

Forced Migration Review

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Climate change: Choices for displaced people



Forced Migration Review

Forced Migration Review (FMR)

brings together diverse, knowledgeable authors – especially those with lived experience – to foster practical learning and discussion that can improve outcomes for forcibly displaced people. Our free flagship magazine is accessible to a global audience, online and in print. Related audio and visual content is available online.

Forced Migration Review

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at Podampeta, Odisha.
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Architesh Panda*

From the Editors

As many gather for COP30 in Brazil later this month, it feels timely to be publishing this issue of FMR. The huge response we received to our call for proposals confirmed that the interplay of climate change and displacement is a key theme of interest to our readers, with many actively working on projects related to it. In FMR 76, authors from five continents share their unique perspectives to bring you a rich body of articles which we hope will inform and inspire, bringing fresh thinking and provoking debate.

As we have edited this issue, the voices of those most affected have constantly brought home to us the very real human impacts of a changing climate. In Micheal Gumisiriza's article (p.114), he shares a refugee called Chance's view from the ground: "The rains delay, and when they come, they come like they are angry. They come with a lot of force and end up washing everything away and destroying crops and property." Musa, a 45-year-old displaced father of five, highlights the complex relationship between different drivers of displacement on the shores of Lake Chad. "We left because of fighting, but we would have left anyway. The water is gone. The fish are gone. The land is sand now. How do you stay in a place that has nothing?" he tells us in Seun Bamidele's article (p.61).

Limited choices and painful trade-offs are recurrent themes in the issue but each and every author also offers ways forward which will expand options, increase agency and enable people facing displacement



Alice Philip



Jo Boyce

to shape the best futures they can for themselves and their wider communities. This kind of grounded hope is something which we surely need in the face of the huge challenges the climate crisis presents and we are so grateful to the authors for their commitment to moving forward the debates and proposing solutions.

The Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) has been a long-time partner of FMR and they brought their considerable expertise to the development of the call and to every stage of the reviewing process. Particular thanks go to Sarah Koeltzow at PDD for her unwavering commitment to this project and her many hours of reviewing alongside our wonderful team of specialist reviewers: Evan Easton-Calabria, Hannes Einsporn, David Durand-Delacre, Jassin Irscheid, Hayley Kornblum, Juan Mendez, Nicodemus Nyandiko, Ferdinand Nabiswa Makhanu, Ranjan Panda, Annah Pigott-McKellar, Héloïse Ruadel, Yvonne Su, Shana Tabak and Paul Tacon.

We are very grateful as ever to the organisations who have supported FMR this year: UNCHR, as a core donor, and the University of Oxford as our host institution, and on this issue in particular the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the International Labour Organization and the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, Canada.

Over the last few months, We have had to make some changes at FMR and have sadly had to say goodbye to long-time

staff members Sharon Ellis and Maureen Schoenfeld, who had faithfully supported the Editors over many years, with special responsibilities for administration, finance and communications. We are really grateful for all they gave to FMR and wish them well in their next steps.

The next year marks an exciting new phase in FMR's development as we take time to reshape our work for the future. Much has changed since we launched over 30 years ago – in forced migration trends and in communication technology – but our commitment to being a forum where ideas spark discussion and enrich debates has not diminished. We remain focused on improving outcomes for displaced people through everything that FMR does. We are developing some new projects which we are looking forward to sharing with you over the coming months – do watch this space!

We would love to hear from you if you would like to be involved in FMR in any way over the coming year or have topic suggestions to share with us. We are looking for new partnerships and collaborations and await your email. We will also be launching a readership survey in early 2026 and invite you all to help shape our future with your responses.

