to flee their homes, including war, violence, food insecurity, and lack of opportunity. Although some individuals displaced by climate-related causes cross international borders, the great majority of individuals find refuge within their own country. Under the worst projections, by 2050, up to 216 million people around the world, including 19 million people in North Africa, could be forced to move internally within their countries due to slow-onset climate change impacts, such as water scarcity, reduced crop productivity, and rising sea levels.¹ This estimate paints a startling picture for displacement over the next several decades, should government inaction on the intersection of climate, development, human rights, gender, and migration policy continue.

As one of the most arid and water-scarce regions in the world, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is particularly vulnerable to the changing climate.² It is heating twice as quickly as the rest of the world, with certain countries' temperatures, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, projected to rise by 9 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.³ Furthermore, there are huge variations in the region's ability to mitigate the impacts of climate change. For example, wealthy oil-rich countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) may have the capacity to provide safe and healthy conditions for inhabitants — even if they lack the political will to do so — while resource-scarce countries may struggle to meet the needs of their populations.⁴

As such, projections of future forced displacement due to climate change may be daunting for a region already facing intermittent conflict, economic crises, and, in some countries, poor governance. And yet because of the scale of the issue, the nuances of the relationship between climate change and displacement are sometimes poorly understood. To better comprehend the current and future impacts of climate-induced displacement within the MENA region, this series of policy briefs draws on the research of scholars from across the region. Together, the briefs examine various avenues of protection for individuals displaced by climate change and delve into the question of whether responses to climate-induced displacement should be addressed at the country, regional, or global levels. They also explore how internally displaced persons (IDPs) who relocate due to climate-related factors can be supported, and apply a gendered lens to the issue of climate displacement.

As a whole, the series calls for greater action on the issue of climate change and migration with regard to mitigation, prevention, and protection — as well as preparedness and human rights-focused responses for those forced to flee.

To begin, two authors ask whether the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees — the hallmark of our global system of protection — can be expanded to include individuals fleeing the impacts of climate change. Chiara Scissa suggests that a traditional interpretation of the Refugee Convention, which typically excludes disaster-induced displacement from refugee status, overlooks the deliberate weaponization of disasters and natural resources in conflicts. She highlights the cases of Syria and Yemen, where certain minority groups face discrimination and intentional harm due to state and nonstate actors' systematic attacks on food and water supplies. Ultimately, Scissa argues, the convention should be applied more broadly and consider the compounding effects of disasters and vulnerabilities induced by conflict.

Next, Rasha Akel explores the relevance of the Refugee Convention for environmentally displaced populations. She recommends applying a "social paradigm" to the question of the convention's relevance, rather than the dominant "hazard paradigm." While a hazard paradigm looks at disasters removed from their social context, a social paradigm views them as social phenomena, rooted in historical and structural discrimination. To illustrate this, Akel examines the 1991 and 2011 Somali droughts and ensuing famines as political events, asserting that through this lens, those displaced could meet the convention's definition of "refugee." Akel ultimately argues that "the root socio-structural causes that generate vulnerabilities" within the context of a disaster must be considered for environmental refugees to be afforded adequate legal protection within the existing international framework.

Anna Bailey-Morley also considers how those driven to migrate due to climate change can do so within existing legal pathways. She proposes that skills mobility partnerships (SMPs) form a key part of the response to climate change-related migration, allowing for an alternative to refugee status. She argues that by leveraging SMPs, such as the 2009 agreement signed between Egypt and Italy, countries can expand labor migration pathways in an equitable manner, providing opportunities for those affected by climate change to leave their countries safely and regularly while also

addressing labor shortages in destination countries. Bailey-Morley acknowledges that despite their promising nature, SMPs are still in the nascent stages of implementation and that scaling them up may prove challenging. As such, SMPs should be seen as a complementary policy strategy alongside other avenues for regular and safe migration.

Given that climate change will primarily lead to internal, rather than cross-border, displacement, several authors focus on the challenges faced by IDPs. Illef Kassab considers the status and protection of IDPs who were refugees before having to move again in their host country. She argues that two regional conventions that protect refugees in Africa and also apply to IDPs — the Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (OAU Refugee Convention) and the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) — can be used to jointly strengthen the legal and policy framework for refugees who become internally displaced as a result of climate change impacts within their host country. Kassab situates her argument within North Africa, which is home to approximately 1.4 million refugees and asylum seekers who face the possibility of further displacement due to climate-related factors. Kassab argues that for the two conventions to work in concert, more countries in the region must adopt the Kampala Convention.

Next, Mhd Ekbal Anak further explores whether existing protection mechanisms can adequately address internal displacement within the context of climate change. He highlights existing — though insufficient — international, regional, and national protection frameworks and emphasizes the disproportionate impact of climate-induced displacement on vulnerable populations, including children, women, older people, and people with disabilities, underlining the need for a rights-based and gender-responsive approach. Ultimately, Anak argues, new comprehensive policies and strategic action plans are needed to bridge the policy gap for the protection of IDPs in the context of climate change.

Intissar Hafsi and Adel Azouni also consider gender in the context of climate-induced displacement. They examine the impacts of climate change on the livelihoods and migration decisions of residents of Kerkennah, a Tunisian archipelago in the Mediterranean Sea. Through interviews and a gendered and intersectional approach, Hafsi and Azouni analyze the complex interplay of factors that families consider when deciding whether to remain on ancestral lands or relocate to safer, less impacted areas. In particular, they assess the impact of climate change on Kerkennah's women residents, whose livelihoods and general well-being is adversely affected. They assert that women must be seen as key stakeholders when considering policies to adapt to or mitigate climate change.

Hacer Gören and Ahmet İçduygu then turn the focus to Turkey. They explore the mobility intentions of farmers facing the impacts of climate change on their livelihoods in different parts of the country. Despite facing challenges like water stress and extreme weather events, most farmers who participated in their study expressed no intention to migrate, citing strong ties to their land and communities. Conversely, approximately one-quarter of the interviewees expressed a willingness to relocate but felt constrained from doing so by financial and logistical barriers. Drawing on their findings, Gören and İçduygu underscore the importance of adaptation measures for individuals who are unwilling to move, as well as proactive migration planning for those who would like to move but are unable to do so.

Finally, Florian Bonnefoi examines the impact of climate change on the Nile Delta region in Egypt — an area that is already highly subject to the adverse impacts of climate change. Through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, Bonnefoi highlights the vulnerabilities of local communities, particularly farmers and fishermen, to environmental degradation in the region. He emphasizes the need for coordination among governmental, international, and civil society stakeholders to raise awareness, build infrastructure, and promote sustainable practices to enhance the resilience of coastal areas. Like Gören and İçduygu, he illustrates the need for these actors to promote choice regarding staying or leaving, and for migration to be seen as a viable adaptation measure for those who choose to move.

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POLICY BRIEF

The Weaponization of Natural Resources and Disasters During Conflict: The Refugee Convention's Relevance for Syria and Yemen

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Photo by DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP via Getty Images

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is the most water-scarce region in the world. Over 60% of its population lives in areas experiencing high water stress.¹ In addition, it is vulnerable to droughts and floods, which damage agriculture and the overall economy. In 2021, rising temperatures led to droughts and desertification, affecting water supplies and food production systems. Over 12 million people were affected in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Iran.²

The populations facing these environmental stressors are also seeing immense damage caused by social conflict. In such contexts, clashing parties have long weaponized disasters and natural resources against one another. In the most acute cases, civilians and their families may be compelled to flee across borders.

Syria and Yemen stand out for their extreme vulnerability to resource scarcity and disaster weaponization during armed conflict. Both countries have seen massive displacement as a result. There is evidence of conflict-induced malnourishment and deprivation in Yemen, which has caused near-famine conditions in some parts of the country and one of the worst humanitarian crises worldwide, with 20 million people facing food insecurity.³ In Syria, displacement levels remain the highest in the world. More than 6.5 million people have fled across Syrian borders.⁴

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, known as the Refugee Convention, can generally be applied to conflict settings. But the dominant view in international refugee law today is that refugee status rarely applies in the context of disasters.⁵ This brief challenges that view. It asserts that based on discrimination patterns surrounding access to natural resources and the weaponization of disasters during conflict, the Refugee Convention should be applied for Syrians and Yemenis seeking protection.

In Syria, Water Is Increasingly Weaponized

Water is increasingly becoming a weapon of conflict in Syria.⁶ The country has seen attacks on 457 water supply and sanitation assets, including damage to or destruction of two-thirds of the country's water treatment plants and half of its pumping stations.⁷ Across the country, attacks on water networks resulted in a weeklong gap in water service. Millions of people suffered from long and deliberate interruptions to the water supply.

In Aleppo, disruptions encompassed a deliberate 48-day shutdown of a water treatment plant that served 2 million people.⁸ In 2017, bombings of water resources cut off the water supply for 5.5 million people.⁹ And in 2022, sieges in Aleppo and Dar'a al-Balad restricted the supply of food, water, and electricity, as well as the entry of basic necessities such as flour, fuel, and medical aid. In Al Bab, water shortages affected 185,000 people.¹⁰

After 10 years of war, only about half of Syria's water and sanitation systems function properly. Water supply has been further affected by the lack of electricity. Up to 60%–70% of the country's power generation capacity has been down.¹¹ Assaults such as these disrupt civilians' basic human rights and make it extremely difficult for people to meet their basic needs for water, food, shelter, and health. Last year, over 90% of the Syrian population was living below the poverty line. About 14.6 million Syrians (around 67% of the total population) needed humanitarian assistance, while approximately 12 million people faced acute food insecurity.¹² The weaponization of water access has also put the lives of vulnerable people at serious risk. As of March 2019, an estimated 4.7 million children needed humanitarian assistance. Of these, 490,000 were located in hard-to-reach areas.¹³

Marginalized Groups Are Disproportionately Affected

The weaponization of natural resources and unlawful destruction of essential infrastructure has not impacted Syrians equally. Rather, it disproportionately affects specific ethnic and religious minority groups. Sunni Arabs have been one of the groups hardest hit by the conflict and have experienced the greatest displacement from Syria. Because of their perceived political hostility to the government, Sunni Arabs are undergoing severe human rights abuses and multiple layers of discrimination, including restricted access to essential services like electricity and water.¹⁴

Moreover, some groups of Kurds in Syria, such as the Maktoumeen, lack citizenship and legal documents, which exacerbates their marginalization. In government-controlled areas, Maktoumeen are denied the right to work, form and join trade unions, and access social security, health care, and education.¹⁵ In March 2022, a three-week siege around Kurdish-majority neighborhoods in Aleppo prevented the entry of necessities such as flour, fuel, and medical aid, putting Maktoumeen livelihoods at serious risk.

Palestinians in Syria are also gravely impacted by a lack of access to essential resources. As of December 2020, 569,000 Palestinians were registered with the Syria office of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). In contrast with Syrian citizens, these Palestinians do not have the right to vote, hold public office, or own agricultural land or more than one house per person.¹⁶ Despite UNRWA's efforts to provide cash and food assistance, education, and health care services in Syrian refugee camps for Palestinians, 96% of beneficiaries need humanitarian assistance. Further, several UNRWA schools have been damaged or destroyed during the Syrian conflict, together with homes and infrastructure. Around 40% of Palestinians in Syria are still displaced.

Disasters and the Weaponization of Natural Resources Are Exacerbating Yemen's Civil War

Yemen is facing a devastating food security crisis. Meanwhile, intense floods and persistent drought are destroying crops, further exacerbating the already catastrophic situation. Currently, around 19 million people in Yemen (63% of the population) are unable to meet their daily food needs.¹⁷ As of March 2019, 7 million Yemenis, particularly women and children in rural areas, were malnourished.¹⁸

The collapse of food supplies in Yemen has been harshly exacerbated by the civil conflict between Houthi insurgents and the Sunni government. Major airports and ports that were crucial to food imports have closed, while humanitarian supplies have been denied or diverted to keep relief from reaching populations under enemy control.¹⁹ In addition, more than 1,200 air strikes have targeted agricultural infrastructure. Fisheries have also seen damage.²⁰

Yemen has the highest rate of water collapse in the Middle East. In the capital, Sana'a, people receive water twice a week, while in the city of Taiz, public networks deliver water only once every 30–60 days.²¹ Water scarcity across Yemen, exacerbated by the protracted conflict and disasters, has limited access to safe water for 17.8 million people. As a result, an increasing number of farmers are being forced to abandon their homes. The lack of fresh water has contributed to the outbreak of cholera, with more than 1 million suspected cases and nearly 1,500 associated deaths.²²

But there is another fundamental reason why water is lacking in Yemen: The resource has been weaponized by the warring parties, which have bombed the country's civilian infrastructure, including water treatment and irrigation systems, agricultural sites, schools, hospitals, and sanitation plants.²³ Water scarcity also highlights another key challenge in Yemen: discrimination between majority and minority groups.

