Université Abdelmalek Essaâdi | جامعة عبد المالك السعدي

كلية العلوم القانونية والسياسية - طنجة

Faculté des Sciences Juridiques et Politiques - Tanger

FONDATION RENÉ CASSIN

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

TANGIER

Refugee Law in the Face of Climate-Induced Migration

Which Developments for Effective Contemporary Protection?

CONCEPT NOTE / SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK & CONFERENCE THEMES

19 – 21 January 2027 | Tangier, Kingdom of Morocco



According to the Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025, published by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), natural disasters triggered 45.8 million new internal displacements in 2024, the highest annual figure recorded since monitoring began in 20081. The report further indicates that approximately 70% of all internal displacements recorded during that year were caused by disasters. These figures concern internal displacement and do not include cross-border population movements.

In this context, the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), published in 2022, highlights the increasing exposure of populations to climate-related risks2. Similarly, the World Bank estimated in 2021 that up to 216 million people could become internal climate migrants by 2050 in the regions examined3. More recently, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has emphasized the growing relationship between climate change, disasters, conflict, and displacement, highlighting the increasing vulnerability of populations affected by environmental transformations4.

Climate-induced migration remains difficult to quantify because of the multiplicity of factors driving and shaping population movements. Furthermore, although several international organizations, including the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR, address climate-related mobility within their respective mandates, no international organization is exclusively responsible for this phenomenon. It is also considerably easier to quantify displacement caused by sudden natural disasters than migration resulting from slow-onset environmental degradation, such as desertification, water scarcity, and rising sea levels.

The existing literature on this matter highlights a striking paradox. While scientific research demonstrates the growing scale of climate-induced mobility, legal scholarship continues to emphasize the inadequacy of the current international legal framework. The pioneering work in this field is Jane McAdam's Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law (Oxford University Press, 2012). McAdam argues that international refugee law provides only limited protection to persons displaced by climate change and advocates a complementary approach based on existing protection mechanisms rather than the creation of a distinct legal status for climate refugees.

More recent literature has further developed this analysis. In particular, Benoît Mayer and François Crépeau's edited volume, Research Handbook on Climate Change, Migration and the Law (Edward Elgar, 2017), emphasizes the complexity of the concept of climate migrants and the necessity of combining international refugee law, international human rights law, migration law, and environmental law. Similarly, Walter Kälin and Hannah Entwisle Chapuisat's Protection of Persons Displaced Across Borders in the Context of Disasters and the Adverse Effects of Climate Change (UNHCR, 2024) adopts a practical perspective, identifying existing legal instruments and encouraging states to strengthen complementary protection mechanisms adapted to contemporary environmental challenges.

These publications raise two major questions. The first concerns whether the 1951 Geneva Convention should be amended or interpreted more broadly to reflect the realities of climate-induced displacement. The second concerns whether a new international legal instrument specifically addressing environmental displacement should be adopted or whether

existing legal mechanisms should instead be strengthened and adapted. These two approaches remain central to contemporary academic debates concerning the future of international protection.

The Limoges Appeal of 23 June 2005 and the subsequent draft conventions developed through the work of the International Centre of Comparative Environmental Law (CIDCE) offer a particularly relevant example of proposals for a dedicated international framework. Their development, including the April 2025 draft, provides an opportunity to assess the achievements and remaining challenges of such initiatives without prejudging the choice between a new legal instrument and the adaptation of existing mechanisms.

The purpose of this international conference is therefore to examine the following central question:

To what extent can international refugee law provide effective protection to persons displaced by climate change and environmental degradation, and what legal developments are necessary to overcome the limitations of the existing international protection framework?

This issue lies at the heart of contemporary academic and institutional debates and is particularly relevant for several reasons. First, climate change increasingly contributes to population displacement resulting from both sudden disasters and gradual environmental transformations. These developments raise fundamental legal questions concerning the responsibilities of states, the protection of affected populations, and the applicability of existing international instruments.

