

Climate Justice and Human Mobility: Bridging EU Commitments and Policies

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The complex interplay between human mobility and climate change has emerged as a pressing global concern, with profound implications for social, economic, and environmental stability. This policy brief examines the European Union's response to the climate-migration nexus, tracing its historical evolution and current challenges. It highlights the need for a human rights-centred approach to policymaking, emphasising the importance of addressing the structural inequalities and power imbalances inherent in climate-induced migration. By integrating climate justice principles, the EU can pave the way for a more inclusive and sustainable approach to the challenges posed by climate change and human mobility.

UNDERSTANDING THE CLIMATE CHANGE—MIGRATION NEXUS

The nexus between human mobility and climate change has a complex and multifaceted nature, which defies a linear definition. Understanding this relationship requires consideration of various interconnected factors. Climate change impacts, such as rising sea levels, extreme weather events, droughts, and resource scarcity, can directly and indirectly influence migration patterns,¹ acting as threat multipliers for pre-existing socio-economic vulnerabilities.² However, it's essential to recognise that the nexus is not a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship. The impacts of climate change are often gradual, long-term, and intertwined with other factors, making it challenging to attribute migration solely to them. Finally, while most climate-related movements are anticipated to be internal, an increase in cross-border movements is also predicted.³

In 2019, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) introduced the term “climate migration” in its glossary, defining it as “the movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across an international border”.⁴ As such, climate migration encompasses various forms of mobility. Among these are voluntary migrations, where individuals choose to move in response to changing climate conditions, such as rising sea levels or increasingly severe weather events. Forced displacement occurs when people are compelled to leave their homes due to environmental degradation or disasters, often without the ability to return. Lastly, governments may implement planned relocations as part of adaptation strategies to mitigate the impacts of climate change on populations at risk.

However, the climate crisis not only triggers population movements but also undermines the ability of the most vulnerable populations to migrate.⁵ As poverty and inequality intensify, many people find their ability to move constrained. In certain instances, particularly among poorer households exposed to greater climate risks, this can result in immobility when relocating becomes unattainable, giving rise to what is termed as “trapped populations”.⁶ These populations are often left in deteriorating conditions, facing increased risks and diminished livelihoods.

Importantly, the intersection of climate change and human mobility is heavily influenced by strictly political

considerations. Categorising migration as irregular or as an invasion increases the likelihood of implementing restrictive policies⁷ or disregarding the issue altogether. The politics surrounding the climate change-migration nexus hinder the adoption of a human rights lens and overshadows the discourse on safeguarding the rights of people forced to move.⁸ Nonetheless, an increased focus on human mobility in the context of climate change and the integration of human rights considerations into climate action is essential for formulating policies that meet the needs of both individuals and the environment,⁹ ultimately working toward the creation of a fully sustainable society.

EVOLUTION OF THE EUROPEAN RESPONSE

The EU's commitment to climate action and human rights is globally recognised, yet the intersection of these principles with human mobility introduces complexities. While the EU has displayed leadership in climate policy formulation, its response to migration within this framework has been marked by hesitancy and inertia, as different conceptualisations of the issue have led to different approaches.

1999-2010: securitisation

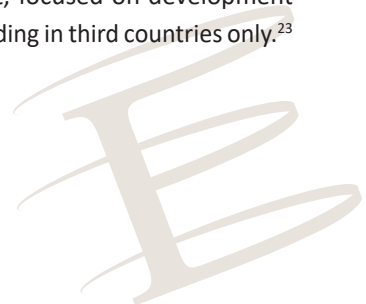
During the period spanning from 1999 to 2010, the relationship between climate change and human mobility was predominantly framed through a securitisation lens. This stance emerged amidst a global debate polarised by gloomy and often alarmist predictions, foreseeing an unsustainable surge in migratory pressures towards Europe.

European institutions first acknowledged the link between environmental factors and migration in 1999, when a European Parliament resolution highlighted “environmental refugees” as a major humanitarian crisis with implications for the stability and security of affected countries, including those within the EU.¹⁰ Notably, this resolution was drafted by the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Security, and Defence Policy, reflecting the prevailing viewpoint of the early 2000s that regarded climate-

induced migration as a security threat. This security-centred perspective was strengthened by the 2008 Solana report, in which the High Representative identified migration as one of the risks and threats posed by climate change,¹¹ prompting a call for integrating environmental considerations into the formulation of a comprehensive European migration policy.¹² This sentiment was echoed in the EC white paper on “Adapting to climate change: Towards a European framework for action”,¹³ wherein the notion of adaptation was intertwined with potential security implications of failure to adapt,¹⁴ particularly concerning migration flows towards Europe.

