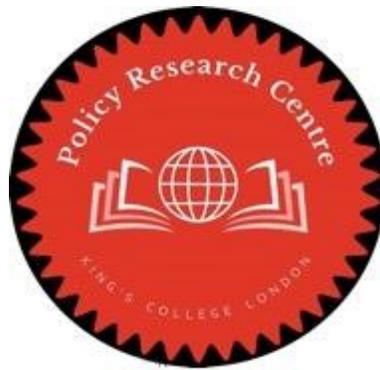


Climate-Induced Displacement and the Evolving Definition of “Refugee” a study on Haiti and Kiribati

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What is a climate refugee?

Climate change intensifies weather phenomena that risk livelihoods and forces migration, internally and externally. Since 2008, over 376 million people have been displaced by floods, storms, droughts, and many other climate-related disasters (EPRS, 2023, p2). Yet, the people affected by these extreme weather events are not recognised internationally as refugees. As per the 1951 Geneva 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.’ Written in a post-WWII context, it does not acknowledge climate change as a driver of displacement. Thus refugees seeking asylum due to climate-change related reasons, are unable to get adequate legal protection.

The term ‘climate refugee’ is a controversial one, many institutions use the term ‘forced climate migrant’ (Berchin et al., 2017, p148) This is because the ‘migrant’ suggests a voluntary move while ‘refugee’ implies the forced nature of the move. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a refugee has a valid claim over refugee status when climate change and armed conflicts interact (Climate Change and Disaster Displacement, n.d.). The article quotes ‘Regardless, the term “climate refugee” is not endorsed by UNHCR, and it is more accurate to refer to “persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change.”’

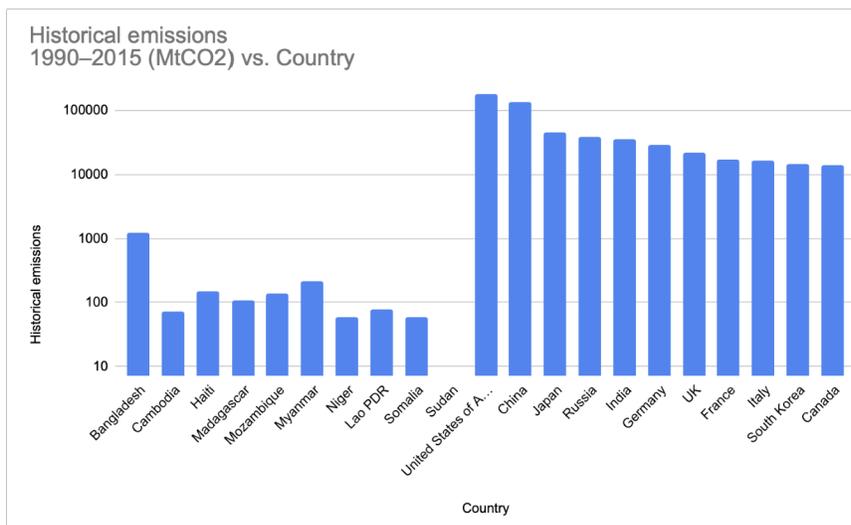
The refusal to use the word ‘refugee’ highlights how international law understands the issue of environmental displacement. Climate change does not act alone, it intensifies pressures like food insecurity or weak governance which makes it difficult to recognise climate change as the sole cause (EPRS, 2023, p5). Because of this, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) argues that creating a separate “climate refugee” category may oversimplify a complex situation and leave many unprotected (Let’s Talk About Climate Migrants, Not Climate Refugees, 2019).

To formalise the term “climate refugee” the 1951 Geneva Convention would have to be reopened or expanded, which is something that the UNHCR and the IOM warn would do more harm than good. (Let’s Talk About Climate Migrants, Not Climate Refugees, 2019). They say that opening up the Refugee

Convention might weaken refugee status as a whole at a time where millions of people still need protection from persecution and conflict. Due to this, organisations fear that expanding the Convention would reduce the willingness of states to uphold the protections they already have.

While these concerns are valid, avoiding legal reform altogether risks entrenching a significant protection gap. Existing refugee law prioritises persecution-based harm, leaving people displaced by slow-onset climate impacts or repeated disasters without protection. This suggests that the challenge is not whether protection is possible, but whether states are willing to recognise climate-related harm as a legitimate basis for mobility rights. Regional agreements, humanitarian visas, and complementary protection regimes demonstrate that legal adaptation can occur without undermining the core protections of the 1951 Convention.

On the other hand, avoiding the term ‘climate refugees’ has consequences. Research, as seen on the chart below, shows that countries most affected by climate driven displacement, such as Haiti, Kiribati, Sudan, and Madagascar have contributed very little to global emissions, while major economies like the United States, China, and Japan have been the largest contributors (Arce et al., 2024, p4). Using neutral terms like ‘forced climate migrant’ and ‘climate-displaced people’ downplays the responsibility of high-income states whose consumption has fuelled and intensified climate change.



