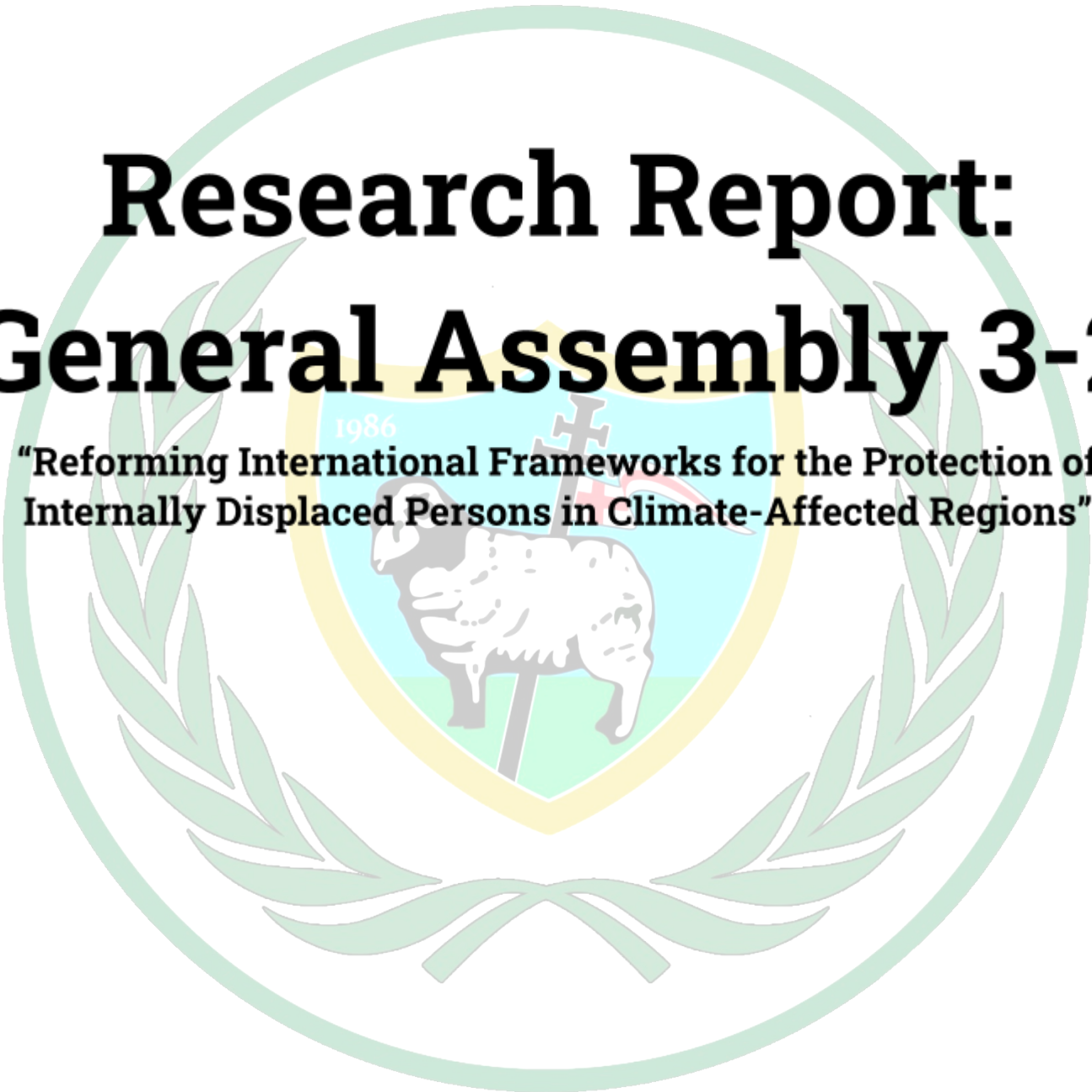


Research Report: General Assembly 3-2

**“Reforming International Frameworks for the Protection of
Internally Displaced Persons in Climate-Affected Regions”**





Committee: General Assembly 3-2

Issue: Reforming International Frameworks for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Climate-Affected Regions

