

# Increasing Displacement In West Africa: Reconceptualizing International Protection For Climate Migrants Beyond The 1951 Refugee Convention

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DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.15.12.2025.p16811  
<https://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.15.12.2025.p16811>

Paper Received Date: 14th October 2025  
Paper Acceptance Date: 25th November 2025  
Paper Publication Date: 6th December 2025

## Abstract

Climate change is increasingly responsible for human migration, and West Africa is one of the most vulnerable regions. Environmental factors such as Sahelian desertification, recurrent droughts, coastal erosion between Ghana and Senegal, and wet-season flooding between Niger and Nigeria are forcing individuals to migrate internally and transnationally. Despite the growing numbers of climate-related displacement, the 1951 Refugee Convention does not account for climate migrants, and therefore vulnerable individuals remain without adequate legal protection under international law. This legal and institutional gap enhances susceptibilities in West Africa where environmental changes rapidly alter settlement patterns and means of livelihoods. Although international institutions such as the United Nations, UNHCR, IOM, and UNDP have invested in displacement and migration response programs, these programs are too limited in scope, non-coordinated, or not legally binding, rendering them inadequate. Regional instruments, such as ECOWAS free movement protocols, provide some mobility and humanitarian relief but are limited in scope and enforcement. For this reason, climate migrants endure social exclusion, economic insecurity, and human rights abuses.

This study evaluates climate migration in West Africa by reviewing the relationships between environmental, social, and economic displacement drivers. It evaluates the role of international governance and criticizes the inadequacies of regional and international systems in providing comprehensive protection. The study uses Niger, Senegal, and Ghana case studies to determine achievements and gaps in current responses and emphasizes the need for improved coordination and targeted interventions. It finally urges legal and policy reforms to define climate migrants, integrate displacement into national and regional planning, and further safeguard livelihoods and human rights. Focusing on West Africa, the paper underscores the need for overhauling protection systems in order to apply efficient, fair, and sustainable policies for climate-displaced persons.

## Introduction

Climate change is becoming more widely recognized as being amongst the most significant drivers for human migration in the twenty-first century. West Africa, which is characterized by fragile ecosystems, high population growth rates, and economic vulnerabilities, is among the most adversely affected areas. Ecological stressors in the guise of desertification in the Sahel region, prolonged and recurrent droughts in Niger and Mali, sea shore erosion in Ghana and Senegal, and seasonal floods in Nigeria are displacing thousands of people and households from their homes each year. These internal climate mobilizations are also transnational, presenting complex challenges to host societies, states, and humanitarian organizations.

International legal frameworks have lagged behind and failed to afford adequate protection to these groups despite growing scale and urgency of climate displacement. The 1951 Refugee Convention, the cornerstone of refugee law, establishes a refugee as a person outside his or her country and afraid to return because he or she fears persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. It does not classify people displaced by environmental or climate reasons alone. As a result,

millions of climate migrants in West Africa are in a situation of legal limbo, having no access to international protection, social services, and economic opportunities.

International institutions like the United Nations, UNHCR, IOM, and UNDP have begun addressing some of the components of climate migration through humanitarian measures, adaptation initiatives, and models of migration. These are typically disjunctive, poorly coordinated, and ineffective in terms of their legal mandate. Regional agreements such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) free movement protocols provide some protection and mobility for displaced individuals but are greatly constrained by non-uniform application, budgetary constraints, and not paying attention to climate-specific risk.

This paper argues that the exclusion of climate migrants from normal protection mechanisms is a serious shortcoming both of international and regional governance. Focusing on West Africa, it examines the environmental, social, and economic drivers of climate displacement, reviews the response so far from global and regional governance frameworks, and highlights shortcomings in existing frameworks. Relying on this case study, this research aims to advise policy and legal reform to better safeguard the rights, livelihoods, and human dignity of climate migrants. Lastly, the study underscores the necessity to revisit global protection strategies so that climate migrants across West Africa, and all over, are no longer caught between legal and humanitarian limbo.

