Afrocentric Legal Review (ALR)

https://doi.org/10.68928/ALR-2026-2-2-01

|Print ISSN: 3156-7207|e-ISSN: 3156-7193 |

Received: 10th May, 2026
Revised: 25th August, 2026
Accepted: 27th September, 2026

Climate-Induced Migration in the African Sahel: Legal Invisibility and International Protection Gaps

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Abstract: In the African Sahel, an increase in temperature, heatwaves, desertification, drought, floods, loss of ecosystems, and collapse of livelihoods are forcing vulnerable populations to migrate from their habitat. These climate-related stressors interact with poverty, insecurity, armed conflict, and weak institutions, creating complex displacement dynamics. But despite the scale and intensity of climate-induced migration in the Sahel region, existing international refugee, human rights, and climate change governance systems do not provide adequate protection for climate-displaced persons. This is because climate-displaced persons are deemed "invisible" under traditional protection frameworks. This study critically assesses the gaps in legal and institutional frameworks associated with climate-induced migrants in the African Sahel. The research employed a doctrinal and analytical approach in analysing doctrines of refugee law, climate governance instruments, regional frameworks in Africa, and human rights principles. The study found that the lack of cohesion between refugee law, climate governance, and migration governance is creating substantial protection gaps for climate migrants in the Sahel. These legal frameworks are institutionally unsuitable to address the compounded displacement issues affecting the region. Therefore, this research recommends a rights-based and regionally responsive framework to strengthen legal status, institutional cooperation, and protective mechanisms for climate migrants in Africa.

Keywords: Climate-induced migration, legal invisibility, Environmental Displacement, African Sahel, refugee Protection

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1. INTRODUCTION

Climate Change has become one of the major causes of human migration around the world in the 21st Century. But one particular region that is presently most adversely affected by the impacts of climate change is the African Sahel. The region is burning. Not exactly by flames, but by the increasing impacts of the drivers of climate change. Junaid et al. extrapolate that the African Sahel has evolved into one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world.[1] Indeed, the Sahel region is witnessing increasing temperatures, alongside changes in rainfall patterns, heatwaves and longer-lasting droughts, desertification encroachment and extreme weather conditions that have occasioned increased pressure on both human livelihoods and ecosystems along this fragile semi-arid belt[2]. The World Bank 2025 publication on the impact of climate change in the Sahel indicated that the African Sahel is one of the regions most profoundly affected by climate conditions, with an estimated 1.5 times the global mean increase in temperature, resulting in extreme temperature fluctuations and a highly unpredictable precipitation regime[3]. The frequency and severity of climate change drivers have placed the Sahel into an urgent category of climate-vulnerable areas, creating large-scale migration pressure of such a nature and magnitude as never previously experienced anywhere else in the world.[4]

Spanning across the Southern edge of the Sahara Desert, from Senegal to Sudan, through about ten countries, the Sahel represents one of the most environmentally vulnerable regions on Earth[5]. The impact of climate Change in this region is devastating, especially judging from the fact that it does not operate in isolation. According to Ofori et al., climate change generates a multiplier displacement process where environmental pressures cause resource competition, resource competition creates violence, and then violence generates mobility that is both climate change-induced and economically related[6]. The central problem facing these displaced populations is their "legal invisibility" within the international protection regime. Individuals who are forced to flee because of climate change in the Sahel do not meet the definition of refugees in the 1951 Refugee Convention. Also, there are no provisions for creating legally enforceable protection obligations for climate migrants under either the UNFCCC or the Paris Agreement.[7] While climate-induced migration is identified as a factor driving displacement under the 2018 Global Compact for Migration, it contains no binding obligations[8]. The

[1] Uzair Junaid et al., "CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRATION: GAPS IN REFUGEE LAW AND THE RIGHT TO ENVIRONMENTAL ASYLUM," *Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review* 3, no. 4 (2025): 570–78, https://doi.org/10.63878/cjssr.v3i4.1409.

[2] Ejemai Eboreime et al., "From Drought to Displacement: Assessing the Impacts of Climate Change on Conflict and Forced Migration in West Africa's Sahel Region," *The Journal of Climate Change and Health* 23 (May 2025): 100448, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2025.100448.

[3] World Bank, *Mapping Impact in the Sahel: Regional Impacts of Adaptive Social Protection Programs on Capacities for Resilience to Climate Change* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1596/43379.

[4] Pablo Ceballos et al., "El Sahel: la frontera invisible entre el cambio climático y los desplazamientos forzados," *Clínica Jurídica per la Justícia Social / Informes*, n.d., https://doi.org/10.7203/clinicajuridica.31358.

[5] Sonja Ayeb-Karlsson et al., "'We Herders Are Often Chased About by Drought': A Systems Analysis of Natural Resource Degradation Within the Climate–(Im)Mobility–Violence–Health Nexus in Sahel," *Earth* 6, no. 1 (2025): 11, https://doi.org/10.3390/earth6010011.

[6] Desmond Oklikah Ofori et al., "A Systematic Review of International and Internal Climate-Induced Migration in Africa," *Sustainability* 15, no. 22 (2023): 16105, https://doi.org/10.3390/su152216105.

[7] Cristiano d'Orsi and Gino J. Naldi, "Climate-Induced Displacement in the Sahel: A Question of Classification," *International Review of the Red Cross* 103, no. 918 (2021): 1029–65, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383121000941.

[8] Fran Woodworth "Exclusion of Climate Migrants from the Global Compact on Refugees: Geopolitics: Vol 29 , No 1 - Get Access," accessed May 19, 2026, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2023.2225242.

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

definitions of refugees contained in the OAU Convention of 1969 and the Kampala Convention of 2009 provide more potential for textual development than global frameworks regarding protection obligations for climate migrants. However, neither of these two African instruments has been implemented systemically with respect to climate-induced migration in the Sahel. Therefore, millions of climate-displaced persons inhabit a grey area under international law characterized by uncertainty regarding their legal status and rights as climate immigrants. This creates a normative and institutional gap.