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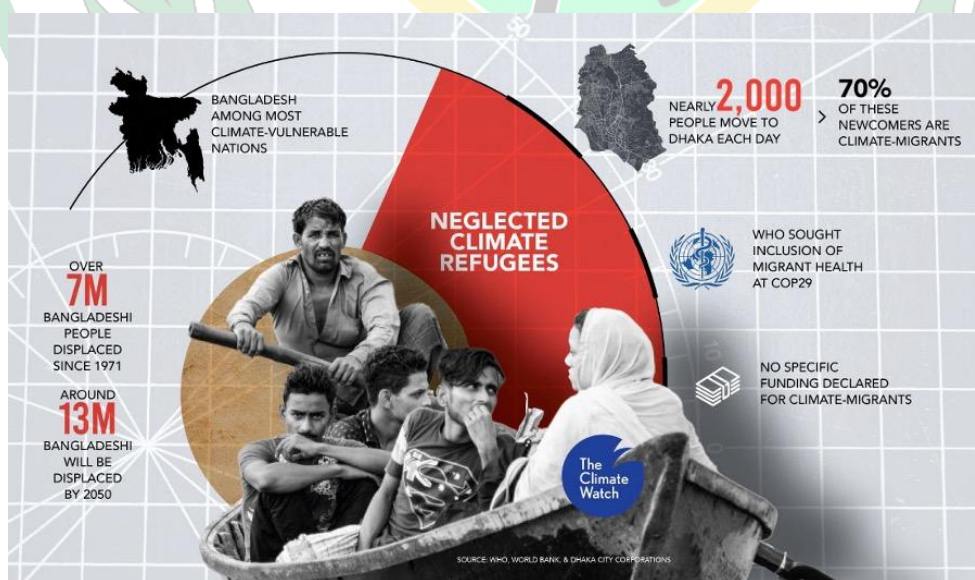
Introduction

Climate change has become the defining crisis of our century, not only because of its devastating impact on ecosystems but also because of its profound disruption of human lives, forcing millions to abandon homes, livelihoods, and ancestral lands. Yet the most haunting dimension of this upheaval is the plight of internally displaced persons, those who remain within their own borders but are nonetheless uprooted by things like floods in Bangladesh, droughts in the Sahel, hurricanes in the Caribbean, or rising seas in the Pacific. Unlike refugees, whose legal status is enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, internally displaced persons fall into a legal void: they are citizens of their own states, yet when those states are overwhelmed, unwilling, or unable to act, international law offers no binding recourse. The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement of 1998 attempted to sketch a framework of rights and responsibilities, but they remain soft law, more aspirational than enforceable, a moral compass rather than a shield. This paradox of displacement without recognition has created a humanitarian blind spot at precisely the moment when climate change is accelerating the scale of internal migration to unprecedented levels. The World Bank's *Groundswell Report* projects that by 2050, climate





change could displace over 216 million people internally across Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, a demographic shift that will reshape economies, destabilise fragile states, and test the resilience of international institutions. Yet despite the magnitude of this looming crisis, the international community has failed to craft binding frameworks that integrate climate justice, human rights, and humanitarian protection. The injustice is glaring: those least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, often in the Global South, are the ones most vulnerable to displacement, condemned to invisibility in international law. History shows that displacement has always forced legal innovation. The Refugee Convention arose from the ashes of World War II, and the Guiding Principles from the tragedies of Rwanda and Bosnia, but climate displacement, driven not by war but by planetary collapse, has yet to inspire a comparable revolution. If the twentieth century was defined by the Refugee Convention, the twenty-first must be defined by a climate displacement protocol, a binding instrument that recognises the rights of climate-affected IDPs and obliges states to act. Without such reform, millions will remain trapped in the paradox of being displaced yet legally invisible, their dignity contingent on the goodwill of governments and the overstretched capacity of humanitarian agencies.