Muhamasheen Communities Face Higher Risks

Although the war in Yemen is having devastating effects on millions of civilians, minority groups such as the Muhamasheen, who were already suffering from caste-based discrimination and poverty before the war began in 2015, are at heightened risk of harm.

"Muhamasheen" means "the marginalized" and indicates a servant class. The Muhamasheen lack proper documentation and equal access to available resources, and they are often made even more vulnerable by being displaced to the front lines of conflict.²⁴ They are mostly confined to slums, have few economic opportunities, and face restricted access to water, sanitation, and education, as well as other basic services. They are rarely allowed to marry someone belonging to another caste. The fact that they fall outside Yemeni dominant tribal and societal structures means they have no political representation and have little access to damage compensation or mediation in cases of conflict.

While Yemen's laws do not explicitly discriminate against the Muhamasheen, de facto discrimination against them permeates Yemen's institutions, including its administrative, local, and traditional authorities.²⁵ As a result, they are frequently denied access to — or the ability or awareness to access — many rights.

A 2015 survey conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) of 51,406 Muhamasheen highlighted the terrible living conditions the community is experiencing. According to the report, only 1 in 5 people aged 15 or over could read or write, and only 2 in 4 children aged 6 to 17 were enrolled in school, although the average was nearly twice that figure. Further, only 2 in 5 Muhamasheen households had a latrine.²⁷ During the conflict, Muhamasheen women have been disproportionately exposed to sexual violence and harassment by combatants, particularly at checkpoints.²⁸

Muhamasheen communities have suffered from historical patterns of discrimination, marginalization, and violence that have made their experience of displacement different from the rest of Yemen's population. In cases of evacuation from war-torn or disaster-prone areas, their lack of tribal connections means they have no native villages to return to or safety net to support them. Their lack of documentation may also constrain their access to aid, while discriminatory practices have obstructed their access to humanitarian assistance.

Discrimination, the Weaponization of Disasters, and the 1951 Refugee Convention

According to the Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their home country or seek its protection due to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, nationality, membership in a particular social group, religion, or political opinion. To be eligible for refugee status, an individual must be able to demonstrate a lack of state protection based on one of these five grounds.

While the Refugee Convention may find application in conflict settings, the dominant view in international refugee law holds that refugee status does not fundamentally apply in the context of disasters, since none of the five listed grounds is necessarily met. But it is crucial for decision-makers to incorporate the contemporary understanding of disasters: They are not catastrophic manifestations of nature beyond human control; instead, a disaster is the combination of environmental threats with social, cultural, economic, and political factors. These turn a natural hazard into a disaster.²⁹

Understood as such, disasters are not at all "natural." Rather, they are determined by the social context that an impacted person is experiencing. Discrimination, gender constructs, and unequal distribution of land, resources, work opportunities, or livelihoods all shape people's vulnerability, exposure, and resilience to disasters as well as their access to protection. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) itself acknowledges that "people who are socially, economically, culturally, politically, institutionally or otherwise marginalized are especially vulnerable to climate change and also to some adaptation and mitigation responses."³⁰ So conceived, disasters may discriminate or magnify existing discrimination patterns that normally may not sufficiently establish a well-founded fear of persecution.³¹ Conversely, in emergency situations, discrimination may put life at risk, raising a situation to the Refugee Convention's required threshold.

The relevance of disasters to the determination of refugee status is even greater when an entity — whether a state or nonstate actor — weaponizes disasters to inflict harm on a specific community or group of people. This is the danger facing minority groups in both Yemen and Syria. In these countries, systematic attacks on food and water supplies are intended to harm civilians or parts of the population under enemy control. If it were demonstrated that resource scarcity or disasters were being weaponized by one or more combatant groups to harm perceived opponents or other targeted groups, putting their health, livelihood and life at serious risk, the Refugee Convention could well find application.

In the aftermath of disasters such as drought or a flood, reported cases involving the denial, deprivation, or obstruction of humanitarian aid — even in areas under the control of nonstate actors — demonstrate a lack of state protection that could be considered persecution under the Refugee Convention. Hampering or obstructing minority groups' access to basic services during a crisis can irreparably affect their recovery as well as their life and prospects. As such, discrimination rooted in ethnic, religious, or political grounds may well amount to persecution under the convention. If a state is unwilling or unable to protect its citizens from discrimination during an emergency, it potentially demonstrates a lack of state protection and substantiates a need for refugee status.

In its country guidance on Syria, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) considers the lack or denial of water, hygiene, or natural resources as relevant only to complementary forms of protection, not to refugee status. However, the guidance does not account for the above analysis or the fact that attacks against natural resources and

infrastructure not only undermine civilian livelihoods, but also break down social relationships, economic systems, and governance mechanisms necessary for the provision of basic services and health care.³²

A final comment relates to the particular case of Palestinian refugees in Syria who have availed themselves of UNRWA protection.³³ Pursuant to the Refugee Convention, where such protection has ceased for a reason beyond the applicant's control and forced them to leave UNRWA's area of operation or prevented them from re-availing themselves of such protection, the person concerned should be granted refugee status automatically. As seen, the conflict and weaponization of natural resources in Syria (primarily water) has affected UNRWA's capacity to cover the basic needs of Palestinian refugees residing there.

Moreover, UNRWA has admitted that, due to financial gaps, its ability to deliver essential services, including humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees in Syria, is limited.³⁴ The fact that thousands of Palestinians are still displaced is indicative of this limited capacity. In this context, the EUAA has found that protection from UNRWA in Syria can be considered to have ceased within the meaning of the Refugee Convention.³⁵ As such, if Palestinians previously under UNRWA mandate leave Syria and flee to another country, under the Refugee Convention, they should be entitled to refugee status.

Policy Recommendations

What emerges from this analysis of displacement in Syria and Yemen is that the Refugee Convention can apply where states and nonstate actors exploit disasters, aid delivery, or resource scarcity to provoke intentional harm for reasons protected under international refugee law. The same holds true where patterns of discrimination compound the effects of disasters and lead to varying levels of exposure, access to relief, and risks of persecution. These demonstrate a lack of state protection.

To meet the needs of Syrians and Yemenis seeking protection, parties to the Refugee Convention and its protocol on processing protection claims should:

1. Consider the particular role that disasters play in amplifying existing patterns of discrimination — for instance, in transforming socioeconomic disadvantage or political marginalization into a risk of persecution.
2. Consult relevant country of origin information (COI) to gather insights into the occurrence, damages, and impacts of disasters in a given area, the risks associated with the event, and the measures taken by the state to protect the affected population. Consult COI to assess the presence or lack of discriminatory laws, practices, or behaviors in post-disaster assistance and relief.
3. Investigate whether disasters, resource scarcity, or environmental degradation are weaponized by conflicting parties as a way of harming a particular part of society on grounds protected by the Refugee Convention (race, nationality, membership in a particular social group, religion, or political opinion).

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POLICY BRIEF

Keeping the Refugee Convention Relevant: Expanding Protection for Environmentally Displaced Populations

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Introduction

Migration is not a new phenomenon. Historically, it has been a mechanism for adapting to deteriorating environmental conditions.¹ Given the increasingly detrimental impacts of climate change, environmental migration is expected to increase.² According to the 1990 First Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the greatest impact of climate change could be human migration.³ By 2050, 150 million people could be displaced by climate change-related phenomena such as desertification.⁴

Given that climate change will affect the lives and fates of millions of people who will be forcibly displaced, addressing the plight of environmentally displaced populations is of crucial importance. This topic is particularly significant for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which is expected to be one of the regions most affected by climate change.⁵ Inhabitants of the MENA region already face numerous environmental challenges, such as desertification, water scarcity, and heat waves, all of which are predicted to worsen in the near future.⁶ Intense weather events driven by climate change, such as droughts, floods, and storms, will all impact migratory flows across the region.

The ability — or inability — of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, known as the Refugee Convention, to address the plight of people displaced by climate change impacts has been a critical area of discussion among legal scholars and practitioners. The use of the terms “climate refugee” and “environmental refugee” has been a topic of contention, as the current legal definition of “refugee” does not explicitly mention environmental displacement.⁷ Further, some actors have expressed concern that expanding the Refugee Convention to include environmental refugees could indirectly reduce the protection afforded to conventional political refugees.⁸

One existing view in international refugee law is that the Refugee Convention is but a peripheral instrument for addressing the legal status of populations who are displaced by natural disasters and climate change. By contrast, this brief argues that the relevance of the Refugee Convention to such situations is limited to how natural disasters are conceptualized.⁹ Drawing on the recent legal literature of scholars who adopt a social perspective to understand disasters and climate change, it finds that as a living document, the Refugee Convention remains relevant in these contexts.

First, this brief presents the dominant view among scholars and practitioners, which is influenced by what Mathew Scott calls the “hazard paradigm.”¹⁰ Next, it presents the “social paradigm” as an alternate way of understanding natural disasters with its own implications for how refugee status is determined in these contexts. Lastly, the brief provides policy recommendations for relevant stakeholders working to address the plight of populations displaced because of climate change.

Discussion

Theoretical Frameworks: The Hazard Paradigm Versus the Social Paradigm

The Hazard Paradigm

How a disaster is conceptualized has important implications for the relevance of the Refugee Convention for populations displaced by natural disasters and climate change. The “hazard paradigm,” which today is the dominant perspective, focuses on a hazard independently of its social context.¹¹ Within this paradigm, affected populations are construed as passive victims of indiscriminate and uncontrollable forces of nature, which are granted agency.¹² Human agency is absent from this perspective.¹³ Such a conception of natural disasters has consequences for the determination of refugee status.

Through the hazard paradigm, populations impacted by natural disasters do not satisfy the definition of “refugee” stipulated in the Refugee Convention. According to the convention, a refugee is “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”¹⁴ Given that discrimination is an integral feature of the definition, and that the hazard paradigm views disasters as being inherently indiscriminate, this dominant view holds that the Refugee Convention does not apply to people displaced by climate change impacts.¹⁵ Furthermore, the definition of “refugee” requires the existence of a persecuting agent, which the context of environmental displacement lacks.¹⁶ The hazard paradigm frames harm as being inflicted by forces of nature,

which do not qualify as agents of persecution and thus disqualify environmentally displaced populations from the definition enshrined in the Refugee Convention. While this perspective has made its way into jurisprudence, another perspective for understanding natural disasters could offer an avenue for protecting these populations that satisfies the convention's definition.

The Social Paradigm

By contrast, the “social paradigm,” which was developed within the field of disaster risk reduction, understands disasters as social phenomena.¹⁷ This perspective holds that natural disasters result from the interaction of natural hazards with social vulnerability, which is formed within social and historical contexts.¹⁸ As such, the social paradigm accounts for the presence of human agency and looks to the social root causes of a disaster. It recognizes that vulnerability is differentiated based on preexisting structural patterns of discrimination against particular marginalized groups.¹⁹ Thus, it largely rejects the hazard paradigm's assumption that a disaster's impacts are indiscriminate.²⁰ By recognizing the differentiated experiences of vulnerability and discrimination within a social context, the Refugee Convention can be relevant for the environmentally displaced.

The Case of the Bantu and Reewin During the 2011 Somalia Drought

The relevance of disasters to the Refugee Convention can be highlighted by applying the social paradigm to the predicament of the Reewin and Bantu people living in Somalia during the 2011 famine. Due to drought and crop failure, 750,000 people were living in famine conditions in South and Central Somalia by October 2011.²¹ It is reported that the marginalized Bantu and Reewin people were disproportionately affected by the disaster.²²

Understood through the hazard paradigm, which does not account for the historical and social context in which a disaster occurs, the Reewin and Bantu people were exposed and vulnerable to the famine simply because they happened to have insecure livelihoods.²³ This perspective would look to the onset of drought to explain the starvation of hundreds of thousands of people. On the other hand, the social paradigm considers the root socio-structural causes that generate vulnerabilities within the context of drought and famine.²⁴ In other words, the predicament of the Reewin and Bantu people is inseparable from the broader social context in which the disaster unfolded.²⁵

Scholars who have studied these Somalian communities assert that they have historically endured systemic marginalization and discrimination within the wider society. For example, members from their community were excluded from important government positions, and their economic and social opportunities were restricted.²⁶ Further, during the 1991–92 famine, the Bantu and Reewin people, along with their livestock and food stores, were violently targeted by the militias of more powerful clans.²⁷

According to Scott, the differential vulnerability experienced by the Bantu and Reewin people, whose discriminatory treatment exacerbated their vulnerability to drought and famine, may have been capable of satisfying the convention's definition of “refugee” (by having a well-founded fear of persecution under the convention).²⁸ This determination, however, is predicated upon the application of the social paradigm, rather than the hazard paradigm, in the context of drought and famine.

