

STUDENT PAPER 2

Literature Review:

Why has climate change increased the number of displaced persons of the world?

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FEBRUARY 5, 2025



ABSTRACT

This literature review explores the complex interplay between climate change, migration, and socio-political factors, focusing on the case studies of Kiribati and Syria. It critically examines the notion that climate change is a direct driver of conflict and displacement, arguing instead that deeper systemic issues often underlie these phenomena. Selby et al. (2017) contend that Syria's civil war was primarily fueled by political repression and economic hardship rather than solely by climate-induced drought. This perspective challenges the prevalent narrative that frames environmental degradation as the main catalyst for conflict. Abel et al. (2019) further complicate this understanding by emphasizing the need for precise definitions and contextual sensitivity in studying climate-induced migration, suggesting that varying socio-political contexts significantly influence the outcomes of environmental stressors. In contrast, Kiribati exemplifies the direct threats posed by climate change, with rising sea levels compelling the nation to consider migration as a last resort. The Kiribati government advocates for "migration with dignity," aiming to preserve cultural identity while addressing the existential threat of climate change. This case highlights the importance of international cooperation and comprehensive legal frameworks to protect climate migrants, who currently lack formal recognition under international law. The review highlights the necessity of addressing both environmental and socio-political vulnerabilities in formulating effective responses to climate-induced displacement. It calls for a transnational approach that prioritizes the dignity and rights of affected populations, recognizing that the challenges posed by climate change require collaborative, context-sensitive solutions that transcend national borders. Ultimately, the findings highlight the urgent need for an integrated framework that addresses the multifaceted drivers of climate migration while ensuring the protection of displaced persons and the preservation of their cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is rapidly transforming the world's socio-political and economic landscape, creating a host of challenges that demand urgent global attention. Among its most severe consequences is the forced displacement of millions of people, driven by rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and the widespread degradation of vital ecosystems. Vulnerable regions, particularly those in the Global South with limited resilience and adaptive capacity, are bearing the brunt of these impacts, leading to a displacement crisis that crosses national borders and affects both those displaced and the communities that host them. Unlike refugees fleeing war or persecution, those displaced by climate change are not legally recognized under international law, leaving them without the critical protections that are afforded to refugees, such as the right to seek asylum and access to international assistance. This lack of formal recognition and protection places climate migrants in a particularly precarious position, vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination, with little recourse for support or safety. This gap in legal protection raises an urgent and pressing question: Why has climate change contributed to the growing number of displaced persons around the world, and what steps can be taken to address this crisis? Current research increasingly emphasizes the complex, multi-dimensional relationship between environmental stressors, socio-economic vulnerability, and political instability as key drivers of climate-induced migration. Case studies such as the Syrian civil war illustrate how climate change-related disruptions—like prolonged droughts, resource scarcity, and agricultural collapse—can aggravate existing social tensions, leading to mass migration both internally and across borders. These cases serve as stark reminders of the way environmental degradation interacts with socio-political factors to intensify conflict and displacement. As the effects of climate change continue to intensify, the number of people displaced by environmental factors is expected to rise exponentially, putting further strain on international systems and local infrastructures. Despite the growing recognition of climate-induced migration as a global crisis, climate migrants still lack formal legal status and protection under international law, leaving them without essential support in times of displacement. This gap in recognition and protection further complicates the global response to this issue and highlights the need for more comprehensive legal frameworks that specifically address the rights of climate migrants. This research will critically analyze the unique vulnerabilities faced by climate-induced migrants, particularly considering their exclusion from international refugee protections and will assess the adequacy of current legal frameworks in addressing the growing challenges posed by climate change-induced displacement. By exploring the intersections of environmental degradation, legal recognition, and political response, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the legal, humanitarian, and policy challenges facing climate migrants.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK GAP FOR CLIMATE MIGRANTS