With best wishes,

Alice and Jo
FMR 76 Editors

Contents

- p.6** **Foreword**
Hannes Einsporn and Jassin Irscheid,
Robert Bosch Stiftung
-
- p.7** **Adapting to climate uncertainty
in Nigeria**
Taofik Oyewo Hussain
-
- p.12** **Leading in displacement: refugees at
the forefront of climate action**
Ayoo Irene Hellen, Qiyamud Din Ikram
and Jocelyn Perry
-
- p.17** **Already displaced, now facing
disaster: climate change impacts
on displaced people**
Evan Easton-Calabria
-
- p.21** **No choice but to move: climate
displacement and eroding
livelihoods in Mongolia**
Kiril Sharapov
-
- p.26** **Neo-colonial pathways to safety?
Climate displacement and Australia
and New Zealand's migration policies**
Laura Kraft
-
- p.31** **Confronting climate injustice: how
Canada can support displaced people**
Rahul Balasundaram
-
- p.36** **Imagining alternative migration
futures for the Pacific Island States**
Vittorio Bruni and Yvonne Su
-
- p.40** **What is choice without knowledge?
Climate literacy for displaced
communities**
Philippa Weichs, Emmanuel Zangako
Peter and Isaiah Du Pree



- p.45** **The promise of satellite imagery in
addressing climate displacement**
Sarah Hoyos-Hoyos, Yousef Khalifa
Aleghefeli and Emmanuel Kyeremeh
-
- p.50** **Displaced by climate, marginalised
by the State: Afro-Colombians
in Medellín**
Michael Nabil Ruprecht and Sonja
Ayeb-Karlsson
-
- p.55** **Between displacement and
entrapment: climate-induced
(im)mobility in the Middle East**
Wassim Ben Romdhane,
Bram Frouws and Jennifer
Vallentine
-
- p.60** **Sacred lands: belonging and
displacement in Nigeria**
Seun Bamidele
-
- p.65** **Supporting decent work for those
forced to move and those who
want to stay**
Anne Beatrice Cinco, Paul Tacon,
Héloïse Ruauudel and Alice Voza

p.70 **Slow versus sudden: tailoring planned relocation to different hazard types**
Claudia Fry, Giovanna Gini and Annah Piggott-McKellar

p.75 **Environmental justice and planned relocation in Central Africa**
Gabriel Ajabu Mastaki

p.79 **Unstable ground: navigating climate relocation through Bosnia's invisible fault lines**
Kaja Burja and Nika Burja

p.84 **Speaking up: using participatory communication to support inclusive relocation**
José Daniel Rodríguez Arrieta

p.88 **Beyond survival: two cases of planned relocation in India**
Architesh Panda and Sumanta Banerjee

p.94 **Non-economic losses: centring choice and place**
Julia M Blocher and Dalila Gharbaoui

p.99 **Disasters, displacement and legal choices: how communities are using courts to seek justice**
Bella Mosselmans, Matthew Scott, Yumna Kamel and Anila Noor

p.104 **Anticipatory financing: enabling choice amid displacement in the Philippines**
Oenone Chadburn and Maria Theresa Niña Espinola-Abogado

p.109 **Intergenerational strategies for adaptive livelihoods: evidence from Bangladesh**
Bishawjit Mallick, Oishi Rani Saha and Rup Priodarshini

p.114 **When climate change blows off your roof and nobody comes: a refugee's reality check**
Micheal Gumisiriza

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FMR Staff who worked on different stages of this issue: Alice Philip (Managing Editor), Emily Arnold-Fernández (Associate Managing Editor), Catherine Meredith (Deputy Editor), Jo Boyce (Deputy Editor, maternity cover), Maureen Schoenfeld (Communications and Finance Assistant) and Sharon Ellis (Administrative Assistant).

Foreword

Speaking of ‘choice’ in the context of people being forced to move amidst the climate crisis can feel audacious. What options do people displaced by climate impacts really have? Their decisions are made under conditions of uncertainty, amid shrinking options for migration and mobility and dwindling international solidarity.

However, this issue reminds us not only why we should work towards more choice but also provides us with insights into how this could be done better. The contributors critically reflect on challenges and solutions from across the world: from innovative approaches in climate financing in the Philippines and the vital role of refugee leadership in governance structures in Uganda and Pakistan, to rights-based planned relocations in Latin America, Africa, the Pacific, and across Asia as a complex process requiring careful consideration of cultural ties, livelihood reconstruction, and community participation to avoid merely shifting vulnerability to a new location. The issue also investigates the use of digital technologies to inform climate displacement responses and critically assesses migration pathways, decent economic opportunities, and sustainable livelihoods in high-income countries like Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

From rising sea levels threatening coastal populations to the intensifying frequency and severity of natural hazards, the climate crisis is rendering homes uninhabitable and futures uncertain for millions – especially for those who have been least responsible

for its causes. Collectively, the contributions to this issue emphasise that responses to climate displacement must be proactive, rights-based and human-centered, moving beyond reactive measures. The international aid system, however, is undergoing a rapid transformation, driven significantly by sustained and severe cuts in aid budgets. This situation should give even more urgency to questions of how international solidarity is organised, and who participates in its decision-making.