Policy Recommendations

- Policymakers, academics, and individuals involved in the processes of determining refugee status should apply the social paradigm when understanding cases linked to such natural disaster contexts. The hazard paradigm falls short of fully capturing the vulnerabilities and discriminatory realities of individuals exposed to harm in these contexts, thereby excluding them from potential protection mechanisms that they could otherwise be eligible for.
- The above actors should apply the social paradigm to the case of Syria, which experienced a severe multiyear drought before the 2011 uprising. This perspective would consider the negative impacts of the drought (the hazard) to be a result of the interaction between drought and social vulnerability within the social and political contexts. Furthermore, some scholars have argued that the desertification seen in Syria was itself caused by poor governmental policies and mismanagement.²⁹ These policies harmed particular social groups who were made more vulnerable to the drought and became forcibly displaced.

- In order to better understand the harm facing a person seeking protection through the Refugee Convention, actors involved in refugee status determination should make use of updated reports written by international humanitarian organizations that provide insights into conditions in the field.³⁰ Additionally, these actors should utilize in-depth ethnographic studies and reports on particular contexts and situations, since factors covered by the Refugee Convention are highly context-specific.³¹ In particular, in-depth qualitative investigations can provide “thick” description and insights which quantitative and statistical methods might not manage to capture.
- International organizations, academic institutions, and governments should encourage more publicly accessible anthropological research into the contexts of climate change and natural disasters to better inform policymakers and refugee status determination processes.
- Academic institutions, international organizations, and civil society organizations should develop shared strategies and networks to build off each other’s efforts to expand protections for the environmentally displaced. Donors should target these institutional networks to foster a more participatory conversation around the issue.

Conclusion

The point of departure for this brief is that the Refugee Convention is a living document. It retains its relevance amid our increasing awareness of environment or disaster-driven displacement, even if such displacement was not at the forefront of the minds of its drafters.

This brief fleshes out two disaster paradigms with different implications for the determination of refugee status and offers the recommendations above in light of the discussion. Clearly, the social paradigm can keep the Refugee Convention relevant in the context of environmental displacement. As such, we need not “reinvent the wheel.” Rather, as legal scholar Jane McAdam notes, “The trick is to apply existing law principles to the facts at hand.”³²

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POLICY BRIEF

Moving Beyond the Refugee Convention Impasse on Climate Displacement: Skills Mobility Partnerships

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Introduction

Efforts to reopen the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees to enshrine protections for climate refugees face several complications: The current political climate toward refugees — particularly in the Global North, where fear dominates much of the rhetoric around migration — makes expanding the convention a nearly impossible task. Opening the Refugee Convention up to renegotiation could also undermine existing refugee protections. Meanwhile, some of those severely affected and displaced by climate change are rejecting the “refugee” label.

This brief explores these complications and proposes that skills mobility partnerships (SMPs) form a key part of climate and migration policy. “Skills mobility partnerships” are defined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as bilateral or multilateral agreements between states that, “although they may vary in form, modality, and level of stakeholder involvement ... all place skills development at the heart of their efforts.” SMPs must possess the following five components: “formalized State cooperation; multi-stakeholder involvement; training; skills recognition; and migration/mobility.”¹

These partnerships can allow for the expansion of labor migration pathways in an equitable manner and act as a climate change adaptation strategy.² They can support the introduction and expansion of climate resilience measures and potentially prevent mass displacement.³ They can also prevent countries of origin from suffering huge, one-way workforce losses to destination countries that are often wealthier.⁴ As such, SMPs could prove to be an essential tool in the development of green skills, or the “technical knowledge, expertise and abilities that enable the effective use of green technologies and processes in professional settings,” globally.⁵

The 1951 Refugee Convention and Barriers to Its Expansion

Although certain states and intergovernmental bodies, such as the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU), have expressed great concern over the role of climate change in the forced displacement of people, there is still no internationally binding legal definition of “climate refugee.” As a result, there remains a void within the international legal system regarding the protection of said people.⁶ The 1951 Refugee Convention and the related 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees underpin international refugee law, but most people displaced by the impacts of climate change are not protected under the convention.⁷

Instead, the Refugee Convention has to date been used in all climate displacement-related litigation to deny or reduce the provision of legal protection for migrants. For example, it was used to reject Ioane Teitiota’s request for refugee status in New Zealand, which was made on the grounds that rising sea levels and environmental degradation will force the residents of Kiribati to leave their island.⁸

To provide international legal protection for climate refugees, the Refugee Convention would have to be reinterpreted or expanded. But this would pose many issues. First, differentiating between climate and other factors as the cause of displacement can be extremely difficult. There is also no real political appetite at the state level for the expansion of the convention. Individual EU member states have resisted the idea of creating a new “climate refugee” category.⁹ As a body, the EU prefers to address the root causes of migration through strategies like its Green Deal.¹⁰

Another major obstacle is the lack of a clear and internationally agreed upon definition of “climate refugee.” Negotiations over how to define the term will likely be highly contentious and difficult.¹¹ There is also the risk that opening up the convention — especially amid the current wave of highly negative political rhetoric around refugees and migrants around the world — could result in a narrower definition of “refugee” and exclude migrants who may have been displaced as a result of climate change but cannot prove it.¹²

Furthermore, the impetus for opening the convention would have to come from states. This appears unlikely, considering the current discourse around refugees.¹³ The “refugee” label has even been resisted by the governments of some affected countries. These governments have argued that it suggests they have produced refugees and obfuscates the responsibility of the world’s largest climate polluters, of whom their states are often victims.¹⁴

In 2017, New Zealand piloted an “experimental humanitarian visa” for Pacific Islanders displaced because of climate change, but the trial was canceled after six months because Pacific Islanders did not want it.¹⁵ This is because they saw refugee status as a last resort. Instead, they implored the New Zealand government to focus on supporting adaptation methods, providing legal migration pathways, and reducing emissions.¹⁶ Similarly, former I-Kiribati President Anote Tong resisted the “climate refugee” label. Kiribati followed a “migration with dignity” policy until recently, when it abandoned the policy in favor of an approach centered on adaptation and mitigation.¹⁷

For all these reasons, it is highly unlikely that any attempts to expand the Refugee Convention to include “climate refugees” will be feasible. Even if it could happen, it would be a very slow process. With climate change already driving displacement, we should instead focus our efforts on developing rapid solutions to build climate resilience. This will help prevent forced displacement and expand existing labor pathways for those who do wish to move.

Global Skills Mobility Partnerships

By expanding existing labor pathways, we can also create migration pathways for those affected by climate change. In fact, this can be an essential mechanism for doing so.

There is a growing conversation around the importance of migration for supporting Europe’s green transition. Migration would help destination countries build their green workforce and close gaps in green skills.¹⁸ However, these policies would need to be very carefully designed so that they are not extractive in nature and do not expose migrant workers to underpayment and exploitative work conditions. For example, if all the green-skilled residents of states negatively affected by climate change leave for Europe or the United States, then origin countries will be left without workers capable of building climate resilience in place. This dynamic is highly exploitative and often benefits wealthier Global North countries to the detriment of the Global South. This is where global skills partnerships come in.

Global skills partnerships are grounded in Sustainable Development Goals 4, 8, and 10 and Objective 18 of the 2018 Global Compact on Migration, which calls for states to invest in skills development and facilitate the mutual recognition of skills, qualifications, and competencies.¹⁹ Under a global SMP, a destination and origin country agree on 1) the portion of training in the origin country, 2) how the benefits of skilled migration will support training for nonmigrants, 3) who will offer employment in the destination country, and 4) the standards of employment.²⁰ The agreement ensures that financing for the partnership creates human capital in the origin country. Global SMPs can only function if the origin and destination countries mutually recognize the skills that are proactively needed in both countries.²¹ A mechanism must also be created to ensure training costs are distributed fairly.²²

IOM has developed its own category of global skills partnerships. Introduced in 2019, these partnerships have eight identified prerequisites:²³

1. Long- and mid-term planning.
2. Skills classification and recognition at the national level and beyond.
3. A multistakeholder approach and policy coherence.
4. A mechanism for addressing the social aspects of employment and mobility.
5. Data for evidence-based policy.
6. An incorporation of migration considerations.
7. Local development and job creation.
8. Cost reduction and sharing.

Global SMPs provide a model through which skilled migration can take place, benefits are ensured for the origin country, and migrant workers are protected. The origin country:

- Receives subsidized training for “home track” professionals.
- Builds up its training institutions.
- Grows its domestic workforce. (Some trainees either return or never migrate.)
- Receives remittances from “away track” graduates.
- Does not face a fiscal drain from graduates’ migration.²⁴

For their part, migrant workers receive professional employment, significantly increased earnings, and internationally recognized training.²⁵

A partnership between the Italian and Egyptian governments offers one example of a successful SMP. These countries signed an agreement in 2009 to provide solutions for Egyptian youth in areas suffering from high unemployment and irregular migration. As part of the agreement, IOM launched the Education and Training for Egyptian Youth program in 2010.²⁶ Multiple partners, including Italian and Egyptian employers, the Egyptian Ministry of Education, and Italian training authorities, collaborated to develop training at the Fayoum Advanced Technical School for Hotel Management and Tourism Services in the Fayoum governorate of Egypt. The project supported the renovation of the school and the creation of a database for international job matching.

Through the project, 60 teachers were trained in Egypt and abroad. In 2013, 115 students were provided with internships and traineeships in tourist destinations in the Red Sea area.²⁷ The aim of the project was to improve local education and training opportunities while facilitating regular labor migration to Italy. This project is a good example of how the development of training institutions and education in the country of origin forms an essential part of a mutually beneficial SMP.

However, a major obstacle to the utility of SMPs is their current inability to work at scale, or to scale up significantly. These programs can be expensive. They are also difficult and time-consuming to design, as there are many different national contexts and sector requirements to account for.²⁸ Further, high operating costs and poor management have often resulted in projects ending after the completion of their pilot phase.²⁹ Each partnership requires its own curriculum and set of partners, and the cost of training and skills validation is relatively fixed, meaning that scaling up the project does not make it more cost-effective.³⁰ Of more than 50 transnational vocational education and training projects and SMPs carried out in Germany, only three followed through with the global SMP framework or intended to do so.³¹

Given the high demands of the SMP model, some might argue that it should be discarded in favor of a more cost-effective strategy. But we must weigh the high costs of these programs with the economic risks presented by leaving unmet the demand for skilled workers, as well as the disproportionate burden currently placed on origin countries to finance the education and training of workers.³² Programs can scale up if they are able to meet employers’ needs and utilize appropriate legal migration channels and if the political will exists in receiving countries.³³ This political will can pose a major barrier to the success and implementation of these programs on a larger scale.

Skills Mobility Partnerships in the Context of Climate Change

As a concept, SMPs are still in their infancy. They are not yet widely utilized as a policy tool.³⁴ Their application for green-skilled mobility is an even more recent concept, meaning we do not have a strong base for evaluating the model’s potential for tackling climate change.³⁵ The nascent nature of these schemes and the issues with scale mean that the global SMP model should be seen as just one complementary policy strategy in our attempts to address the impact of climate change on migration. For example, SMPs centered around climate mitigation and adaptation programs in North Africa, which is severely affected by climate change, could prove highly impactful.³⁶

IOM is currently advocating for SMPs to support the green transition in North Africa.³⁷ Its goal is to convince the EU that the green transition needs to happen on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea.³⁸ The development of green skills globally is essential for effective climate policy. For example, a centerpiece of the EU's Green Deal is the "Farm to Fork" strategy. It will require certain countries, including those in North Africa, to demonstrate that they fulfill certain requirements, such as reduced water consumption, if they wish to export products to the EU. For North African countries to accomplish this, the region must develop green farming skills. This will require investment and skills development and showcases the ability of a SMP to serve as an effective, sustainable, and equitable policy tool.