International law scholarship is increasingly examining climate migration, environmental displacement, refugee protection, and climate justice[9]. An increasing amount of scholarship is also focused on environmental vulnerability, conflict and migration in the Sahel[10]. However, there are significant gaps. Despite the scale and complexity of displacement in the Sahel, it remains a comparatively understudied legal and institutional environment.[11] Most of the literature related to climate migration takes either a very broad global perspective or a highly specific focus on some small Island States.[12] The literature does not adequately examine the Sahel's unique combination of ecological degradation, insecurity, fragile states, and cross-border movement. Additionally, limited amounts of scholarly work have investigated institutional gaps between refugee law, climate governance, and human rights law in the context of African Regional Systems[13]. Current reform proposals continue to lack sufficient calibration to the Sahel's unique legal and governance structures[14]. This study addresses these gaps directly[15]. This study provides a critical examination of climate-induced migrant invisibility in the African Sahel and proposes a rights-based reform framework that is anchored in extant regional architecture in Africa[16]. This is with the aim of filling protection gaps created by international and regional frameworks. By this, the study makes contributions to international refugee law, climate justice and human rights literature while addressing policymakers in AU member states, UNHCR, IOM and governments of Sahel countries[17]. The proposed reforms explicitly build on existing frameworks rather than new multilateral agreements. A practical decision made with consideration of current geopolitical realities. Legal invisibility is not merely

[9] Jane McAdam, *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law* (Oxford University Press, 2012), https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=lHcEPGcPlBoC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=McAdam,+J.+(2012).+Climate+Change,+Forced+Migration,+and+International+Law.+Oxford+University+Press.&ots=lmKcWwlxrA&sig=TkJvm0BtZPZTYphqiEJuVcGWXwo.

[10] Cristiano d'Orsi and Gino J. Naldi, "Climate-Induced Displacement in the Sahel: A Question of Classification," *International Review of the Red Cross* 103, no. 918 (2021): 1029–65.

[11] d'Orsi and Naldi, "Climate-Induced Displacement in the Sahel," 2021.

[12] Virginia De Biasio, "Not Just 'Sinking Islands': Climate Change and Adaptation in Small Island Developing States," *Political Studies* 73, no. 4 (2025): 1370–91, https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217241298848.

[13] Caitlan M. Sussman, "A Global Migration Framework Under Water: How Can the International Community Protect Climate Refugees?," *Chi. J. Int'l L. Online* 2 (2023): 41.

[14] Paul Atagamen Aidonojie, "Restorative Justice," in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Energy Economics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), 404–409.

[15] McAdam, *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law*.

[16] Osikemekha A Anani, Abel Inobeme, Osayomwanbo Osarenotor, Frances Ngozi Olisaka, Paul Atagamen Aidonojie, Emmanuel Olusegun Olatunji, and Aishatu Idris Habib, "Application of Microorganisms as Biofactories to Produce Biogenic Nanoparticles for Environmental Cleanup: Current Advances and Challenges," *Current Nanoscience* 19, no. 6 (2023): 770–782.

[17] Ilef Kassab, "A Synergistic Approach to the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention," *Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy*, May 2, 2024, https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/synergistic-approach-oau-refugee-convention-and-kampala-convention.

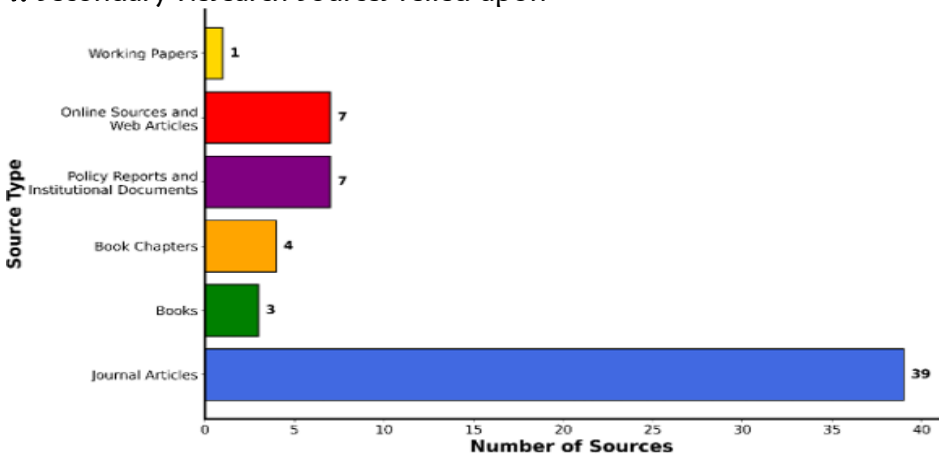
Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

a conceptualisation problem regarding classification[18]. Rather, it constitutes a moral failure with quantifiable human costs[19].

2. METHOD

This study applied a doctrinal research approach, which relies heavily on the interpretation and analysis of legal sources[20]. Within this context, it involves an evaluation of legal instruments and frameworks, policy documents, and academic scholarship relative to the issue of climate-induced migration and protection gaps within the Sahel region of Africa. In addition, this study incorporated a comparative and multi-disciplinary approach to analyze how refugee law interacts with climate governance, migration governance, and human rights law at both the international level and the African regional level. The primary and secondary data collection and analysis were conducted in a manner that provides for transparency, methodological rigour, and systematic selection of relevant data. As such, primary data consisted of international and regional legal instruments that include the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1967 Protocol, the OAU Refugee Convention, the Kampala Convention, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Paris Agreement, and other relevant frameworks on migration and climate governance. Secondary data consisted of peer-reviewed articles, books, policy reports, online articles, institutional publications, and scholarly commentaries related to the issues of climate change, migration governance, environmental displacement, and human security within the Sahel.

