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CLIMATE CHANGE, STAYING IN PLACE AND SAFE MIGRATION

GLOBAL TRENDS, RISING RISKS IN TÜRKİYE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COP31

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Introduction

Migration has long been a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by war, conflict, political repression, economic inequality, social change and environmental conditions. Decisions to move or remain are rarely determined by a single cause; they emerge from interacting circumstances. Climate change has become a major force that transforms these circumstances and intensifies existing vulnerabilities. Climate-related mobility should therefore be examined not as a category wholly separate from other forms of migration, but through the interaction of environmental hazards with economic, social and political conditions.

Common accounts of climate migration focus on communities compelled to leave because of floods, droughts, storms and other disasters. Although such accounts make the consequences of climate change visible, they can imply a direct and one-way causal relationship between climate change and migration. Current research instead shows that the same climate hazard may produce four distinct outcomes under different social and economic conditions: voluntary migration, forced displacement, voluntary staying, and an inability to move despite a desire to leave. Climate-related mobility should therefore be assessed not only by counting those who move, but also by examining the options available to households and communities to stay or move.[1]

This distinction directly affects the scope of climate policy and the allocation of resources. A focus limited to people who move overlooks both those who remain to protect land, livelihoods or household members and those unable to leave high-risk areas because they cannot afford migration. The World Migration Report 2026 shows that migration requires access to financial resources, social networks, information and legal opportunities. In some cases, climate hazards reduce rather than expand the resources households need to move.[2] A nationwide study in Bangladesh published in 2026 found that 67.3% of long-term rural-to-urban climate migrants belonged to the highest wealth quintile, while those remaining in high-risk rural areas were concentrated in lower wealth groups.[3] These findings challenge the assumption that climate migrants necessarily come from the poorest groups. Mobility may provide an adaptive opportunity for households with adequate resources, while economically and socially disadvantaged groups remain exposed in high-risk areas.

In this analysis, climate-related mobility is used as an umbrella term encompassing voluntary migration, forced displacement and planned relocation associated with climate hazards. The term climate migrant does not denote a single, binding status under international law. Different forms of mobility must therefore be distinguished according to their causes, degree of voluntariness, duration and protection needs.[9][16]

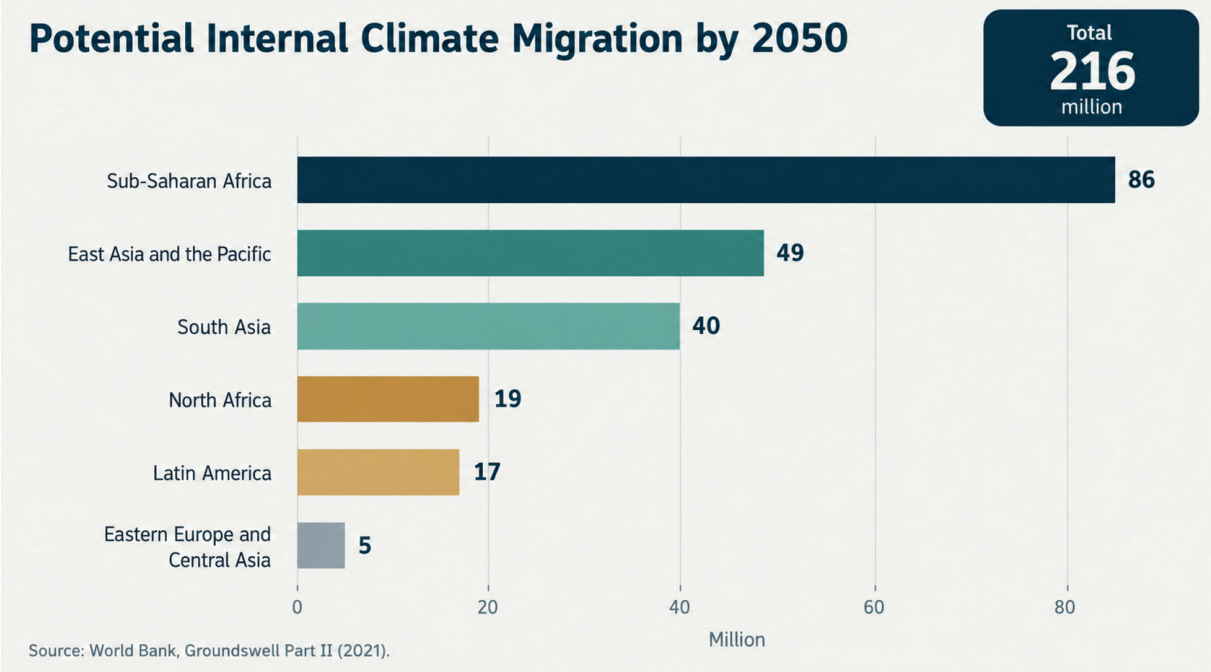
The central argument is that climate-related mobility is shaped not only by environmental hazards, but also by the unequal distribution of opportunities to remain safely, to move and to rebuild life after loss. The most visible populations on the move are therefore not always those most vulnerable to climate risk.

