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An evaluation of the legal and political framework for climate refugees in the context of climate-induced displacement

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Abstract

Climate-induced displacement has emerged as one of the most pressing humanitarian and governance challenges of the twenty-first century. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, flooding, desertification, and water scarcity are increasingly forcing communities to migrate from vulnerable regions, often with little formal protection or legal recourse. Despite growing recognition of climate-induced migration, international and national legal frameworks remain fragmented and largely inadequate to address the specific vulnerabilities of climate-displaced populations. This study examines the experiences of climate-affected communities in Balochistan, Pakistan, focusing on their awareness of, and access to, existing legal and policy mechanisms for protection. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve participants who have experienced climate-induced displacement. Thematic analysis of the data identified four main themes: limited awareness and access to legal frameworks, structural inequalities shaping vulnerability, marginalization and exclusion from policy processes, and the emergence of collective action among displaced communities advocating for recognition and rights. Findings suggest that social, economic, and political hierarchies determine which communities are most affected by climate risks and least able to claim protection under existing frameworks. Furthermore, participants reported that collective organizing and grassroots movements are increasingly used to challenge systemic neglect and advocate for policy reform. The study highlights the urgent need for legal and policy adaptations at both national and international levels to ensure climate-displaced populations can exercise their rights and access protection. By linking empirical evidence with legal and political analysis, the research provides insights for policymakers, activists, and scholars seeking to strengthen climate displacement governance.

Keywords: Legal; Political Framework; Climate Refugee; Climate Induced Displacement.

1. Introduction

Climate-induced displacement is a multifaceted global issue that is increasingly recognized as a critical challenge in the context of climate change. The drivers of such displacement include extreme weather events, sea-level rise, desertification, and water scarcity, which collectively force populations to migrate in search of safety and livelihoods (Faruk & Juthi, 2025; Mittal et al., 2024). This phenomenon is not easily categorized within existing migration frameworks, complicating efforts to provide adequate support

and protection for affected populations (Tinoco & Menjivar, 2025). The socio-economic impacts of climate-induced migration are profound, affecting labor markets, infrastructure, and resource allocation in both origin and destination areas (Bilmez & Umutlu, 2025; Mittal et al., 2024). Socially, it disrupts communities, alters demographics, and poses health challenges (Mittal et al., 2024). Despite the growing scale of this issue, global governance remains fragmented and inadequate, with no single organization taking responsibility for climate displaces (Jordan, 2022). Legal frameworks, such as the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, have proven insufficient in addressing the unique needs of climate migrants, as evidenced by the experiences of citizens from Kiribati and Tuvalu seeking asylum (Salvador, 2023). The lack of coordinated global action exacerbates existing inequalities and could lead to heightened conflicts (Faruk & Juthi, 2025). Research highlights the need for comprehensive planning and international cooperation, including the development of new policies that recognize climate migrants and protect their rights (Faruk & Juthi, 2025; Mittal et al., 2024). Proposed solutions include education programs, infrastructure investments, and increased climate finance to manage migration sustainably (Bilmez & Umutlu, 2025). Addressing climate migration is essential for climate change adaptation and global security, necessitating urgent attention from policymakers and international bodies (Faruk & Juthi, 2025; Gaffar, 2022).

