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Climate Migration and Global Policy Responses in India: An Analytical Review

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ABSTRACT

Climate-induced migration has emerged as a critical humanitarian and developmental challenge globally, with India standing at the forefront due to its profound geographical vulnerability and socioeconomic conditions. This Paper provides a comprehensive analysis of climate migration in India, examining its multifaceted drivers, the scale of displacement, and the severe socioeconomic and human rights impacts on affected populations. It critically assesses India's existing national policy frameworks and legislative initiatives, highlighting significant gaps and implementation challenges. Concurrently, the Paper explores the evolving landscape of global policy responses, detailing the roles of international organizations and the limitations of current international legal instruments. The analysis reveals an urgent need for a holistic, rights-based, and integrated approach at both national and international levels, advocating for proactive policy formulation, robust implementation of adaptation strategies, and strengthened international cooperation to protect and rehabilitate climate-displaced communities and ensure long-term resilience and sustainable development.

Keywords: Climate, migration, globally, analysis, holistic, strategies

1. Introduction

Contextualizing Climate Change and Human Mobility

Climate change represents one of the most formidable challenges confronting the global community, exerting severe negative impacts on ecosystems and human societies.¹ Projections indicate that by the end of the century, climate change could compel the migration of nearly 200 million people due to natural disasters.¹ More immediate estimates suggest that over 200 million individuals may be displaced by climate change by 2050, with an average of 21.5 million people forcibly displaced annually since 2008 by weather-related events.² The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) characterizes climate change as the defining crisis of our era, with disaster displacement being one of its most devastating consequences.³ The consistent projection of hundreds of millions displaced globally by mid-century and the framing of climate change as a "defining crisis" underscore the immense scale and urgency of this issue. This is not merely a future concern but an ongoing humanitarian challenge, where current reactive measures are proving insufficient. The accelerating rate of displacement necessitates proactive, systemic solutions to avert a larger humanitarian catastrophe and safeguard human security and development.

Defining Climate Migration: Terminology and Nuances

The terminology surrounding individuals compelled to move due to environmental changes remains contested, lacking a universally accepted legal definition. Terms such as 'Climate Migrants' or 'Environmental Refugees' are commonly used to describe people who relocate because of climate change-induced alterations, including floods, droughts, or rising sea levels.¹ However, the use of 'refugee' in this context is widely debated, with many commentators preferring 'climate-displaced persons' or 'climate migrants'.² The International Organization for Migration (IOM) broadly uses the term "climate mobility"⁴, while UNHCR explicitly does not endorse 'climate refugee,' instead favoring the phrase 'persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change'.³

This terminological debate highlights a critical legal and conceptual void. The core issue is that existing international refugee law, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, defines a refugee based on a well-founded fear of persecution due to factors like race, religion, or political opinion, and notably excludes individuals displaced by climate devastation or natural disasters.² Furthermore, the term 'migrant' can be problematic as it implies a choice that often does not exist for those forced to leave their homes due to environmental degradation.² The inadequacy of current labels leaves millions without formal protection or rights, complicating policy responses and resource allocation. The growing calls for a separate legal status for climate-induced displacement reflect a fundamental need for new legal instruments tailored to this unique and complex form of human mobility.²

Scope and Structure of the Paper

This Paper delves into the intricate dynamics of climate migration within India, examining its specific regional vulnerabilities, the diverse climatic and non-climatic drivers, and the profound socioeconomic and human rights implications for affected communities. It proceeds to analyze India's current national policy responses and legislative efforts, identifying critical gaps and challenges. Subsequently, the Paper explores the broader landscape of global policy responses, highlighting the roles of international organizations and the limitations of existing international frameworks. Finally, it concludes with a synthesis of key findings and proposes actionable recommendations for fostering a more comprehensive, rights-based, and integrated approach to climate migration in India and globally.

2. The Landscape of Climate Migration in India

2.1. Vulnerability and Hotspots: Geographical and Socioeconomic Factors

India, with its vast and diverse geography, stands as one of the countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. According to the World Risk Index 2024, India ranks third globally with a risk index score of 40.96%.¹ More than 80% of India's population resides in districts susceptible to climate-induced disasters.⁷ The country's extensive 7,500 km coastline is particularly at high risk from sea-level rise, erosion, and natural disasters such as tropical storms and cyclones, affecting approximately 170 million people.⁸

Climate impacts are not uniform but concentrate in specific, often already socio-economically marginalized, areas, creating distinct climate migration hotspots. Coastal regions like the Sundarbans in West Bengal and the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta face relentless threats from rising sea levels, cyclones, and floods.¹ Between 1990 and 2016, India lost 235 square kilometers of land to coastal erosion, jeopardizing livelihoods and homes.⁸ West Bengal, Kerala, Gujarat, and Odisha have experienced significant coastal erosion, with West Bengal seeing changes along 70% of its coast.⁸ Mega-cities such as Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata, with millions living in urban coastal areas, are also at high risk of flooding and sea-level rise, likely necessitating future relocation.⁸

