Considerations for a Climate Migrant's Bill of Rights

A political and moral imperative in a world under strain

CARNEGIE ETHICS FELLOWS

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Introduction

In October 2021, the White House released a new **report** exploring the impact of climate change on migration. This marked the first time that the U.S. government officially noted the link between climate and human mobility. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have been highlighting this link for years, but the recognition by the Biden administration of the interconnectedness between climate and migration was a critical step forward. Today, superpowers and small nations alike are seeing the significant impacts of worsening climate change on migration and the global consequences.

Climate change-induced mobility is driven by a myriad of variables, such as extreme weather events or gradual environmental change, leading to significant risks across the spectrum of regional and state stability. In response, individuals and families in climate-vulnerable areas are faced with limited mobility options and even less support from states and the international community. As climate-induced migration rises both within and between states, new ethical questions and concerns are emerging for individuals, families, states, NGOs, and multilateral institutions.

The worsening of climate change-induced migration, alongside its recognition as a critical geopolitical concern, presents an opportunity for the public and policymakers to reflect on the key ethical questions at the heart of the issue and to develop responsible solutions through multilateral means. While it is impossible to move beyond traditional concerns of power and economics rooted within an international system defined by state sovereignty, we cannot afford to sideline ethics as a tool in the discussions and debates around climate migration. Doing so risks exacerbating the negative effects for those individuals and communities living on the frontlines of climate change.

The following report introduces four considerations for practitioners operating in this space to consider. We intend for these considerations to help inform a blueprint by which such practitioners can ensure that ethics remain the basis upon which the international community seeks to formalize the protection of the agency, dignity, rights, and well-being of affected individuals and communities.

CONSIDERATION 1:

Supporting Sustainable Solutions

The intersection between climate change and human mobility is complex, woven by the threads of cultural ties, systemic barriers, physical ability, and human agency. As the effects of climate change continue to grow in severity and frequency, communities tied to the lowest socioeconomic strata are expected to struggle the most, most notably in the Global South, revealing the deep-rooted connections between climate change, poverty, and mobility. By 2050, the **World Bank estimates** that a combined total of 216 million people could become internally displaced by the impacts of climate change in six regions: sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, South Asia, North Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. These are also already some of the poorest regions in the world today. Indeed, **Black et al.** confirmed the connection between climate change, poverty, and mobility, noting how the effects of climate change can affect migration directly—by increasing the hazardousness of a location—and indirectly—by affecting other drivers of migration, such as personal economic circumstances and regional politics.

It is the opinion of these Fellows that individuals and communities migrating due to environmental changes should be provided access to and educated about sustainable solutions and practices to meet their daily basic needs and to reduce the risk of prolonged poverty. Sustainable solutions and practices should be developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders—at-risk rural and urban communities currently mobile and permanently settled; local, regional, and national governments; intragovernmental agencies; non-governmental agencies; and domain experts—to identify solutions and practices compatible with community and regional cultural practices, native flora and fauna, and local government regulations. The short-term goal of implementing these solutions and practices should be to reduce the risk of immediate poverty due to environmental migration by adequately meeting an individual's or family's daily basic needs, including food security, water security, and energy infrastructure. The long-term goal of implementing these solutions and practices is for individuals, families, and communities to achieve permanent aid independence, producing thriving local economies and increasing financial inclusion into regional and global markets.

Multidimensional Poverty and Climate Change

In 2017, the **World Bank adjusted** the international poverty line from $1.90 per person per day to $2.15 per person per day, updating the standard by which impoverished households are categorized as living in extreme poverty. The international poverty line is used to measure only one dimension of poverty: monetary poverty. Monetary poverty, however, is not the only kind of poverty that matters in an ever-changing climate. Multidimensional poverty—defined by the World Bank as households experiencing deprivation of at least one dimension of poverty (monetary, education, access to basic infrastructure)—provides a more holistic view of what it means to be impoverished in underdeveloped nations and how varying dimensions of poverty do and could interact with the effects of climate change. In 2018, the global multidimensional poverty headcount ratio **reached 14.7 percent**, outpacing the global monetary poverty headcount ratio of 8.7 percent, bringing attention to the impoverished households not captured by the monetary poverty dimension alone. For the purpose of this consideration, multidimensional poverty refers to households in extreme poverty also experiencing energy poverty and water insecurity, subsections of the Multidimensional Poverty Measure's "access to basic infrastructure" dimension. Access to basic