How Should Climate Migration Data and Projections Be Read?

A central methodological problem in climate-migration debates is the treatment of indicators measuring different phenomena as though they described the same category. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) records disaster-related internal displacement movements occurring within a given year. When the same person is displaced more than once, each movement may be counted separately. The total may also include disasters, such as earthquakes, that are not directly related to climate change. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), disasters caused 45.8 million new internal displacements across 163 countries and territories in 2024; 25.2 million were linked to storms and 19.1 million to floods. At year-end, 9.8 million people remained internally displaced by disasters.[2] Using annual movements and the year-end displaced population interchangeably can therefore distort the scale of climate-related mobility.

The World Bank's Groundswell report projects that, without adequate action, up to 216 million people could migrate within their countries across six regions by 2050. This figure is neither an observed movement nor an unavoidable outcome. It represents the upper bound, under a pessimistic scenario, of additional internal migration that could arise from slow-onset effects such as water scarcity, declining agricultural productivity and sea-level rise. The projection excludes international migration and evacuations or displacement caused by sudden-onset disasters. The report also concludes that strong emission reductions and inclusive, resilient development could reduce potential mobility by as much as 80%.[4] The projection should therefore be treated not as an inevitable forecast, but as a warning about the need for timely climate and development policies.

Estimates of climate migration by 2050 range from 143 million to 1.2 billion people because the studies do not measure the same phenomenon. Some estimate the population potentially exposed to climate hazards; others count people at risk of displacement, expected internal migrants or cross-border movements. Definitions, methods and geographical coverage must therefore be considered when comparing figures.[2] Large estimates can raise awareness, but when removed from context they create two problems. First, societies in the Global South may be portrayed as a homogeneous population expected to move north, turning climate migration from an issue of



protection and adaptation into one of border security. Second, they can obscure the fact that most climate-related mobility takes place within national borders and over relatively short distances. The category of climate migrant can thus illuminate protection needs while also being used to legitimise more restrictive migration and border policies.[5]

Global Outlook: Vulnerabilities and Forms of Mobility

East Asia and the Pacific and South Asia are among the principal regions of climate-related mobility. Typhoons, floods, coastal erosion and sea-level rise combine with high population density and precarious settlements to increase displacement risk. IDMC recorded 19.6 million internal displacements linked to conflict and disasters in East Asia and the Pacific in 2025. Typhoons affecting the Philippines, China and Indonesia were central to the rise in disaster displacement, while conflict displacement also reached a new level. In South Asia, milder monsoon conditions reduced disaster displacement to 4.6 million. A decline in movements recorded in one year, however, does not mean that exposure to climate hazards or long-term displacement risk has diminished.[6]

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the effects of drought and extreme heat on migration are shaped by rain-fed agriculture, unequal land tenure, shrinking pastoral routes and wetlands, armed conflict and inadequate social protection. The World Bank's projection of 86 million potential internal

climate migrants in the region by 2050 reflects not only the severity of hazards but also the fragility of livelihoods and public services.[4] In North Africa and the Middle East, rising water stress, agricultural losses and the limited housing capacity of rapidly growing cities are major drivers of climate-related mobility.