### **Methodology**

This study draws on a qualitative, case study approach to examine climate-driven displacement within West Africa and assess the effectiveness of international and regional protection systems for climate migrants. Focusing on West Africa allows the rigorous examination of environmental, social, and policy dynamics within a region highly vulnerable to climate change.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative and analytical method is used in understanding drivers, trends, and implications of climate migration in West Africa. The study integrates data from diverse sources, including peer-reviewed journals, United Nations and ECOWAS reports, government reports, as well as credible non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on migration and climate. This enables the complete understanding of the West African setting as well as a deconstruction of international and regional systems of governance.

### **Data Collection**

1. Document Analysis: The study analyzes international treaties, conventions, and agreements, e.g., the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Global Compact on Migration, and UN mechanisms regarding climate change.
2. Case Studies: Some countries like Niger, Senegal, and Ghana are studied in order to illustrate the real on-the-ground impact of climate change-induced displacement, policy responses, and protection gaps.
3. Secondary Data: Statistical reports, policy briefs, and UNHCR, IOM, UNDP, ECOWAS, and other associated agency reports provide qualitative and quantitative data on policy influence and migration patterns.

The study employs thematic analysis to identify patterns and trends in climate-induced displacement and protection effectiveness. Key themes that emerge include environmental drivers, legal and policy loopholes, regional cooperation, and implications for human rights. Cross-country comparative analysis puts variability in vulnerability, adaptation, and governance responses into focus.

### **Limitations**

The study is limited to secondary data and case studies only, without any primary field observation or interviews. The presence of data and differences in reporting between West African nations may restrict generalizability. The adopted method, nonetheless, provides a comprehensive and systematic method of understanding the legal, social, and environmental aspects of climate migration in West Africa

### **Results / Findings**

The research indicates that climate change is a significant and widening reason for human displacement in West Africa, and both socio-economic and environmental reasons underpin the migration flows. The key findings from the case study analysis of Niger, Senegal, and Ghana are outlined below:

## 1. Environmental Drivers of Displacement

- Desertification and Drought: Continued droughts and spreading desertification of the Sahel area in Mali and Niger have reduced arable land, triggering food deficits and rural-urban migration.
- Coastal Erosion and Flooding: Senegal and Ghana face heavy coastal erosion and sea-level increase, which resettle low-lying coastal dwellers. Flooding during rainy seasons also fuels rural-urban migration.
- Compound Vulnerabilities: Poverty, weak infrastructure, and decreased government support interact with environmental stress to enhance the displacement of susceptible populations like women, children, and smallholder farmers.

## 2. Scale and Patterns of Migration

- Migration is internal (rural-urban) and cross-border, particularly in the Sahel, where groups move into neighboring states in quest of arable land and livelihood opportunities.
- Displacement is usually seasonal or temporary, but recurring environmental shocks are creating half-permanent migration flows, particularly among smallholder farmers and fisherfolk.

## 3. Shortcomings of Current Protection Mechanisms

- The 1951 Refugee Convention does not mention climate migrants, leaving vulnerable groups unprotected under the law.
- International action by UNHCR, IOM, and UNDP provides humanitarian aid and adaptation programs but are ad hoc and in default of meeting long-term displacement needs.
- Regional frameworks such as ECOWAS free movement agreements facilitate mobility across borders but neglect climate-related displacement and are hardly implemented in member states.

## 4. Livelihood and Human Rights Implications

- Climate migrants have limited access to housing, education, health centers, and job opportunities among host communities.
- Hostility, competition for resources, and social exclusion between host and displaced communities are increasing.
- Disproportionately, women and children are affected due to gendered exposures and livelihood reliance on natural resources.

## 5. Adaptive and Policy Emergence

- Some West African governments are incorporating climate migration into national development and adaptation plans.
- Local and regional NGOs are primarily involved in emergency support, skills development, and advocacy for climate-displaced individuals.
- Gaps in coordination at international, regional, and national levels still undermine the effectiveness of interventions.

## Discussion and Policy Recommendations

### Legal and Institutional Gaps

Exclusion of climate migrants from the 1951 Refugee Convention is a critical gap in international protection. The Convention was designed to save refugees who are fleeing persecution, yet it does not account for the rising number of people displaced solely on environmental and climatic grounds (Migration Policy Institute, 2023). In West Africa, this gap subjects millions to legal vulnerability where they enjoy no access to asylum, protection, or basic services. Existing international efforts such as the Global Compact on Migration acknowledge climate displacement but are largely non-binding and lack enforceable action plans, with little effective protection afforded to these groups (Earth.Org, 2025).