Data from (Arce et al., 2024)

Thus, scholars argue that acknowledging ‘climate refugees’ is necessary to highlight the unjust reality that those in low-emission countries face for a problem they did not cause. Others argue that protection can come in the form of the already existing tools such as humanitarian law, disaster management, and more without needing to rewrite the 1951 Refugee Convention (Let’s Talk About Climate Migrants, Not Climate Refugees, 2019). This approach would avoid legal risks but still offer support to those displaced by environmental factors.

How does climate change lead to displacement?

Climate change shapes migration in several interconnected ways, and many authors, including Berchin et al. (2017, p148), have tried to categorise the different forms this displacement can take. One group includes people who are temporarily displaced when extreme weather events suddenly make their homes unsafe. Another group consists of people who move because climate change makes environments physically uninhabitable, through sea-level rise, erosion, saltwater intrusion, and changing rainfall patterns that degrade land and water resources (Balesh, 2015, p79; Berchin et al., 2017, p148).

A further pattern of movement emerges when climate change slowly undermines people’s livelihoods. Many communities depend on agriculture, fishing or natural resources, all of which are highly sensitive to changes in temperature and rainfall (Koefoed et al., 2025, p2).

Across all of these categories, researchers emphasise that climate change rarely acts alone. Instead, it amplifies existing vulnerabilities, such as poverty, weak infrastructure, political instability and limited state support. In many parts of the Global South, these combined pressures turn climate change threat multiplier, deepening social and economic stresses and making displacement far more likely (Rust, 2023, p245).

While it can be difficult to isolate climate change as the single cause behind any migration decision, the evidence is clear, environmental pressures linked to climate change are now shaping when, how and why people move.

Case studies: Kiribati and Haiti

The following case studies illustrate how the legal protection gap surrounding climate-induced displacement operates in practice. Kiribati highlights the challenges posed by slow-onset climate impacts such as sea-level rise, while Haiti demonstrates how repeated disasters interact with poverty and weak governance to force movement. Together, these cases show how people displaced by climate change fall outside the scope of refugee law, despite facing serious threats to their lives and livelihoods.

Kiribati is a low-lying island nation in Oceania which is vulnerable to sea levels rising and is already experiencing some of the most severe effects of climate change in the world. Most of its atolls sit only one or two metres above sea level, which makes them extremely vulnerable to rising seas and coastal erosion (Balesh, 2015, p88). Saltwater is seeping into freshwater supplies, destroying crops, and making drinking water unsafe in many areas.

Climate change has also driven internal migration. Many islanders from the outer islands are moving to South Tarawa, the capital, because it has more services and slightly better protection from sea-level rise. But this has created extreme overcrowding: South Tarawa now has one of the highest population densities in the Pacific, putting pressure on housing, water, waste systems and public health (Curtain&Dornan, 2019, p2). As conditions worsen, many I-Kiribati are considering leaving the country altogether, not because they want to, but because their land, water and livelihoods are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

Modelling shows how strong this pressure has become. By 2030, around 64% of I-Kiribati aged 20–44 will want to migrate but will not have the financial or legal means to do so (Curtain&Dornan, 2019, p2). This reflects both growing environmental stress and a lack of opportunities within Kiribati's small economy. In other words, climate change is pushing people to think about life elsewhere, but the routes to leave are extremely limited.

For I-Kiribati who try to move abroad, New Zealand is the main destination. But the pathways available are small and restrictive. The best-known route is the Pacific Access Category (PAC), which offers only a very small number of visas each year and is based on employability rather than humanitarian need. Applicants must show English proficiency, meet educational requirements and secure a job offer, which makes this pathway inaccessible for many people, especially those from rural outer islands (Curtain&Dornan, 2019, p32).

Some I-Kiribati use temporary labour mobility schemes, such as seasonal agricultural work. These programmes allow people to earn money but do not provide a long-term right to stay. Workers must return home after their contracts end, which means these schemes cannot protect people facing long-term climate risks (Paton, 2021, p20).

Because of these limits, migration demand far exceeds supply. Even if current rates continue until 2050, fewer than 18,000 people from Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru combined are expected to migrate internationally (Curtain&Dornan, 2019, p1). This is extremely small compared to the scale of climate pressures at home. The Balesh, 2015 report notes that pathways favour people who are wealthier, more educated or better connected.

Kiribati also became a landmark example in international human rights law. In 2020, the UNHRC ruled in the Teitiota case that countries cannot deport individuals if climate change conditions in their home country pose a serious threat to their right to life (Historic UN Human Rights Case Opens Door to Climate Change Asylum Claims, 2020). Although Teitiota was not granted refugee status, the ruling is significant, it shows that climate-related harm can justify protection under human rights law even when it does not fit the refugee definition.

This case opens a possible path for future climate-related asylum claims, especially for individuals who face extreme or life-threatening environmental conditions. It also highlights the gap in current international protection systems: climate impacts are real, but legal pathways for those affected remain limited.

