

MIGRATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE – WHY TERMINOLOGY MATTERS?

This fact sheet is part of a series that distils key topics in the climate migration literature into clear and concise summaries, addressing a need expressed by policymakers. Each sheet focuses on a specific subtopic, condensing existing knowledge into an accessible format. It provides an overview of main findings alongside policy-relevant insights. The fact sheets use the term ‘climate migration’ as a broad concept that encompasses various forms of (im)mobility in the context of climate change.

OVERVIEW

The **negative effects of climate change** and other environmental factors play **a direct and indirect role** in driving various forms of mobility, be it forced or voluntary, within countries or across borders.²

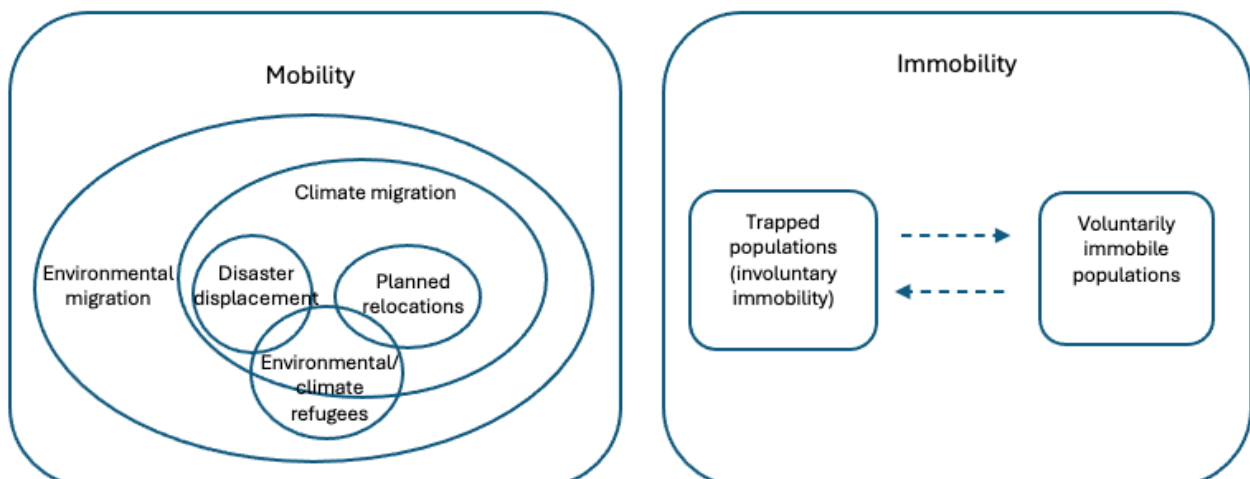
As a result, **several terms** have emerged to describe forms of mobility where **climate change plays a role**, as well as circumstances when environmental and climate factors limit people’s movements (immobility).^{17,5} To date **there is**

no legal or internationally accepted definition. Within the EU, different institutions have used different terms at different moments in time and in different policy areas, although an explicit reference to climate change features consistently as of 2017.

DEFINITIONS AND KEY TERMS

Environmental migration: “persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or

FIGURE 1. Recurring terms to describe population movements in the context of climate change



CLIMATE AND MIGRATION: TERMINOLOGY IN EU DOCUMENTS

- 1999** **‘environmental refugees’** as **‘a symptom of a humanitarian disaster’**, European Parliament, Resolution on the environment, security and foreign policy (A4-0005/1999, point L)
- 2008** **‘environmental migrants’/‘environmentally-induced migration’** with climate change as a major driver, High Representative and the European Commission, Climate Change and International Security, S113/08, (Solana Report): 2, 10.
- 2011** **‘environmentally-induced migration’**, European Commission, Communication on The Global Approach to Migration and Mobility, COM(2011) 743 final: 6-7.
- 2013** **‘climate change, environmental degradation and migration’**, Commission Staff Working Document, Climate change, environmental degradation, and migration, SWD(2013) 138 final: 35
- 2017** **‘persons displaced by effects of climate change’**, European Parliament, Resolution on Addressing refugee and migrant movements: the role of EU external action, 2015/2342(INI), C 298/39, point 31
- 2022** **‘migrants and persons displaced due to disasters, the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation’**, Commission staff working document Addressing displacement and migration related to disasters, climate change and environmental degradation, SWD (2022)18
- 2023** **‘climate displacement and migration’**, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission, Joint Communication on the Climate and Security Nexus

progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.^{5,8} Developed by IOM in 2007, this definition encompasses all types of population movements (forced and voluntary, temporary and permanent, internal and international) and various types of environmental drivers, including those related to climate change.

Human mobility in the context of climate change: “general umbrella term used to describe any movement of people happening in the context of climate change.”¹⁴ This term is used by the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change \(UNFCCC\)](#) and represents a dedicated workstream of the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage, established at COP19.^{15,16} It comprises migration, displacement and planned relocation related to the adverse impacts of climate change. It is commonly employed to ensure convergence in multilateral frameworks around actions on climate change and population movements. The term mobility encompasses also non-mobility scenarios resulting from the adverse effects of climate change, like the case of “trapped populations” (see below).

Climate migration: “the movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across an international border.”⁸ Under this definition, changes in environment and migration decisions are directly linked to climate change. The term is used in the World Bank’s Groundswell report to describe future migration patterns.¹⁹ While it has no legal value, this term is also mentioned in the legally binding [Cancun Agreements](#). The latter, however, distinguish it from forced climate change-induced movements, namely displacement and planned relocation, hence suggesting a narrower interpretation of the term to refer only to voluntary movements.

Disaster displacement: “situations where people are forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of a disaster or in order to avoid the impact of an immediate and foreseeable natural hazard. Such displacement results from the fact that affected persons are (i) exposed to (ii) a natural hazard in a situation where (iii) they are too vulnerable and lack the resilience to withstand the impacts of that hazard.”¹⁴ The [Platform on Disaster Displacement](#), a state-led multistakeholder initiative launched in 2016 to

foster international cooperation on this matter, employs this term to refer to sudden forced movements. The [Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre \(IDMC\)](#), subject expert organisation leading data collection and analysis efforts, uses it to present annual statistics on internal displacements.

Environmental (or climate) refugees: “people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life.”^{4,9} This definition has been used to advocate for international protection for the specific group of forced environmental/climate migrants.^{12,1} While it is broadly recognised that people displaced for environmental or climate-related reasons might need protection and assistance, their situation does not fall under the definition of ‘refugees’ of the 1951 Geneva Convention. In addition, their displacement is likely to be internal and temporary.^{11,16}

Trapped populations: people “who do not migrate, yet are situated in areas under threat, [...] at risk of becoming ‘trapped’ or having to stay behind, where they will be more vulnerable to environmental shocks and impoverishment. The notion of trapped populations applies in particular to poorer households who may not have the resources to move and whose livelihoods are affected”.⁸ This term, therefore, describes situations of involuntary immobility.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The **choice of language** to describe mobility and immobility in the context of climate change has important implications for policy responses, protection responsibilities and public discourse.^{18,6}
- Terms like ‘environmental migration’, ‘climate migration’ and ‘environmental/climate refugees’ may suggest simplistic causal relations between environmental factors, climate change and people’s decision to move.^{3,13}
- If not used appropriately, these terms risk overlooking the role of other social, political and economic drivers that intersect with environmental and climate factors, blurring distinct forms of mobility and ignoring the aspect of immobility (see Figure 1).²
- Other terms, like ‘disaster displacement’ and ‘trapped populations’, point directly to protection needs of affected populations, but reflect only a portion of the phenomenon that links climate change to mobility.
- Finally, general definitions like “human mobility in the context of climate change” comprise a broad spectrum of population movements and forms of immobility, but may not provide a clear call to action for policy makers.

FURTHER READING

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- [17] UNFCCC (2024b). Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage. [Technical guide on integrating human mobility and climate change linkages into relevant national climate change planning processes](#). Bonn.
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