Figure 1: Secondary Research Sources relied upon



Source: Design by the authors based on data obtained

Relevant data were located using structurally designed keyword search techniques and evaluated based on their thematic relevance, credibility, and analytical contribution to the objectives of the study. Doctrinal analysis was used to assess whether or not existing legal frameworks provided adequate protection for individuals who migrate due to climate change within the Sahel region of Africa. A comparative analysis was also employed to compare interactions between the international and regional protection systems within the African Union for the purposes of providing legal recognition, coordinating institutions, and addressing protection gaps experienced by climate-induced migrants.

[18] Caitlan M. Sussman, "A Global Migration Framework Under Water: How Can the International Community Protect Climate Refugees?," *Chi. J. Int'l L. Online* 2 (2023): 41.

[19] Muhammad Mutawalli Mukhlis, Maskun Maskun, Muhammad Saleh Tajuddin, Andi Tentri Yeyeng, and Paul Atagamen Aidonojie, "The Crisis in Red Sea Region: Legal and Socio-Economic Impact on International Commerce," *Al-Risalah: Forum Kajian Hukum dan Sosial Kemasyarakatan* 24, no. 2 (2024): 17–35.

[20] Collins Ekpenisi et al., *Constitutional, Legal, and Procedural Perspectives on Witness Protection: A Comparative Study of Nigeria, India, and the United States*, n.d.

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Climate Change and Migration Dynamics in the African Sahel

Climate change, in general terms, describes the large-scale transformation of global or regional climate systems that occur over time due to the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.[21] Within the context of the Sahel region, however, the term describes how this change interacts with other environmental stressors that redefine human security and mobility. Climate-induced migration or mobility refers to the movement of people caused wholly or partly by the adverse effects of climate change[22]. The migration can be within or across national borders. Also, such movement can result from either rapid changes or events like floods and storms or gradual changes or events like desertification, drought, and temperature increase. The Sahel region is now considered one of the most environmentally vulnerable parts of the world. The word "Sahel" is "*sāḥil*" in Arabic, and it means "coast" or "shore", figuratively describing it as the edge of the Sahara Desert[23]. Badewa et al. provide that the Sahel represents an area of semi-arid land that transitions between the desert (Sahara) to the North and the savanna to the South. This transitional zone consists of vast, barren plains that span approximately 5,400 km (3,300 mi) through Africa, from Senegal in the West to Sudan in the East. The Sahel extends across nearly 1,000 km (600 mi), from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean[24]. As shown in Figure 1 below, countries bordering the Sahel include large portions of Eritrea, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania. Some additional countries also possess smaller regions of Sahelian terrain. These countries include South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Nigeria, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Gambia, and Senegal. The Sahel is often viewed as a transitional zone of land, which results in some variation in how some scholars consider the list of countries included within this zone. Given the fact that there is no clearly defined coastal or country-state boundary, the number of countries included in the Sahel can vary.

Figure 2: Map of the Sahara and Sahel Regions.



Source: Victoria Heath[25]

The Sahel faces an unprecedented level of environmental vulnerability and climatic stress. The environmental crisis is largely confined to ecological issues such as habitat loss, soil salinisation, diminished availability of fresh water, and disruptions to food chains as a result of

[21] Andrew L. Fanning and Jason Hickel, "Compensation for Atmospheric Appropriation," *Nature Sustainability* 6, no. 9 (2023): 1077–86, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-023-01130-8.

[22] Syeda Kashmala Susan, *Climate Refugees and International Protection: Expanding the Scope of the Refugee Convention*, 3, no. 3 (2025).

[23] Simeon Evstatiev, "Religion, Centers, and Peripheries: Notes on West Africa and the Arabs," *Филология*, no. 43 (2023): 22–31.

[24] Adeyemi Saheed Badewa et al., *NATO's Regional Challenges Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in SAHEL*, n.d.

[25] Victoria Heath, "Unravelling the Conflicts in Africa's Sahel Region," *Geographical*, October 25, 2024, https://geographical.co.uk/science-environment/unravelling-the-conflicts-in-africas-sahel-region.

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e-ISSN: 3156-7193

the increasing frequency of droughts, worsening desertification, and irregularities in seasonal rainfall. Each of these factors is causing increasingly unsustainable habitats. Therefore, the climate variability of this area is not just an environmental issue but is a real threat to social stability, economic viability, and human safety. Ahenkan refers to the Sahel as one of the world's "global climate hotspots."[26] and the information clearly supports his claim. Climate change impacts are beginning to be measured in terms of temperature. The Sahel is warming at approximately 1.5 times the rate of the rest of the planet, with the WMO noting that Africa is warming at a greater rate than the global average[27]. These effects have been catastrophic and quantifiable. In April 2024, temperatures at Kayes in western Mali reached 48.5 °C, the highest temperature ever recorded in the Sahel, and Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal each reported temperatures above 45 °C[28]. This has contributed to a significant increase in the humanitarian costs of heatwaves. Heatwaves are among the deadliest types of extreme weather events, and deaths caused by heatwaves in the Sahel are consistently understated, typically not verified until several months later. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the world's foremost authority for assessing the science of climate change, has predicted that the increase in temperature in the Sahel region will likely exceed 2°C (3.6°F) on average in the next two decades[29].

