INTERNATIONAL DETENTION COALITION

POLICY BRIEF

Protecting People, Not Borders

Climate-Induced Displacement and the Risks of Detention-Centered Migration Governance

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Protecting People, Not Borders: Climate-Induced Displacement and the Risks of Detention-Centered Migration Governance

Executive Summary

As the impacts of climate change intensify, the world is witnessing an unprecedented rise in climate-related displacement. Communities are being uprooted due to rising sea levels, desertification, extreme weather events, and the gradual erosion of livelihoods. In response, some States have turned to restrictive migration management tools, including immigration detention, to regulate movement and discourage irregular entry. This approach raises serious concerns about the human rights of those displaced by climate-related factors – many of whom migrate out of necessity, not choice. The use of detention in this context risks criminalizing survival and undermines global commitments to human dignity and climate justice.

This policy brief examines the interconnections between climate change, displacement, migration management, and the use of immigration detention, identifying key risks and opportunities for policy advancements, protection-centred responses, and rights-based alternatives to detention in the context of growing climate-related displacement.

Introduction

Climate change has become an increasingly significant driver of displacement, reshaping global mobility patterns and challenging existing protection frameworks. From sudden-onset disasters like floods and cyclones to slow-onset processes such as sea-level rise, drought, and desertification, environmental changes are compelling millions to flee their homes—often with no viable path to return. At the end of 2023, 7.7 million people were living in internal displacement due to disasters, [1] and over the past decade, weather-related events have triggered an estimated 220 million internal displacements—averaging 60,000 displacements per day (IDMC, 2024).

The interlinkages between climate change and displacement are complex and intensifying. Global heating exacerbates environmental degradation, disrupts livelihoods, fuels poverty, and undermines access to basic rights, contributing to overlapping and protracted crises. Moreover, not only can the impacts of climate change aggravate tensions, weaken social cohesion and deepen existing inequalities, they also disproportionally affect already vulnerable populations. In the face of these challenges, those forcibly displaced by climate-related reasons are left with no choice but to migrate.

Nevertheless, that is not an easy path either. While greatly contributing to the climate crisis, some countries are adopting migration governance policies that favour the protection of borders, not people. In addition, despite the growing scale of

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1 https://www.internal-displacement.org/focus-areas/Displacement-disasters-and-climate-change/

climate-induced mobility, international legal frameworks have yet to fully recognize or address the protection needs of climate-displaced persons. As a result, millions find themselves caught in legal and policy vacuums, without access to adequate support or durable solutions, and at heightened risk of human rights violations.

Criminalisation of migration and the risks of securitization measures

In recent years we have seen an increasing politicization of the topic of migration, with more States resorting to measures such as the widespread use of immigration detention, pushbacks and externalisation of border control, all symptoms of such politicization. The arbitrary detention of migrants is part of a wider trend of States to criminalise migrants and migration and the lack of safe pathways for migration is both one of its causes and its symptoms.

States increasingly conflate climate-induced migration with irregular migration, leading to policies focused on securitization and border control, including the expansion of immigration detention facilities, which subject those who have been forcibly displaced due to climate reasons. Immigration detention represents one of the most flagrant human rights violations of our time, through which people on the move are deprived of their liberty in frequently sub-standard conditions, often for months or even years awaiting processing of their cases or deportation.

Not only has the use of immigration detention been expanding in most regions of the world, but emerging trends within this context also include the use of alternative places of detention, usually with less safeguards than detention in detention centres or even prisons, occurring in hotels, boats or secluded locations. Another trend is the increased use of digital technologies and surveillance mechanisms as alternative forms of detention rather than alternatives to detention, disregarding the negative effects of their use on the individual or the legal and ethical considerations that have not yet been explored.

These restrictive approaches to migration management, which reflect the growing politicization and criminalisation of migration, are not occurring in a vacuum: they are being adopted while by mid-2024, around 90 million of the current 123 million forcibly displaced people are living in countries with high-to-extreme exposure to climate-related hazards. It is evident that these measures disproportionally affect those forcibly displaced by climate-related reasons, who are left with no choice but to leave their homes.

Navigating the nexus: Climate induced displacement and Detention-Centered Migration Governance

The interconnection between climate-induced displacement and current migration trends is evident: Climate change is increasingly a factor behind displacement and migration. While the climate crisis only worsens, leading to growing displacement and migration, some countries invest more and more in criminalisation of migration and in securitisation measures, including immigration detention. What is interesting to note is

that those countries that are the biggest emitters of greenhouse gas historically, thus contributing greatly to the climate crisis, are also those who spend the most on border and immigration enforcement. A study by the Transnational Institute showed that seven countries, namely the United States, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, Canada, France and Australia, are responsible for 48% of the world's historic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. They have also collectively spent at least twice as much on border and immigration enforcement (more than $33.1 billion) as on climate finance ($14.4 billion) between 2013 and 2018,[2] creating a 'Climate Wall' to keep out the consequences of climate change to which they have severely contributed.[3] Figures illustrate this phenomenon: for example, in the United States, spending on border and immigration enforcement tripled between 2003 and 2021. In Europe, the budget for the European Union (EU) border agency, Frontex, has increased by 2763% since its founding in 2006 up to 2021. The study also shows that while countries with the highest historic emissions are fortifying their borders, those with lowest are the hardest hit by population displacement. One example of this is Somalia, which has been responsible for 0.00027% of total emissions since 1850 but had more than one million people (6% of the population) displaced by a climate-related disaster in 2020.[4]