2011-2020: development and adaptation

The decade from 2011 to 2020 witnessed a pivot towards framing the climate-migration nexus through the lenses of development and adaptation, moving away from purely security-oriented responses. Guided by the Stockholm Programme (2009), the Commission began exploring the connection between climate change, migration and, for the first time, development.¹⁵ This turning point was reflected in the 2011 Communication on the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM),¹⁶ which recognised climate change as an international challenge and a driver of migration and displacement, advocating for an approach that also integrates adaptation measures.¹⁷ Similarly, the 2013 SWD “Climate change, environmental degradation, and migration”¹⁸ underscored the importance of EU external policies, particularly adaptation strategies, development initiatives, and humanitarian aid.¹⁹ The 2013 Communication “Maximising the Development Impact of Migration”²⁰ acknowledged the positive effects of migration for both countries of origin and destination and highlighted the need to further explore links between environmental degradation, migration and development and the potential of migration as an adaptation strategy.²¹ Nevertheless, the integration of migration into adaptation strategies remained sporadic across official documents. Even the 2016 Communication “Lives in Dignity: from Aid-dependence to Self-reliance”,²² which outlined the framework for displacement, focused on development assistance and resilience-building in third countries only.²³



In 2017, the EP issued a resolution urging the EU and its Member States to accept their responsibilities concerning climate change and recognise its effects on population displacement.²⁴ Yet subsequent policy initiatives, such as the European Green Deal,²⁵ only linked forced displacement related to climate change with collaboration with partners to increase resilience and to strengthen EU external action, including in the context of the Common Security and Defence Policy.²⁶ This represents a regression from the limited progress made towards a more human-centred approach. The 2020 Communication on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum²⁷ continued this trend, acknowledging climate change as a driver for migration but failing to address climate-displaced persons specifically.²⁸ Instead, the emphasis remained on addressing irregular migration,²⁹ while neglecting the establishment of regular channels for safe and legal migration except for “those in need of protection”,³⁰ effectively excluding environmental migrants.

Over the past decade, the European Union has recognised the disruptive effects of climate change on migration patterns. Despite efforts to affirm the nexus between development, adaptation, and migration, the primary objective often revolves around control and reduction of migration flows.³¹ The concept of migration as adaptation was side-lined with a preference for promoting regular migration in third countries, overlooking the importance of opening similar pathways to Europe for those at risk of climate-induced displacement.³² This highlights the EU’s predominantly externalised approach to migration policies, ultimately underscoring the inadequacy of current efforts to facilitate regular migration.³³

Post-2020: progress or regression?

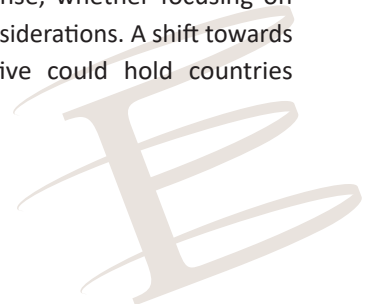
Recent years have seen increased attention to the protection of human rights of those displaced by climate change. However, the extent to which progress has been made remains questionable. In 2021, the EP Development Committee released a report³⁴ stressing the EU’s imperative role in climate mitigation, adaptation, and protection of the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The report aptly recognised climate change and natural disasters as drivers of migration,³⁵

stressing the need for enhanced coordination between climate and migration strategies.³⁶ In the EP resolution on the strategy,³⁷ there was a resounding emphasis on the Union’s responsibility to prepare for climate-induced displacement by implementing adequate measures to protect the human rights of populations threatened by the effects of climate change.³⁸ However, the report failed to reach simple majority and was subsequently rejected,³⁹ indicating that climate-induced migration issues still receive low priority on the European agenda.

In 2022, the Commission released a SWD on “Addressing displacement and migration related to disasters, climate change and environmental degradation”.⁴⁰ This document urged greater attention on the challenges of providing adequate protection and aid to people moving due to climate change, as their lack of legal status prevents them from exercising their fundamental rights.⁴¹ While this document marked a significant progress in adamantly highlighting the importance of environmental migrants’ rights protection, the recent adoption of the New Migration Pact seemingly reversed these advancements by omitting any mention of the relationship between climate change and mobility.⁴² This setback underscores the need for continued advocacy and action to ensure that climate-induced migration remains a consideration in policy formulation.