infrastructure—electricity and safe water for consumption and sanitation—**is pivotal** to the economic prosperity and survival of every person, and will increase in necessity to offset the effects of climate change in vulnerable populations.

Previous case studies highlight the interconnection between multidimensional poverty and the consequences of climate change. Individuals, families, and communities—especially in at-risk regions—should be prioritized in the global push for sustainable development.

- People in poor, rural communities in the **drought-affected Northern Highlands of Ethiopia** have been cutting down trees to use for firewood for decades, taking more wood to be used for energy consumption than can be replanted. This leads to biodiversity loss, soil erosion, and broader destruction of the greater ecosystem.
- **In Zimbabwe**, government officials are preparing to cull 200 elephants to alleviate food insecurity due to one of the country's worst droughts in decades. This crisis has left nearly half the country's population at risk of experiencing acute hunger. This follows a similar action taken by the government of Namibia, which culled over 700 wild animals to provide meat for its citizens, nearly half of whom are at high risk of suffering from extreme acute hunger. **Namibia** is also suffering from its worst drought in nearly 100 years, with the government citing water conflict between humans and wildlife as a contributing factor to its **decision** to cull these animals.

Ethical Implications

In the context of the climate crisis, advanced economies are overwhelmingly responsible for the degradation of the environment and the resulting adverse effects felt throughout the globe in the form of worsening droughts, severe floods, devastating storms, and rising sea levels. In the case of the biomass fuel-dependent communities in Northern Ethiopia, a lack of agency and dignity results from spending too much time gathering and producing biomass fuel for energy consumption to provide for daily basic needs. This time could be more appropriately spent if these communities received access to efficient energy infrastructure, allowing individuals to focus on more sustainable and economical living practices, giving them the freedom to move from subsistence farming to commercial or cooperative farming. They lack the agency to make different decisions because they are trying to survive in a broken system that they themselves did not break; dignity is lost because outside circumstances have made them dependent on aid.

The basis of this consideration, then, is to address the absence of a multidimensional poverty perspective in current climate migration frameworks. Doing this means paying special attention to energy poverty and water security and offering community-based sustainable solutions and practices. This will allow individuals and communities affected by climate change to maintain their agency and preserve their sense of dignity by knowing that they have the ability to sustain themselves and become aid-independent.

"The absence of a multidimensional poverty perspective in climate migration frameworks ignores the realities of energy poverty and water security."

CONSIDERATION 2:

Closing Legal Gaps

Climate migration poses a significant challenge to international humanitarian law, necessitating comprehensive legal reforms and collaborative efforts across various levels of governance. By recognizing the rights of climate change-affected migrants and implementing robust legal protections, the international community can better address the humanitarian implications of this crisis. A multifaceted approach is required, involving individual citizens, states, international organizations, and civil society to create a more inclusive and protective legal framework, ensuring migrants' rights and dignity are upheld amidst the growing challenges posed by climate change. This consideration intends to act as a guide to protect these climate change-affected migrants, ensuring that ethics are the basis for any new legal framework.

The issue of climate change-induced migration is an evolving and urgent challenge, yet there is a noticeable gap in international law addressing the rights and protections of affected persons. Unlike traditional refugees, people migrating due to the effects of climate change are not explicitly covered by the **1951 Refugee Convention** or other core international agreements, leaving them in a vulnerable legal position. As climate change increasingly forces groups and individuals to move, the lack of a stand-alone legal framework results in a fragmented approach from receiving states, many of which struggle with capacity and resources.