Beyond coastal areas, other regions are severely impacted. In coastal Odisha, farmers are forced to migrate as their agricultural land is lost to sea-level rise, and fishermen lose their equipment to cyclones.⁹ In the Sundarbans, people are fleeing poverty and the collapse of traditional livelihoods due to climate change.⁹ The hilly districts of Uttarakhand experience erratic rainfall and receding water tables, compelling residents to abandon their homes and farms for the plains.⁹ In Maharashtra's Beed district, recurrent droughts drive migration, while in Bihar's Saharsa, widespread flooding and waterlogging render land unfit for cultivation.⁹

This concentration of impacts in vulnerable areas highlights that climate migration in India is not solely an environmental issue but a profound development and equity challenge. Over half of the Indian population is engaged in climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture, making their livelihoods highly susceptible to climate variations.¹⁰ Approximately 30% of the Indian population grapples with destitution.¹⁰ The interconnectedness of geography, economy, and poverty amplifies climate risks, creating complex, intersecting crises that demand integrated and equitable solutions.

2.2. Key Drivers of Migration: Sudden-Onset and Slow-Onset Events

The drivers of climate migration in India can be broadly categorized into sudden-onset and slow-onset climatic events. Sudden-onset drivers include immediate hazards such as floods, glacial lake outbursts, storms, and cyclones.¹ For instance, Cyclone Amphan, the strongest storm recorded in decades in the Bay of Bengal in May 2020, forced several million people to evacuate.⁸ Annually, about 3.6 million Indians were displaced between 2008 and 2018, primarily due to flooding from monsoon rains.⁸ The 2018 floods in Kerala displaced approximately 1.4 million people, serving as a stark reminder of likely future consequences.⁸ In Bihar, major floods, such as the Kosi Floods in 2008, have severely affected millions.⁹

In contrast, slow-onset climatic drivers are more insidious, including sea-level rise, salinization of land, desertification, increased water scarcity, and coastal and riverine erosion.¹ While displacement from sudden-onset disasters is readily apparent, migration patterns resulting from slow-onset events are often harder to quantify.⁸ These gradual changes erode livelihoods and habitability over time, frequently leading to what appears to be "voluntary" migration but is, in essence, compelled by worsening conditions.¹² For example, the Sundarbans delta experiences an average yearly sea-level rise of 8 millimeters, significantly higher than the global average, leading to accelerated land erosion and salinization.⁹ In Maharashtra's Beed district, recurrent droughts and decreasing rainfall have made agriculture unsustainable, forcing households to migrate for work.⁹ Similarly, in Uttarakhand, erratic rainfall and receding water tables have led to the abandonment of homes and farms.⁹

The insidious nature of slow-onset disasters means that policy responses must extend beyond immediate disaster relief to address the cumulative and often irreversible impacts of these changes. These impacts frequently result in permanent displacement and the loss of traditional livelihoods, necessitating long-term planning and recognition of these migrants. The difficulty in identifying and quantifying these slow-onset impacts also points to a significant data gap that hinders effective long-term policy design and support for affected populations.

Table 1: Key Climate Hazards and Their Impacts on Migration in India

Hazard Type	Specific Examples/Regions	Impact on Migration
Sudden-Onset		
Cyclones, Storms	Cyclone Amphan (Bay of Bengal), Cyclone Fani (Odisha), Cyclone Aila (Sundarbans)	Forced evacuation, destruction of homes, loss of livelihoods, immediate displacement
Floods	Monsoon Flooding (all India, especially Ganges-Brahmaputra basin), Kerala Floods (2018), Kosi Floods (Bihar)	Annual displacement (3.6 million Indians annually 2008-2018), loss of land/livelihoods, temporary or permanent displacement
Glacial Lake Outbursts	Himalayan regions (general)	Forced displacement, destruction of infrastructure
Slow-Onset		
Sea-level Rise	Sundarbans (West Bengal), Indian coastline, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata	Loss of land, salinization of agricultural land, compelled migration, need for managed retreat, permanent relocation
Salinization of Land	Sundarbans, Coastal Odisha	Render agricultural land useless, collapse of traditional livelihoods, forced migration
Desertification, Increased Aridity	Beed (Maharashtra), other semi-arid regions	Recurrent droughts, crop failures, increased pressure to migrate, long-term displacement
Water Scarcity, Erratic Rainfall	Uttarakhand, Beed (Maharashtra)	Receding water tables, difficulty in crop cultivation, abandonment of homes and farms, increased burden on women for water collection
Coastal/Riverine Erosion	West Bengal, Kerala, Gujarat, Odisha, Majuli Island (Assam)	Loss of land (235 sq km between 1990-2016), destruction of villages, forced relocation, shrinking habitable areas