In small island states and low-lying coastal areas, losses extend beyond housing, infrastructure and livelihoods. Territorial integrity, cultural heritage, burial grounds and place-based identities are also at risk. In the dry corridors of Latin America, climate pressures combine with violence, organised crime and inadequate state protection, increasing internal mobility as well as cross-border migration and the need for international protection.

A 2024 study of 87 people migrating from Central America to Mexico found that more than 80% had experienced at least one climate event during the preceding five years and 55% had been exposed to four or more hazards. Alongside environmental conditions, 66% cited insecurity, 62% violence and 54% unemployment among the factors influencing migration. Only 25% had received any form of state support.[7] Although the limited sample cannot represent the region's entire migrant population, the findings show how climate hazards operate as risk multipliers by aggravating crop losses, barriers to food and water, exposure to violence and inadequate state protection.

The influence of climate change on migration decisions cannot be assessed only in cases where drought, floods or extreme heat are explicitly reported. Climate hazards can damage livelihoods and restrict access to essential services. When combined with rising household debt, income loss and gaps in social protection, these effects can increase exposure to armed groups, violent actors and other relations of dependency. They may influence not only the decision to move, but also its timing, direction and form. When interviews, official records and protection assessments register only the primary stated reason, climate effects may disappear within categories such as economic need, family reunification or violence. Climate and environmental data should therefore be incorporated systematically into country-of-origin information, individual case assessments and protection records.[7]

Remaining in place is not, by itself, evidence of successful adaptation. Some households choose to stay to protect land, livelihoods or social ties; others cannot move because they cannot meet the cost, relinquish care responsibilities, obtain documentation or access safe routes. Voluntary staying and involuntary immobility must therefore be distinguished in data collection and policymaking.[1][2]

Climate change does not constitute an independent legal ground for refugee status. Existing refugee law and complementary protection may nevertheless apply where climate hazards interact

with conflict, violence, discrimination or inadequate state protection. Applications for international protection should therefore be assessed not only by reference to the stated environmental cause, but also by considering whether climate impacts create risks of persecution, serious harm or refoulement.[17]

The Distinctive Features of Contemporary Climate Mobility in Historical Perspective

Environmental change has influenced population movements throughout history. Research spanning the Ice Age, medieval droughts, the North American Dust Bowl of the 1930s and the 1970 Bhola Cyclone shows how changes in water and food resources and declining habitability have shaped mobility.[8] This record indicates that migration should not automatically be treated as a humanitarian crisis. Under appropriate conditions, mobility can serve as an adaptation strategy that enables households and communities to reduce risk, diversify livelihoods and reach safer places.

The historical record does not erase the distinctive causes and responsibilities of contemporary climate mobility. Today's environmental change is increasingly rapid and largely driven by human activity. A pronounced inequality also separates the countries that have contributed most to climate change from the societies most exposed to its harms. Nation-state borders restrict safe and regular movement, while access to safer areas increasingly depends on income because of rising land and housing costs.

Climate Mobility in International Policy: Commitments, Implementation Gaps and COP31

The relationship between human mobility and climate change has become more visible in international policy over the past decade. It is addressed through the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage, established in 2013; the Task Force on Displacement created after the Paris Agreement; the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction; the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration; and the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage. The Task Force continues to develop policies to avert, minimise and address displacement related to the adverse effects of climate change.[9] Yet the IOM's 2026 report finds that existing policies and practices have not produced comprehensive systemic change. Action remains fragmented across

institutions and policy fields, interventions concentrate on post-disaster humanitarian needs, and long-term local solutions remain limited.[2]

The implementation gap is not merely a shortage of finance. Climate finance is generally allocated through indicators focused on emission reduction and physical infrastructure. Social dimensions of mobility, including rent support, care services, labour-market transitions, access to identity and other documents, and the preservation of community ties—remain poorly integrated into current project and financing models. A similar problem affects local government: when responsibilities are devolved without adequate fiscal resources, data access and planning authority, the language of local action can become an obligation unsupported by power or resources.