While no dedicated treaty exists, several international instruments, such as the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, the **1951 Refugee Convention**, the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**, and the **Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols** provide foundational protections that can be extended to climate change-affected migrants. Yet, these frameworks do not specifically address the definition of a "climate migrant," or the unique nature of climate migration, such as environmental degradation or climate change-induced displacement.

The Gaps in Legal Frameworks

The 1951 Refugee Convention and its **1967 Protocol** define a refugee as someone fleeing persecution based on race, religion, nationality, or political opinion. However, the Convention **does not recognize** environmental factors as legitimate grounds for seeking refugee status. Similarly, human rights frameworks like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protect basic rights such as life and asylum. However, they **do not address** the specific vulnerabilities of climate change-induced migration. The Geneva Conventions, designed to protect individuals during conflict, also **lack provisions for environmental displacement.**

The necessity for creating a robust framework for climate migration cannot be overstated. For example, we can build on the **Kyoto Protocol** and the **Paris Agreement** to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. A climate migration framework could benefit from and leverage proven tools to address climate-driven migration. Kyoto's carbon trading offers a model funding mechanism that channels resources into vulnerable regions, helping communities adapt locally and reducing forced migration. Meanwhile, the Paris Agreement **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)** and **Global Stocktake** would provide a basis for migrationresilience commitments, meaning national pledges to protect at-risk populations, reviewed regularly to adapt to shifting climate risks. Together, these approaches could suggest a pathway forward and make the case for a climate migration treaty that

is well-funded, accountable, and proactive in supporting communities threatened by climate impacts, instilling confidence in the responsible management of resources.

Ethical Implications

The ethical imperative of establishing a comprehensive framework for climate migration is paramount. This is not merely a legal necessity but a **moral obligation** rooted in our commitment to uphold human dignity and respect in the face of unprecedented global challenges. To address climate migration with ethical clarity, we must reimagine protections that respect the agency of individuals and acknowledge the dignity they carry as they are forced to move. Closing the legal gaps that currently exist is crucial to ensuring these protections. Inaction could leave vulnerable communities uncertain, underserved, and unprotected by existing legal frameworks. The urgency of this issue extends beyond what is legally feasible; it underscores what is ethically imperative. We must **affirm our collective responsibility** to create a humane and just response to climate-induced migration ensuring and safeguarding migrants' human and legal rights.

CONSIDERATION 3:

Driving Multi-Stakeholder Consensus for Climate Security

As early as 2007, stakeholders across the international security community began to refer to climate migration as a "**threat multiplier**," whereby the interrelated effects of climate change will "exacerbate pre-existing threats and other drivers of instability to contribute to security risks." This built on **existing scholarship** showing that the impact of population size, movement, and distribution are widely acknowledged as significant factors in contributing toward state stability, and geopolitical dynamics writ large. Still, many climate security initiatives struggle to adequately account for the impact of ongoing population changes caused by climate change, failing to account for the agency and protection of the rights of the affected individuals. Therefore, these initiatives also do not address the significance of climate migration, instead focusing on climate change-related impacts that more directly affect taxpayers, such as installing costly military base infrastructure to accommodate rising sea levels. As a result, the international community appears overwhelmed and underperforming in contending with how to approach the role of migration in climate security.

The View from International Institutions

In May of 2022, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) **published a compelling article** that proposed a role for itself in addressing this crisis. Actions include avoiding duplicative interventions and expertise, bolstering civil preparedness, and leveraging its long-time leadership on civil preparedness programs to enhance member countries' capacities to absorb increased numbers of climate-induced migrants. This would be achieved by working across **Defense, Diplomacy and Development (3D)** programming stakeholders. Yet, in **NATO's 2023 Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment**, the discussion around the impact of migration as a "threat multiplier" was extremely limited with only three citations represented in the entire bibliography. In fact, despite increasing consensus

about the link between climate migration and state stability within the international security community, the **International Organization for Migration (IOM) for Climate and Security** also appeared unconvinced with regard to these interwoven risks, formerly stating on their website that:

> *"The relationship between climate change and migration has [also] often been discussed through a security prism, whereby climate change on the one hand, or migration on the other, are seen as a threat to peace leading to increased securitization of these questions and creating further restrictions to mobility. Yet, existing evidence on the topic is inconclusive, and claims linking climate change, migration, security and conflict must be considered with extreme caution."*

Though no specific sources were cited to support this statement, IOM nonetheless outlined initiatives to address the allegedly unsubstantiated "security prism" through the **UN Community of Practice (CoP) on Climate and Security**, the global **Task Force on Migration, Environmental Change and Conflict**, and the **Geneva Dialogue on Environment, Climate, Conflict, and Peace**. It is worth noting that this text no longer appears on the IOM website, which was updated this year to address climate security, in the opinion of this research team, in a much more comprehensive and evidence-based manner:

> *"The consequences of climate change affect all areas . . . economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political . . . and undermine conflict prevention, sustaining peace and sustainable development efforts with a disproportionate impact on communities with existing vulnerabilities, including migrants, women and girls, children, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples. . . . In fragile and conflictaffected states, these dynamics exacerbate tensions, particularly when national and local policies fail to address the causes of existing tension . . ."*

The **NATO 2024 Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment report**, released in late August 2024, included much-needed detail throughout the Resilience and Civil Preparedness section, detailing how supporting local civilian authorities to manage civil services, energy, food and water resources, health crises, and manage uncontrolled movement of people is amplifying pressure on NATO presences. Through a number of case studies, it seems that NATO, like IOM, are beginning to more thoughtfully contend with the role of population structures and regional stability as impacted by climate-induced migration.

Ethical Implications

Because it is important to be mindful of the political consequences of framing climate migration through the lens of security, as NATO points out in their report, the defense stakeholders must not operate alone in protecting the ethically based rights of individuals when pursuing sustainable solutions. The 3D programming stakeholders are all equally integral constants in any equation that seeks to ethically address climate migration. Thus, there remains a powerful impetus behind the seemingly increasing alignment across different missions of multilateral forums, including both NATO and IOM, as unlikely but necessary partners to leverage ethics as a lens by which to understand how political demography is impacting climate-induced risks toward international security.

As security researcher Asif Muztaba Hassan **writes in *The Diplomat***, it is readily apparent that "military planning for climate change does not account for consideration of 'threat to habitats and species,' but focuses on social strife and state collapse in regions already suffering from scarce resources and ethnic friction." Therefore, policy levers and tools must be used to create an incentive structure by which policymakers in the international security and development communities can collaboratively and more

effectively strategize about how to address climate migration as a significant threat to international security. These policies must ensure comprehensive and crosscutting analysis and education across the many interrelated factors that drive population change in response to climate change-induced migration. However, these policies should also seek to consolidate and build momentum behind existing initiatives focused on sustainable and ethics-driven solutions.