At the Robert Bosch Stiftung, our objective is to shape migration policy, governance and practice in a manner that upholds human dignity through far-sighted, inclusive approaches. Whether it is our work on access to climate finance, on mechanisms that support agency and choice, or on translating policy into action, we believe centring affected communities as integral partners is essential to forging effective and just pathways forward.

The articles in this issue underscore that effective and sustainable solutions are those in which affected communities are not merely recipients of aid, but active decision-makers in shaping their own futures. Integrating their knowledge and perspectives with innovative tools and support – national and international – serves to enhance dignity and agency for people as they navigate the accelerating impacts of climate change.

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Displaced by climate, marginalised by the State: Afro-Colombians in Medellín

Michael Nabil Ruprecht and Sonja Ayeb-Karlsson

Climate change is intensifying racialised displacement in Colombia. For internally displaced Afro-Colombians from the Chocó, environmental degradation intersects with conflict and state abandonment in shaping forced migration.

In Colombia's Pacific coastal department of the Chocó, Afro-descendant communities are facing compounding crises. While the region has long been marked by underdevelopment, armed conflict and state neglect, a new and intensifying force is reshaping life and displacement dynamics: climate change. Shifting rainfall patterns, recurrent flooding, prolonged droughts and soil degradation have destroyed local livelihoods and transformed environmental threats into existential ones. Yet these are not simply natural events; rather, they are deeply embedded in racialised histories of territorial abandonment, exclusion and violence.

This article draws on original qualitative fieldwork conducted across six neighbourhoods in Medellín between September 2023 and May 2024 with Afro-Colombian communities displaced from the Chocó.¹ The study is based on 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews, complemented by participant observation and community gatherings designed to collaboratively identify key issues. It argues that climate change functions as an amplifier of structural violence and racial marginalisation, accelerating the displacement of historically neglected populations. By tracing how displaced families experience, narrate and resist this layered crisis, the article demonstrates how state abandonment and

racialised governance generate a distinctive form of climate displacement that remains largely unacknowledged within national and international frameworks.

Environmental degradation as a trigger of displacement

The Chocó, one of Colombia's most biodiverse yet impoverished regions, ranks among the areas with the highest annual rainfall globally, sustained by intense precipitation and dense river networks. Yet residents report that this hydrological cycle has become increasingly unstable in recent decades, a pattern consistent with broader climate-change signals documented in tropical Andean and Pacific lowland regions.² Seasonal rains have become less predictable, with sudden-onset floods inundating entire villages, while multi-week dry spells strain drinking water access and compromise planting and harvesting cycles. These shifts directly threaten small-scale agriculture and fishing - the foundations of *Afro-Chocoano* livelihoods - by eroding food security, reducing income opportunities and amplifying existing vulnerabilities.

Many fieldwork participants linked these changes to broader climate change processes, as well as to deforestation and illegal mining. Indeed, climate change, uncontrolled logging and gold mining (often by armed groups or multinational

corporations) have intensified not only sedimentation in rivers - thus contributing to risks of massive flooding - but also river pollution. Residents describe how riverbanks erode more quickly, crops fail more often, and formerly fertile land becomes uninhabitable. In such contexts, climate change is not simply an environmental phenomenon but part of a broader territorial and racialised dispossession.

As one elderly woman from the San Juan basin noted during interviews:

“The water eventually took our house, but before that, it had already taken our fields and animals...when we asked the authorities for help, they said they couldn’t do anything... so there was nothing left to keep us there.”

In this sense, environmental stressors act less as new threats and more as amplifiers of existing forms of State abandonment and structural marginalisation. Displacement becomes the inevitable outcome when livelihoods collapse, State protection fails, and no institutional safety net exists.