TOWARDS A PARADIGM SHIFT? RETHINKING THE CLIMATE—MIGRATION NEXUS

The climate-migration nexus has been debated within European institutions since the early 2000s, resonating across both migration and environmental policy domains. Yet, persistent inconsistencies remain and the emphasis on minimising arrivals to Member States has remained largely unchanged.⁴³ A paradigm shift is necessary to effectively address this issue. This requires a conceptual reframing that elevates the relevance of the topic and seeks integrated solutions bridging environmental and migration policies. The framing of the issue profoundly influences the policy response, whether focusing on security or human rights considerations. A shift towards a climate justice perspective could hold countries



accountable for the consequences of their emissions,⁴⁴ fostering a more holistic response that addresses humanitarian concerns beyond mere migration control and climate impact mitigation.

The conclusions drawn regarding the specific protection of environmental migrants by the EU are disappointing, revealing a lack of coherence and harmony between efforts to manage migration and the safeguarding of human rights. In an increasingly hostile European landscape for migrants, where the right to asylum and protection is under pressure, the trend towards externalisation of migration management effectively outsources the EU's obligation to respect human rights.⁴⁵ This signals a decline in the EU's role as a defender of human rights, exacerbated by political inertia. Consequently, the response remains flawed and incomplete, failing to address all dimensions of migration and displacement and leaving people without protection.

The EU, with its unique position and competences in climate change, migration, and human rights, has the opportunity to leverage its capabilities effectively. While enhancing preventive measures is crucial, equal importance must be placed on assisting and protecting those compelled to migrate due to climate change. This assistance should go beyond humanitarian aid to encompass protective measures facilitating safe border crossing.⁴⁶ Despite the absence of specific provisions for environmental migrants in both international and EU law, safeguarding their human rights remains paramount. This aligns with the European commitment to upholding the dignity and well-being of all individuals.

Amidst the backdrop of contentious debates on migration, particularly since 2015, the EU faces a critical juncture: to persist as a fortress or to prioritise adequate human rights protection for those in need.

PRIORITISING PEOPLE: HUMAN RIGHTS AND CLIMATE JUSTICE IN EU POLICY

The European focus on preventing displacement casts doubts on the underlying intentions of strategies aimed

at averting climate-induced migration.⁴⁷ The prevailing concern about potential mass migrations to Europe has framed the climate-migration nexus predominantly as a security issue for Europe or a developmental concern for third countries. These narratives favour a rhetoric that often overlooks the rights of the most vulnerable individuals and reveals inherent paradoxes within EU policies. Indeed, while acknowledging the necessity of labour migration to offset an ageing population, the EU struggles to attract workers and simultaneously prioritises strict border controls and migration policies. Moreover, the EU's stance on climate-induced migration presents a double paradox. First, EU Member States, major contributors to historical and present greenhouse gas emissions, experience the least severe impacts of climate change, which they have significantly contributed to causing. Second, while the EU is renowned for adhering to humanitarian principles and providing aid, the lack of a comprehensive approach to the issue may be seen as insufficient.

When acknowledging the less severe consequences of climate change for the Global North, it's essential to recognise that developed countries bear the primary responsibility for the climate crisis. Climate justice places human rights at the forefront, holding states accountable for their role in the crisis and ensuring the protection of vulnerable populations.⁴⁸ By taking a clear stance on the matter, the EU has the potential to address environmental injustices, promote social equity, and safeguard the rights of those impacted by the climate crisis through a nuanced and comprehensive strategy.

Empirical evidence strongly suggests a significant link between the climate crisis and issues of justice, as lower-income countries and vulnerable communities are disproportionately affected.⁴⁹ As a former colonial power and a major contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions, the EU bears a significant responsibility for addressing the unequal impacts of climate change and the historical injustices embedded within its colonial past.⁵⁰ By integrating climate justice principles into policymaking, the EU can acknowledge and rectify its historical role in perpetuating structural inequalities and

power imbalances between the Global North and the Global South.⁵¹ This approach is not only ethically crucial but also necessary for fostering global solidarity and ensuring a just transition to a sustainable future for all.