Reforming international frameworks for internally displaced persons in climate-affected regions is therefore not merely a legal necessity but a moral imperative, a test of whether humanity can respond to its own planetary crisis with solidarity rather than indifference, with justice rather than neglect.

Key Definitions and Concepts

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): Individuals forced to flee their homes due to armed conflict, generalised violence, human rights violations, or disasters but who remain within their country's borders. Unlike refugees, IDPs do not cross international boundaries and therefore lack protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention. The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) provide a non-binding framework for their rights.

Climate-Induced Displacement: Movement of people triggered by sudden-onset disasters (cyclones, floods, and wildfires) or slow-onset processes (desertification, sea-level rise, and salinization). This displacement is multicausal, often intertwined with poverty, governance failures, and conflict. Importantly, there is no legal category of "climate refugee" under international law.

Refugee vs. IDP Distinction: Refugees are protected under the **1951 Refugee Convention** and **1967 Protocol**, which apply to those crossing borders due to persecution. IDPs remain within their state and rely on domestic protection mechanisms, often weak or absent.





Refugees, IDPs, migrants... what's the difference?

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Refugees



Flee their homes, cross an international border, and cannot return because they fear their lives are in danger.

IDPs



Flee their homes for the same reasons as refugees, but have not crossed an international border.

Asylum-Seekers



Flee their homes and claim they are refugees, but their status has not yet been definitively determined.

Migrants



Voluntarily leave their homes to settle permanently in another region or country for a variety of different reasons.

Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998): Drafted under the leadership of Francis Deng, these principles outline the rights of IDPs and responsibilities of states. They cover protection during displacement, humanitarian assistance, and durable solutions. However, they are not legally binding.

Disaster (UNDRR Definition): A serious disruption of community functioning involving widespread human, material, economic, or environmental losses that exceed the ability of the affected community to cope using its own resources. This definition is crucial because climate-related disasters often trigger displacement.

International Protection: A legal concept referring to the responsibility of the international community to safeguard individuals when their own state fails to protect them. Traditionally applied to refugees, but increasingly debated in the context of climate-induced displacement.





Complementary Protection: A form of protection under human rights law for individuals who do not meet the strict refugee definition but face risks such as torture, inhuman treatment, or threats to life if returned. Climate impacts may trigger such risks, making complementary protection relevant.

Loss and Damage Finance: A mechanism under UN climate negotiations (UNFCCC) to compensate countries suffering irreversible climate impacts. This concept is increasingly linked to displacement, as funds could support adaptation, relocation, and protection of IDPs.

Global Compact for Migration (2018): The first international instrument to explicitly recognize climate change, disasters, and environmental degradation as drivers of migration. While non-binding, it sets commitments for cooperation, preparedness, and safe migration pathways.

Nansen Initiative (2015 Protection Agenda): A state-led process that produced recommendations for addressing disaster-induced cross-border displacement. Though focused on cross-border cases, it shaped discourse on climate mobility and highlighted the need for frameworks covering IDPs.

Major Parties involved

The question of reforming international frameworks for the protection of internally displaced persons in climate-affected regions cannot be addressed without mapping the constellation of actors whose decisions, resources, and responsibilities shape the fate of those uprooted. At the center stand nation-states, both those directly affected by climate displacement and those whose emissions have historically driven the crisis. Vulnerable states such as Bangladesh and Mozambique and small island nations in the Pacific bear the brunt of climate-induced displacement, often lacking the institutional capacity to provide adequate protection for their IDPs. Yet the responsibility does not rest solely with them;





industrialized nations whose carbon footprints have fueled global warming carry a moral and political obligation to support protective frameworks, whether through funding, resettlement programs, or advocacy in international fora. Alongside states, the United Nations system plays a pivotal role. The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), though traditionally focused on refugees, has increasingly engaged with IDPs, while the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) provide operational support in disaster-affected regions. The Human Rights Council and treaty bodies, such as the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, also shape normative standards that can be leveraged to protect displaced populations.