Haiti's experience of climate displacement can be understood through four interconnected dynamics: environmental degradation, internal displacement, cross-border migration, and legal exclusion. Together, these factors show how climate change acts as a threat multiplier, making displacement increasingly unavoidable while leaving affected populations without meaningful legal protection.

Haiti is often described as one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. The country faces long droughts, stronger hurricanes, extreme heat, and repeated flooding. Because Haiti has lost most of its forests over decades of environmental degradation, the soil can't absorb heavy rainfall, so storms almost always lead to landslides or flash floods (Koefoed et al., 2025, p2). As a result, families regularly lose crops, animals, homes, and sources of income. Over time, this constant cycle of shock and recovery pushes many Haitians to move simply because staying becomes too difficult.

Climate pressures are also layered on top of political instability and poverty. This makes it nearly impossible for communities to rebuild before the next disaster hits. When farmland becomes too dry to farm or is washed away by storms, families often move to cities like Port-au-Prince in search of work. But these cities are just as vulnerable. Many urban neighbourhoods sit in low-lying coastal areas with poor drainage and extremely weak infrastructure. Places like Cité Soleil flood quickly, leaving newly arrived families at risk again (Rust, 2023, p226). Internal movement does not always provide safety, people may be displaced several times within Haiti without finding stability.

The 2010 earthquake and Hurricane Matthew in 2016 show just how fragile Haiti's situation is. Although the earthquake wasn't caused by climate change, its devastating impact was worsened by years of environmental decline and unsafe housing (Koefoed et al., 2025, p2).

Most Haitians who move do so within their own country, often shifting between rural and urban areas. But when repeated disasters make life unbearable, people begin looking across borders. Haitians have migrated to the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Chile, and increasingly the United States because they feel they have no other option after losing everything multiple times (Douyon, 2023). Despite clear links between climate stress and migration decisions, countries like the United States do not recognise climate change as a valid reason for protection. This creates a major legal gap.

The main form of protection Haitians have received in the U.S. is Temporary Protected Status (TPS), granted to Haitians who were already in the country during major crises. TPS allows people to stay and work temporarily, but it does not apply to Haitians who try to flee new climate-driven disasters. Someone whose house was destroyed by a hurricane cannot apply for TPS if they were not already in the U.S. at the time (Rust, 2023, 230).

Asylum is also extremely hard to obtain. U.S. law requires people to prove persecution based on race, politics, or a social group. Environmental destruction, even if it has made life unlivable, does not count as persecution. This means asylum claims based on climate impacts are almost always rejected, leaving many Haitians with no legal pathways to protection (Doran, 2011, p117).

Haiti shows how climate change, poverty, weak governance, and environmental degradation combine to make displacement almost unavoidable for many families. Yet the international legal system still treats climate factors as irrelevant to protection.

Policy Recommendations

Since climate change is not recognised under the 1951 Refugee Convention, people forced to move because of rising seas, droughts or extreme weather still fall into a legal gap. Instead of reopening the Convention, which many experts warn could weaken protection for refugees fleeing persecution, governments can create additional legal pathways for people affected by climate pressures. These could include humanitarian visas or seasonal work schemes that allow safe and organised movement from highly vulnerable countries. Existing models such as New Zealand's Pacific Access Category demonstrate that structured migration pathways already exist, but these schemes remain extremely limited and are often based on employability rather than vulnerability. Expanding and adapting such pathways could allow safer, more organised movement for climate-displaced people without undermining the refugee protection regime.

At the same time, the global community needs to invest more in adaptation measures so that people are not forced to leave their homes in the first place. Improving coastal protection, building climate-resilient infrastructure, strengthening early-warning systems, and supporting drought-resistant agriculture can help communities stay safe where they live. Kiribati has already started thinking about long-term relocation planning, while Haiti continues to struggle with repeated hurricanes, soil degradation and drought, all of which require stable international support. In these contexts, adaptation strategies must be supported by sustained international funding, as placing responsibility solely on fragile states risks deepening existing inequalities and governance challenges.

A sense of climate justice should guide these efforts. Countries that have contributed the most to historical emissions are not the ones suffering the worst climate impacts. Creating a global climate mobility fund, where high-emitting countries contribute based on their responsibility, would help finance relocations, emergency responses and long-term recovery in vulnerable states.

Climate-induced displacement reveals a fundamental mismatch between contemporary drivers of migration and the legal frameworks designed to govern them. As the cases of Kiribati and Haiti demonstrate, people are increasingly forced to move not because of persecution, but because environmental conditions

make life unsustainable. Yet international law continues to treat climate factors as legally irrelevant to protection. Without alternative pathways grounded in human rights and climate justice, climate-displaced people will remain trapped in legal limbo. Addressing climate displacement therefore requires not only legal innovation, but a broader commitment to responsibility, equity, and global accountability.

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