In light of these considerations, the following recommendations aim to align EU policies with climate justice and human rights principles:

1. **Promote human security and adopt a human rights-centred approach.** Shift the paradigm from national security to human security by integrating human rights into all climate and migration policies. Focus on safeguarding the safety, well-being, and dignity of individual impacted by climate change. Enhance human rights protections for migrants, ensuring their dignity and security throughout the migration process. Engage with communities and human rights defenders to create responsive and effective policies.
2. **Strengthen legal protection for environmental migrants.** Establish clear legal frameworks to recognise and protect the status and rights of environmental migrants. Implement measures such as temporary or long-term admission based on climate-induced migration, humanitarian visas, and safe and regular migration pathways. Uphold the rights of migrants, coordinating efforts among international and national legal bodies to ensure consistent protection.
3. **Integrate climate justice principles into policy formulation.** Embed climate justice principles in policy formulation to address historical responsibilities and structural inequalities. Hold major emitters accountable for their contributions to climate change. Develop policies that mitigate the disproportionate impacts on vulnerable populations, fostering coordination across sectors to improve policy coherence and effectiveness.
4. **Foster inclusive policy formulation.** Engage in meaningful dialogue with affected communities and stakeholders to develop policies that reflect their needs and realities. Ensure inclusivity in policymaking by considering the perspectives of those impacted by climate change, fostering ownership and support for implementation. Enhance coordination among governments, NGOs, and the private sector to break silos.
5. **Develop a comprehensive strategy for climate-induced migration.** Create an integrated strategy for climate-induced migration that extends beyond humanitarian aid. Include protective measures for safe border crossings, such as labour migration and visa facilitation. Ensure protection for displaced individuals and uphold their fundamental rights. Apply this strategy within the EU and in third countries, coordinating efforts across government sectors and agencies for a unified approach.
6. **Support climate adaptation and resilience.** Invest in climate adaptation initiatives in vulnerable regions, supporting community resilience to climate impacts. Recognise migration as an adaptation strategy, respecting individuals' agency and creating viable migration pathways. Engage with communities and human rights defenders to guide investments, ensuring they meet the actual needs of those affected.
7. **Ensure accountability for climate crisis contributions.** Hold Member States accountable for their contributions to the climate crisis through fair distribution of responsibilities and resources. Implement the polluter-pays principle to support mitigation and adaptation efforts in disproportionately affected regions. Promote international coordination to enforce accountability and bolster adaptation initiatives.
8. **Promote global solidarity and just transition.** Advocate for global solidarity and a just transition towards sustainability. Foster international collaboration to address climate change, social equity, and human rights holistically. Lead by example in committing to humanitarian principles and addressing environmental injustices. Enhance international coordination to maximise impact and ensure equitable support across regions.



CONCLUSION

The increasing polarisation around climate change and migration significantly influences the current policy framework and its possible developments. By employing varying degrees of nationalism as responses to the climate crisis, some parties promote border reinforcement over addressing structural problems. This dichotomy between environmental protection and human mobility is misleading,⁵² as they are not mutually exclusive. Additionally, the EU's approach to achieve its migration goals raises further concerns about the effectiveness of European action in protecting, respecting, and promoting human rights.

The European Union's approach to climate-induced migration reveals significant gaps between its commitments and its policies. Despite acknowledging the nexus between climate change and migration, the EU's policies often prioritise security and control over human-centred solutions. This undermines the EU's credibility and its role as a global leader in both human rights and climate action. As nations continue erecting physical and ideological barriers, the plight of environmentally displaced people remains unanswered. Aligning efforts to tackle climate change, sustainable development, and human rights protection concurrently could bridge the gap that environmental migrants currently face. More investment in adaptation and listening to communities and human rights defenders are essential steps in this direction.

The EU stands at a crossroad in addressing climate migration amidst rising nationalism and xenophobia, and there is an urgent need for decisive action. Policymakers must transcend empty, racial and unjust rhetoric that links (climate) migration to national security concerns, hindering meaningful progress. Instead, prioritising human security offers a pathway towards addressing the underlying vulnerabilities and safeguarding the rights of individuals impacted by the climate crisis, fostering a more sustainable and just approach. To truly address the challenges of climate-induced migration, a paradigm shift is imperative. This shift should focus on integrating

climate justice into all policy frameworks and holding major emitters accountable. Additionally, the EU must reconcile its external and internal migration policies to create safe, legal pathways for those displaced by climate change. The current approach, characterised by externalising migration management and neglecting the rights of environmental migrants, is both ethically and practically inadequate. A genuine commitment to climate justice requires confronting the EU's historical responsibilities and addressing the structural inequalities that drive migration.

Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of historical and political factors. Only through a concerted effort to prioritise human rights and climate justice, overcoming colonial and imperialistic heritages, can the EU fulfil its commitments to its values and uphold its role as a global leader.

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