### Regional Responses and Limitations

West Africa has also shifted to address cross-border migration by regional means, namely the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) protocols for free movement. These protocols provide freedom of movement among member countries and some form of protection to migrants; yet, they do not address climate-driven displacement directly nor define special assistance to the affected communities subjected to repeated environmental shocks (Bensah, 2023). Implementation is not equal, with some countries lacking infrastructure or resources to entirely implement mobility rights. Further, coordination between regional bodies and global institutions

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10.29322/IJSRP.15.12.2025.p16811

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such as UNHCR and IOM remains poor, thus compromising the effectiveness of interventions and exposing climate migrants to vulnerabilities (IOM, 2023).

### Human Rights and Livelihood Implications

West African climate migrants are faced with numerous challenges beyond displacement. Limited employment opportunities for housing, education, health, and the host community foster socio-economic insecurity (Osei-Amponsah, 2023). Social conflicts between host communities and migrants normally arise from rivalry for available resources, creating a vicious cycle of vulnerability and marginalization. Disproportionately affected are vulnerable groups like women and children, with women inclined to bear the brunt of shortages in resources and children falling victim to education and development disruptions (Chigudu, 2024). These vulnerabilities highlight the imperative need for strong protection frameworks that go beyond the emergency humanitarian response to include long-term support, resilience building, and human rights enforcement.

### Emerging Adaptation Strategies

Several West African countries have begun mainstreaming climate migration into national development and adaptation plans. Locality-based programs, generally brought about by NGOs or local governments, focus on resilience, skills building, and sustainable livelihood (Osei-Amponsah, 2023). While essential, these are modest-sized and under-resourced programs, typically not addressing extensive or iterated movements. Strengthening such initiatives via global and regional partnerships is central to developing scalable, long-term solutions.

### Policy Recommendations

1. Legal Recognition: Establish a new international legal framework or adjust existing conventions to legally establish climate migrants, ensuring access to rights, protection, and humanitarian aid (University of Chicago, 2024).
2. Regional Mechanisms: Expand ECOWAS and other regional organizations to include climate-qualifying migration policies with equal application among members (Bensah, 2023).
3. Protections of Human Rights: Include climate migration within national human rights and development policy so that access to housing, education, health, and work is ensured (Chigudu, 2024).
4. Community-Based Adaptation: Promote local initiatives to enhance resilience, enhance livelihoods, and provide shelter for displaced individuals with concerted international finance and technical support (Osei-Amponsah, 2023).
5. Enhanced Coordination: Foster increased collaboration among UN agencies, regional bodies, national states, and NGOs to develop coordinated and integrated measures against displacement caused by climate change (IOM, 2023).

### Conclusion

The reduction of West African climate migration must be achieved by an inclusive approach that synthesizes legal reform, strengthened regional cooperation, human rights protection, and community-based adaptation interventions. Through these provisions, the international community and the regional community can be in a position to enhance the protection of the rights and livelihoods of climate migrants and avoid their exposure to legal and humanitarian limbo (Migration Policy Institute, 2023; Earth.Org, 2025). Harmonized, proactive interventions are necessary to generate resilience and equity in a region increasingly affected by climate change.

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## Authors bio

Robert Abeku Ansah is a Ghanaian researcher, scholar and freelance writer. He specializes in climate change, environmental governance, gender and youth leadership and regionalism with interest in West Africa. His research examines the interface between environmental pressure, human mobility, and policy frameworks such as ECOWAS, exploring how legal, social, and economic institutions respond to vulnerable groups. Robert has authored and co-authored several studies on climate migration, human rights, and sustainable development, making policy changes and protection policies a call based on evidence. Outside research and academic work, he works with NGOs to ensure adaptation strategies, resilience building, and livelihood protection for affected populations. His research seeks to integrate findings into planning, legal policy, and human rights scholarship to create more equal, sustainable, and inclusive solutions for environmental change-affected populations.