Climate displacement in the Global South is a multifaceted issue exacerbated by climate change, which is expected to displace up to 250 million people by 2050, with the majority of this displacement occurring in ecologically and economically vulnerable regions of the Global South (Gonzalez, 2019; Sarkar & Danda, 2023). The impacts of climate change, such as rising temperatures, water stress, droughts, floods, and sea-level rise, are significant stressors that lead to both voluntary and forced migration (Almulhim et al., 2024). These environmental challenges are compounded by systemic power relations and structural conditions, which influence the vulnerability of populations and their capacity to adapt (Olarie & Díaz-Márquez, 2025). The Global South faces unique challenges due to endemic poverty, inequality, and food insecurity, which are further exacerbated by rapid urbanization as displaced populations move from rural areas to cities, leading to increased social and environmental problems (Mónico et al., 2025). Despite the scale of the issue, international legal frameworks, such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals, have yet to develop comprehensive protections for climate-displaced persons, leaving significant gaps in addressing climate justice and displacement (Gonzalez, 2019). Moreover, the phenomenon of climate-induced migration is not solely driven by environmental factors but is also influenced by political, institutional, and socio-economic factors, necessitating a comprehensive approach to adaptation and risk reduction strategies (Almulhim et al., 2024; Muzaffar, 2022). The Global South requires collaboration and support from the Global North, including compensation for loss and damage, to effectively manage climate-induced migration (Almulhim et al., 2024). Additionally, the intersection of climate displacement with global care chains highlights the need for policies that support local caring practices, as many resourceful individuals from vulnerable regions are drawn into transnational labor markets, often leaving their communities without essential care resources (Clark & Bettini, 2017). Addressing these complex challenges requires nuanced, multi-level policy

interventions that consider the diverse impacts of climate change on different socio-demographic groups and promote inclusive urban integration (Olarte & Díaz-Márquez, 2025; Tuitjer, 2018).

Climate displacement in Pakistan, particularly in the Balochistan region, is primarily driven by a combination of environmental, socioeconomic, and political factors. The region is highly susceptible to climate-induced hazards such as floods, droughts, and extreme weather events, which are exacerbated by weak institutional capacities and deep-rooted socioeconomic inequalities (Makki et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2025). Balochistan's fragile geography and fragmented security landscape further complicate the situation, as climate change acts as a "threat multiplier," intensifying existing conflicts and creating new ones (Makki et al., 2024; Saad et al., 2024). The 2022 floods, for instance, highlighted the severe impact of climate change on human security, leading to significant displacement and loss of livelihoods (Saeed, 2023). Socioeconomic vulnerabilities, including income inequality, landlessness, and limited access to essential services, compound the risks associated with climate-induced migration (Ullah et al., 2025). Additionally, historical-structural factors such as colonial legacies and governance failures contribute to the region's vulnerability (Bibi & Abbasi, 2024; Ullah et al., 2025). The lack of comprehensive legal frameworks to protect climate-displaced persons further exacerbates the issue, as existing national and international laws are inadequate in addressing the unique challenges posed by climate-induced displacement (Bibi & Abbasi, 2024; Bronen et al., 2018). Consequently, the displaced populations face heightened risks of violence and exploitation, particularly women, who encounter systemic barriers and restricted access to relief resources (Ullah et al., 2025). The interplay between climate change and conflict in Balochistan underscores the urgent need for integrated policies that address these multifaceted challenges, promote climate equity, and enhance institutional resilience to safeguard affected communities (Asif et al., 2025; Makki et al., 2024).

This study focuses on understanding the lived experiences of climate-displaced communities in Balochistan in relation to legal and political frameworks. Its significance lies in examining the interplay of social inequality, access to protection mechanisms, and the emergence of collective action among affected populations. By exploring both the gaps in existing frameworks and grassroots strategies for advocacy, the research provides empirical evidence that can inform national policy reform and contribute to global debates on climate-induced displacement. This study is guided by three key objectives. First, it seeks to explore the awareness of, and access to, existing legal and policy frameworks among communities vulnerable to climate displacement. Second, it examines how social stratification and systemic inequalities determine which communities are most exposed to climate risks and least able to access protection. Third, it investigates the emergence of collective action and grassroots movements among climate-displaced communities advocating for recognition and rights. Together, these objectives provide a comprehensive understanding of the legal, political, and social dimensions of climate displacement in Balochistan, offering insight into the broader challenges of governance, justice, and ethical responsibility in the era of climate change.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Legal Frameworks for Climate Displacement