Equally significant are regional organizations, which often pioneer broader definitions and stronger commitments. The African Union's Kampala Convention (2009) stands out as the first legally binding regional instrument on IDPs, obliging states to prevent displacement and protect those affected. In Latin America, the Cartagena Declaration expanded refugee definitions to include those fleeing generalized violence and disasters, offering a precedent for climate-related displacement. These regional frameworks demonstrate that innovation often begins closer to the ground, where the impacts are most acute. Non-state actors also occupy crucial space in this landscape. Humanitarian NGOs such as the Norwegian Refugee Council, Médecins Sans Frontières, and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre provide direct assistance, document displacement trends, and lobby for stronger protections. Academic institutions and think tanks contribute research that quantifies climate impacts and exposes legal gaps, while grassroots movements amplify the voices of displaced communities themselves, ensuring that reforms are not merely technocratic but grounded in lived realities.

Finally, one must acknowledge the role of financial and climate institutions. The Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund, and emerging mechanisms for loss and damage finance hold the potential to channel resources toward displacement-affected populations. Yet without explicit frameworks linking finance to protection, these funds risk bypassing the very communities most in need. Thus, the constellation of actors is vast: states, UN agencies, regional bodies, NGOs, academics, and financial institutions all intersect in





shaping the fate of climate-displaced IDPs. The challenge lies in harmonising their efforts into a coherent, binding framework that transforms fragmented goodwill into enforceable rights

The international community has not been entirely silent on the plight of internally displaced persons, yet the actions taken thus far reveal a pattern of partial measures, regional innovations, and non-binding commitments that fall short of the scale of the climate displacement crisis. The most significant milestone was the adoption of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in 1998, drafted under the leadership of Francis Deng, which articulated the rights of IDPs and the responsibilities of states and humanitarian actors. These principles were groundbreaking in recognizing internal displacement as a distinct humanitarian issue, but their status as soft law meant they lacked enforcement power. States could endorse them rhetorically while ignoring them in practice, leaving millions of IDPs dependent on the goodwill of governments and the limited capacity of humanitarian agencies. In Africa, however, progress was more tangible: the African Union's Kampala Convention of 2009 became the first legally binding regional instrument on IDPs, obliging states to prevent displacement, protect those affected, and provide durable solutions. While its implementation has been uneven, the Kampala Convention stands as proof that binding frameworks are possible when political will aligns with regional urgency.

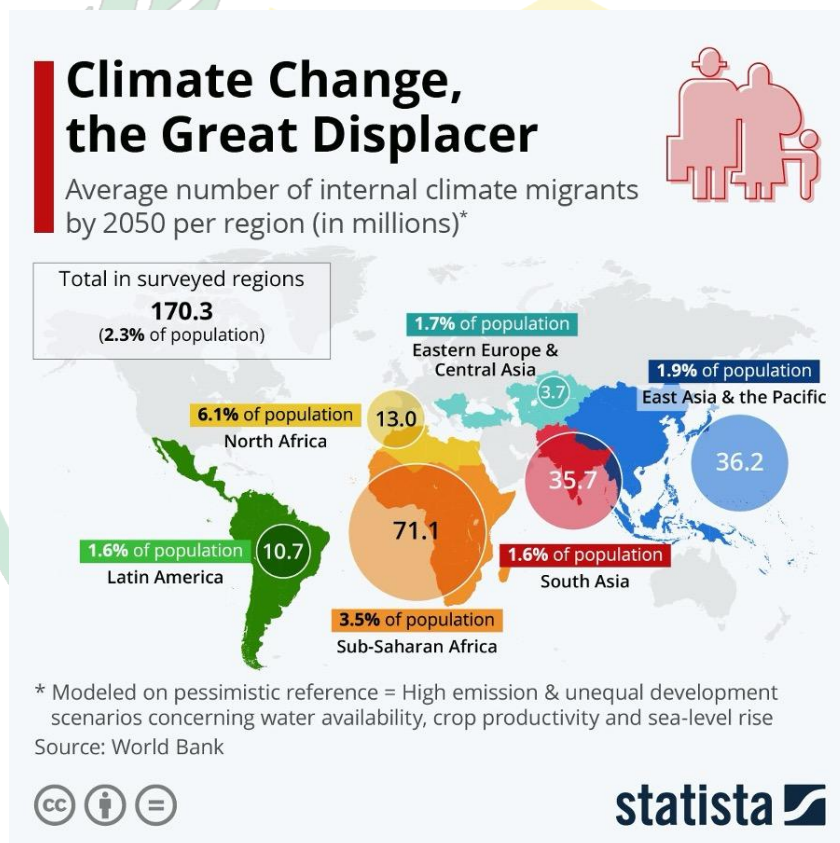
Other regions have taken steps that, while not directly focused on climate displacement, broadened the scope of protection in ways that could be instructive. The Cartagena Declaration of 1984 in Latin America expanded the definition of refugees to include those fleeing generalised violence and disasters, setting a precedent for recognising environmental drivers of displacement. The Nansen Initiative (2012–2015), a state-led process, produced a Protection Agenda that addressed disaster-induced cross-border displacement, highlighting the need for cooperative mechanisms when climate disasters push people across borders. Although focused on cross-border cases, the Nansen Initiative catalysed global debate on climate mobility and underscored the inadequacy of existing frameworks. At the global level, the Global Compact for Migration (2018) marked the first international instrument to explicitly acknowledge climate change, disasters, and