By September 2025, USD 790.24 million had been pledged to the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage, of which USD 397.74 million had been received. The Fund's initial implementation phase for 2025–2026 was limited to USD 250 million.[10] The challenge is therefore not only the volume of finance. Pledges must become accessible and predictable resources capable of responding to needs at different stages of climate-related mobility.

Against this background, the thirty-first United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP31), to be held in Antalya in November, offers an important opportunity to link climate-related mobility more closely with international adaptation and loss-and-damage agendas.[11] Success should not be measured solely by the inclusion of the issue in negotiating texts. Concrete benchmarks should include mobility and involuntary-immobility indicators in national adaptation plans; a financing mechanism within the Loss and Damage Fund that jointly supports displacement prevention, safe mobility and durable solutions; and representation for affected communities and migrant-receiving local governments in funding decisions.

Climate-Related Mobility in Türkiye: Rising Risks and Limited Data Capacity

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), 2,475,019 people migrated between provinces in 2025, and 510,226 identified "better housing and living conditions" as their reason for moving.[12] These indicators do not measure the scale of climate migration. TurkStat's existing categories do not distinguish climate shocks, associated livelihood losses, repeated post-disaster movements or people unable to move despite wanting to do so. A reliable national total for climate-related migration in Türkiye cannot therefore be derived from current statistics. The data gap does not demonstrate an absence of climate effects; it shows that a measurement system capable of separating those effects from other migration drivers has not yet been established.

Data from the Turkish State Meteorological Service (MGM) show that climate pressure is becoming more pronounced. Türkiye's areal precipitation in 2025 was 414.9 millimetres, 27.6% below the 1991–2020 norm and the lowest level in 61 years. In and around Şanlıurfa, Kilis, Gaziantep and Hatay, declines exceeded 60% in some locations.[13] The return of higher rainfall in many regions during the first nine months of 2026, however, shows why a direct causal link cannot be drawn between a single dry year and permanent migration.[14] Determining the extent to which seasonal agricultural labour originating in Şanlıurfa or Konya is climate-related requires longitudinal research that tracks crop and income losses, household debt, irrigation access, care responsibilities and mobility routes over time.

Türkiye's Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Action Plan 2024–2030 provides an important framework for water, agriculture, cities, disasters and social development.[15] Yet unless migrant-sending basins and migrant-receiving cities are connected within the same planning chain, agricultural adaptation in rural areas, post-disaster social assistance and housing policy in destination cities will remain fragmented. Local governments may produce risk maps, but their limited authority over labour, social protection and agriculture can create implementation gaps. Businesses often assess climate risks to facilities while excluding impacts on supplier farmers, seasonal workers and regional mobility in water-intensive production areas. Urban planning also requires housing and land policies that prevent rising prices in safer locations from pushing low-income groups into new risk zones.

Research on climate-related mobility in Türkiye should focus on mechanisms in different regions rather than attempting to produce a single national total that cannot yet be reliably measured. Priorities could include drought, agricultural income loss and seasonal labour in the Konya Closed Basin and Southeastern Anatolia; temporary displacement after wildfires on the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts; repeated movements caused by floods and landslides in the Black Sea region; and access to housing and services in major cities. Instead of assuming direct causality between climate hazards and migration, studies should track household income, debt, social protection, care responsibilities and mobility routes over time to generate more verifiable evidence.

Policy Priorities for Climate-Related Mobility

Policies on climate-related migration should not seek to prevent all human mobility. Restrictive approaches can weaken migration's adaptive function and leave communities without adequate livelihoods, housing or protection in high-risk areas. Policy performance should be judged by whet-

her households can remain under safe and sustainable conditions, move through prepared and regular pathways when necessary, and restore rights, livelihoods and social ties after displacement.