The legal frameworks addressing climate displacement are currently inadequate, as they often fail to recognize the unique challenges posed by environmental factors. In South Asia, for instance, existing international and national laws, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, do not sufficiently protect climate-displaced individuals, highlighting significant legal gaps and institutional weaknesses (Bibi & Abbasi, 2024). Similarly, the reinterpretation of concepts like "persecution" within international law could expand protections for those fleeing environmental degradation, suggesting a need for a human security-based legal reform (Sugow, 2025). In India, the anticipated displacement of millions due to climate events underscores the urgency for comprehensive legal initiatives that prioritize human rights and community involvement in decision-making (Stellina & Mani, 2024). Furthermore, the situation in Pacific Island states illustrates the necessity for integrated legal frameworks that facilitate safe mobility for climate-displaced populations, emphasizing climate justice. Overall, the current legal landscape requires significant reform to adequately address the complexities of climate-induced displacement (Sachs, 2025).

2.2. Social Inequality and Vulnerability

Climate-induced displacement is profoundly influenced by socio-economic status, caste, gender, and political marginalization, leading to unequal experiences among affected populations. Research indicates that marginalized groups, such as women and indigenous communities, face heightened vulnerabilities due to systemic barriers, including limited access to resources and legal protections (Jayawardhan, 2017; Ullah et al., 2025). For instance, in Pakistan, climate-induced migration is exacerbated by socio-economic inequalities and historical structures that perpetuate gender disparities and tribal norms (Ullah et al., 2025). Similarly, in India, the intersection of caste and gender significantly shapes the experiences of environmentally mediated migrants, revealing how socio-economic disadvantages compound climate vulnerabilities (Michael & Bansal, 2023). Furthermore, children from displaced indigenous communities, like the Pashtun, are particularly susceptible to exploitation and cultural marginalization, highlighting the urgent need for policies that address these intersecting vulnerabilities (Khan, 2025). Overall, addressing these disparities is crucial for developing effective, inclusive climate adaptation strategies (Harun et al., 2025).

2.3. Political and Policy Responses to Climate Displacement

Political and policy responses to climate displacement are increasingly critical as climate change is projected to displace millions, particularly from vulnerable regions like the Global South (Gonzalez, 2019). Effective policies must encompass prevention, management, and healthcare for displaced individuals, yet implementation remains limited due to insufficient political will and public demand (Palinkas, 2020). Advanced democracies often frame climate migrants through colonial lenses, portraying them as either threats or undeserving victims, which exacerbates systemic injustices and hinders equitable responses (Stanley, 2021). While international frameworks like the Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals acknowledge the issue, they lack robust legal protections for climate-displaced persons, leaving many without adequate support

(Gonzalez, 2019). In the South Pacific, countries like New Zealand face challenges in balancing support for regional neighbors with restrictive immigration policies, reflecting a broader reluctance to address the implications of climate-induced migration comprehensively (Rive, 2014).

2.4 Collective Action and Social Movements

Community-based activism and collective mobilization play a pivotal role in supporting climate-displaced populations by fostering resilience, enhancing mental health, and advocating for environmental justice. Grassroots approaches empower local communities to engage actively in climate initiatives, promoting collaboration and education to drive effective climate solutions (Kumar et al., 2024). Collective actions emerge as a response to the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change, enabling affected populations to preserve their social and cultural ties while navigating displacement (Tinoco & Menjivar, 2025). Furthermore, community support is crucial in addressing mental health issues stemming from climate displacement, as social capital can facilitate recovery and resilience among vulnerable groups (Sumasumo, 2025). Additionally, grassroots organizations can mobilize residents to confront environmental injustices, advocating for access to essential services and resources necessary for survival and adaptation (Reyes & Vargas, 2025). The recent surge in socio-environmental activism underscores the importance of local engagement in addressing the climate crisis, highlighting altruistic values and community attachment as key motivators for collective action (Gravante & Poma, 2020).