2.3. Scale and Projections of Displacement: Quantitative Estimates and Future Trends

The scale of climate-induced displacement in India is substantial and is projected to accelerate significantly. Between 2008 and 2018, approximately 3.6 million Indians were displaced annually, primarily due to monsoon flooding.⁸ A 2021 Paper by ActionAid and Climate Action Network South Asia estimates that India alone will see 45 million people forced to migrate from their homes by 2050 due to climate disasters, a figure three times higher than present numbers.⁹

The World Bank's Groundswell Paper (2018) projects that by 2050, without concrete climate and development action, over 143 million people across Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South Asia could be forced to move within their...[source](#) In South Asia, internal climate migrants could number over 40 million, representing up to 1.8% of the region's total population.¹³ Climate migrants are projected to increase by a factor of six between 2020 and 2050 in the pessimistic reference scenario.¹³

These quantitative estimates underscore that climate migration is not merely a potential future problem but an accelerating, inevitable reality. The projected six-fold increase in climate migrants by 2050 highlights the urgency of proactive planning. This implies that policies focused solely on prevention or "staying in place" will be insufficient; a significant portion of the population will be compelled to move, necessitating robust frameworks for managed retreat and dignified relocation. The emphasis on *internal* migration also means that national governments bear the primary responsibility for these populations, unlike cross-border refugees who fall under international protection mechanisms.

The World Bank Paper further outlines three plausible scenarios for internal climate migration, demonstrating that future trajectories are not fixed and can be significantly influenced by policy choices:

Table 2: Projections of Internal Climate Migration in South Asia/India (by 2050)

Source/Paper	Region	Scenario	Projected Number of Internal Climate Migrants (Millions)	Percentage of Regional Population	Key Drivers
ActionAid / Climate Action Network South Asia (2021)	India	-	45	-	Climate disasters
World Bank Groundswell Paper (2018)	South Asia	Pessimistic Reference (high emissions, unequal development)	40.5 (range: 30.9 - 40.5)	1.8% (range: 1.35% - 1.77%)	Lower water availability, crop productivity, rising sea level, storm surges
World Bank Groundswell Paper (2018)	South Asia	More Inclusive Development (high emissions, improved development)	21.1 (range: 18.1 - 24.1)	0.89% (range: 0.76% - 1.02%)	Lower water availability, crop productivity, rising sea level, storm surges
World Bank Groundswell Paper (2018)	South Asia	More Climate-Friendly (lower global emissions, unequal development)	16.9 (range: 11.4 - 22.4)	0.74% (range: 0.48% - 0.98%)	Lower water availability, crop productivity, rising sea level, storm surges

The significant reduction in projected migrants under more inclusive development and climate-friendly scenarios underscores the critical importance of concerted action on climate change mitigation and adaptation, coupled with inclusive development policies. This provides a clear incentive for urgent climate action and comprehensive planning.

2.4. Socioeconomic and Human Rights Impacts: Livelihoods, Health, Education, Gendered Vulnerabilities

The human rights implications of climate migration are profound, extending beyond mere displacement to encompass a wide array of socioeconomic consequences. For individuals forced to flee their homes, fundamental questions of human dignity and rights to safety, shelter, and adequate standards of living arise.¹⁴ Access to essential services like education, healthcare, and stable employment often proves elusive, and cultural and social rights can be severely jeopardized.¹⁴ The very process of migration can expose individuals to exploitation, human trafficking, and other human rights abuses.¹⁴

Specifically, the right to life, liberty, and personal security is threatened as climate migrants undertake risky journeys, facing exposure to theft, assault, sexual violence, and discrimination at their destinations.¹⁴ The right to food, water, and housing is frequently compromised, as migrants struggle to access healthy food, safe drinking water, and proper housing, often leading to competition for scarce resources with existing populations or confinement to marginalized areas.⁹ Children from climate migrant families often lose out on educational opportunities due to language barriers, financial constraints, or disrupted schooling, while adults face unemployment or precarious employment, hindering their ability to provide for their families and reintegrate into society.⁹ Exposure to adverse living conditions, poor nutrition, and stressful circumstances can result in serious, long-term illnesses, mental health disorders, and reduced life expectancy, further exacerbated by minimal access to health services.⁹