Another factor contributing to this phenomenon is that the border security industry is increasingly profiting from the growing climate crisis. The higher rates of displacement and migration, coupled with the rhetoric of migrants as threats and xenophobia, as well as the restrictive migration governance approaches, favour government spending on border security, digital technologies for immigration enforcement and immigration detention. The management of immigration detention facilities and measures is a lucrative business, and one that stands to grow from the hardship experienced by individuals worldwide. However, immigration detention is ill-suited to address climate displacement, often targeting individuals who are already in vulnerable situations and lacking legal migration pathways. This practice raises human rights concerns and fails to address the root causes of mobility.

Ultimately, the prioritisation of militarised borders over climate finance threatens to worsen the climate crisis for humanity.[5] Countries with the economic capacity and responsibility to invest on climate mitigation and adaptation measures instead choose to prioritise border control. Different choices, such as investing on climate finance or on supporting individuals uprooted due to climate change to relocate as an adaptation strategy could lead to improving the current grim picture. Regular pathways for migration, for example, can be an important means of climate adaptation and one that acknowledges the social, cultural and economic benefits brought by migrants to host communities.

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[2] https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/global-climate-wall-report-tni-web-resolution.pdf
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid. p.2
[5] Ibid.

The Transnational Institute made it clear: "treating the victims of climate change as threats is a triple injustice: those least responsible for the climate crisis are not only the most likely to be victims of climate change, but are now regarded as threats if they migrate in order to survive. The nature of security-framing also obscures the complex reasons for migration and serves to distract from alternative approaches that would seek to support migrants to stay when they can and migrate if they must."[6]

Recommendations: prioritizing human rights and investing in ATD

In the face of escalating climate-induced displacement, migration governance frameworks must evolve to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of affected individuals. The following recommendations outline a path toward more humane, rights-based, and effective responses to climate-related mobility:

- **Recognize and respond to the protection needs of climate-displaced persons**

  States and international actors must acknowledge climate-induced displacement as a legitimate protection concern. This includes broadening protection frameworks to encompass people displaced by both sudden- and slow-onset climate impacts and ensuring access to safety, legal status, and essential services.

- **End the Use of Immigration Detention for Climate-Displaced Individuals**

  Detaining people for reasons related to their migration status, especially when driven by climate-related crises, is incompatible with human rights standards. States have already committed through Objective 13 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration to working towards promoting, implementing and expanding alternatives to detention, favoring non-custodial measures and community-based care arrangements. They have also committed to taking steps towards ending child immigration detention. Similarly, under the Global Compact on Refugees, States committed to support "the development of non-custodial and community-based alternatives to detention, particularly for children (…)" (para. 60). Thus, States should honour and reaffirm these commitments, also considering the context of the climate crisis and of climate-induced displacement and migration.

- **Invest in rights-based Alternatives to Detention (ATDs) and non-restrictive migration governance approaches**

  Instead of punitive enforcement, states should adopt engagement-based ATDs grounded in case management and community support. These alternatives are not only cost-effective but have proven more successful in achieving case resolution, preserving well-being, and maintaining compliance. ATD should be seen as a system change strategy to reduce and ultimately end immigration detention, building migration governance systems that ensure dignity and human rights,

[6] Global Climate wall - https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/global-climate-wall-report-tni-web-resolution.pdf p. 35

through which people at risk of immigration detention are able to live in the community, without being detained for migration-related reasons.

- **Reallocate resources from border militarization to climate mitigation, adaptation and climate finance**

Redirecting funds from restrictive border enforcement to climate resilience initiatives can strengthen both climate mitigation and human mobility responses. The wealthier countries, those which have contributed the most to the climate crisis through GHG emissions, have so far chosen to direct their existing resources to increasing border control and implementing securitization measures rather than investing on adaptation and mitigation measures and addressing the root causes of migration and displacement. Different choices could lead to a different outcome than the one present today.

- **Adopting a whole of society approach and strengthening regional and international cooperation**

A whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is essential. Partnerships between governments, civil society, and international organizations must be institutionalized to ensure coordinated responses, especially in regions most vulnerable to climate disasters. Collaborations between local authorities and CSOs must be supported and replicated. Moreover, regional solutions and complementary pathways must be promoted.

Conclusion

Climate change is reshaping global mobility, driving displacement through both sudden and slow-onset disasters. Yet, rather than addressing the root causes or responding with compassion and foresight, many states have turned to securitized migration governance—including immigration detention—further marginalizing those already at risk. This approach criminalizes survival and ignores the systemic injustices at the heart of climate-induced displacement.

To reverse this trend, states must uphold their international commitments by ending the use of immigration detention for climate-displaced persons and instead invest in rights-based ATD that protect human dignity and enable case resolution within communities. Redirecting resources from border militarization to climate adaptation and resilience measures, expanding regular migration pathways, and fostering inclusive, coordinated responses are essential steps forward.

Ultimately, addressing climate displacement demands a shift from punishment to protection—one that affirms the humanity and rights of people on the move and builds migration systems that reflect global solidarity, equity, and justice.