Although scholarship on climate displacement and vulnerability has grown, there is limited research examining the lived experiences of affected communities in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan. Few studies explore the intersection of legal access, social inequality, and grassroots advocacy, highlighting the need for empirical work to inform both policy and ethical debates around climate-induced migration. This study addresses this gap by engaging directly with displaced communities, providing qualitative insights into legal awareness, vulnerability, and collective mobilization.

3. Material and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of climate-displaced populations in Balochistan. The study population consisted of individuals displaced by climate-induced environmental stressors, including droughts, floods, and water scarcity. A purposive sample of twelve participants was selected, ensuring diverse representation across gender, age, and geographic location. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Interviews explored participants' awareness of legal frameworks, experiences of displacement, social vulnerabilities, and engagement in collective action. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, involving familiarization, coding, identification of patterns, and development of overarching themes. This approach allowed for the nuanced exploration of social, legal, and political dimensions of climate-induced displacement.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Limited Awareness and Access to Legal Frameworks

Participants consistently reported low levels of awareness regarding legal protections for climate-displaced and vulnerable populations. They emphasized that existing policies primarily provide immediate relief but often fail to offer formal recognition, long-term rights, or consistent protection. One participant explained, “We do not know what laws protect us. When floods destroyed our homes, the government gave temporary help, but there was no legal recognition or permanent solution. We feel invisible to the system and often depend on NGOs for support and information.” Participants highlighted that this gap in legal literacy and access creates additional vulnerabilities. Individuals and communities often navigate displacement without understanding their entitlements or the mechanisms available to secure protection, leaving them reliant on ad hoc humanitarian programs. One participant noted, “Without knowing our rights or having access to proper legal guidance, we have no way to claim protection. The system doesn’t reach us unless someone outside helps.”

The accounts also revealed that limited awareness hampers advocacy and self-representation. Participants indicated that even when legal frameworks exist, the inability to access or understand them prevents effective engagement with authorities or participation in policymaking processes. One participant remarked, “Even if the law is supposed to help us, we can’t use it because we don’t know it exists. That keeps us invisible and powerless.” Overall, participant narratives underscore a critical gap in legal literacy and accessibility, highlighting the need for outreach, education, and structured support to ensure that climate-displaced populations can access rights, protections, and sustainable solutions. The findings suggest that enhancing awareness and accessibility is essential for bridging the gap between humanitarian assistance and formal legal recognition.

4.2. Structural Inequalities and Vulnerability

Participants highlighted that vulnerability to displacement is closely linked to structural social and economic inequalities. Marginalized communities, including low-income households, socially excluded groups, and those from disadvantaged castes, were reported to face disproportionate exposure to climate-related disasters and conflict, while simultaneously having limited capacity to access protection or recovery mechanisms. One participant explained, “The rich can move to cities, get jobs, or rent houses. We cannot. Our caste and poverty keep us trapped in drought-affected areas. The government responds slowly, and we are left behind every time disasters strike.” Participants emphasized that these inequalities shape both the degree of risk and the ability to respond effectively. Structural disadvantages, including lack of resources, limited mobility, and social exclusion, constrain options for survival, relocation, or legal recourse. One participant noted, “Even when aid is available, we struggle to access it. Wealth and social networks make a huge difference—without them, we are always at the back of the line.”

The accounts also highlighted how inequality intersects with policy gaps. Participants reported that temporary or discretionary measures often fail to reach the most vulnerable, who are least able to navigate bureaucratic processes or assert their rights. As one participant observed, “Policies are designed assuming people can move, apply for support, or advocate for themselves. But we cannot. The system is not built for people like

us.” Overall, participant narratives reveal that structural inequalities significantly shape vulnerability to displacement and access to protection. These findings underscore the need for targeted policies that recognize and address socio-economic disparities, ensuring that marginalized populations are not left disproportionately exposed to disaster and displacement risks.