Racialised displacement and the role of the State

Despite official narratives that position climate shocks as apolitical or ‘natural’, the experiences of *Afro-Chocoano* communities suggest otherwise. Participants in the study consistently described the absence of State protection in both the lead-up to displacement and its aftermath. They viewed local governments as largely ineffective, under-resourced or corrupt. Environmental early warning systems were either unavailable or ignored, and State authorities also failed to prevent land grabs or violent threats by illegal armed actors competing for resources across the territory.

Importantly, this absence of State support and protection is not new. It reflects a long trajectory of racialised State neglect, whereby

Afro-Colombian territories receive minimal infrastructure investment, health services or educational opportunities. As scholars such as Arturo Escobar have argued, the abandonment of Afro-descendant territories is a form of structural violence: uneven development allows the State to justify directing resources towards regions deemed more ‘modern’ or ‘productive,’ thereby projecting the neglect of Afro-Colombian territories as a rational policy choice rather than racialised exclusion.³

Some residents viewed this neglect as intentional. One respondent, displaced from the Atrato River valley, explained:

“If this were Bogotá or Medellín, the government would have done something... but we are Black and we live far away from big cities, so they let the river wash us away.”

This perception that Afro-descendants are excluded from the collective sense of who is fully recognised as a citizen deserving of protection reinforces feelings of abandonment and further intensifies their displacement experiences. It also explains why many climate-displaced Afro-Colombians do not register as internally displaced persons (IDPs): they fear that, given the pervasive conflict-focused framework, their displacement will not be acknowledged as legitimate, and their rights will not be protected by the state.

Urban resettlement in Medellín

Displacement from the Chocó often leads families to Medellín, the capital of Antioquia, whose booming economy and public transport infrastructure offer the illusion of opportunity. In reality, Afro-Colombians arriving in Medellín face a new set of challenges. They are frequently pushed to the city’s geographical margins, including the steep, landslide-prone hillsides of the Aburrá Valley, informal and precarious settlements

or flood-prone ravines.

This urban periphery is itself a product of historical displacement. Many of Medellín's poorest *comunas* (neighbourhoods) - such as Manrique, Villa Hermosa and San Javier (also known as *Comuna 13*) - are home to generations of conflict-displaced Colombians, and new arrivals from the Chocó often settle alongside earlier waves of migrants. However, they report particular vulnerabilities as Afro-descendants, including racist policing, discriminatory rental markets and exclusion from local decision-making.

Crucially, housing is often precarious, consisting of informal dwellings built on unstable slopes, with no land titles, sewage or access to safe drinking water. Many families live in structures threatened by landslides or rain-induced collapses, mirroring the environmental vulnerabilities they left behind. This creates a tragic irony: those displaced by climate risks in the Chocó often find themselves re-exposed to environmental risks in Medellín, this time without the social safety nets of extended kinship or customary land rights.

Institutional gaps and policy failures

Colombia has a progressive legal framework on internal displacement, enacted through Constitutional Court rulings and the 2011 Victims and Land Restitution Law (also known as Law 1448). However, environmentally displaced Afro-Colombians face substantial obstacles in accessing assistance. One major challenge is the lack of effective recognition. Climate factors are excluded from displacement registries - the official databases the State uses to identify and certify IDPs - meaning those fleeing floods or environmental degradation often remain 'invisible' to the system. This limits their access to humanitarian aid, housing subsidies or psychosocial support. However, in April 2024 Colombia's Constitutional

Court issued a breakthrough ruling explicitly recognising climate change as a contributing factor to internal displacement for the first time. This precedent opens legal and institutional pathways for better recognition and protection of those displaced by environmental crises, particularly in historically marginalised regions such as the Chocó.

Another barrier is urban governance. Medellín has won global praise for its innovation, sustainable architecture and urban development, labelling itself as one of the world's smart cities. However, critics argue this model often excludes poor, racialised communities, deepening the wealth gap between privileged and neglected neighbourhoods. As one local advocate explained:

"The city's strategy is beautification, not inclusion. There are a few cable cars and museums, but most of our people in the slums still suffer from frequent water and electricity shortages...not to mention the deficient public bus system when you live up on the valley slopes...sometimes we have to walk one hour uphill to get back home after work."

Indeed, the focus on urban spectacle and gentrification in certain neighbourhoods has created new tensions, particularly as informal settlers, many of them climate-displaced Afro-Colombians, face eviction or relocation due to infrastructure projects. In some cases, urban development is reproducing displacement, rather than solving it.