Controlled environment agriculture (agricultural practices that create fully controlled environments for growing plants through techniques such as "vertical farming") is another key area where SMPs could be implemented. Programs that employ these practices are very much in their infancy in Egypt, which is becoming one of the countries most severely affected by extreme weather patterns, and investment has been difficult to attract.³⁹

Hydroponics, or the use of a water-based nutrient solution rather than soil to grow plants, is the most popular form of controlled environment agriculture in Egypt.⁴⁰ In order to promote this form of farming, which could prove essential for the country's climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies to flourish, increased investment and skills development are critical. A SMP would provide this opportunity while bolstering the workforce of a partner country.

Policy Recommendations

Many countries are already undergoing severe climate change impacts, with many people displaced as a result. To expand migration pathways and enable people to migrate safely and with dignity, we must rapidly implement innovative policy solutions. But policies to develop in-place climate adaptation and mitigation, so that people who wish to remain (a desire evidenced by the demands of Pacific Islanders in response to New Zealand's experimental humanitarian visa) can do so, are essential.

SMPs can be applied as an innovative and equitable policy tool for promoting green skills development. In turn, this can both expand existing labor migration pathways for populations affected by climate change and build in-place climate resilience in destination countries. However, it is important to note that given the small scale of these programs, they are just one of multiple policy tools that can be deployed to address the effects of climate change on migration.

Below are several policy recommendations for the effective use of SMPs in tackling climate-induced displacement:

1. Invest in and implement the global skills partnerships model to promote green skills development, support migrants displaced by climate change, and strengthen adaptation strategies.
2. Ensure that these schemes meet labor demands in countries of origin as well as destination countries.
3. Ensure that the private sector is involved in these schemes.
4. Encourage countries to align or mutually recognize qualifications and skills to facilitate the scale-up of these programs.
5. Apply best practices from previous SMPs based in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, such as the Egypt-Italy partnership, which successfully involved multiple stakeholders and developed training institutions and education in the country of origin.

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POLICY BRIEF

A Synergistic Approach to the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention

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Photo by EDUARDO SOTERAS / AFP via Getty Images

Introduction

Data released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in mid-2022 reveals a multifaceted scenario in North Africa. The region is home to approximately 1.4 million refugees and asylum seekers. Sudan has emerged as a significant host country, sheltering over 1.2 million individuals.¹ Other North African countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, collectively host approximately 140,000 individuals with official refugee status.²

However, the dynamics of displacement in North Africa extend beyond refugees. By the end of 2022, Algeria, Mauritania, and Sudan reported approximately 252,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) resulting from various disasters, with Sudan alone accounting for 227,000 IDPs.³ From 2012–22, the region experienced a staggering 1.9 million internal displacements, triggered by 72 recorded disaster events encompassing floods, wildfires, earthquakes, storms, and extreme temperatures.⁴

This leads us to a compelling question: How many of these climate-induced IDPs in North African countries were originally refugees who fled other countries? The intersection between climate-induced internal displacement and refugee status remains a complex and under-explored aspect of climate migration. The rising incidence of climate change events in North Africa compounds this challenge.⁵ While the region grapples with increasingly frequent climate-induced disasters, data and statistics on the convergence of refugee status and internal displacement remain scarce.⁶

In the African context, the Organisation of the African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (OAU Refugee Convention) provides protection to refugees who have crossed international borders, while the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) provides a framework for protecting and assisting IDPs across the continent, including in the context of climate-induced internal displacement.⁷

While most North African countries, except Morocco and Western Sahara, have ratified the OAU Refugee Convention as of May 16, 2019, the ratification of the Kampala Convention remains limited.⁸ As of April 27, 2022, Mauritania and Western Sahara are the only North African countries to have ratified the Kampala Convention, leaving a gap in the legal frameworks for addressing climate-induced internal displacement.⁹

This policy brief explores how the Kampala Convention can complement the OAU Refugee Convention in this complex landscape. It aims to bridge the protection gap for individuals facing the dual challenge of refugee status and climate-induced internal displacement and explores how the two conventions can work together to better protect and assist them. The brief then provides recommendations on how to strengthen the legal and policy frameworks for protecting refugees who experience climate-induced internal displacement within their host countries in North Africa.

Understanding the Protection Gap

The Absence of a Specific Legal Framework

The primary protection gap in the context of refugees experiencing climate-induced internal displacement within their host countries lies in the absence of a dedicated legal framework for addressing this intersection. The existing legal instruments, the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention, are designed to cater to distinct categories of displaced individuals — refugees and IDPs, respectively. As a result, refugees who find themselves internally displaced due to climate change-related factors face a lack of clear and comprehensive protection.

For example, refugees from Sudan, who are initially granted asylum in Tunisia under the OAU Refugee Convention due to political persecution, also encounter climate-induced internal displacement within Tunisia due to severe drought and food scarcity. This situation highlights the protection gap where refugees, although covered by the OAU Refugee Convention, face challenges in securing specific protections and assistance related to climate-induced internal displacement. To bridge this gap, it is imperative to explore how these refugees can be afforded the necessary safeguards under existing legal instruments.

Uncertainty Regarding Dual Categorization Under the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention

A fundamental question arises when examining the protection gap: Can a refugee also be considered an IDP under the Kampala Convention when experiencing climate-induced internal displacement? This dual categorization under two distinct conventions is a complex issue and requires careful consideration. The challenge is to determine whether refugees facing climate-induced internal displacement can simultaneously fit into both categories, and if so, what specific protections and assistance are provided under each convention.

The Limited Ratification of the Kampala Convention

The limited ratification of the Kampala Convention by North African countries also contributes significantly to the protection gap. The Kampala Convention provides a framework for addressing the protection and assistance of IDPs, including those displaced due to climate change-related factors. The low number of ratifications within the region means that many countries lack a legal framework to comprehensively address climate-induced internal displacement, leaving refugees experiencing such displacement with insufficient protection and assistance.

Exploring Dual Status Under the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention

The definitions of “refugee” and “internally displaced person” as provided, respectively, by the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention determine who qualifies for protection and assistance under these regional instruments.

Under the OAU Refugee Convention, three cumulative prerequisites must be met for a person to be considered a refugee and obtain refugee protection.¹⁰ The person must 1) have a genuine fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, 2) be located outside their country of nationality, and 3) have an inability or unwillingness to seek protection from their country of nationality due to such fear. Article 1, Section 2 of the convention extends this protection by eliminating the necessity for a well-founded fear of persecution and broadens the circumstances that compel individuals to flee their home country. Hence, refugees, by definition, have been displaced across borders.

On the other hand, the Kampala Convention defines IDPs as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.”¹¹

This definition identifies two conditions an individual must satisfy to be considered an IDP: 1) the individual must be involuntarily displaced, and 2) the individual must not have crossed an international border. The absence of cross-border displacement in the definition explains why IDPs are not refugees. An individual may meet the definition of IDP if displaced by a natural disaster.

While the requirement for the absence of international border-crossing is a key aspect, the interpretation of the definition of IDP under the Kampala Convention allows for a nuanced understanding. This interpretation suggests that individuals classified as refugees may also fall under the category of IDPs if they undergo internal displacement within the borders of their host country. For example, refugees forced to relocate within their host country due to natural disasters remain within its borders, thus fulfilling the criteria for internal displacement under the Kampala Convention.

Moreover, the Kampala Convention does not refer to the notion of citizenship. However, the phrasing “to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence” indicates that the presence of these people or groups of people must have reached some permanency in the said country. This also applies to refugees.¹² In this sense, the Kampala Convention definition underscores the inherent vulnerabilities of IDPs by outlining their defining characteristics, instead of conveying a normative concept.¹³ Therefore, a refugee could simultaneously be considered an IDP as defined by the Kampala Convention and, thus, benefit from the protection and assistance that the convention provides.

Some scholars consider refugees who experience displacement within the country where they sought refuge or asylum to remain refugees only, and not IDPs.¹⁴ However, it would be fitting to consider the application of the Kampala Convention by analogy whenever refugee law does not adequately address their needs arising from their displacement.¹⁵

How the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention Can Complement One Another

IDPs share similar factual circumstances with refugees.¹⁶ However, despite the protections provided by international refugee law, refugees face numerous social, economic, and legal challenges that can only be exacerbated by internal displacement within their host countries.¹⁷ Indeed, “when people are on the move, it is difficult to ensure that their rights are protected, hence necessitating a specific legal framework to protect them.”¹⁸

Although the OAU Refugee Convention serves as a foundational framework for addressing refugee issues within the African continent by setting out the rights and obligations of both refugees and host states, it has limitations when it comes to addressing the complex issue of climate-induced internal displacement within a host country. As the mandate of the OAU Refugee Convention is rooted in the historical context of decolonization and conflict in Africa, it seems that the OAU Refugee Convention cannot be readily adapted to this situation.¹⁹

Refugees who experience internal displacement within their host country cannot be protected from some of the challenges that are posed by internal displacement and that were not accounted for under international refugee law — for instance, the right to not be arbitrarily displaced or to not be forced to return or resettle within the host country.²⁰

As the complexities of displacement evolve, particularly in the context of climate-induced internal displacement, there exists a notable protection gap.²¹ The Kampala Convention emerges as a complementary framework that can work in tandem with the OAU Refugee Convention to effectively bridge this gap by addressing various root causes for displacement and covering protection before, during, and after displacement.

The Kampala Convention stands as a seminal continental instrument designed to address the multifaceted challenges confronted by IDPs across Africa. As the first international legally binding instrument on IDPs, the convention provides a comprehensive framework to safeguard the rights, dignity, and well-being of IDPs across the continent.²²

In this context, the Kampala Convention places the primary responsibility for protecting and assisting IDPs within their territories squarely on the shoulders of states. It calls on states to enact domestic legislation and establish a national authority or body to coordinate efforts related to IDPs.²³ In addressing climate-induced internal displacement, the Kampala Convention explicitly instructs states to “take actions to safeguard and support individuals internally displaced as a result of natural or human-made disasters, including climate change.”²⁴

A Synergistic Approach: Enhancing Protection Through Collaboration

In essence, the Kampala Convention and the OAU Refugee Convention are complementary instruments that, when working in harmony, can provide a comprehensive and coordinated response to the challenges faced by refugees who experience climate-induced displacement in their host countries. To further elucidate this collaborative approach, the following points outline specific measures that illustrate how the synergistic implementation of these conventions can enhance protection for refugees affected by climate-induced internal displacement.

- **Prevention and mitigation of climate-induced internal displacement:** The Kampala Convention acknowledges the need to adequately plan for climate-related disasters through the development and implementation of early warning systems, disaster risk reduction strategies, emergency and disaster preparedness, and management measures.²⁵ This proactive approach aligns with the growing recognition of the need to mitigate climate-related displacement and complements the OAU Refugee Convention’s mission of safeguarding refugees.

- **Engaging refugees affected by climate-induced internal displacement:** The Kampala Convention stipulates that “States Parties shall consult internally displaced persons and allow them to participate in decisions relating to their protection and assistance.”²⁶ Extending this provision to refugees who experience climate-induced internal displacement, particularly regarding the planning of resettlement strategies and the development of lasting solutions to address climate-related displacement, allows states to better address their specific needs and vulnerabilities and confers legitimacy on the process.²⁷ Moreover, involving refugees in decision-making processes should promote responsiveness to their unique circumstances. This includes considering the needs of vulnerable groups among refugees, such as women and children who may be disproportionately affected by climate-induced internal displacement.
- **Extending humanitarian assistance obligations to refugees affected by climate-induced internal displacement:** The Kampala Convention establishes the responsibility of states to provide IDPs with humanitarian assistance, encompassing vital necessities like food, shelter, medical care, and social services.²⁸ Moreover, it highlights the possibility of states seeking assistance from various actors, including international organizations and humanitarian agencies, to fulfill these obligations.²⁹ These provisions can be applied to refugees who experience climate-induced internal displacement within their host countries, complementing the protection granted by the OAU Refugee Convention. This allows them to receive the necessary support tailored to their specific requirements and vulnerabilities, thereby preventing arbitrary displacement, and fostering a collaborative, comprehensive response to the challenges associated with climate-induced internal displacement.
- **Ensuring documentation for refugees impacted by climate-induced internal displacement:** The Kampala Convention emphasizes the necessity of proper documentation for IDPs and promotes the creation and maintenance of an updated register, the issuance of relevant documents, and the replacement of documents lost or destroyed in the course of displacement “without imposing unreasonable conditions.”³⁰ The extension of this provision to refugees facing climate-induced internal displacement within their host countries, who might require such documentation to access rights and services efficiently, seems necessary to complement the protection offered by the OAU Refugee Convention. Collaboration with international organizations CSOs, humanitarian agencies, and civil society organizations, as encouraged by the Kampala Convention, can enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives.³¹
- **Ensuring effective remedies for refugees impacted by climate-induced internal displacement:** The Kampala Convention calls for establishing a legal framework to ensure just and fair compensation and emphasizes the importance of reparations for those who have suffered displacement-related damages.³² For refugees experiencing climate-induced internal displacement, Article 12, Section 3 serves as an additional layer of protection. It ensures that if a host country fails to adequately respond to the needs of IDPs during natural disasters or environmental crises, IDPs have a legal basis to claim compensation and reparations for damages suffered. This complements the protection framework of the OAU Refugee Convention by emphasizing the importance of accountability and reparations in situations where such protection is lacking.