4.3. Marginalization from Policy Processes

Participants emphasized that marginalized communities frequently experience exclusion from decision-making processes related to displacement and humanitarian response. Government interventions were described as predominantly top-down, episodic, and disconnected from local needs, leaving affected populations with little influence over policies that directly affect their lives. One participant explained, “Officials come during emergencies, give aid, and leave. They do not listen to our experiences or involve us in planning. Our voices are not counted, and the policies never reflect what we need for long-term survival.” Participants highlighted that this exclusion limits the effectiveness of policy measures. Without input from those directly affected, interventions often fail to address the structural causes of vulnerability or provide sustainable solutions. One participant noted, “Policies are written far away, by people who don’t understand our struggles. They only respond to crises, not the everyday challenges that keep us at risk.”

The accounts also emphasized the psychological and social impact of being marginalized from policy processes. Communities reported feelings of invisibility, disempowerment, and frustration, which further undermine trust in institutions. As one participant remarked, “When our opinions are ignored, we feel powerless. We see aid coming, but it’s not solving the problems we face.” Overall, participant narratives reveal a persistent disconnect between legal frameworks, governmental interventions, and the lived realities of displaced communities. The findings underscore the need for participatory approaches that include affected populations in planning, implementation, and evaluation, ensuring that policies are both relevant and sustainable.

4.4. Emergence of Collective Action and Advocacy

Participants emphasized that, despite experiences of marginalization and exclusion from policy processes, displaced communities have developed collective strategies to advocate for their rights and ensure their voices are heard. Local networks, advocacy groups, and informal coalitions were described as key mechanisms for organizing, sharing information, and engaging with civil society organizations. One participant explained, “We started meeting regularly, sharing stories, and contacting NGOs. Together, we organized petitions, raised awareness, and tried to make our problems visible. Only by acting collectively do we gain a chance to be heard.” Participants highlighted that collective action strengthens social solidarity and provides a platform for political and social engagement. By mobilizing around shared grievances, communities can address structural inequalities, influence policy discussions, and negotiate better access to resources and protection. One participant remarked, “Working together gives us confidence and power. Alone, we are ignored; together, we can demand attention and push for change.”

The accounts also indicated that collective initiatives operate across formal and informal spaces, including community meetings, social media activism, and collaboration

with NGOs. These efforts enable communities to bypass barriers imposed by top-down interventions and limited access to formal legal frameworks. As one participant noted, “Even when the government does not listen, our networks allow us to make our issues known. It is our way of taking control over our lives.” Overall, participant narratives reveal that collective action and advocacy emerge as critical tools for agency, resilience, and policy influence. These findings underscore how marginalized populations actively negotiate visibility, recognition, and rights through organized, community-driven efforts, highlighting the role of social networks in enhancing political and social engagement.

5. Conclusions

This study highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by climate-displaced communities in Balochistan. Findings indicate that awareness of legal frameworks is limited, with formal protections largely inaccessible to vulnerable populations. Structural inequalities, including socio-economic status and social exclusion, determine which communities are most affected and least able to seek legal recognition or assistance. Participants reported marginalization from policy processes, emphasizing that government interventions often remain reactive, short-term, and disconnected from local needs. Despite these challenges, displaced communities are actively organizing, forming networks, and engaging in collective action to advocate for rights, recognition, and access to services. The research underscores the urgent need to reform both national and international frameworks for climate displacement. Legal mechanisms should be adapted to recognize climate-induced migration as a category warranting protection, ensuring access to rights, resources, and long-term solutions. Policies must incorporate local participation, address structural inequalities, and support grassroots mobilization. Ethical considerations should guide the design and implementation of protection strategies, recognizing the human rights of climate-displaced populations. By linking empirical insights with legal and political analysis, this study contributes to the growing discourse on climate displacement governance, highlighting the interplay between vulnerability, access to legal protection, and collective agency. Future research should explore scalable policy interventions and mechanisms for integrating community voices into formal frameworks, ensuring that climate-displaced populations are no longer invisible within national and international legal and policy landscapes.

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