Drought is the most persistent and destructive manifestation of this disaster. Based on their study of the EM-DAT Emergency Database, Parodi et al. found that there were approximately 125 million people affected by severe droughts in the Sahel between 1970 and 2022. Within this period, droughts affected about 125 million people, which is approximately 2.5 million people per year[30]. Since temperatures continue to climb, the frequency and intensity of droughts will only worsen due to increased rates of evaporation and decreased amounts of precipitation, thereby creating a vicious cycle of ecological collapse. Environmental vulnerability and drought are exacerbated by desertification and land degradation. These factors are causing agricultural decline and creating long-lasting damage. Desertification and land degradation add both structural and permanent elements to the drought crisis. Balsari et al. indicated that desertification in the Sahel is expanding at a rate of approximately 48 km per annum, thus continuously decreasing the amount of arable/habitable land available for millions.[31] For example, Niger loses between 100,000 and 120,000 hectares of arable land every year due to erosion/degradation of the soil[32]. The UNCCD's 2023 Data Dashboard noted that approximately 15.5% of Earth's land area is currently degraded, with nearly half of this

[26] Albert Ahenkan, "The Magnitude, Pattern, and Implication of Climate Change in Africa: A Review of the Evidence," in *Climate Change in Africa*, ed. Mohammed Amidu et al., Advances in African Economic, Social and Political Development (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-15259-6_2.

[27] Africa Climate Insights, "WMO Report: Africa Gripped by Heat, Floods, and Drought," *African Climate Insights*, April 7, 2025, https://africaclimateinsights.org/wmo-report-africa-gripped-by-heat-floods-and-drought/.

[28] "Deadly Heatwave in the Sahel and West Africa Would Have Been Impossible without Human-Caused Climate Change | IFRC," April 18, 2024, https://www.ifrc.org/nota-prensa/deadly-heatwave-sahel-and-west-africa-would-have-been-impossible-without-human-caused.

[29] "Global Warming: Severe Consequences for Africa | Africa Renewal," accessed May 21, 2026, https://africarenewal.un.org/en/magazine/global-warming-severe-consequences-africa.

[30] Luca Parodi et al., "Anticipatory Action for Drought in the Sahel: An Innovation for Drought Risk Management or a Buzzword?," *Frontiers in Climate* 6 (March 2024), https://doi.org/10.3389/fclim.2024.1347519.

[31] Satchit Balsari et al., "Climate Change, Migration, and Civil Strife," *Current Environmental Health Reports* 7, no. 4 (2020): 404–14, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40572-020-00291-4.

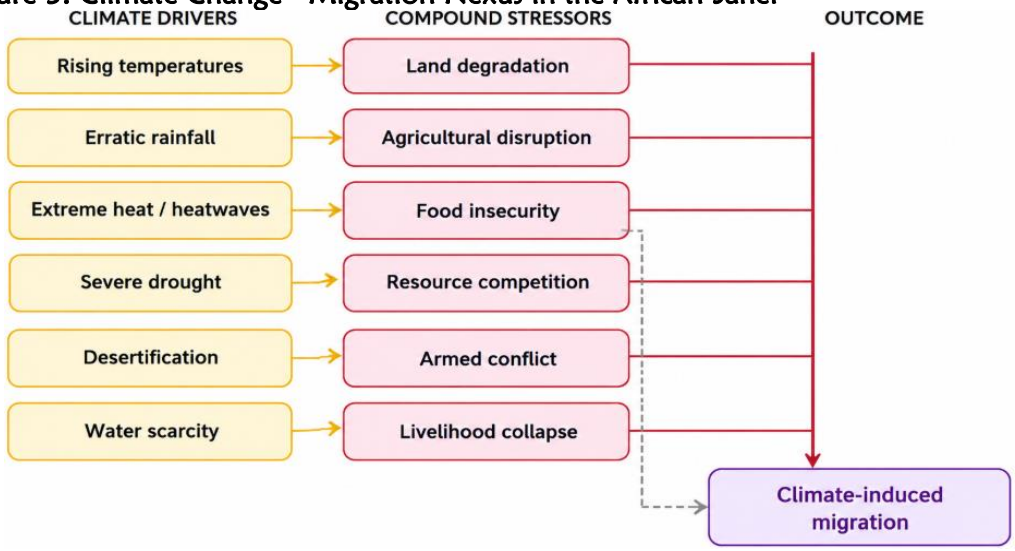
[32] "Niger: Climate Change and Armed Conflict Threaten the Livelihoods of Nomadic Herders - Niger | ReliefWeb," March 19, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/niger-climate-change-and-armed-conflict-threaten-livelihoods-nomadic-herders.

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

being located in Africa. It is estimated globally that around 135 million people are at risk of displacement due to desertification, with sub-Saharan Africa bearing a disproportionate share.[33]

The hydraulic collapse of the region has increased this instability. The dramatic decrease in the sizes of rivers and lakes, most notably the 90% loss of Lake Chad since 1960, has greatly reduced available grazing lands and water[34]. This is directly impacting the livelihoods of tens of millions of people dependent upon Lake Chad for access to water for irrigation purposes, fishing opportunities, etc. The large-scale reduction in the size of rivers and lakes in the region has greatly limited grazing lands and water sources, leading to an intense struggle between farmers and pastoralists who are continuously competing for declining natural resource bases. Water and soil degradation severely threaten the Sahel, affecting millions of livelihoods. Between 60-80% of the population is employed in pastoralism and agriculture, which accounts for about 40% of the region's GDP.[35] Thus, the failure of agriculture can be seen as not only an environmental issue but also a structural cause of poverty, instability, and forced migration.

Figure 3: Climate Change - Migration Nexus in the African Sahel



Source: Designed by the authors based on data obtained

Many residents of the African Sahel region are migrating for a better livelihood[36]. This migration, whether internally or internationally, is large-scale, increasing rapidly, and lacks institutional governance. Between 2022 and 2023 alone, climate-related shocks caused nearly 7.4 million people to be displaced in Sub-Saharan Africa, while conflict/violence resulted in 9 million people being displaced. Both drivers are occurring simultaneously and mutually intensifying[37]. According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the Central Sahel increased from 95,000 in 2014 to over 2.4 million

[33] African Development Bank, "Desertification and Land Degradation," Text, African Development Bank Group, African Development Bank Group, November 25, 2024, https://www.afdb.org/en/topics-and-sectors/topics/desertification-and-land-degradation.