Policy Recommendations

Through an analysis of the legal frameworks provided by the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention, as well as an exploration of the gaps and opportunities for collaboration between these instruments, it is evident that a synergistic approach is essential to effectively address the protection and assistance needs of affected populations. Building upon the insights gained from this analysis, the following policy recommendations are proposed to enhance the resilience and well-being of refugees facing climate-induced internal displacement in North Africa:

1. Strengthen the ratification of the Kampala Convention and the implementation of the OAU Refugee Convention. North African countries should prioritize the accession to and implementation of the Kampala Convention. Additionally, governments should enhance their capacity to implement the OAU Refugee Convention effectively, including through the establishment of monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with treaty obligations.
2. Enhance synergy between the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention by establishing a continental coordinating mechanism. The establishment of a continental coordinating mechanism, facilitated by the African Union, could serve as a platform for dialogue, information sharing, and joint initiatives aimed at addressing the intersection of refugee status and climate-induced internal displacement. African governments, UN agencies, CSOs, and academia should be actively involved in the design and implementation of this mechanism to ensure its effectiveness and inclusivity.

3. Invest in climate resilience and disaster preparedness. North African countries, supported by international partners and financial institutions, should prioritize investments that include developing early warning systems, improving infrastructure to withstand climate-related hazards, and implementing community-based adaptation measures. International cooperation is needed to build their capacity to mitigate and respond to the impacts of climate change with a focus on protecting vulnerable populations, including refugees and IDPs.
4. Promote research and data collection on the intersection of refugee status and climate-induced displacement. This includes conducting comprehensive assessments of the drivers, trends, and impacts of climate-induced displacement on refugee populations, as well as identifying best practices and innovative solutions for enhancing protection and assistance. North African governments should allocate funding to support multidisciplinary research projects and capacity-building initiatives that address this critical knowledge gap.

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POLICY BRIEF

A Framework for Protecting Human Rights in the Context of Internal Climate-Induced Displacement

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Introduction

Climate change and disasters, both slow- and rapid-onset, contribute to displacement. Some displaced individuals cross international borders and become refugees. Others face limited options inside their country's borders as internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁹ At the end of 2022, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimated the number of IDPs worldwide at 71.1 million, with 62.5 million IDPs displaced by conflict and violence and 8.7 million displaced by disasters.² That same year, over 305,000 people were newly displaced by disasters in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. By comparison, 223,000 people were displaced in the region in 2021, mostly by severe drought, flash floods, and storms.³

It is crucial to protect the rights of IDPs who experience climate-induced displacement by providing humanitarian assistance, tackling disparities, and preventing conflicts, although this may be difficult amid ongoing hostilities.⁴ All of these concerns fall under the umbrella of climate justice, which emphasizes equal access to resources and the right to exist free from harm.⁵ Thus, protecting and empowering IDPs through a human security approach is vital.⁶ By integrating human security principles with climate justice considerations, policymakers can formulate robust policies aimed at safeguarding IDPs, enhancing their resilience, and upholding their fundamental rights within the context of climate-induced displacement.

This brief examines existing international legal frameworks and their roles in providing protection for IDPs at the international, regional, and national levels. Recognizing that vulnerable groups — including youths, women, older adults, people with disabilities, and people residing in rural areas — are particularly affected by climate change, it proposes a human rights-based approach grounded in climate justice to ensure comprehensive and sustainable protection for IDPs.

The Inherent Difficulty of Conceptualizing Climate-Induced Displacement

Human mobility can take on various forms, including displacement, migration, and planned relocation. It can be either voluntary or forced, with varying levels of freedom and constraint. In most cases, movement is not entirely voluntary or forced, but falls somewhere on a continuum between the two.⁷ According to the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, internal displacement may occur when, following a disaster or in anticipation of a disaster, people evacuate or flee their homes or places of habitual residence and remain within the country's borders. This brief acknowledges that planned relocation, or conscious migration, can be an effective strategy for adapting to climate change.⁸

Understanding the characteristics of these movements and how they relate to various climate shocks and stressors is key for developing effective policy responses and adaptation plans.⁹ In the discourse of environmental migration, conceptualizing and accurately describing climate-induced displacement is an underlying stumbling block.¹⁰ There is no universally agreed-on definition of “climate-induced displacement,” despite the first mention of the term in the 2008 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) assembly documents.¹¹ In this brief, “climate-induced displacement” refers to the movement of people within a country due to the effects of rapid- or slow-onset climate events, such as earthquakes, floods, and droughts.

Scales of Protection: Legal and Policy Frameworks

The responsibility to protect people affected by climate-induced displacement primarily lies with a country's national authorities. The United Nations (UN) already outlined the rights of these individuals in relation to climate change in 2015.¹² Further, in 2017, the Human Rights Council called on states to take appropriate measures to safeguard the rights of displaced people vulnerable to climate change impacts.¹³

The UNFCCC also recognizes that states have common but differentiated responsibilities in the area of climate change: Developed countries should provide financial resources to assist developing countries in implementing the objectives of the UNFCCC.¹⁴

In the context of climate change, the issue of internal displacement lies at the intersection of various legal and policy fields, including international human rights law, international environmental law, international disaster relief law, disaster risk reduction, and sustainable development. It requires concerted action across these fields.¹⁵

The International Legal Framework

While the Guiding Principles of 1998 are not legally binding, they are recognized by the international community as an “important international framework for the protection of IDPs.”¹⁶ The Guiding Principles have also provided a basis for the creation of frameworks and operational guidelines at the international, regional, and national levels.¹⁷ They explicitly include “natural or human-made disasters” as a cause of displacement in the definition of “internally displaced person.” This context was further addressed in normative frameworks, including the Guidelines on the Protection of Persons in Situations of Natural Disasters, which apply a human rights approach and are relevant to climate change and climate-related disasters.¹⁸

Under international environmental law, states have made commitments on climate change mitigation and adaptation that are essential for preventing and addressing displacement. Key instruments include the 1992 UNFCCC and subsequent agreements negotiated under its umbrella. In the 2010 Cancun Adaptation Framework, the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC recognized the need for measures regarding climate-induced displacement, migration, and planned relocation as part of action on adaptation and called on states to enhance climate change-related disaster risk reduction strategies.¹⁹

More recently, the UNFCCC's Global Stocktake — a comprehensive assessment of the world's progress on climate action and an updated road map to enhance ambition to meet the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement — for COP28 made clear references to displacement.²⁰ It recognized the particular vulnerability of displaced groups, acknowledged existing efforts to respond to displacement, and called for governments and relevant institutions to make progress on their policies. COP28 also operationalized a “loss and damage” fund, to which countries immediately pledged more than \$700 million, and included displacement and displaced people in its scope.²¹ This will allow the fund to support vulnerable developing countries to implement measures and policies related to displacement.²²

The Paris Agreement contains explicit references to human rights. The Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage associated with climate change impacts was mandated to establish a task force on displacement related to the adverse impacts of climate change.²³ On the basis of its work, COP welcomed a series of policy recommendations and strategies that reflect integrated approaches to climate-related displacement in the broader context of human mobility.²⁴

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–30 (SFDRR) also recognizes the importance of addressing displacement caused by disasters and climate change; it provides opportunities to reduce risk and address displacement through disaster risk reduction policies and practices.²⁵ Additionally, the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes that climate change undermines sustainable development, with Goal 13 of this agenda dedicated specifically to climate action.

Regional Legal Frameworks

The 2009 Kampala Convention (formally known as the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa) sets out clear responsibilities for countries in the assistance and protection of IDPs in Africa, regardless of the cause of their displacement.²⁶ Given its comprehensive nature, the Kampala Convention presents a significant opportunity for addressing disaster and climate-induced displacement in the continent.²⁷ As outlined in Article 2(a), the convention also aims to address the root causes of internal displacement by working to prevent, mitigate, and eliminate these causes.

The convention is widely regarded as a major advancement toward building a legally binding regulatory framework for the protection of IDPs. This is partly due to the role it attributes to all stakeholders, including states, as well as other groups and entities involved in or affected by internal displacement, such as humanitarian organizations and other nonstate actors.²⁸

In the MENA region, there is no specific regional framework or mechanism to address internal displacement, although some initiatives have taken place in recent years. These include Resolution No. 8244 of March 2018, which was adopted by the Arab Ministers of Foreign Affairs Council to support internally displaced people in Arab countries and in Iraq in particular.²⁹

In September 2018, an additional clause was added to task the Arab Ministers of Social Affairs Council and the Arab Ministers of Health Council with designing an Arab project that would focus on providing humanitarian support for IDPs through self-reliance. The following year, another resolution tasked the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States (LAS) with forming a joint committee, composed of experts and representatives from the ministries of Interior and Justice, to study an Iraqi proposal to develop an Arab convention on assisting and protecting IDPs in the Arab region.

In December 2021, the Council of Arab Ministers of Justice of LAS adopted a resolution to assign Iraq, based on its proposal, to prepare the draft "Arab Model Guiding Law on Protection and Assistance of IDPs in the Arab Countries."³⁰ In addition to these initiatives, the LAS adopted an updated version of the Arab Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction 2030 in April 2018 to accelerate the implementation of the Sendai framework in the Arab Region.

National Legal Frameworks

The first Global Report on Law and Policy on Internal Displacement, published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) in December 2022, focuses on internal displacement in the context of disasters and climate change.³¹ According to the interactive dashboard developed by UNHCR, as of February 2024, Africa and the Middle East have created 46 and 21 IDP-specific instruments, respectively, that address both conflict- and disaster-related displacement.³² These have stemmed from legal obligations in Africa to incorporate the provisions of the Great Lakes Protocol and the Kampala Convention into domestic law.³³

Iraq and Yemen, for instance, have adopted comprehensive frameworks specifically dedicated to the protection and assistance of IDPs. Yemen adopted the National Policy for Addressing Internal Displacement to demonstrate the country's commitment to assist IDPs, find durable solutions for them, and prioritize such efforts.³⁴ This is particularly relevant in light of the large-scale internal displacement in the country triggered by the ongoing civil war. As of 2023, more than 2.7 million individuals identify as IDPs in Yemen.³⁵

In addition, approximately 6 million IDPs were identified in Iraq between 2014 and 2017. By 2023, this number had diminished, but 1.14 million remain internally displaced. This figure includes 135,498 individuals who remain displaced because of climate-related factors across most of the country. These include water scarcity, droughts, and sandstorms, which have affected central and southern Iraq in particular.³⁶ In Iraq, the main legal instruments for addressing internal displacement are the 2021 National Plan for Getting the Displaced Back to their Liberated Areas, the 2018 Principled Returns Framework, and the 2008 National Policy on Displacement.³⁷

How Climate-Induced Displacement Impacts the Human Rights of the Internally Displaced

Climate-induced displacement has significant consequences for the protection of IDPs human rights. Approximately 80% of IDPs reside in fragile environments, with displacement both a cause and result of fragility.³⁸ In several states in the MENA region, protracted armed conflict has displaced millions over the years. As a result, some of the highest numbers of IDPs worldwide are found in this region. In Syria, more than one-third of the country's total population was internally displaced as of December 2023.³⁹

Climate-induced displacement disproportionately affects children, adolescents, and older adults and intersects with factors like gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and disability. This differential impact exacerbates existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, with over 30.5 million displaced children and youths and an estimated 2.6 million displaced older adults.⁴⁰