The inability to classify climate-induced migrants as refugees presents significant challenges, as they lack formal protections under current frameworks. While the UN Human Rights Committee has acknowledged that 'it is unlawful for states to send people to places where the impacts of climate change

expose them to life-threatening risks or a risk of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment’ (McAdam, 2020), the non-binding nature of this guidance limits its enforceability, leaving countries to follow their own interpretations of climate responsibility. Without enforceable protections, many governments, particularly right-leaning ones, may choose not to extend protections, prioritizing national interests over humanitarian obligations. Bettini and Casaglia (2024) reveal how some governments, like Italy’s right-wing coalition, have framed the climate crisis as a national issue, aiming to “taming the debate on the impacts of global warming and reducing it to a domestic matter” (Bettini & Casaglia, 2024). This reframing, which Bettini and Casaglia term ‘domestication,’ allows states to sidestep global responsibilities by avoiding the implications of transnational climate migration, an approach that reinforces borders and diminishes collaborative international solutions. As Jakobsson (2021) notes, the role of framing in this process “determines the conceptual boundaries through which different elements of policymaking are understood” (Jakobsson, 2021). By positioning climate migration as a domestic concern, governments shift the narrative to support containment strategies rather than fostering collective global responses. Furthermore, by securitizing climate-induced migration as a national threat, governments amplify restrictive immigration policies, justifying enhanced border control measures under the guise of national security. As Bettini and Casaglia (2024) observe, “the figure of the climate refugee has also been one of the key vehicles for the securitization of climate change” (Bettini & Casaglia, 2024). This framing strategically limits the policy communities and institutional venues involved in addressing climate migration, thereby narrowing the scope of solutions considered (Jakobsson, 2021). This selective engagement aligns with the Italian coalition’s tendency to focus on immediate, pragmatic responses, like local disaster relief, “in favor of more pragmatic pathways” (Bettini & Casaglia, 2024), rather than addressing the root causes and transnational impacts of climate change. Kingdon’s concept of convergent policy streams further illustrates this point, as he argues that the interplay between problem framing, political interests, and policy options significantly influences the resulting agenda (Jakobsson, 2021). In the case of climate migration, right-wing parties leverage these streams to legitimize policies that not only restrict entry but also perpetuate racialized narratives about migration from the Global South to the Global North, framing migrants as outsiders and potential threats (Bettini & Casaglia, 2024). This racialized framing compounds the barriers faced by climate migrants from vulnerable regions, whose needs are often overlooked in favor of restrictive national agendas. McAdam’s emphasis on the right to life, which “includes the right of individuals to enjoy a life with dignity” (McAdam, 2020), highlights that climate displacement threatens not only physical safety but also fundamental standards of living. However, restrictive policies shaped by security-centered narratives jeopardize this dignity, leaving vulnerable communities with inadequate protection against intensifying climate impacts. Bettini and Casaglia (2024) caution that if right-wing parties increasingly incorporate “climate security” rhetoric without challenge, it risks becoming “another weapon against progressive politics and migration rights” (Bettini & Casaglia, 2024), shifting the focus from collective climate action to security-oriented policies. Both McAdam’s humanitarian insights and the critiques from Bettini and Casaglia reveal the stark contrast between humanitarian approaches to climate displacement and nationalist responses that prioritize containment. The Italian case exemplifies how

the focus on domestic ‘solutions’ limits international cooperation, ultimately restricting protections for climate migrants facing escalating risks due to environmental degradation. These limitations in legal and political frameworks highlight the urgent need for a comprehensive, international response that respects the dignity and rights of all individuals affected by climate change, recognizing that the framing and categorization of climate migration profoundly shape the policies and institutional responses considered on the global stage (Jakobsson, 2021).