[34] Satchit Balsari et al., "Climate Change, Migration, and Civil Strife," *Current Environmental Health Reports* 7, no. 4 (2020): 404–14, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40572-020-00291-4; Oyewumi Ogunmakin, "Will They Continue to Endure: How Conflict and 'Climate-Induced' Migration Is Affecting the Lake Chad Region," *Journal of Environment, Climate, and Ecology* 1, no. 2 (2024): 16–24, https://doi.org/10.69739/jece.v1i2.136.

[35] Noëlle Rodembourg, "The Sahel and the Challenges of Climate Change," *Alliance Sahel*, October 29, 2024, https://www.alliance-sahel.org/en/news/sahel-climate-change-challenges/.

[36] Collins Ekpenisi et al., *2. Right of Nature in Africa: Assessing the Feasibility of Granting Legal Personhood to Rivers and Forests*, April 2, 2026, https://kwasuspace.kwasu.edu.ng/handle/123456789/6770.

[37] *Africa Migration Report (Second Edition)* (2024), https://publications.iom.int/books/africa-migration-report-second-edition.

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

in 2023. This marked an increase of 2446%[38]. Collectively, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger had over 2.9 million refugees and internally displaced people in 2022. In addition, Nigeria was home to over 2.4 million climate-displaced individuals in 2022, the highest since 2011, due to massive flooding from July to November[39]. Cross-border migrants follow traditional paths of intra-regional migration as opposed to transcontinental paths. Traditionally, the Sahel has been characterized as an area of free-flowing migration with citizens of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger frequently crossing their borders for trading and seasonal work, mainly to Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal[40]. It is estimated that there are around 50 million nomads/pastoralists who represent about 72 per cent of the Sahel's total population, who rely heavily on livestock production and are increasingly being forced to cross national borders due to violent conflicts between farmers/herders resulting from shrinking pastureland throughout the Sahel, including Nigeria, Mali, Chad, and others.[41]

Without concerted action regarding climate and development, it is predicted that by 2050, between 28 - 32 million people will be forced to migrate from West Africa as a result of drought/water shortages, declining harvests, and collapsing ecosystems, with a projection that Niger alone will lose approximately 30% of its population (nearly 19.1 million people). Estimates suggest that the maximum potential for sub-regional climate displacement in Sub-Saharan Africa may reach up to 86 million by 2050.[42][43] Yet, there are inadequate provisions for recognition of climate change as grounds for refugee status under current international legal frameworks governing refugees and migration. The displacement dynamics present in the Sahel exhibit multi-dimensionality, transcending nation-state boundaries and are caused by a combination of environmental degradation, conflict and governance fragility.[44] This is a combined reality that extant refugee/migration law cannot effectively address.

3.2. International and Regional Legal Frameworks

The current international regime regulating forced migration is based mostly on the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. It is the foundation of modern-day asylum policies. However, the 1951 Refugee Convention is not suitable for addressing climate displacement[45]. This is not a minor weakness of the Convention; it is an inherent part of the core definitions used in the Convention. Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as a person having a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion[46]. Each element in this definition is a barrier for climate-induced migrants. Climate

[38] "New IRC Report: Political and Economic Marginalisation Paving Way for Climate Change and Conflict in Central Sahel | The IRC," accessed May 29, 2026, https://www.rescue.org/uk/press-release/new-irc-report-political-and-economic-marginalisation-paving-way-climate-change-and.

[39] "Africa," World Migration Report, accessed May 29, 2026, https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024/chapter-3/africa.

[40] "Keeping Track in Africa | Mixed Migration Centre," Https://Mixedmigration.Org/, November 20, 2025, https://mixedmigration.org/publications/mmr/2025/keeping-track-migration-africa-2025/.

[41] Team SolidariTee, "What Factors Drive and Influence Displacement and Migration in Africa's Sahel Region?," SolidariTee, February 28, 2026, https://www.solidaritee.org.uk/post/what-factors-drive-and-influence-displacement-and-migration-in-africa-s-sahel-region.

[42] Ayoba Faye, "Climate-Driven Migration Threatens the Sahel's Livelihoods," Dialogue Migration, September 8, 2023, https://dialoguemigration.com/en/news/climate-driven-migration-threatens-the-sahels-livelihoods/.

[43] *Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration*, September 13, 2021, https://hdl.handle.net/10986/36248.

[44] Collins Ekpenisi et al., "Constitutional and Legislative Framework for Sustainable Environmental Management in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges," *Journal of Indonesian Constitutional Law* 2, no. 2 (2025): 193–226.

[45] Paul Atagamen Aidonojie, "Environmental Hazard: The Legal Issues Concerning Environmental Justice in Nigeria," *Journal of Human Rights, Culture and Legal System* 3, no. 1 (2023): 17–32.

[46] Uzair Junaid et al., "CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRATION."

Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193

change is not persecution. The atmosphere is not persecuting anyone. Desertification does not discriminate against its victims based on political views. To Ginting et al., the exclusion of climate migrants from the persecution-based regime is simply the implication of trying to apply a persecution-centred framework to an environmentally driven displacement phenomenon[47]. Then, there is the Principle of Non-refoulement. Although non-refoulement under Article 33 offers some protection for climate migrants, human rights law has further expanded the principles of non-refoulement beyond the limits imposed by the convention. In fact, in Teitiota v. New Zealand (2020), the UN Human Rights Committee ruled that states may not deport individuals back to countries where climate change would put them in danger of death or arbitrarily deprive them of their lives[48]. While analytically important because it extends the non-refoulement doctrine beyond the confines of the convention, the ruling sets such a high bar when trying to prove that it actually provides theoretical protection to the Sahelian climate migrants[49]. Non-refoulement is reactive, not preventative. It only applies when the state attempts to return someone to their country of origin; it does not guarantee the rights that are needed for durable protection. Human rights law has become the primary source of law that is sometimes relied on to extend protection to climate migrants who are excluded from refugee protection. For example, ICCPR Article 6 (the right to life), ICESCR Articles 11 and 12 (right to an adequate standard of living; water and food) can serve as possible bases for claims for relief[50]. However, these frameworks could provide additional protections to climate-induced migrants, but they do not replace it. The protections offered by human rights law are insufficient for meeting the protection needs of climate migrants in the Sahel.