Children and Youth

Internally displaced children face persistent challenges in accessing basic services, which hinder their rights to education, health, protection, and nondiscrimination.⁴¹ When they are forced to migrate, children are removed from stable homes and supportive communities, leaving them vulnerable to various forms of harm and danger, such as family separation, child labor, child marriage, violence, exploitation, abuse, and trafficking.⁴² Furthermore, children and adolescents are disproportionately affected by the severe consequences of climate change resulting from past generations' greenhouse gas emissions. Their limited resources and young age hinder their ability to adapt to the changing climate.⁴³ This is a concern, considering that the countries most affected by climate change have predominantly young populations.⁴⁴ Children who remain in affected areas are exposed to evolving environmental impacts and face the risk of disasters, potentially leading to continued impoverishment and eventual displacement.⁴⁵

Women and Girls

Climate-induced displacement also has distinctly gendered impacts. Primarily due to entrenched discrimination, women and girls experience displacement differently from men and boys. The gender-differentiated effects of climate change manifest in various areas, including health, food security, livelihoods, and human mobility.⁴⁶ Intersectional discrimination further exposes women and girls to increased vulnerability to climate change. Roles they may traditionally assume, such as gathering food and water, are directly affected by slow-onset climate processes.⁴⁷ Women might have limited access to land, property ownership, and livelihoods, which increases their dependence on other family members and exacerbates their vulnerability to slow-onset events, constituting barriers to achieving durable solutions.⁴⁸

While men and boys are more likely to migrate in the early stages of a crisis, women and girls often stay behind, living in increasingly hazardous environments. As in other situations of internal displacement, women and girls displaced due to climate change impacts often have fewer livelihood opportunities and limited access to health care. Further, they are exposed to a higher risk of sexual and gender-based violence, forced labor, exploitation, abuse, and human trafficking.⁴⁹ In some societies, women and girls unaccompanied by a male family member may face discrimination and barriers to accessing basic services and obtaining civil documentation.⁵⁰ They may be subjected to child or forced marriage, and girls may drop out of school. For a rights-based, gender-responsive approach to climate action, it is crucial that policymakers facilitate meaningful, informed, and active participation by a diverse group of women and girls in decision-making processes.⁵¹

Older Adults and People With Disabilities

Older adults and people with disabilities may face difficulties fleeing from areas affected by sudden-onset climate events.⁵² When families flee disaster zones, they may leave behind vulnerable family members who would have difficulty traveling. These vulnerable individuals are then exposed to ongoing hazards.⁵³

These groups have specific protection needs, especially with regard to accessing health care. They often encounter multiple forms of discrimination and obstacles in accessing basic services and essential information and participating in decision-making processes. People who are older or have disabilities experience heightened risks of neglect, violence, exploitation, and abuse.⁵⁴ They may even lose access to natural resources they used to control and means of production, affecting their livelihoods and their status within their households and communities.⁵⁵

Durable Solutions to Climate-Induced Displacement

In the case of internal displacement, three solutions are typically recognized: returning to the place of origin, local integration, or resettlement in another part of the country.⁵⁶ However, climate-induced displacement requires more complex and flexible approaches. A combination of solutions, including seasonal or temporary movements to the community of origin, may be necessary.⁵⁷ Different family members may utilize different solutions, with some permanently or seasonally returning while others work elsewhere or do not return.

With this in mind, durable solutions for climate-displaced individuals should be integrated into national development plans and backed by financial and technical support from local governments and the international community. Flexibility is crucial, considering that some slow-onset disasters may prevent a safe return. As such, it is essential to

explore preventative, diverse solutions and integrate them into national planning processes. In extreme cases where living conditions become untenable, as is the case for many low-lying island states, durable solutions may involve regional and international cooperation, leading to new options like cross-border migration.⁵⁸

Policy Recommendations

Despite emerging recommendations on how to manage climate-induced displacement, there are few comprehensive international frameworks or national policies that address the issue.⁵⁹ Bridging the policy gap requires establishing comprehensive, continental policies, coordinated frameworks, and strategic action plans. However, adopting new laws and policies is only the first step. Success will also require the political will to implement those frameworks effectively.

To that end, this brief proposes the following recommendations for protecting human rights in the context of climate-induced displacement:

- Adopt a regional framework tailored to the needs of the MENA region and drawn from existing international agreements, such as the UNFCCC, the Guiding Principles, and the Kampala Convention. The development of a regional framework will strengthen the quality of institutional engagement, build internal capacities, and promote more systematic, cross-regional action.
- Adopt a rights-based and gender-sensitive approach to ensure that responses to climate-induced displacement are sustainable and include measures for the specific protection of vulnerable displaced groups, such as children and women separated by disasters.⁶⁰
- Apply a climate justice perspective to focus on fairness and equity in resolving the obstacles faced by IDPs.
- Clearly address the roles and responsibilities involved in an effective and coordinated response to displacement. This includes designating specific officials and ensuring they have adequate legal and administrative authority and institutional capacity.
- Review national and local disaster risk reduction laws, policies, strategies, and plans to ensure the various instruments and approaches align with national, regional, or international legal frameworks that address climate-induced displacement.
- Focus on adaptation measures that increase resilience in place and reduce displacement risk — unless the community identifies migration as an opportunity.
- Law and policymaking processes should be participatory and inclusive of all relevant stakeholders across sectors. This in turn can promote buy-in, long-term engagement, and effective coordination in implementation.
- Consolidate databases to bridge existing data deficiencies and provide gender-disaggregated data, which is essential for informed policy implementation.

Notes

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POLICY BRIEF

Addressing Gender Inequality and Climate-Induced Displacement in Kerkennah, Tunisia

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Photo by Pierre Gassin

Introduction

In recent years, the escalating global crisis of climate-induced displacement has left an indelible mark, affecting regions worldwide. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region bears a significant part of the burden. Climate change, which manifests in rising sea levels, soil degradation, and extreme weather events, has rapidly become an urgent and pervasive challenge. As of 2022, weather-related events have triggered an annual average of 32.6 million new displacements, surpassing those caused by conflict and violence.¹

Notably, the MENA region stands out as one of the areas most vulnerable to climate change globally, with 60% of its population exposed to severe water stress.² In Tunisia, climate-related factors contribute significantly to internal migration patterns. Over the past decade, regions like Greater Tunis have witnessed an increase in migration. Approximately 46,000 citizens have sought better economic opportunities, primarily driven by climate-induced events such as droughts and rising sea levels. These environmental displacements not only impact individual lives but have broader geopolitical implications, shaping the movement of people due to climate change in the region.

The islands of Kerkennah in Tunisia emerge as a microcosm of these challenges. Approximately 9 kilometers from the Tunisian coast, northeast of the governorate of Sfax, are the islands of Kerkennah, which form an archipelago in the Mediterranean Sea with a perimeter of 160 kilometers. The archipelago is made up of two main islands: Gharbi and Chergui, or Grande Kerkennah, in addition to 12 islets.³ Currently, the archipelago faces a perilous future, with a projected rise in sea levels that will threaten the lives of thousands of residents by 2050. In addition, Kerkennah grapples with environmental degradation, which has resulted in a decline in agricultural productivity and fishing yields.⁴

Caught between the dual threats of climate change and Tunisia's worsening economic conditions, the islands' vulnerability is starkly evident. As of now, their inhabitants and government representatives have yet to mount a substantial response in the face of these impacts. The economic repercussions are sizeable, with a notable rise in unemployment rates and an overall decrease in the archipelago's gross domestic product (GDP).

Methodology and Approach

This brief employs a mixed-method approach to explore the intersection of climate-induced displacement, gender inequality, and women's empowerment in Kerkennah, Tunisia. The research methodology combines qualitative interviews with a gendered and intersectional analysis to provide an initial understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

We conducted in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including 40 local community members, 20 women living in Kerkennah who are affected by climate change, 15 national policymakers, 10 representatives from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and five experts in the fields of climate change, water management, and gender. This purposeful sampling approach ensured diverse representation across age groups, socioeconomic statuses, and geographical locations within Kerkennah. We employed thematic coding during qualitative data analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns within the narratives, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted realities shaping the impact of climate change on the island. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of the challenges faced by Kerkennah's residents, paving the way for evidence-based interventions tailored to address their specific needs and vulnerabilities.

Additionally, we applied a feminist-informed gender analysis framework to this study to examine how climate-induced displacement impacts women and men differently. This involved exploring gender-based distinctions between roles, responsibilities, vulnerabilities, power dynamics, decision-making processes, and access to resources.

Finally, an intersectional analysis was employed to understand how various intersecting factors, including age, socioeconomic status, and educational level, contribute to differential experiences of climate-induced displacement and empowerment among women in Kerkennah. This approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of the multiple dimensions of vulnerability and resilience within the population.

Climate-Related Impacts, Migration Decisions, and Gender in Kerkennah

In North Africa, an estimated 19 million people will be displaced due to climate-related reasons by 2050.⁵ Tunisia's vulnerability to coastal erosion and the impacts of disasters will unfortunately put its people and infrastructure at risk.⁶ These challenges loom large over Kerkennah, where climate change may exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and threaten the livelihoods of residents.

According to Mehdi Ben Haj, vice president of the Blue Season Association, "Several parts of the Kerkennah archipelago will disappear within a few years; the rise in sea level represents a real danger for the islands and the local population."⁷ Nour Mansour, a member of TunSea association, explained the threat that flooding poses to coastal Tunisian areas: "Sea level rise can cause increased coastal erosion, leading to shoreline retreat and increasing the risk of coastal flooding and salt intrusion. This will lead to habitat loss and disruption of ecological balances in these sensitive areas, which will cause a displacement of inhabitants."

As a whole, Tunisia also faces other climate-related threats. Ichrak Klai, an activist and environmental lawyer, explained that extreme heat is also a problem. "The implications of climate change for our country are particularly concerning. In this month of January, the number of hot days clearly exceeds that of cold days with a general increase in the area affected by drought in Tunisia, in all its forms." For Kerkennah specifically, the most worrying threat is the accentuation of climate variability, which would result in a greater frequency of extreme climate phenomena such as floods.

In the face of these environmental challenges, the prospect of climate-induced displacement looms large. Rising sea levels and environmental degradation raise concerns about the long-term viability of remaining in ancestral lands. Climate change-induced shifts further compound challenges, particularly in the agricultural sector. Unpredictable weather patterns and changing growing conditions disrupt traditional farming practices, undermining agricultural productivity and economic stability. This disruption not only jeopardizes local livelihoods but also exacerbates food insecurity, deepening vulnerabilities within the community.

This dilemma prompts discussions within communities about the necessity of seeking safer environments, reflecting the profound impact of climate change on the very fabric of livelihoods and community cohesion. In contemplating migration, one interviewee reflected, "The thought of leaving our ancestral lands is heartbreaking, but the changing climate makes staying here increasingly untenable. Our discussions at home often revolve around the idea of seeking a safer place for our families." The use of the term "heartbreaking" to convey the emotional turmoil of considering leaving ancestral lands due to climate-induced displacement underscores the deep emotional attachment to the land, while the acknowledgment of the "changing climate" emphasizes the pragmatic need to prioritize safety.

Family discussions reflect a collective recognition of the urgency to ensure loved ones' well-being. On the one hand, these discussions revolve around emotional attachment to land and ancestral homes, but on the other, families must consider pragmatic concerns and familial responsibilities. This emotional dimension is crucial in understanding the reluctance and internal conflict experienced by individuals and communities grappling with the prospect of relocation.

Particularly concerning is the disproportionate impact on women in the islands of Kerkennah, who find themselves contending with intensified responsibilities and diminished resources.⁸ As women typically oversee household tasks such as food preparation and water collection, these duties become increasingly arduous amid shifting environmental conditions. Compounded by the lack of access to water and sanitation facilities, women and girls face heightened health risks, negatively impacting their well-being.

The increasing salinity of water sources presents a pressing concern, as it directly affects agriculture and household consumption. This phenomenon not only reduces crop yields but also undermines food security, a critical aspect of overall well-being. Local women, who bear the brunt of household responsibilities, articulated the profound impact of these changes on their daily lives. They described struggling to secure enough food for their families amid dwindling resources.

In our interviews with Kerkennah's local community members, women shared poignant perspectives on the deep impact of climate change on their daily lives. One respondent expressed, "The increasing salinity of our water sources has made it difficult to sustain our crops and nourish our families. It's a constant struggle to secure enough food for everyone." When discussing household responsibilities, another woman lamented, "Fetching water, once a routine task, has become arduous due to environmental changes. We spend hours seeking clean water sources, affecting our overall well-being."