CASE STUDIES ON KIRIBATI AND SYRIA

Recent literature on climate change migration positions Kiribati and Syria as crucial case studies, highlighting the complex interplay of environmental and socio-political factors that drive displacement in vulnerable regions. Kiribati, a low-lying island nation in the Pacific, confronts an existential threat from rising sea levels, with scientific projections indicating that significant parts of its territory may be rendered uninhabitable within the next few decades. The physical changes anticipated on Kiribati’s shores are so extreme that both the government and local communities are compelled to contemplate unprecedented relocation strategies, raising questions about the legal and political frameworks necessary to support “climate refugees” (Wyett, 2018). As Wyett notes, “the inundation of an entire nation due to anthropogenic climate change has never been seen” (Wyett, 2018), making Kiribati potentially the first country to experience total submersion due to rising seas. This unprecedented situation has brought global attention to the severity of the threat facing Kiribati, where urgent measures are needed to ensure a sustainable future for its people. However, migration is not merely an issue of survival; it also entails challenges of preserving cultural identity, social cohesion, and sovereignty – factors that make relocation a last-resort option in the eyes of many i-Kiribati people. This delicate balance has prompted Kiribati’s leaders to pursue innovative bilateral agreements, policy initiatives, and international dialogues aimed at facilitating dignified migration while safeguarding the cultural heritage of its people. In contrast, Syria’s climate-induced migration reveals a more complex interaction between environmental degradation and socio-political tensions, which aggravates the nation’s instability. Long-standing droughts and extreme weather patterns have repeatedly threatened Syria’s agricultural base, contributing to widespread rural-urban migration that, according to some studies, further fueled socio-economic grievances and public discontent. While some argue that recurring droughts were a catalyst for social unrest, others, such as Selby et al. (2017), challenge the often-simplistic “Syria-climate conflict thesis” (Selby et al., 2017), cautioning against attributing the nation’s internal conflict solely to environmental factors. Instead, these critics argue that Syria’s socio-political vulnerabilities, compounded by rapid urbanization, economic hardship, and political repression, were instrumental in creating conditions ripe for conflict. This complex scenario highlights the multifaceted drivers of climate migration and the varying forms that adaptation and displacement can take. Syria’s case study thus serves as a reminder that while climate impacts can aggravate migration pressures, their role in inflicting conflict is deeply intertwined with existing socio-political factors, making it difficult to isolate environmental causes from other structural drivers. Together, these two cases illustrate the profound diversity in climate migration experiences and highlight the urgent

need for adaptable, context-sensitive policies that address both immediate survival needs and long-term cultural preservation.

The case of Kiribati exemplifies the intricate balance between environmental displacement, cultural identity, and socio-political considerations in climate-induced migration. Scholars widely agree that migration may become inevitable for small island states like Kiribati as they face escalating impacts of climate change (Allgood & McNamara, 2017). To address these challenges, the Kiribati government has developed strategies focusing on both adaptation and planned migration. “Migration with dignity is crucial,” notes Wyett (2014), reflecting the government’s stance that while “relocation will always be viewed as an option of last resort,” (Wyett, 2014) it must be approached with respect for the dignity and rights of the i-Kiribati people. This statement highlights the government’s commitment to prioritizing voluntary migration over forced displacement, with policies that strive to maintain cultural identity and community cohesion. For Kiribati, migration is not merely a question of survival; it involves issues of sovereignty, heritage, and identity. To support this delicate balance, the government is actively seeking bilateral migration agreements with nearby nations like Australia and New Zealand, which, as Wyett (2014) argues, “present the best policy option” due to their proximity and capacity to accommodate climate migrants from Kiribati. However, challenges persist as Kiribati contemplates migration. Population growth combined with shrinking land availability is projected to cause “population density to increase fivefold by 2100, a situation that is clearly unstable” (Wyett, 2014). Rising sea levels aggravate living conditions, placing additional pressure on resources, infrastructure, and social systems. Although the international community has expressed concern for Kiribati’s situation, Wyett notes that assistance has focused on in-situ adaptation rather than acknowledging the need for migration: “The international community has focused its altruistic efforts on helping countries adapt to the impacts of climate change in place” (Wyett, 2014). Locke also emphasizes the need for proactive, well-planned strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of forced relocation, noting that, “with proper planning and specific policy implementation, the costs of relocation for displaced persons and recipient states can be minimized,” (Locke, 2009). His analysis complements Kiribati’s approach by highlighting the need for intentional policies to reduce the economic and social burdens associated with displacement. Locke further observes that Kiribati faces direct threats from climate change and experiences, “secondary impacts of climate change, exacerbating existing problems associated with degradation and pollution,” (Locke, 2009). These secondary effects indicate that climate change intensifies pre-existing issues, straining the nation’s ability to sustain its population, infrastructure, and health systems. Additionally, Locke points to the combined influence of “economic migratory pull factors associated with uneven development” (Locke, 2009) and “environmental push factors” (Locke, 2009), highlighting the interaction of economic disparities and environmental deterioration in driving migration. For Kiribati, he argues, the “anticipated rise in global mean sea levels... will gradually lead to increased out-migration as a method of survival” (Locke, 2009), suggesting that relocation may indeed become essential as climate conditions worsen. The i-Kiribati community is already grappling with significant effects of climate change, though these impacts vary across its dispersed islands, presenting unique adaptation challenges. While some acknowledge the need for relocation, sentiments