Community responses and everyday resistance

Faced with institutional indifference, Afro-Colombian communities have developed their own responses. During fieldwork, participants highlighted several grassroots initiatives, including traditional midwifery

networks, mutual aid schemes, youth cultural workshops and women-led soup kitchens. These spaces serve not only as survival strategies but as sites of identity affirmation and resistance. One particularly innovative example is the work of local ethnic councils. Called *consejos comunitarios*, these are local governance bodies recognised by Law 70 of 1993. Members are chosen in community assemblies to represent the group's interests. While they were originally tied to managing rural collective lands, councils have also adapted to urban settings, helping displaced Afro-Colombians maintain cultural and political representation. They work as a bridge between the community and government institutions, advocating for housing and land rights, pushing for inclusion in urban planning, and making sure displacement policies respect cultural and collective rights. In this way, councils protect not just material needs, but also community identity and survival during displacement.

These community responses are complemented by trans-local solidarity networks. Afro-Colombian leaders in Medellín often maintain links to their home communities in the Chocó, circulating news, mobilising resources and engaging in advocacy efforts both locally and nationally. Religious spaces, such as Afro-Colombian churches or community centres, often act as hubs for organising, while cultural practices such as traditional music and dance serve as forms of resistance and memory preservation.

However, community-led resilience remains fragile and uneven as these efforts often face barriers, including lack of funding, political co-optation and legal uncertainty. Participants emphasised that true transformation requires more than resilience, it requires justice as well as state support and recognition. One community leader put it plainly:

"We resist not because we are strong, but

because we are ignored. We should not have to fight this hard just to be seen."

Integrating Afro-Colombian voices into climate policy

While grassroots resilience is admirable, it cannot substitute for institutional accountability. It is critical that national and international actors move beyond symbolic inclusion and toward practical, systemic changes. Afro-Colombian voices must be central in shaping Colombia's climate response, particularly when it intersects with questions of displacement, race and historical exclusion.

Emerging models of participatory climate governance, such as community-led risk mapping, offer promising directions. Likewise, academic and NGO partnerships that prioritise co-production of knowledge with affected communities help amplify marginalised voices. However, these efforts must be matched by political will, equitable funding and clear metrics of inclusion.

Multilateral frameworks such as the UNFCCC and the Cartagena+40 process should explicitly address the racial and ethnic dimensions of climate-related displacement by requiring race/ethnicity-disaggregated data; embedding the participation of Afro-descendant organisations in protection design and monitoring; and aligning adaptation, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and mobility policies with safeguards against discrimination for groups such as the *Afro-Chocoanos*.

Recommendations

The experience of Afro-Colombian IDPs from the Chocó challenges dominant narratives around displacement and climate change. It demands a shift from understanding climate-induced migration as a singular, apolitical process, to seeing it as a deeply racialised, historical and structural phenomenon.

Climate shocks do not act in isolation; they compound legacies of neglect and exclusion.

The following policy recommendations could help address these challenges:

1. Implement the Constitutional Court ruling expanding the legal definition of forced displacement in Colombia to include environmental factors.
2. Integrate racial equity and cultural rights into all phases of climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction and urban planning.
3. Support Afro-Colombian organisations with direct funding, legal tools and participatory mechanisms for urban governance.
4. Develop tools that capture the environmental, social, economic and political drivers of displacement, enabling both analysis of complex mobility patterns and evidence-based advocacy for targeted policies and interventions.
5. Invest in the Chocó's resilience by strengthening local institutions, infrastructure and land rights, preventing displacement before it begins.

Ultimately, this article underscores the urgency of reclaiming the narrative of environmental displacement, as a product

not of nature, but of state agency, policy choices, historical injustices and institutional failures. Afro-Colombians displaced from the Chocó to Medellín are not just victims of climate change; they are survivors of systemic abandonment and architects of grassroots resistance.

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1. *The research for this article, including fieldwork as well as primary and secondary data analysis, was conducted by Michael Nabil Ruprecht as part of his forthcoming doctoral dissertation in political science and international public law.*
2. *IPCC (2021) Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge, UK, and New York, US: Cambridge University Press*
3. *Escobar, A (2008) Territories of difference: place, movements, life, redes, Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press*

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