Climate change-induced displacement disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, particularly women and youth. The phenomenon of 'feminization of agriculture' is observed in many climate-impacted regions, where women increasingly bear the dual responsibility of agricultural work and unpaid care of family members as male members migrate.⁹ This adds up to 12-14 hours per day of work burden for women, impacting their health and well-being.⁹ Youth face specific vulnerabilities that disrupt their education, limit access to opportunities, and exacerbate economic instability.¹⁰ For instance, in the Sundarbans, youth displacement is significant due to flooding and cyclones.¹⁰ The absence of legal protections leaves climate migrants in a precarious position, with little recourse to assert their rights or access essential services, making human rights abuses, including modern slavery and inadequate access to basic amenities, common occurrences.¹⁵

This detailed enumeration of human rights impacts demonstrates that climate migration is not merely a logistical challenge but a profound human rights crisis. The vulnerability to exploitation, trafficking, and discrimination underscores severe protection gaps. The disproportionate burden on women and the disruption to youth's education and opportunities highlight how climate impacts exacerbate existing gender and intergenerational inequalities. This necessitates that policy responses must be rights-based, gender-sensitive, and inclusive, explicitly addressing the protection needs of the most vulnerable and integrating human rights principles into all stages of migration management, from prevention to post-displacement rehabilitation.

3. National Policy Responses and Adaptation Strategies in India

3.1. Existing Policy Frameworks and Gaps

India's existing legal and institutional frameworks are largely ill-equipped to handle the complex and multifaceted issue of climate migration. The country currently lacks a specific legal category for climate migrants, and its approach to migration and displacement is primarily governed by outdated laws such as the 1946 Foreigners Act and the 1955 Citizenship Act.¹⁷ This absence of a clear legal framework means that climate migrants are often treated as illegal immigrants, subjecting them to detention, deportation, and denial of basic rights.¹⁷

While state-level disaster management policies address sudden-onset displacement, India significantly lacks comprehensive policies for slow-onset events like sea-level rise and coastal erosion.⁸ The Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 also lacks provisions specifically for climate migrants.⁸ Furthermore, India's National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), while serving as a broad framework, does not place sufficient emphasis on aspects related to climate-driven migration.¹¹ Similarly, State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs), despite being primary policy documents, give little focus to climate-related displacement, often prioritizing infrastructure over human impacts in coastal zone management policies.⁸

This fragmented and reactive approach to climate migration represents a significant policy lag. Despite the escalating crisis, there is no cohesive national strategy to proactively manage climate migration, leaving millions of migrants in a vulnerable and precarious situation.¹⁷ The limited emphasis on migration in the NAPCC suggests a disconnect between broader climate action and human mobility considerations, highlighting a need for integration and a more holistic view that explicitly accounts for human displacement.

3.2. Legislative Initiatives: The Climate Migrants (Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2022

In an attempt to address this policy vacuum, legislative initiatives have been introduced in the Indian Parliament. Notably, the Climate Migrants (Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2022, was introduced as a private member's bill.¹¹ This bill aims to establish a comprehensive policy framework for the protection and rehabilitation of internally displaced climate migrants in India.¹²

The Bill proposes a broad definition of "climate migrants," encompassing individuals or communities forcibly displaced, government-evacuated, or voluntarily migrated due to worsened living conditions caused by both slow-onset (e.g., droughts, sea-level rise, erosion) and sudden-onset (e.g., floods, cyclones) climate events.¹² It outlines the establishment of a National Climate Migration Authority and inter-departmental State Climate Migration Authorities, along with sub-district Migration Facilitation Centres, to identify, document, and monitor climate migration.¹²

The proposed functions of these authorities are comprehensive, covering:

- **Monitoring and Assessing Risk:** Continuous risk assessment, strengthening forecasting mechanisms, and monitoring slow-onset events.¹²
- **Prevention and Mitigation:** Utilizing public works programs like MGNREGS for infrastructure development, incorporating adaptive measures in agriculture, promoting organic farming, providing crop and cattle insurance, investing in sustainable urban infrastructure, and establishing temporary shelters.¹²
- **Relief and Compensation:** Ensuring basic living standards in temporary shelters offering loss and damage compensation (cash transfers, land grants, housing support).¹²
- **Resettlement, Rehabilitation, and Re-integration:** Registering migrants, facilitating return to safe areas, developing resettlement plans with community involvement, providing alternatives for those dependent on natural resources, offering re-skilling opportunities, linking with MGNREGS for employment, facilitating school enrollment, and ensuring electoral registration.¹²
- **Climate Migration Fund:** The Bill proposes a Climate Migration Fund with an initial corpus of 1,000 crore INR, with ongoing contributions from central and state governments and employers.¹²

Despite its comprehensive nature and clear recognition of the problem, the Climate Migrants (Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2022, along with another similar bill, "have gone nowhere in parliament".¹¹ This reveals a significant gap between legislative intent and implementation reality. The failure to pass such a robust bill prolongs the "legal void"¹⁷ and leaves millions of climate-displaced individuals without a clear framework of rights and support, underscoring the urgent need for political attention and commitment to institutionalize these vital protections.