toward migration are mixed; as one respondent put it, “Kiribati is my birthplace, this is where I belong and I would die here” (Allgood & McNamara, 2017). Others voice concerns about adapting to life elsewhere, questioning, “How will we survive there? Everything will change” (Allgood & McNamara, 2017). The rising sea levels have stirred a blend of apprehension and resolve among citizens, who face the possibility of parts of the island nation becoming uninhabitable. Studies by Maekawa et al. (2019) reveal high climate awareness among the younger generation, with 80% of students expecting sea level rise and 84% recognizing climate change’s potential impact. This suggests that environmental concerns shape young i-Kiribati views of their future. Despite this awareness, migration is not seen as an easy or preferred solution; it is viewed as complex, with challenges surrounding adjustment and survival. For many, “the issue of education plays a significant role in decision-making, and, before and after migration, is the most important motivation for Kiribati people to migrate to Fiji” (Maekawa et al., 2019). Education is thus a primary driver for migration, seen as a route to stability and adaptability. However, relocation to countries like Fiji comes with barriers, as Kiribati certifications often go unrecognized, limiting employment opportunities and complicating integration (Maekawa et al., 2019). Religion also influences migration views, with some locals citing the Biblical story of Noah as proof that God will shield them from catastrophic flooding, thereby reinforcing their decision to stay (Allgood & McNamara, 2017). This deep-seated connection to the land persists even as some acknowledge the limited adaptation options available. Of those surveyed, 14 suggested finding a new place for resettlement, while 11 advocated for increased in-situ adaptation to preserve their way of life within the islands as long as possible (Allgood & McNamara, 2017). This attachment to homeland is profound; Maekawa et al. (2019) note that only a minority of respondents express no intention to return, highlighting the deep cultural and emotional ties to Kiribati, which they see as both heritage and pride. This sentiment is echoed by the High Commissioner of Kiribati to Fiji, who states, “the Kiribati people will not leave their homeland, their heritage, and their pride” (Maekawa et al., 2019). These varied responses underscore the need for culturally sensitive policies and robust international support for climate migration. The government of Kiribati is urged to engage in bilateral and international dialogues to secure adaptation funding and create pathways for migration. Kiribati’s predicament brings focus to the global need for policies that transcend in-situ adaptation, emphasizing the necessity of collaborative international migration agreements that support displaced populations while preserving their sense of identity and dignity.

In examining Syria’s climate change migration, scholars like Jan Selby et al., and Meliz Ergin critique the often-simplistic link drawn between environmental factors and conflict. Selby (2017), for instance, challenges the “Syria-climate conflict thesis” (Selby et al., 2017), a widely accepted narrative that attributes Syria’s civil war directly to climate change-induced drought. He argues that this thesis, while “powerful... because it illustrates the chaos that may ensue as greenhouse gas emissions rise” (Selby et al., 2017), fails to capture the full complexity of the conflict. Rather than being directly climate-driven, Selby contends that Syria’s civil war stemmed from deeper, systemic socio-political issues. Supporting this, he notes that “none of the political demands made by Syria’s early 2011 protests movements related directly to either drought or migration” (Selby et al., 2017), highlighting that political repression and economic hardship