Moreover, the scarcity of clean water presents a formidable obstacle, especially for women tasked with household water collection. Environmental changes make accessing clean water increasingly difficult, necessitating trying journeys to find suitable sources. This burden falls disproportionately on women, constraining their time and energy while exposing them to health risks associated with inadequate sanitation and waterborne diseases. As Azza Saleh, a waste management consultant, explained, "The economy of the island of Kerkennah is based on maritime activities, in which women of Kerkennah play a vital role through coastal fishing, setting, and hauling fishing nets and other activities. Meanwhile, the effect of rising seawater combined with rising sea temperature is threatening the balance of the marine ecosystem and the social life of women. That's why climate change must be tackled to preserve our human existence and our assets."

The phenomenon of climate-induced displacement has only served to magnify existing gender disparities on the island. With limited decision-making power and resources at their disposal, women bear a disproportionate burden and struggle to adapt to their changing surroundings.⁹ Traditional gender roles entrenched within these communities exacerbate the challenges faced by displaced women and compound the strain on their livelihoods and overall well-being. Thus, the interplay between environmental degradation, gender inequalities, and displacement underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address the multifaceted challenges confronting Kerkennah's population.

Unfortunately, Kerkennah has become highly vulnerable and caught between the threat of climate change and the worsening economic situation in Tunisia. Meanwhile, the state remains silent and incapable in the face of the impacts. Through our synthesis of diverse perspectives on the matter, this study seeks to inform policy formulation, advocacy efforts, and community-driven initiatives aimed at building resilience and fostering sustainable development in Kerkennah and beyond.

Policy Recommendations

The qualitative interviews with women in Kerkennah unveiled a broad spectrum of challenges encompassing economic, social, and psychological dimensions.

To address these challenges, we propose the following recommendations to the Tunisian government as well as all stakeholders working on climate and environmental issues:

1. Develop culturally relevant definitions of empowerment.

- This recommendation stems directly from the interviews we conducted with women, as they emphasized the need for a holistic understanding of empowerment that goes beyond economic factors. Specifically, relevant actors should:
- Establish a collaborative working group involving local women, community leaders, and relevant experts to co-create culturally specific definitions of women's empowerment.
- Develop an index incorporating economic, social, and psychological indicators that accurately measure and monitor women's empowerment in Kerkennah.
- Implement training programs for government officials and service providers on culturally relevant definitions to ensure effective and informed policy implementation.

2. Strengthen social capital.

- Allocate funding for community-led projects that focus on building social capital among women in Kerkennah, such as communal farming initiatives or women-led cooperatives.
- Foster a network of support and knowledge exchange by establishing mentorship programs that connect experienced women to those who face challenges.
- Conduct awareness campaigns that promote community ties and encourage community participation in local development projects.

3. Enhance Tunisian public policies.

- Actively involve women with relevant lived experiences in the design and implementation of policies related to climate-induced displacement.
- Establish diversity and inclusion training programs for government officials to ensure awareness of and sensitivity to the diverse social experiences within the community.
- Collaborate with international organizations to share best practices on decolonizing approaches and implement pilot programs to test their effectiveness in the local context.

Conclusion

By acknowledging the specific needs of women and engaging them as experts in policy design and implementation, we can promote a more inclusive and effective response to climate change that empowers women, ensures their rights, and fosters sustainable adaptation strategies in the face of climate-induced displacement.

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POLICY BRIEF

Unable or Unwilling to Move? How Climate Change Impacts the Decision to Migrate Among Turkish Farmers

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Introduction

Climate change effects, including drought, sea level rise, floods, storms, and land salinization, drastically impact agrarian populations who are highly dependent on the environment for their livelihoods. As a result, these populations might choose to migrate to adapt to the effects of climate change. This brief examines the mobility intentions of farmers facing the impacts of climate change in three regions of Turkey and presents three recommendations for Turkey's approach to climate change adaptation.

Background

Situated in the semiarid Mediterranean, Turkey is increasingly exposed to varying impacts of climate change.¹ More and more, agriculture in the country has been impacted by sudden-onset events — including storms, hail, flooding, heat waves, and gradual effects, such as rising temperatures, declining levels of underground and surface waters, and soil salinization. Other challenges, such as increasing input costs, market fluctuations, aging rural populations, and lack of agricultural reform, are further exacerbating the impacts of climate change on agriculture. For instance, Turkey's agricultural sector was severely hit by drought in 2007, leading to a 7.3% agricultural degrowth. The worst effects were seen in the Central Anatolia, Aegean, and Marmara regions.²

Additionally, there has been a noticeable upward trend in the number of extreme weather events in Turkey, particularly over the past two decades. The year 2022 saw a record 1,030 such events, with flooding, storms, and hail happening most frequently.³ The future looks even graver; Turkey is expected to experience extremely high water stress by 2040.⁴

This brief argues that farmers experiencing the impacts of climate change have different intentions, which are likely to lead to different forms of mobility or immobility. Some farmers might be voluntarily mobile, while others are involuntarily mobile. Similarly, some populations might be voluntarily immobile and resist moving, despite the exacerbating effects of climate change. By contrast, others might be willing to relocate but lack the necessary means to move. Undoubtedly, mobility and immobility intentions largely depend on economic, political, and social factors — both related and unrelated to climate change — to the extent that they rely on aspirations and choices made by individuals and communities.

Decision-Making Around Climate Change-Induced Migration Is Context-Specific

Whether climate change leads to human migration was once a prevalent question. Now, it is well evidenced that climate change can lead to human mobility. The following nuanced question is more relevant now: To what extent, in which direction, and for which populations does climate change lead to migration?⁵ This brief also aims to address this very question.

Although climate change-related decision-making on migration is highly context-specific and complex, we can highlight three important tendencies.

First, people's migration decisions are dependent on the climate change events they experience. For instance, the impacts of rapid-onset events (flooding and storms) and gradual events (sea-level rise) tend to lead to different patterns of movement — for example, from rural to urban areas, or within or beyond a country's borders.⁶

Second, whether climate change leads to migration primarily depends on the abilities of individuals or households and their socioeconomic circumstances. In specific contexts, climate change can also trap people, particularly disadvantaged households, in their original locations.⁷

Third, how people understand moving and staying is subjective and constitutes a critical dimension of climate-induced migration. A subjective understanding of moving, hopes and fears surrounding a new place, and attachment to culture and land all impact people's decisions to migrate.⁸ Sometimes, such factors outweigh the role of climate change in the decision to move or stay.

Figure 1 — Research Zones in Turkey



Source: Nations Online Project.

Note: A map of Turkey where Regions A, B, and C are highlighted in red circles.¹⁰

Addressing the impacts of climate change on the mobility intentions of farmers requires a comprehensive approach. Farmers, particularly those in low-income or middle-income countries such as Turkey, often have limited resources and access to support systems. They may need more financial means, technology, and infrastructure than others to adapt to the impacts of climate change, making them more vulnerable to its effects. The impacts of climate change can lead to rural-to-urban or other migration patterns as farmers seek alternative livelihoods.

The Study: What We Found

This brief employs data that was gathered as part of a broader field study on the sociology of climate change adaptation in selected agrarian zones of Turkey. The study was conducted from 2021–23 by Hacer Gören.⁹ It used a mixed-method approach that included responses from survey interviews with 111 farmers, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 53 farmers, and focus groups from the research zones indicated in Figure 1. Questions directed to farmers regarding their migration intentions included internal migration aims, such as rural-to-rural, rural-to-urban, intra-regional, and interregional movements.

Table 1 — Findings on Mobility Intentions of Farmers.

Mobility Tendencies	Percentage
Willing to move	6%
No intention of moving	71%
Willing to move but cannot afford it	23%

Source: Authors.

As seen in Figure 1, the leftmost research zone, Afyon-Şuhut (Region A), is located within the inner Aegean region, where farming is focused on cereals and cash crops such as potato and opium poppy. The middle zone, Mersin Erdemli (Region B), is a coastal town in the Mediterranean region. Here, farmers predominantly cultivate fresh fruits and vegetables, mainly lemon and other citrus fruits. Lastly, the rightmost zone, Şanlıurfa Eyyübiye (Region C) is situated in the southeastern Anatolia region, known for its cultivation of cash crops like cotton, corn, red lentils, and cereals. Each of these three research sites faces different impacts of climate change and relies primarily on agricultural activities.

“The scale of these mobilities will largely depend on the severity of climate change and wider-scale plans to mitigate and adapt to climate change.”

Most Farmers Do Not Intend to Move

As seen in Table 1, nearly 3 out of 4 farmers (71%) had no intention to quit farming and migrate, despite facing challenges both related and unrelated to climate change. The rate of farmers willing to migrate was low (6%). Each farmer interviewed had encountered multiple climate change impacts. These included water stress, drought, storms, and floods, as well as related outcomes such as a significant rise in pests and the reduction of groundwater levels. Irrespective of regional differences, all farmers also expressed significant concerns about escalating input prices and the unpredictable state of the market.

Such factors, however, did not lead the majority of those surveyed to consider quitting farming and migrating elsewhere. One underlying reason may be that the effects of climate change have not been severe for as long in these parts of Turkey as they have in parts of South Asia or Africa.

The most likely reason behind farmers' unwillingness to migrate is a connection to land, belongings, and culture, as well as familial ties. This is evident in the statements of one farmer below:

“I have never encountered such extensive flooding throughout my four decades in farming! 50% of the planted potatoes have been lost due to decay. After the severe inundation, the remaining 50% has also succumbed to fungal issues.”

“Have you ever thought about leaving farming and migrating?”

“Where should I head? How could I depart from my land, hometown, and all I hold dear?”

—A dialogue with a farmer from Region A, May 2023



Many Farmers Are Willing, But Unable, to Relocate

The findings above only provide a partial glimpse into the decision-making of the individuals surveyed regarding climate change mobility, which not only depends on the willingness or desire to move, but also the ability to do so. The capabilities and socioeconomic conditions of individuals and households further shed light on decision-making at the intersection of challenges related and unrelated to climate change. It is thus crucial to note that while climate change can contribute to migration, the decision to migrate or not is often intertwined with other social, economic, and political factors.¹¹

On the question of whether they would relocate to a different town or urban center, 23% of farmers (Table 1) indicated a desire to migrate. However, many of them were unable to do so, as shown in the following statement:

“Of course, I would want to move and live in the urban center. Life here is getting more and more challenging. Electricity prices and prices of materials necessary for greenhouse cultivation are climbing, and we more often experience storms and losses in yields. But how to move? It requires lots of money and planning to move to another place! Plus, I have almost no acquaintance living in the city, either.”

—A farmer from Region B, September 2022

This statement highlights the challenges faced by individuals who are willing but unable to relocate.¹² If these farmers managed to arrange the necessary means for migration, they would need to leave behind their farming lands, properties, and places of attachment in the hopes of seeking a more favorable location.



Which farmers are open to migration? There are various contributing factors, but why some farmers aspire to move and others do not can mainly be attributed to a history of previous migration or a preexisting network in a new place — for example, families, friends, and neighbors who have migrated previously. Land ownership is another critical explanatory factor in one's willingness to migrate. For instance, compared to farmers who own land, tenant farmers who do not own any land tend to be more willing to move but less able to do so.

As the impacts of climate change become more severe and economic conditions worsen in Turkey, internal migration will likely increase among people living in rural areas. We can expect growth in two specific groups: 1) people internally displaced due to climate change, and 2) people willing to move but unable to do so (the involuntarily immobile). Such dynamics are likely to manifest in the inner parts of Turkey, the drying Lakes Region, coastal areas, and southeastern and eastern regions that are more prone to climate change impacts.

Considering the possibility of climate mobility from these regions and the country's existing internal migration patterns, climate mobility will likely create a complex structure encompassing the whole country in the long run. The scale of these mobilities will largely depend on the severity of climate change and wider-scale plans to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Discussion

Climate change is a pressing issue in Turkey, as it is across much of the Middle East and North Africa. The country is already facing rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and more frequent and more intense extreme weather events such as storms, heat waves, and floods. For farmers in Turkey, deciding whether to migrate in the face of the increasing realities of climate change is a complex process. It occupies the intersection of climate change, social, economic, and political factors, and subjective understandings of moving and staying.

There is no doubt that climate change is affecting mobility patterns in Turkey's agrarian zones. However, migration research and policies focused on climate change adaptation should recognize that many impacted individuals may not want to relocate. It is essential to consider their aspirations and capabilities: Some may desire to move but remain in their original location because of financial constraints, small networks, or limited access to information and support mechanisms. Conversely, some at-risk individuals may choose to stay voluntarily in place for multiple reasons of attachment. Comprehending this subjective decision-making process presents empirical challenges.