3.3. Government and Joint Programs: FAO-IOM Joint Programme, MGNREGS

While a comprehensive national policy for climate migrants remains elusive, various government programs and joint initiatives are active in addressing climate change impacts and migration in India.

The **FAO-International Organization for Migration (IOM) Joint Programme** aims to enhance the resilience of rural households to climate change, thereby alleviating the pressure to migrate and improving migration outcomes.¹⁸ Launched in January 2024, this program focuses on three main components:

1. **Strengthening climate resilience:** Improving capacity to adopt climate-adaptive agricultural practices and establishing green agribusinesses.¹⁸

2. **Empowering informed decisions:** Improving access to information on migration and climate-smart agriculture through mobile resource centers and community-led knowledge sharing.¹⁸
3. **Fostering policy coherence:** Enhancing the capacity of state and local stakeholders to address the nexus of climate change, rural livelihoods, and human mobility.¹⁸ This program specifically targets marginalized groups, including women, youth, lower castes, and smallholder farmers, who are disproportionately affected.¹⁸

The **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)** is also recognized for its potential role in addressing climate migration. The proposed Climate Migrants Bill, for instance, suggests using MGNREGS for infrastructure development in climate hotspots to prevent or reduce the speed of climate events, and for providing temporary shelters and facilitating employment during rehabilitation.¹² However, MGNREGS has faced notable obstacles, including low wage rates, delayed payments, system leakages, and administrative delays in declaring drought.¹⁵

The **World Bank** actively supports India's efforts to build climate resilience across various sectors. This includes supporting the shift to greener transportation, conserving biodiversity and sequestering carbon, helping smallholder farmers adapt to climate change, and supporting the Atal Bhujal Yojana for community-led groundwater management.⁷ The World Bank also assists in restoring coastal ecosystems by planting mangroves and supports the development of low-carbon energy, including green hydrogen, and accelerating climate finance mobilization.⁷

These initiatives, while valuable, often focus on alleviating the pressure to migrate or improving migration outcomes, rather than providing comprehensive protection and rehabilitation for *already displaced* populations. The acknowledged obstacles in programs like MGNREGS suggest that even well-intentioned programs can be ineffective in practice, particularly for vulnerable populations who require immediate and reliable support. This indicates that effective policy requires not just the existence of programs but also their robust, equitable, and efficient implementation, and a more integrated design that considers the full spectrum of climate mobility, from prevention to post-displacement rehabilitation and re-integration.

3.4. Grassroots Adaptation and Community-Led Initiatives

Amidst the challenges at the national policy level, grassroots adaptation strategies and community-led initiatives are emerging as critical components in building climate resilience and reducing migration in rural India. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), as decentralized bodies of local self-governance, are empowered to design and implement village-level development plans.²⁰ The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) offers a powerful opportunity to build climate resilience by incorporating activities such as watershed management, sustainable agriculture, and renewable energy integration.²⁰

These community-driven projects leverage local knowledge to identify climate risks and design context-specific solutions. For example, the Kumharra panchayat has strategically included water conservation and soil management activities like contour trenching and farm ponds, leading to significant water table recharge and reduced migration.²⁰ In Mandla, integrating climate risk assessments into GPDPs with technical support from NGOs has generated new employment opportunities under central schemes, thereby significantly reducing migration and vulnerability.²⁰

Women play a particularly important role in these grassroots movements, often taking leadership roles in local self-government systems and eco-friendly ventures.¹⁶ Initiatives like the "Star Village Awards" recognize villages where communities collaborate to enhance their environment, promoting practices such as planting trees for every girl child born and implementing water conservation systems.¹⁶ The "Women Farmers for Earth" initiative aims to equip first-generation women farmers with managerial skills to enhance farm profitability and break cycles of poverty, directly addressing the "feminization of agriculture" where women increasingly manage farms due to male migration.¹⁶ Examples include women-led eco-tourism ventures in coastal Maharashtra, conversion of lake reeds into saleable baskets in Manipur, and women leading water conservation initiatives in Uttarakhand.¹⁶ Campaigns promoting healthy renewable energy sources also empower rural women to improve their well-being while reducing environmental harm.¹⁶

The detailed examples of these grassroots initiatives demonstrate that local communities possess significant agency and traditional knowledge for climate adaptation. The success of GPDPs in reducing migration highlights that localized, participatory approaches can be highly effective in building resilience in place. The strong emphasis on women's pivotal role and leadership in various eco-friendly ventures reveals a critical, often overlooked, resource for climate action. This suggests that national policies should not be exclusively top-down but should actively empower and integrate these grassroots efforts, providing technical and financial support. Investing in women's leadership and capacity building at the local level is not just an equity issue but a strategic imperative for effective climate adaptation and sustainable development, directly countering the increased burden on women and strengthening overall community resilience.