were more central motivators for unrest. Moreover, “migrants from the northeast were not significantly involved in the early 2011 unrest” (Selby et al., 2017), challenging claims that drought-induced migration contributed to the conflict. This critical stance questions popular portrayals of the Syrian crisis as a model case of “climate crisis” (Selby et al., 2017), instead urging a deeper investigation into the political and social vulnerabilities that amplify climate impacts in fragile states. Abel et al. further complicates this view, noting that “changing the definition of our conflict variable and the sample of countries employed in the estimation substantially modifies the results of the conflict and selection equations” (Abel et al., 2019). This suggests that understanding the nature of climate-induced migration requires precise definitions and contextual sensitivity, as different variables may yield differing conclusions. In Syria’s case, Abel et al. argue that “the effect of SPEI on conflict occurrence is specific to relatively small conflicts... and to countries affected by the Arab Spring in the period 2010–2012” (Abel et al., 2019). This specificity highlights the regional factors that influence how environmental stresses intersect with migration and conflict, complicating assumptions that climate change broadly drives migration. Adding a global perspective, Ergin expands on the idea of environmental displacement as a transnational responsibility. He argues that the impacts of climate change on countries like Syria illustrate the “growing gap between those who generate ecological problems and those who suffer from the consequences” (Ergin, 2017), stressing the importance of recognizing the disparity between contributors to and victims of climate-induced crises. For Ergin, this issue requires an eco-cosmopolitan framework – an ethical stance that recognizes “environmental migration as a planetary issue that calls for global responsibility” (Ergin, 2017). His framework advocates for a more transnational approach, where affected populations receive support through local solutions and a cooperative international response. Echoing this view, Abel et al. emphasize that “policies to improve the adaptive capacity to deal with the effects of climate change in developing economies may have additional returns by reducing the likelihood of conflict and thus forced migration outflows” (Abel et al., 2019). This statement highlights the role of adaptive policies in mitigating conflict and supporting communities in situ. Thus, while Selby et al. (2017) cautions against oversimplifying the environmental drivers of conflict, Ergin (2017) and Abel et al. (2019) highlight that climate-induced displacement necessitates global solidarity. Their work collectively suggests that both the root causes of displacement and the response must consider socio-political and economic inequities, challenging the notion that climate change alone drives forced migration and advocating for an internationally cooperative approach to manage these complex issues.

CONCLUSION

In exploring the cases of Kiribati and Syria, this literature review reveals that climate change has significantly contributed to the increase in displaced persons around the world, but not solely due to environmental factors. The case of Kiribati illustrates how environmental degradation, such as rising sea levels and extreme weather, directly threatens livelihoods and forces communities to consider migration. However, the government’s emphasis on planned migration and the protection of cultural identity shows that displacement in the face of climate change is not only driven by environmental forces but also by the

need to preserve sovereignty, heritage, and community cohesion. Despite the challenges posed by legal recognition, economic barriers, and emotional ties to the land, the growing threats from climate change are making migration increasingly inevitable for vulnerable island states. In contrast, Syria's experience challenges the assumption that climate-induced migration is solely a result of environmental degradation; rather, it shows that pre-existing socio-political vulnerabilities, including political repression and economic instability, are often more significant drivers of displacement. This suggests that while environmental factors like climate change may push migration pressures, they are often rooted in deeper socio-political issues, such as governance, economic hardship, and regional conflict. Together, these cases demonstrate that the increase in displaced persons due to climate change is not only a result of environmental push factors but is also deeply intertwined with socio-political and economic vulnerabilities. Climate change acts as a catalyst that exacerbates existing inequalities and weaknesses within nations, driving migration as a response to multiple, compounding crises. Furthermore, this analysis exposes a critical gap in the international legal framework: there is currently no legally recognized status for climate-induced migrants, meaning they lack protections afforded to refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention. While climate change may push individuals and communities to migrate, they are not eligible for asylum or international protection solely based on climate-related factors. This absence of legal recognition leaves climate migrants in a precarious position, as they are often classified as economic migrants rather than displaced persons. The literature points to the need for a comprehensive international framework that acknowledges the main drivers and vulnerabilities of climate-induced displacement and provides protection for those forced to migrate due to environmental changes beyond their control. As the world faces more frequent and severe climate impacts, it is crucial to recognize that the rise in displaced persons is not just a direct consequence of environmental change but the result of complex interactions between environmental stressors and socio-political factors. Addressing this issue requires not only environmental solutions but also legal and policy reforms to provide protection for those affected. Thus, the increase in climate-induced displacement reflects a broader global challenge, one that requires addressing both the environmental drivers of displacement and the underlying socio-political vulnerabilities that make communities susceptible to the impacts of climate change. To mitigate the growing crisis, global cooperation is essential, with comprehensive migration frameworks that prioritize both the protection of displaced persons and the sustainable development of vulnerable regions. Only through a coordinated, transnational response can we begin to manage the consequences of climate change and support those most affected by its impacts.

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