environmental degradation as drivers of migration. Yet, like the Guiding Principles, it remains non-binding, offering commitments for cooperation without legal obligations.

The United Nations has also attempted to integrate displacement into broader humanitarian and climate agendas. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) emphasises resilience and preparedness, indirectly addressing displacement by urging states to reduce disaster impacts. The Paris Agreement (2015) established a Task Force on Displacement under the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage, tasked with developing recommendations on climate-related displacement. While symbolically important, the task force's outputs have been limited to guidance documents,



lacking the force of law or dedicated funding streams. Similarly, the Human Rights Council has recognized the human rights implications of climate change, affirming that states have obligations to protect those affected, but enforcement remains elusive.



Taken together, these past actions reveal a landscape of partial progress: principles without binding force, regional conventions with uneven implementation, global compacts that stop short of law, and climate agreements that gesture toward displacement without embedding it in enforceable obligations. They demonstrate that the international community has acknowledged the problem but has consistently avoided the leap from recognition to responsibility. The result is a patchwork of norms and initiatives that, while valuable, leave climate-displaced IDPs in a state of legal invisibility. Reform, therefore, must build on these foundations but move decisively toward binding frameworks that transform aspiration into obligation.

Major Past Actions

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Timeline of events

1951 : Adoption of the **Refugee Convention**, establishing international refugee law but excluding internally displaced persons and climate-related displacement.

1967 : The **Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees** expands the Convention's scope geographically and temporally, yet still leaves IDPs outside its protection.

1984 : The **Cartagena Declaration** in Latin America broadens the refugee definition to include those fleeing generalized violence and disasters, setting a precedent for environmental drivers of displacement.

1998 : Publication of the **UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement**, the first comprehensive framework for IDPs, though non-binding and lacking enforcement. **2009** : The **African Union Kampala Convention** becomes the first legally binding regional instrument on IDPs, obliging states to prevent displacement and protect affected populations.

2012–2015 : The **Nansen Initiative** develops a Protection Agenda for disaster-induced cross-border displacement, sparking global debate on climate mobility. **2015** : The **Paris Agreement** establishes a Task Force on Displacement under the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage, embedding displacement into climate negotiations.

2015 : Adoption of the **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030)**, emphasizing resilience and preparedness, indirectly addressing displacement. **2018** : The **Global Compact for Migration** explicitly recognizes climate change, disasters, and environmental degradation as drivers of migration, though it remains non-binding.