Second, this phenomenon highlights a persistent legal gap. Despite the growing magnitude of climate-induced displacement, persons forced to leave their homes exclusively for environmental reasons are not automatically recognized as refugees under the 1951 Geneva Convention. Although certain mechanisms derived from international human rights law, the principle of non-refoulement, complementary protection regimes, and African regional instruments may apply, these mechanisms remain fragmented and insufficiently harmonized.

In this regard, the conference seeks to move beyond merely identifying the shortcomings of international refugee law. Its ambition is to encourage forward-looking reflection on the evolution of international legal protection, particularly through the adaptation of existing instruments, the strengthening of complementary mechanisms, and the possibility of establishing a new international convention specifically addressing climate-induced displacement.

Organized over three consecutive days in Tangier, Morocco, the conference will adopt an interdisciplinary and international approach, bringing together legal scholars, university professors, researchers, representatives of international organizations, and specialists in migration, environmental law, and human rights. The scientific programme will progressively examine the legal qualification of climate-induced migration, the limitations of existing protection mechanisms, and the prospects for developing a more effective international legal framework. Particular attention will also be devoted to African and Mediterranean perspectives, given the geographical position of Tangier and the relevance of regional cooperation in addressing climate-related human mobility.

The conference aims to promote international academic dialogue, encourage cooperation between research institutions, and contribute to the formulation of scientific recommendations concerning the future of international protection for environmentally displaced populations.

CONFERENCE THEMES AND THREE-DAY SCIENTIFIC PROGRAMME

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE / TANGIER

FIRST DAY / Climate-Induced Migration and the Challenges of International Refugee Law

Theme 1. The Legal Construction of Climate-Induced Migration: From the Emergence of a Phenomenon to Its Normative Qualification

- The legal challenges of characterizing climate-related displacement: between voluntary migration, forced displacement, and compelled mobility.
- The limitations of traditional legal categories in addressing the multifactorial nature of environmentally induced mobility.
- The debate surrounding the concept of the "climate refugee" and the implications of recognizing a new legal category.

Theme 2. International Refugee Law and Climate Displacement: Between the Rigidity of the Conventional Framework and Interpretative Potential

- The scope and limitations of the 1951 Geneva Convention in addressing displacement caused by environmental degradation.
- The possibility of an evolutionary interpretation of the refugee definition in light of contemporary developments.

- The debate over reforming international refugee law: adapting existing instruments or creating a dedicated legal regime?
- The Limoges Appeal of 2005 and the subsequent draft conventions on environmentally displaced persons: legal contributions, limitations, and future perspectives.

SECOND DAY / Complementary Legal Protection and Regional Approaches to Climate Displacement

Theme 3. Protecting Climate-Displaced Persons Through Complementary Legal Regimes

- International human rights law as an alternative and complementary legal basis for protection.
- The interaction between refugee law, migration law, environmental law, and international humanitarian law.
- The development of complementary protection mechanisms and national admission or residence schemes.
- The contribution of African regional instruments to the protection of displaced populations.
- Climate-induced mobility and international protection challenges in African and Mediterranean contexts.

THIRD DAY / The Future of International Protection and Global Governance of Climate Mobility

Theme 4. Towards a Renewed Legal Governance of Climate Mobility

- The contribution of emerging international instruments to the regulation of environmentally induced displacement.
- The role of international solidarity, common responsibility, and climate justice.
- The legal and institutional responsibilities of states and international organizations in addressing climate-induced displacement.
- The prospects for adapting the 1951 Geneva Convention or establishing a new international convention on environmental displacement.
- Prospects for global governance of climate mobility: towards a new paradigm of international protection?

The third day will conclude with an international scientific roundtable devoted to discussing the principal legal recommendations emerging from the conference, followed by the presentation of its conclusions and the identification of opportunities for future academic and institutional cooperation, including possible scientific exchanges with researchers involved in the Limoges initiative.