Climate governance structures increasingly recognize climate migration more explicitly than ever before. However, it has continually refused to commit itself legally to protecting displaced persons. The preamble of the Paris Agreement refers to how climate change "could impact persons on the move," wording carefully selected to preclude any binding obligations. Scholars like Krajewski et al. stress that the Paris reference is mainly symbolic and aspirational. It does not create new, binding migrant-specific rights.[51] Similarly, Cullen provides that the task force on displacement established by the Warsaw international mechanism has produced recommendations and guidance to "avert, minimize and address" displacement, but no enforceable results[52]. According to Hashmi et al., the Loss and Damage Fund established at COP27 and operationalized at COP28 addresses only the financial cost of climate-related damage, including gradual onset impacts. Multiple analyses conclude that climate-displaced persons remain in a "legal limbo", with the UNFCCC framework recognizing climate migration as a problem to be managed, not a rights violation to be addressed[53]. Thus, creating a structural paradigm that protects climate migrants less than other forms of migrants in the Sahel. Despite their lack of legally binding force, the 2018 Global Compacts represent an unprecedented level of acknowledgement of climate migration's governance aspects. Objective 2 of the Global

[47] Grenaldo Ginting et al., "Climate-Induced Displacement and International Human Rights Law: Addressing Legal Gaps in Protecting Environmental Migrants," *Jurnal Smart Hukum (JSH)* 4, no. 2 (2025): 120–33, https://doi.org/10.55299/jsh.v4i2.1595.

[48] Victor T. Amadi and Molya Nd Vundamina, "Migration and Climate Change in Africa: A Differentiated Approach through Legal Frameworks on the Free Movement of People," *Law, Democracy and Development* 27 (April 2023): 31–54, https://doi.org/10.17159/2077-4907/2023/ldd.v27.2.

[49] Cristiano d'Orsi and Gino J. Naldi, "Climate-Induced Displacement in the Sahel: A Question of Classification," *International Review of the Red Cross* 103, no. 918 (2021): 1029–65.

[50] Ginting et al., "Climate-Induced Displacement and International Human Rights Law."

[51] P. Krajewski and Kamila Groszkowska, "Environmental Migration in International Law and Politics," *Journal of Modern Science* 36 (2018): 145–63, https://doi.org/10.13166/jms/85114.

[52] Miriam Cullen, *Disaster, Displacement and International Law: Legal Protections in the Context of a Changing Climate | Article | Politics and Governance*, December 10, 2020, https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/3311.

[53] Syed Shameel Ahmed Quadri et al., "Legal Gaps in Protecting Climate Refugees: Toward a New International Convention," *Social Sciences Spectrum* 4, no. 3 (2025): 229–47.

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Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) recognizes climate as a cause of displacement and calls for adaptation efforts. However, it does not establish any enforceable rights nor any institutional structures through which climate migrants can obtain protection. Furthermore, the burden-sharing framework of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCF) has not been applied in an operative way to climate migrants. Instead, it reinforces the structural limitations contained in the 1951 Convention rather than transcending them[54]. Taken together, therefore, they represent the apogee of soft law on climate migration.

Regionally, perhaps the most notable feature of the OAU Convention as it relates to the issue being discussed in this study is Article 1 (2). This provision broadened the refugee definition by extending coverage to include "persons whose removal or return would place their lives, liberty or freedom in peril," or who "are unable or unwilling to return to their country owing to serious disturbances caused by generalized violence or events seriously disturbing public order." Unlike Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, this provision includes both man-made and natural disaster-related displacement events among its causal factors. Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger are all signatories to this convention. However, Amadi and Vundamina explained that there appears to be virtually no use by any of these five countries of Article I(2) in relation to any climate displacement situation[55]. Therefore, this distinction between conceptual possibility and practical application constitutes perhaps one of the largest and most easily corrected deficiencies in Sahelian climate migration governance. The Kampala Convention is probably the most innovative binding instrument created to date in global displacement governance, and at present, it is underutilized in relation to the Sahel. Pursuant to Article 5(4) of this convention, parties are obligated to protect and assist internally displaced persons resulting from natural disasters, including those resulting from climate change[56]. This provision therefore provides for a specific obligation on behalf of States Parties relative to climate-displaced persons that exists nowhere else in global law. At the same time, and just like many other legal frameworks, its structural limitation is evident. Amadi et al. illustrate that while this convention governs solely internal displacement, cross-border movements triggered by climate and representing an increasing percentage of Sahelian movements are wholly outside the protective ambit of this convention[57].