Climate Pressure and Migration Data in Türkiye: Key Limits

2.48 million

People migrated between provinces in 2025*

Region	Climate Threats	Migration Trends
Central Anatolia	Drought, water scarcity	Rural-to-urban migration increase
Eastern Anatolia	Agricultural productivity decline	Migration of young population
Southeastern Anatolia	Decrease in water resources	Abandonment of agricultural activities

Source: TURKSTAT Internal Migration Statistics 2025.

1. Establish a shared data infrastructure. In Türkiye, TurkStat, the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) and MGM—and equivalent statistical, disaster-management and meteorological agencies elsewhere—should develop a common system for monitoring climate-related mobility. It should track the type and severity of hazards together with livelihood and service losses, repeated displacement and populations unable to leave high-risk areas. This would enable a more robust assessment of climate effects and prevent climate-related mobility from disappearing within general economic migration data.

2. Strengthen the capacity to remain safely and sustainably. Public authorities responsible for agriculture and the environment, local governments, cooperatives and relevant organisations should develop basin-level programmes integrating water management, climate-adapted crop diversity, agricultural insurance and social protection. Performance should be assessed not only by beneficiary numbers or expenditure, but also by changes in abandoned farmland, post-shock household debt and forced migration. The aim is to determine whether staying is safe, voluntary and economically sustainable rather than treating it as inherently successful.

3. Expand safe and regular mobility pathways. Relevant institutions should cooperate so that people compelled to move by climate hazards can do so safely and regularly. Temporary or perma-

nent work permits should be developed, recognition of occupational qualifications across regions and countries should be facilitated, and disaster-affected people should receive time-limited legal stay. Continued access to health care, pensions and social assistance after migration should also be guaranteed.

4. Prepare migrant-receiving cities. Local governments and urban planners should incorporate future climate-related population movements into urban planning. Housing, transport, employment, health and social-service capacity should be planned against 2030 and 2050 climate scenarios. New construction in high-risk areas should be restricted, affordable housing for low-income households expanded, and service deficits in migrant-receiving neighbourhoods addressed. Policy should integrate safe housing, employment and access to public services rather than focus solely on housing supply.

5. Create dedicated finance for climate mobility under COP31. The COP31 Presidency and the Board of the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage should establish a dedicated financing mechanism for climate-related mobility. It should support safe staying, safe movement where migration is unavoidable, and durable post-displacement solutions. Local governments and organisations should have direct access to funding, and affected communities should participate in decisions. Performance should be assessed through the share of finance reaching local actors, the diversity of represented groups, and households' access to safe housing and sustainable livelihoods.

Conclusion

Presenting climate-related mobility as a future wave of large-scale and uncontrolled population movement can increase visibility, but it also tends to misidentify both causes and policy responses. The evidence shows that climate change does not explain migration on its own. Climate hazards interact with livelihood losses, conflict and violence, access to land, care responsibilities, housing conditions, border policies and inadequate state protection. Climate-related mobility should therefore be understood not only as an outcome of social vulnerability, but also as a capacity for adaptation. This capacity is unevenly distributed: people with adequate financial and social resources may reach safer areas, while poorer and less protected groups may be compelled to remain in high-risk locations.

Policies should evaluate three outcomes together: the number of forced displacements averted; the circumstances of people able to move through safe, rights-based pathways; and the share of the population genuinely able to choose to remain. A policy focused only on reducing displace-

ment may suppress mobility and restrict access to safety. One focused only on safe pathways may neglect the adaptation and development investments required for people to continue living where they are. Infrastructure-centred interventions that disregard inequalities in income, housing and social protection may reproduce existing vulnerabilities in new locations. The success of COP31 and national climate programmes should therefore be judged not simply by formal recognition of climate-related mobility, but by whether communities can remain safely, move regularly when necessary and rebuild after displacement with adequate resources, authority and accountability.

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