Both groups have been largely overlooked in discussions of climate mobility. Researchers and policymakers will need to recognize and address both groups in any comprehensive approach to climate migration.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Encourage and strengthen effective on-site adaptation measures.** The severity and frequency of climate change is rising in Turkey, and most farmers are unwilling to move. Adaptation measures should include increased and more inclusive access to climate knowledge, institutional and state support, agricultural insurance, and other planned measures such as agricultural reform.
2. **Proactively plan for migration.** A significant 23% of farmers are willing to relocate but lack the resources to do so. In addition to providing on-site adaptation measures, state and local authorities should jointly consider migration planning and promote the diversification of sustainable income resources for both farmers who are willing and unwilling to move.
3. **Ensure that migration policies are context-specific, participatory, and inclusive.** To develop proactive policies for migration as part of an effective adaptation strategy, policymakers should consider the migration intentions of farmers in the regions of Turkey most exposed to severe climate change impacts. To this end, central and local governments should ensure that policies — for both on-site adaptation and migration as an adaptation strategy — protect the rights and well-being of farmers by considering their different needs, capabilities, and aspirations.

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POLICY BRIEF

Sea-Level Rise in the Nile Delta: Promoting Adaptation Through Circular Migration

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Photo by NurPhoto / NurPhoto via Getty Images

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has identified the Nile Delta as one of the parts of the world most vulnerable to climate change impacts, including sea-level rise and rising temperatures.¹ The climate crisis is compounding an already difficult situation in the delta: Egypt is experiencing sustained demographic growth, gaining 1 million residents every seven months.² The home of half the Egyptian population, the Nile Delta is one of the most populated deltas on the planet, with almost 50 million inhabitants.

Moreover, Egypt's already fragile economy is strongly impacted by inflation since 2016, and especially for the past year. The living and working conditions of local communities — particularly farmers and fishermen in coastal governorates, including Alexandria, Beheira, Kafr el-Sheikh, Daqahliyya, Damietta, and Port-Said — are deteriorating. As climate change impacts intensify, local populations whose livelihoods depend on natural resources are forced to adapt in different ways.³

Although the effects of climate change are not yet strong enough to produce large-scale migrations, studies suggest that 6 million people could be displaced — both internally and across borders — by the end of the century as a result of sea-level rise.⁴ Migration has been a strategy to cope with crises for a long time in the Nile Delta, and it should be integrated into adaptation plans for the region in the face of climate change.

This brief will delve into the environmental vulnerability of the Nile Delta and how climate change is impacting local communities. It aims at improving circular migration as an adaptation strategy at the local scale.

Methods

The findings and argument of this brief are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Egyptian Arabic with farmers, fishermen, and city dwellers in several areas of the Nile Delta between February 2021 and June 2023. High-risk areas were visited several times. Interviews were conducted with different stakeholders, including experts from the United Nations (UN) and foreign development agencies, members of civil society organizations (CSOs), and researchers in Cairo and Alexandria to understand state-led policies regarding adaptation to climate change.

The Nile Delta Under Environmental Threat

The Nile Delta coastline is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change due to rising water. Models show that 25% of the delta could disappear by 2100.⁵ Yet “littoralization” — that is, the concentration of economic activities, investments, and populations in coastal regions — is still very prevalent in Egypt, as it is throughout the rest of the world.

For example, Alexandria has almost 7 million inhabitants, making it the biggest city in the Mediterranean region. Thirty-seven percent of the city's buildings are located less than 1 kilometer from the sea.⁶ Many of them have already deteriorated, particularly on the seafront, and collapses happen regularly. A sea-level rise of just 50 centimeters could displace 2 million people and result in the loss of 214,000 jobs.⁷

The rest of the coast is not spared: In some rural areas, human density reaches 1,500 inhabitants per square kilometer. The retreat of the coastline, which began with the construction of the Aswan Dam in the 1960s and 1970s, is expected to worsen in the coming years, and rising temperatures caused by climate change are expected to affect local ecosystems and lead to a loss of biodiversity.

The Egyptian government has already taken action to protect human settlements. Through the Egyptian General Authority for Shores Protection, the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation is building defense coastal infrastructure along many cities and towns, including Alexandria, Abu Qir, Baltim, and Ras el Bar.⁸ However, given the strong carbon impact of cement production, this is not a perfect solution. The protection of one zone also tends to accelerate the erosion of nearby areas.

Even so, where these structures are located, they have undeniably delayed the effects of wave erosion and prevented displacement. International organizations IOs have implemented similar projects. For instance, since 2018, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has led the Enhancing Climate Change Adaptation in North Coast and Nile Delta in Egypt project. Funded by the Green Climate Fund, this project aims to prevent further coastal erosion through nature-based solutions, including the restoration of natural sand dunes.

Working and Living Conditions Among Local Populations Are Deteriorating

In rural areas, communities of farmers and fishermen are particularly exposed to the impacts of climate change, both direct and indirect. Climate change is intensifying social, economic, and environmental living conditions already in decline.

For the past five years, farmers in the Nile Delta have observed changes including temperature variations, seasonal shifts, and the spread of pests. Seawater intrusions kill palm trees in the Rosetta area and fruit trees in other coastal areas. In Damietta, a guava cultivator explained that he will be forced to abandon his farm if conditions worsen. Local adaptation strategies, such as scattering sand on the fields, are not enough anymore.

Land is becoming less and less fertile. Some interviewees said that certain crops are particularly threatened, such as mangoes, olives, and tomatoes, as well as alfalfa, pushing farmers to buy dry livestock forage. To cope with the negative effects on agricultural production, farmers must use more fertilizers and pesticides. This increases their production costs and further pollutes the land.

Meanwhile, fishermen report that as sea storms intensify and become more frequent, their work is becoming more dangerous. In addition to the dangers posed by sea storms, fishermen suffer from the loss of biodiversity caused by pollution on the Nile, the lakes, and the marine areas. One of the fishermen interviewed noted: “Of course the lake is different now. Many things have changed. Water quality has changed because of pollution and wastewater discharges, and this has an impact on fish.” All fishermen interviewed described a drop in production and income, which they linked to environmental degradation.

Public authorities, development agencies, and UN agencies have moved to compensate for losses and promote the resilience of local communities. For example, the government-led Haya Karima (A Decent Life) development program, launched in 2018, aims to improve infrastructure and services, as well as promote local entrepreneurship for 4,500 rural villages throughout the country. European development agencies are also active in the area. The German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) leads capacity-building projects in Edku and Abu Qir aimed at improving living conditions and creating local jobs. Despite these efforts, government stakeholders recognize that climate action at the local levels lack coordination, and since CSOs tend to focus on urban settings, they rarely reach these remote areas.

For the Nile Delta, Migration Is Not a New Strategy

Following reductions in income related to climate change impacts, migrations from the Nile Delta have already begun. However, it is important to recognize that migration as an adaptation strategy is not new and did not begin with climate change. Historically, migration has been a way of coping with environmental degradation.⁹ For decades, populations in the Nile Delta have relied on multiple economic activities as well as mobility to diversify and increase their income.¹⁰

“Circular migration,” or the temporary and repetitive migration between home and host areas, is the most common migration pattern in Egypt. Although statistics are not available on internal migration in Egypt, and circular migration is not included in the census, empirical observations and academic studies show that circular migration is a widespread model, particularly since Cairo is a megacity that draws most of the migration in the country.¹¹ In Egypt, men commonly live in cities and work in sales, catering, or construction to provide for their families in the countryside. Most of the men interviewed who worked in Cairo visited their wives and children every three months. This model of migration is repeated internationally, with people moving back and forth between Egypt and host countries.¹²



Indeed, international migration and remittances (money that migrants send home) are also a strategy for coping with deteriorating living conditions. The international migration of Egyptians is not new. Since the 1970s, Egyptian men, and sometimes their families, have migrated to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, as well as to Europe. Today, nearly 10% of Egyptians — that is, 10 million people — live abroad. In the face of intensifying climate change impacts and increasingly difficult living and working conditions, we can expect migration between Egypt and the Gulf countries to rise in the coming years.

Further, the fieldwork for this brief found that some fishermen are already making full use of circular migration at various levels to offset the effects of environmental degradation. This is the case of one man interviewed and his colleagues, some of them relatives, who now work as fishermen in Kuwait.¹³ They send money back to their families in the village and come back to Egypt every seven months.

If this migration dynamic becomes even more widespread in the years to come, relevant stakeholders — that is local governments, IOs, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) — will need to prepare to ensure that it is an effective adaptation strategy. To that end, a change of narrative is needed: Migration can be seen as a strategy for adapting to climate change impacts, rather than a public issue to be dealt with.

Migration Can Be Successful Adaptation – Or Maladaptation

At present, migratory strategies are not being fully leveraged to enable the sustainability of local communities and territories. This stems from a lack of awareness around the long-term effects of climate change. Although people on the ground notice and experience the transformation of their environment, they often do not relate them to global climate change, instead considering them temporary or seasonal. Many fishermen and farmers use the same expression: “There’s something about the weather.” This lack of awareness is reflected in households’ investment strategies. Unaware that some of their lands and economic activities are no longer sustainable, they continue to invest in them. Remittances are often used to build houses along the coastline. The landscape of the Nile Delta is marked by brick houses under construction, some of which are just a few dozen meters from the shore. Though efficient in the short term, migration and remittances could lead to maladaptation, increasing vulnerability in the long term.¹⁴

A similar dynamic can be found in the agriculture sector. Remittances are used to buy fertilizers — which only prove effective in the short term. These resources could be redirected toward new agricultural techniques or crops that need less water, or are more resistant to salt or high temperatures.

Indeed, migration and remittances could enable long-term resilience. However, amid challenges such as inflation (the annual urban inflation rate reached 38% in September 2023) and other economic issues facing Egypt, it is unlikely that local communities will invest money from migration in sustainable strategies without the support of local and international government stakeholders.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure the resilience of coastal areas in the Nile Delta and maximize the benefits of migration as adaptation, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. **Continue to build infrastructure** to protect the coastline and shield existing human settlements. Although not perfect, as mentioned above, they ensure safety in the short and middle terms.
2. **Streamline coordination** between various stakeholders, especially at the local level. Coordination is particularly necessary when it comes to water-related issues, which fall within the domains of various governmental and nongovernmental institutions. Avoid overlap between the different levels of government and connect the various development agencies with government and UN players.
3. **Raise awareness in local communities** by providing information about ongoing, irreversible impacts of climate change and the short- and long-term consequences for their livelihoods. Promote dialogue between experts, civil society, beneficiaries, and academia. Civil society actors can act as intermediaries on the ground, as well as through workshops organized in universities.

These actions can be reinforced with government campaigns implemented at the governorate level, but also more locally at the “markaz” level. School curricula are also an essential tool for informing people about the effects of climate change. Educating children about the changing environment can have a spillover effect on their parents’ behavior.¹⁵

4. **Support the role of CSOs.** Expand their scope of action beyond urban settings to reach the most vulnerable communities. Raise awareness about climate change and promote good practices for adaptation and the reinvestment of remittances. The first step would be to identify contacts in the countryside. Joint action between NGOs in Cairo, which often have more resources, and local NGOs in other areas could be useful.
5. **Train key individuals both in and out of target communities** to raise awareness regarding the effects of climate change and promote new ways of using remittances for long-term resilience. Select both men and women who are well integrated into their communities and active in the agricultural sector to take part in expert training workshops. They can then act as intermediaries with their communities.

In 2017, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations implemented a Training of Trainers (ToT) program in palm groves in the Egyptian oases. This could be extended to other agricultural activities in the Nile Delta. In this way, fishermen, farmers’ unions, and agricultural cooperatives could be more systematically mobilized.

6. **Promote sustainability programs** such as the Sustainable Agriculture Investments and Livelihoods (SAIL) project, led by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Ministry of Agriculture. SAIL helps small farmers adapt to a changing environment, and promotes micro-investment in smart agriculture.

Moreover, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) could play a pivotal role. Since 2015, a division of IOM has been dedicated to climate-induced migration. This office could work to build the capacity of relevant stakeholders to improve adaptability to climate change. IOM’s national and regional offices are well established in Cairo, and their programs could help achieve their Migration, Environment and Climate Change (MECC) priorities in the Middle East and North Africa region. In addition to promoting circular migration, policymakers should work to strengthen people’s ability to stay on their original lands.

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