4. Global Policy Responses and International Frameworks

4.1. The International Legal Vacuum: Absence of a Comprehensive Framework

A significant challenge in addressing climate migration globally is the absence of a comprehensive international legal framework. No current international law provides a universally accepted definition of climate migrants or a dedicated legal status for individuals displaced by climate change.² The 1951 Refugee Convention, the cornerstone of international refugee law, does not recognize climate-induced displacement, as its definition of a

refugee is limited to those fleeing persecution.³ This means that individuals compelled to move due to environmental factors fall outside the scope of traditional refugee protection.²

This legal vacuum has profound human costs. Climate migrants are left in a precarious position, often without recognized citizenship or settlement rights, navigating bureaucratic uncertainties that lead to their characterization as "forgotten victims".¹⁵ This implies that the international community is failing to uphold fundamental human rights for a rapidly growing population, as these individuals lack formal protection mechanisms and access to essential services.¹⁵ Many scholars and advocates argue for the creation of a separate legal status outside the existing refugee definition to address the unique challenges faced by climate-induced migrants, emphasizing the need for international cooperation to establish such a comprehensive framework.²

4.2. Role of International Organizations: IOM and UNHCR

Despite the international legal vacuum, key international organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are actively engaged in addressing climate mobility. Their efforts, while crucial, operate within the constraints of the existing international legal framework.

IOM has been a leading convening actor on climate mobility for years, implementing extensive operational, research, policy, and advocacy efforts across six continents.⁴ In 2015, IOM became the first UN agency to establish a global team dedicated to this issue, formalizing its commitment to developing solutions for people on the move due to climate change.⁴ In 2021, IOM launched a 10-year Institutional Strategy on Migration, Environment and Climate Change 2021–2030, supported by the Climate Mobility Road Map, which aims to amplify the voices of affected populations, protect their rights, and respect their freedom to choose whether to stay or migrate.⁴

IOM's objectives in managing climate migration are holistic:

- **Finding solutions for people to stay:** Working to prevent forced migration from environmental factors.⁴
- **Finding solutions for people on the move:** Providing assistance and protection to affected populations when forced migration occurs.⁴
- **Finding solutions for people to move:** Facilitating migration as a climate change adaptation strategy and enhancing community resilience.⁴

IOM's priority areas include migration policy development, data and knowledge generation, operational responses (disaster response, risk reduction, regular migration pathways), and convening stakeholders to integrate migration into climate agendas.⁴ IOM actively advocates for the inclusion of human mobility considerations in climate change policies and financing, promoting frameworks like the Kampala Declaration on Migration, Environment and Climate Change.²¹ In India, IOM has a joint initiative with FAO to tackle climate change-induced migration and hosts sessions on youth-led climate adaptation through migration.¹⁹

UNHCR views climate change as a defining crisis, with disaster displacement as one of its most devastating consequences.³ UNHCR provides protection and assistance to refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs), and stateless individuals who are often on the frontlines of the climate emergency, residing in climate "hotspots" with limited adaptive resources.³ UNHCR's role includes legal advice, guidance, and support for developing enhanced protection for those displaced by disasters and climate change.³ They aim to improve the predictability of their engagement to anticipate and prepare for climate-related emergencies, reduce environmental degradation in displacement settings, and enhance the resilience of displaced people and host communities.³

UNHCR actively participates in global policy processes, raising awareness about climate change as a driver of displacement and the need for protection. Since 2015, UNHCR has been a standing invitee to the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) and a member of its advisory group, strengthening collaboration with states and partners like IOM, UNDRR, UNFCCC, WMO, and UNDP.³ However, UNHCR explicitly does not endorse the term "climate refugee" due to the legal definition of a refugee based on persecution.³

The proactive but limited role of these international organizations highlights a critical point: while they are doing their utmost to provide assistance, develop strategies, and advocate for policy change, they cannot unilaterally create the necessary legal protections. Their work underscores the urgent need for political will from member states to establish new, binding international instruments that complement their operational efforts, ensuring comprehensive protection for climate-displaced populations.