3.3. Legal Invisibility Issues and Gaps in the Protection of Climate-Induced Migrants

A fundamental issue faced by climate-induced migrants in Africa's Sahel is that of legal invisibility. This lack of legal recognition afforded to Sahelian migrants stems from the historical development of international legal structures, which were designed to respond to social and political complexities of previous centuries. The requirements under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol require refugees to have a "well-founded fear of persecution". However, the adverse impacts resulting from climate change are typically not considered persecution[5859]. The lack of legally binding international obligations with respect to climate-displaced persons further exacerbates the protective gap. Instruments such as the Global

[54] "Exclusion of Climate Migrants from the Global Compact on Refugees: Geopolitics: Vol 29 , No 1 - Get Access."
[55] Amadi and Vundamina, "Migration and Climate Change in Africa."
[56] Mukhlish Mukhlisha, Paul Atagamen Aidonojie, Muwaffiq Jufri, Mercy Osemudiame Okpoko, and Obieshi Eregbuonye, "Legal and Regulatory Issues Concerning the Concept of Cloud Seeding in Climate Change Mitigation," *Indonesian Journal of Environmental Law and Sustainable Development* 121, no. 9 (2025): 4877–4893.
[57] Amadi and Vundamina, "Migration and Climate Change in Africa."
[58] d'Orsi and Naldi, "Climate-Induced Displacement in the Sahel," 2021.
[59] Uzair Junaid et al., "CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRATION."

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Compact for Migration recognize climate mobility issues, but they remain largely nonbinding[60]. Regional treaties adopted in Africa are more progressive; however, these treaties face challenges in providing effective legal protection for climate-induced migrants. According to Soares, the Kampala Convention does not regulate the movement of individuals across borders, and when it is implemented, it tends to prioritise those displaced due to conflict over those displaced due to slow-onset phenomena such as desertification[61]. Legal scholars like D'Orsi and Naldi[62] suggest that the provisions contained within the 1969 OAU Convention may be applicable to climate-induced collapse; however, there continues to exist a certain reluctance on the side of member states to recognize the application of these protections to environmental victims, thus rendering them "legally invisible."

The issue of slow-onset environmental degradation is a particularly complicated challenge in examining the availability of protections for climate-induced migrants. Staupe-Delgado explained that desertification, prolonged drought, soil erosion or water scarcity can cause communities to migrate 'gradually' through the collapse of their livelihoods and living conditions. These climate elements often occur slowly, over time, as opposed to sudden disasters[63]. Humanitarian response systems have traditionally focused on providing rapid assistance in response to humanitarian emergencies such as armed conflict, flooding or other types of disaster[64]. As a result, slow-onset environmental degradation associated with receives little attention legally and institutionally[65]. Thus, although a sudden flood could prompt an immediate humanitarian response and provide temporary protection to those displaced by it, the Sahelian farmer who witnesses the gradual deterioration of his land because of desertification or prolonged drought, and then leaves that land and migrates, will remain "a migrant without official legal recognition". This issue provides a significant contribution to legal invisibility.

Moreover, while climate governance and migration instruments are starting to recognize the linkages between climate change and displacement, they exist in a disjointed institutional structure lacking strong coordination mechanisms[66]. Current governance systems remain fractured across refugee law institutions, humanitarian organizations, migration organizations and climate governance organizations that share overlapping yet distinct responsibilities. This fracturing erodes accountability and renders protection mechanisms. The protection crisis associated with climate-induced migration is further exacerbated by significant deficiencies in enforcement institutions. There exists no dedicated international entity presently responsible for exercising comprehensive jurisdiction over climate displacement claims. Regional frameworks in Africa remain institutionally underdeveloped in practice. Similarly, the lack of coordination among the African Union, UNHCR, IOM, and national government

[60] Vincent Chetail, "The Politics of Soft Law: Progress and Pitfall of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration," *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 5 (September 2023), https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2023.1243774.

[61] Alfredo Dos Santos Soares, "Displaced by Environmental Disasters: Evaluating the Kampala Convention's (in)Effectiveness Ten Years after It Came into Force. : The Case of Angola," *Revista Catalana de Dret Ambiental* 14, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.17345/rcda3610.

[62] d'Orsi and Naldi, "Climate-Induced Displacement in the Sahel," 2021.

[63] Reidar Staupe-Delgado, "Progress, Traditions and Future Directions in Research on Disasters Involving Slow-Onset Hazards," *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal* 28, no. 5 (2019): 623–35.

[64] Kingsley Eghonghon Ukhurebor et al., "Environmental Influence of Gas Flaring: Perspective from the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria," *Geofluids* 2024, no. 1 (2024): 1321022.

[65] Nischala McDonnell, "Falling Through the Protection Gaps: Inappropriate Protection of Climate Displaced Persons in the International Refugee Legal Structure," *The Transnational Human Rights Review* 10, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.60082/2563-4631.1103.

[66] Susan F. Martin, "Environmental Change and Human Mobility: Trends, Law and Policy," *Comparative Population Studies* 42 (October 2017), https://doi.org/10.12765/CPoS-2017-13.

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e-ISSN: 3156-7193

entities further compounds fragmentation in protection responses[67]. Structural weakness among Sahelian states further complicates these challenges. Many Sahelian states possess unstable governance systems, insecurity, weak administrative capacity and insufficient financial resources. Similarly, funding for climate adaptation initiatives remains inadequate given increased displacement pressures. These systemic limitations tend to diminish the capacity of states to provide effective humanitarian protection.

Furthermore, the legal invisibility of climate-induced migrants generates numerous human rights implications. When displaced individuals are unable to receive aid through the protections afforded by governments, their right to food, clean drinking water, shelter, and medical care is lost. In turn, this pushes the already impoverished population down into extreme poverty. In addition, it erodes human dignity for these groups[68]. Daalen et al. asserted that women and young girls are disproportionately impacted. They are at higher risk of experiencing gender-based violence, being sexually exploited, and loss of reproductive health services while they are displaced[69]. Pastoralists have a unique experience of being invisible due to their nomadic lifestyle and how they live off their livestock. Their mobile lifestyles directly conflict with the territorial boundaries of protection systems[70]. All of these and many more issues demonstrate that there is a fundamental flaw in international law. International law has moved away from protecting people's rights towards managing them. It leaves those who need help the most with no way of seeking legal recourse.