Table 1: Policy Levers for Climate Security

WHAT	WHO	HOW
Revisiting the Military Mission to Educate Soldiers on Impacts of Climate Migration	State militaries, localized international development and nonprofit partners, and National Military Strategy stakeholders	The international security community must prepare for changes in mission profiles, military tasking, and standard operating procedures, to include closer consideration of the role Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HADR) missions play in the midst of climate change. Specifically, militaries must enact new curricular training for the military on impacts of climate migration as it relates to mission planning.
Establishing More Effective Information-Sharing and Civil-Military Planning	UN Security Council and the broader international committee	Building from the Comprehensive Global Planning Platform, an implementation tenet within the Model International Mobility Convention, the UN Security Council should lead planning efforts for a dedicated working group that will execute authoritative census efforts toward supporting existing tracking mechanisms of climate migration patterns across the globe.
Focus on the Bellwethers of Habitability: Energy & Water Access	Stakeholders in domestic and multilateral bodies that drive strategy documents such as the National Climate Resilience Framework, Climate Adaptation Plan, and others. Such documents require more direct engagement with individuals impacted (or at risk of being impacted) by climate-induced migration, as well as subject matter experts on multidimensional resource scarcity.	Focus on individual prosperity as part of an "enterprise" strategy for addressing climate-induced migration and impacts on geopolitical stability. One such example is the June 2024 partnership between the U.S. Department of Defense and Department of Energy as part of its forthcoming 2024-2027 Climate Adaptation Plan, which specifies "enhancing adaptation and resilience through collaboration with allies and partners" as a key line of effort retained from 2021's plan.
Population Growth as a metric for Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)	Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)	About one-third (49) of countries' NDCs either link population growth to a negative effect and/or identify population growth as a challenge or trend affecting societal needs. This must become a required aspect of NDC planning.

CONSIDERATION 4:

Sharing Financial Burdens

As the frequency of climate change-related severe weather events such as droughts, floods, hurricanes, and heat waves increase over time, it is estimated that the potential impact of these events will cost between $1.7 trillion and $3.1 trillion per year by 2050. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimates that the cost of climate and weather disasters in the United States totaled more than $165 billion in 2022 (not including cost on healthcare system)—the third most costly year on record for climate emergencies due to 18 separate billion-dollar weather and climate disasters. From 2017 to 2022, the annual costs from billion-dollar disasters have exceeded $100 billion, with 2019 being the only exception. The total cost from 2016 to 2022 exceeded $1 trillion.

The Cost to Developing Economies

This picture is even bleaker in developing economies that suffer from harsher weather conditions and have fewer mitigation resources; developing countries have 15 times more victims of natural disasters than developed countries. According to a report by the United Nations Environment Programme, developing nations will require an annual financial commitment ranging from $215 billion to $387 billion throughout this decade to effectively address and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Inevitably, the dislocation caused by these extreme weather events is a global challenge that requires funding at multiple levels for various uses. Funding is required for several purposes including resettlement, climate adaptation, climate mitigation, and rebuilding. Following the board meetings held by the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCC), the Loss and Damage Fund has now been operationalized with funding of ~$661 million since it began at COP28 in Dubai 2023.

Ethical Implications

As to how funds such as these should be distributed, the principle of equitable burden-sharing should be the foundation for financial decision-making. By spreading the burden of adapting to and mitigating climate change effects across states, this reduces the risk of states dealing with additional financial burdens when the livelihood of their communities is at risk.

This consideration has an important role to play in keeping the vast costs of climate migration manageable as international actors evaluate and respond to the relative preparedness of the world to meet this challenge. If ethical principles are followed in these decisions, we can avoid scenarios such as the case of **Niger**. In this nation, farmers who rely on agriculture for their livelihood are likely to be severely impacted by reduced productivity due to climate change, yet per capita, Niger only emits 90 kilograms of carbon dioxide emissions annually compared to 13,000 kilograms from the United States.

Basing decisions on a commitment to equitable burden-sharing means that though they may not experience the effects of climate change as catastrophically as small island states or developing nations do, wealthier nations, corporations, and individuals across the world should still contribute more resources to alleviate the pressures on those disproportionately affected.

Conclusion

Individually, climate change and human mobility are complex issues, but when tied together, this intersection presents a unique set of risks and ethical implications to be considered. Advanced economies in the Global North must contend with the possible security threats caused by worsening, unpredictable climate events, and equally consider the financial costs and benefits of addressing their disproportionate role in contributing to climate change. These nations must, at the same time, heed the pleas of the individuals and communities affected by climate change with the utmost care and respect. Moving forward, should the international community look towards the creation of a Climate Migrant's Bill of Rights as a viable solution, it is important that such a framework not lose sight of what is truly important: the agency, dignity, and well-being of all affected individuals and communities. We are all people; we must treat each other as such

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