Table 4: Roles and Initiatives of Key International Organizations in Climate Mobility

Organization	Mandate/Focus	Key Strategies/Objectives	Policy Advocacy/Engagement	Terminology Stance	India-Specific Initiatives
IOM	Lead convening actor on climate mobility; operational and policy efforts globally.	10-year Institutional Strategy on Migration, Environment and Climate Change 2021–2030; Climate Mobility Road Map. Objectives: Solutions for people to stay, Solutions for people on the move, Solutions for people to move.	Advocates integration of human mobility into climate agendas; promotes sustainable financing for loss and damage; engages in international discussions (e.g., Kampala Declaration, GCM).	Uses "climate mobility" broadly.	Joint Initiative with FAO to Tackle Climate Change-induced Migration; Youth-Led Climate Adaptation Through Migration sessions.
UNHCR	Protection and assistance for refugees, IDPs, and stateless people, especially in climate hotspots.	Improve predictability of engagement for emergencies; reduce environmental degradation in displacement settings; enhance resilience of displaced people and host communities; Operational Strategy for Climate Resilience and Environmental Sustainability 2022–2025.	Raises awareness about climate change as a driver of displacement; standing invitee to Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD); provides legal advice on refugee law in climate context; advocates for inclusion of displaced people in climate action policies (UNFCCC, Paris Agreement).	Explicitly does not endorse "climate refugee"; prefers "persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change."	Provides protection and assistance to refugees and IDPs in India under its general mandate.

4.3. Global Policy Dialogues and Instruments: UNFCCC, GCM, PDD

Climate mobility is increasingly on the international agenda, addressed through various global policy dialogues and instruments, though often in a fragmented manner.

The **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**, established in 1994, recognized the problem of climate change and set the ultimate objective of stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations.²² It directs funds to developing countries for climate change activities and mandates Papering on emissions and adaptation efforts.²² While the UNFCCC primarily focuses on mitigation and adaptation, it provides the overarching framework within which discussions on climate-induced displacement occur. Displacement is now recognized as both a people-centered form of "loss and damage" resulting from climate change and a consequence of loss and damage that disproportionately affects vulnerable countries and communities.⁵ The Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage is a crucial mechanism in this regard.¹

The **Global Compact for Migration (GCM)**, affirmed in December 2018, directly acknowledges that "climate, environmental degradation and disasters increasingly interact with the drivers of refugee movements".³ IOM's work on climate mobility is explicitly linked to several GCM objectives, particularly those related to addressing adverse drivers of migration, facilitating regular pathways, and improving cooperation in the context of disasters and climate change.⁴

The **Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD)** is a state-led initiative that supports the implementation of the Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda on cross-border disaster displacement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Paris Agreement.³ UNHCR, as a standing invitee and advisory group member to the PDD, has strengthened its collaboration with states and partners to address these challenges, focusing on policy coherence, knowledge sharing, awareness-raising, and operational support.³

The existence of these various global policy dialogues and instruments indicates growing international recognition of climate mobility. The UNFCCC addresses the root cause through GHG stabilization and finance, while the GCM and PDD acknowledge climate as a driver and work towards specific

protection mechanisms. However, these are largely non-binding frameworks or platforms for discussion, not comprehensive legal instruments that provide legally robust protection for climate migrants. This implies that while there is growing conceptual recognition and some incremental progress, the global response is still characterized by fragmented efforts rather than a unified, legally binding framework, leaving significant gaps in accountability and protection.

4.4. Perspectives from International Financial Institutions: World Bank's Groundswell Paper

International financial institutions, particularly the World Bank, have also contributed significantly to the understanding and policy discourse on climate migration. The World Bank's Groundswell Paper (2018) shifts the perspective from a purely humanitarian crisis to an economic imperative, framing climate migration as a development challenge that requires strategic investment.¹³

The Paper projects that by 2050, without concrete climate and development action, over 40 million people in South Asia could be forced to move within their own countries due to the slow-onset impacts of climate change, primarily lower water availability, crop productivity, rising sea levels, and storm surges.¹³ It emphasizes that climate migrants could increase by a factor of six between 2020 and 2050.¹³ However, the Paper also demonstrates that concerted action on climate change mitigation and adaptation, coupled with inclusive development policies, could substantially reduce these numbers.¹³

The Groundswell Paper proposes four major policy recommendations to manage the reality of climate migration:

1. **Cut greenhouse gases now:** Rapid global emission reductions are crucial to lessen climate pressure on livelihoods.¹³
2. **Pursue inclusive and climate-resilient development policies:** Anticipatory development policies, economic transition to less climate-sensitive sectors, alternative job opportunities, and investment in human capital are needed.¹³
3. **Embed climate migration in development planning:** Integrate climate migration across its entire life cycle (before, during, and after moving) through strategies like "adapt in place" (climate-smart infrastructure, diversifying income), "enable mobility" (facilitating safe, dignified migration), and "after migration" (preparing sending and receiving areas with livelihoods, infrastructure, and inclusion systems).¹³
4. **Invest now to improve understanding of internal climate migration:** More investment in data collection, monitoring, and contextualization at regional and local levels is essential.¹³