3.4. Towards a Rights-Based Framework for Climate-Induced Migration Protection

Climate change-induced migration has become an increasing trend in the African Sahel region. The increased frequency of climate-related events and the incidental migration have exposed the failure of current international and regional legal frameworks to provide adequate legal status and protection to individuals who have been displaced due to environmental degradation. As a result, the lack of legal recognition and protection of these individuals renders them 'invisible' under international law. There is an urgent need for a rights-based framework for climate-induced migration protection, so as to address the identified normative, institutional and humanitarian failures in current governance structures. At its core, the rights-based reform to climate-induced migration protection will include the formal recognition of climate-induced migrants under international and regional protection regimes. Currently, most international refugee protection frameworks, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, do not recognize climate-related displacement as a legitimate reason for protection[71]. Therefore, either through a reinterpretation of current protection frameworks or the development of new international legal instruments, it is necessary to formally recognize climate-related displacement as a valid reason for protection. In addition, regional institutions such as the African Union should broaden their interpretation of the Kampala Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention to include the effects of slow-onset environmental degradation such as desertification, drought, and water scarcity.

[67] Martin Geiger, "Migration Governance at the Global Level: Intergovernmental Organizations and Environmental Change-Induced Migration," in *Environmental Conflicts, Migration and Governance*, ed. Tim Krieger et al. (Policy Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781529202168.003.0009.
[68] Adama Dieng, "The Sahel: Challenges and Opportunities," *International Review of the Red Cross* 103, no. 918 (2021): 765–79, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383122000339.
[69] Kim Robin van Daalen et al., "A Scoping Review to Assess Sexual and Reproductive Health Outcomes, Challenges and Recommendations in the Context of Climate Migration," *Frontiers in Global Women's Health* 2 (October 2021), https://doi.org/10.3389/fgwh.2021.757153.
[70] Lauren Sakae Nishimura, "Drylands: International Mobility in the Sahel," in *Climate Change, Human Rights, and Adaptive Mobility*, 1st ed., by Lauren Sakae Nishimura (Oxford University PressOxford, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/9780198930068.003.0010.
[71] Uzair Junaid et al., "CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRATION."

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e-ISSN: 3156-7193

In addition to providing formal recognition of climate-induced migrants under international law, the rights-based approach will establish a human rights-centred focus with particular emphasis on the preservation of human dignity, equality and socio-economic rights. Often, when displaced, climate-affected migrants often lose access to necessities of life, like food, clean drinking water, safe housing, health care and income-generating activities. Countries should therefore view climate mobility as both a humanitarian crisis and a human rights violation rather than simply as a migration management challenge. Under this framework, states will ensure that all displaced persons receive basic humanitarian assistance, health care services, education, employment opportunities and legal remedies. Particular attention should be paid to the special needs of vulnerable groups such as women, children and pastoralists who experience higher levels of risk when migrating due to exploitation, gender-based violence and institutional discrimination. Effective institutional coordination should also be at the heart of the rights-based approach. Current institutional arrangements are fragmented across refugee institutions, humanitarian agencies, migration organizations and climate governance bodies[72]. Therefore, a coordinated regional response mechanism is needed that includes the relevant institutions and national governments to facilitate shared responses to displacement crises, monitoring of displacement trends and enhanced accountability.

Finally, the rights-based approach should prioritize climate adaptation and resilience building and preventive protective measures. Much of the displacement occurring in the Sahel region is a direct result of long-term environmental degradation. Early intervention policy efforts through increased investment in climate adaptation, sustainable agricultural practices, water security and livelihood protection can help mitigate future displacement pressures and enhance overall human security[73]. Overall, a rights-based approach transforms the discourse around migration from one focused on managing migration to one focused on protecting the human rights and dignity of those affected by climate change.

4. CONCLUSION

Climate-based migration in the Sahel region has demonstrated an enormous gap in international law regarding the legal protections available to individuals who have experienced this type of migration. As stated above, the results from the research indicate that the current migration laws governing refugees and migrants are not adequate to protect environmentally displaced people. These laws were developed based on persecution, armed conflict, and political violence, whereas today, people are being displaced due to climate-related issues. Therefore, many of these environmentally displaced people are unable to receive protection under the current international refugee protection system, even though they are extremely vulnerable to humanitarian emergencies. Furthermore, as indicated by the findings from this research, environmental migration in the Sahel region is multi-causal, including environmental degradation, insecurity, poverty, conflict, and poor governance. This creates problems with how we define who should be recognized as refugees (as defined by the United Nations), economic migrants or internally displaced persons. Additionally, the division in refugee law, climate governance, migration governance, and human rights systems is responsible for the large-scale failure in providing international protection to those experiencing climate-based migration. From both a theoretical and practical standpoint, the research also indicates that there is a need for the development of new migration governance approaches that incorporate principles of climate justice and human security. The research also emphasizes the necessity of

[72] Yaovi Djivénou Tomety et al., "THE COMPLEXITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRATION: CASE OF THE RETURNED BURKINABE FULANI BREEDERS FROM BOUNA DEPARTMENT IN IVORY COAST TO NOUMBIEL PROVINCE IN BURKINA FASO," *Medzinarodne Vztahy (Journal of International Relations)* 16, no. 1 (2018): 22–38.

[73] Tinni Halidou Seydou et al., "Evaluation of the Impact of Seasonal Agroclimatic Information Used for Early Warning and Farmer Communities' Vulnerability Reduction in Southwestern Niger," *Climate* 11, no. 2 (2023): 31, https://doi.org/10.3390/cli11020031.

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creating a single unified legal framework that integrates environmental protection with human rights and migration governance. Going forward, future actions must focus on establishing internationally binding standards of protection for climate-based migrant populations, strengthening Africa's regional migration governance structures, and increasing the application of climate justice in international migration law.

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Print ISSN: 3156-7207
e-ISSN: 3156-7193