2022 : Creation of the **Loss and Damage Fund** under UN climate negotiations, signaling potential financial support for communities displaced by irreversible climate impacts.





2023–2024 : The UNFCCC **Task Force on Displacement** issues updated recommendations linking displacement to adaptation and resilience strategies, but still without binding obligations.

The persistent gaps in international protection for internally displaced persons in climate-affected regions demand solutions that are both principled and pragmatic, capable of transforming fragmented goodwill into enforceable rights. One possible path is the negotiation of a Climate Displacement Protocol, either as a new treaty or as an additional protocol to existing frameworks such as the Refugee Convention or the Kampala Convention. Such an instrument would explicitly recognize climate-induced internal displacement as grounds for international protection, obliging states to provide shelter, livelihood support, and durable solutions. The benefit of this approach lies in its clarity and binding force, but its drawback is the political difficulty of securing consensus among states wary of new obligations. A second solution is the strengthening of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, transforming them from soft law into a binding convention through the United Nations General Assembly. This would build on existing normative foundations while addressing the enforcement gap, though it risks diluting commitments if states insist on weak compliance mechanisms.

Another avenue is the integration of displacement into climate finance mechanisms, ensuring that funds from the Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund, and the Loss and Damage Fund are explicitly earmarked for supporting IDPs. This would link humanitarian protection to climate justice, channeling resources to the communities most affected. The advantage is immediate financial support, but the challenge lies in designing transparent mechanisms that prevent misallocation and ensure that funds reach displaced populations rather than being absorbed by state bureaucracies. A fourth solution involves expanding social protection systems within vulnerable states, using models such as the International Labour Organization's "just transition" framework to guarantee healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities for displaced persons. This approach emphasizes resilience and





dignity, but it requires significant capacity-building and international support to be viable in fragile states.

Possible Solutions

Finally, solutions must include regional innovation and community participation. Regional bodies such as the African Union and the Organization of American States can pioneer broader definitions and stronger commitments, while grassroots movements ensure that reforms reflect the lived realities of displaced communities. The benefit of regional and local approaches is their responsiveness to context, but the drawback is uneven coverage and the risk of fragmentation without global coordination. Taken together, these possible solutions illustrate that reform is not a matter of choosing a single path but of weaving multiple strands into a coherent framework: binding law, financial support, social protection, and regional innovation. Only by combining these elements can the international community move from recognition to responsibility, ensuring that climate-displaced IDPs are no longer condemned to invisibility but recognized as rights-holders entitled to dignity, security, and justice.

The trajectory of international responses to displacement reveals a sobering truth: while the plight of refugees has inspired binding conventions and robust institutions, the plight of internally displaced persons, particularly those uprooted by climate change, remains trapped in a twilight zone of recognition without responsibility. The frameworks we have – the Refugee Convention, the Guiding Principles, the Kampala Convention, the Global Compact for Migration – are valuable but incomplete, leaving millions of climate-displaced IDPs legally invisible. The timeline of past actions demonstrates incremental progress, yet the absence of binding obligations underscores the urgency of reform. Possible solutions, from a Climate Displacement Protocol to the integration of displacement into climate finance, show that pathways exist; what is lacking is political will and global solidarity. The injustice is glaring: those least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions are those most





vulnerable to displacement, condemned to rely on fragile domestic systems and overstretched humanitarian agencies. Reforming international frameworks is therefore not merely a technical exercise but a moral imperative, a test of whether humanity can respond to its own planetary crisis with justice rather than neglect. If the twentieth century was defined by the Refugee Convention, the twenty-first must be defined by a climate displacement Protocol, a binding instrument that recognises climate-affected IDPs as rights-holders entitled to dignity, security, and support. Without such reform, millions will remain displaced yet invisible, their futures contingent on chance rather than law. The challenge before us is immense, but so too is the opportunity: to craft a framework that embodies solidarity, responsibility, and justice, ensuring that the victims of climate displacement are not forgotten but protected as part of our shared human family.

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