This perspective from the World Bank highlights that addressing climate migration is not merely about managing a crisis but about fostering sustainable economic growth and preventing future economic losses. The nuanced approach of "adapt in place," "enable mobility," and "after migration" indicates a recognition that migration can be a legitimate adaptation strategy, not just a failure of adaptation. This implies that financial institutions play a crucial role in shaping national policies by providing not just funding but also evidence-based frameworks that integrate climate mobility into broader economic and development agendas, emphasizing the economic imperative for proactive climate-resilient development.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis reveals that climate migration in India is an escalating crisis driven by a complex interplay of sudden-onset and slow-onset climatic events, exacerbated by deep-seated geographical vulnerabilities and socioeconomic inequalities. Millions are already displaced annually, with projections indicating tens of millions more by 2050. This phenomenon is not merely a logistical challenge but a profound human rights crisis, disproportionately affecting women, youth, and marginalized communities, and leading to severe impacts on livelihoods, health, education, and safety.

Despite the growing scale of this challenge, India's national policy framework remains fragmented and inadequate, lacking a dedicated legal category or comprehensive policy for climate migrants. While legislative efforts like the Climate Migrants (Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2022, demonstrate a recognition of the problem and propose robust solutions, their stalled progress in parliament highlights a significant gap between legislative intent and political will. Existing government programs and joint initiatives, while contributing to resilience, often focus on prevention or improving migration outcomes rather than comprehensive protection for the already displaced. Conversely, grassroots and community-led initiatives, particularly those led by women, show immense potential for localized adaptation and resilience building, underscoring the importance of empowering local actors.

Globally, a comprehensive international legal framework for climate migrants is conspicuously absent, leaving millions in a legal vacuum without formal protection. While international organizations like IOM and UNHCR are proactive in providing assistance, developing strategies, and advocating for policy integration, their efforts are constrained by the limitations of existing international law. Global policy dialogues and instruments, such as the UNFCCC, GCM, and PDD, have brought climate mobility onto the international agenda and fostered incremental progress, but they largely remain non-binding and fragmented. The World Bank's perspective underscores the economic imperative of addressing climate migration, framing it as a development challenge that requires strategic investment and integration into broader economic planning.

Based on this comprehensive review, the following recommendations are put forth to foster a more effective, rights-based, and integrated response to climate migration in India and globally:

1. **Enact Comprehensive National Legislation:** India must urgently pass and implement a dedicated national policy and legal framework, such as the Climate Migrants (Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2022. This legislation should provide clear definitions, establish institutional mechanisms (e.g., National and State Climate Migration Authorities), ensure rights-based protection, and allocate adequate funding for prevention, mitigation, relief, rehabilitation, and dignified resettlement.
2. **Integrate Climate Migration into Development Planning:** Climate migration should be explicitly embedded into national and sub-national development plans and policies across all sectors. This includes integrating climate risk assessments into planning processes, investing in climate-smart infrastructure, diversifying livelihoods in vulnerable regions, and developing proactive plans for managed retreat and planned relocation where adaptation in place is no longer viable.
3. **Strengthen Grassroots Adaptation and Local Governance:** National policies should actively empower and provide sustained technical and financial support to Panchayati Raj Institutions and community-led initiatives. This includes investing in capacity building for local leaders, promoting traditional knowledge, and recognizing the pivotal role of women in climate adaptation and resilience building at the local level.
4. **Enhance Protection and Support for Vulnerable Populations:** All policy responses must be rights-based, gender-sensitive, and inclusive, explicitly addressing the disproportionate impacts on women, youth, lower castes, and smallholder farmers. This includes ensuring access to basic services (shelter, food, water, healthcare, education), preventing exploitation and human rights abuses, and providing re-skilling opportunities and social protection portability for migrants.
5. **Invest in Data, Research, and Early Warning Systems:** Significant investment is needed to improve the understanding of climate migration, particularly for slow-onset events. This includes strengthening data collection and monitoring capacities at regional and local levels, leveraging new data sources, and enhancing forecasting mechanisms to inform anticipatory policy development and targeted interventions.
6. **Advocate for a Comprehensive International Legal Framework:** India, as a highly vulnerable nation, should actively advocate for the creation of a new, comprehensive international legal status for climate-displaced persons. This would complement existing refugee law and provide a legally binding framework for protection, responsibility-sharing, and international cooperation, ensuring that climate migrants are no longer "forgotten victims."
7. **Foster International Cooperation and Financing:** Strengthen collaboration with international organizations (IOM, UNHCR, FAO, World Bank) and participate actively in global policy dialogues (UNFCCC, GCM, PDD). Advocate for increased and accessible climate finance, particularly for adaptation and loss and damage, to support vulnerable countries and communities in managing climate mobility.

Addressing climate migration requires a paradigm shift from reactive crisis management to proactive, integrated, and rights-based governance. By implementing these recommendations, India can not only protect its most vulnerable populations but also set a precedent for global action in the face of this defining crisis of our time.

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