



When home disappears: reimagining identity and sovereignty in a climate-displaced world

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Abstract

This commentary explores the collision of climate change, forced migration, and identity in the 21st century. At its core is a pressing question: What happens when people lose not just their homes, but their nations? Using the real case of Ioane Teitiota from Kiribati, we argue that current legal frameworks inadequately address the needs of those displaced by climate impacts. As legal systems lag behind environmental realities, a gap emerges, one not just of law, but of justice. We call for international policy reform that recognizes climate-displaced persons as a distinct category, while also urging moral responsibility from faith-based and global communities. Ultimately, we must reimagine sovereignty, identity, and compassion in an era where climate change knows no borders.

Keywords: climate change, climate-displaced, environmental justice, moral obligation, refugee, sovereignty

Introduction: The Case of Ioane Teitiota

In 2013, Ioane Teitiota sought asylum in New Zealand because his home country, Kiribati, was being swallowed by the sea. He was not fleeing war or political violence, but environmental collapse. His claim was rejected. The court ruled that climate change, while devastating, did not qualify as “persecution” under the 1951 Refugee Convention.^{1,2} His case exposed a fundamental gap in global protection frameworks: Those displaced by environmental degradation fall outside the legal definitions of refugeehood.

A clearer framework for understanding climate-displaced persons is offered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) that defines environmental migrants as “persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect 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.”³

This definition bridges the legal ambiguity that currently excludes them from international protection frameworks.

Teitiota’s case is not isolated. Rising seas, stronger storms, and desertification are forcing people across the globe to abandon their homes. These migrants often find themselves in legal limbo—neither refugees nor voluntary migrants, they are displaced but unrecognized.^{4,5}

Climate Displacement: A Growing Reality

Scientific consensus confirms that anthropogenic climate change is accelerating.^{8,9} Communities in low-lying nations, coastal cities, and drought-prone regions face an

existential threat. Unlike voluntary migration, frequently motivated by economic opportunity, climate displacement is often involuntary and irreversible. People are not simply seeking a better life; they are fleeing uninhabitable land.^{8,9}

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA), warns of increased climate-induced flooding and coastal erosion, while international projections suggest tens of millions may be displaced in the coming decades.^{10,11,12}

Not all climate-related displacements cross international borders. The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 forced over a million people to evacuate their homes in the United States, displacing communities for months or years. This case illustrates how sudden-onset disasters, intensified by climate change, can generate internally displaced persons (IDPs) even in high-income countries.¹³ Recognizing both cross-border and internal displacement is critical in developing inclusive frameworks.

Some may argue existing migration systems can accommodate climate-displaced individuals, but words matter. “Refugee” is more than a descriptor; it is a legal category that offers protection. In the Refugee Convention in 1951, refugee is narrowly defined as someone fleeing persecution based on religion, race, political opinion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group.

This definition excludes people fleeing environmental collapse, leaving them without international protection. Betts introduces the concept of “survival migration” to describe those who are forced to cross borders not because of direct persecution, but due to existential threats like environmental degradation or state fragility, challenges that fall outside traditional refugee definitions.¹⁴ As McAdam and Betts argue, this legal gap demands urgent reform. Including climate-displaced persons in refugee frameworks would ensure access to rights, status, and assistance. Without such recognition, they remain stateless, rightless, and invisible.^{14,15}

Is climate displacement a legal or moral issue? We argue it is both. Legal systems provide structure and accountability, but

they must evolve alongside emerging crises. International law has historically responded to new forms of vulnerability—for instance, the expanded definitions found in the Cartagena Declaration in Latin America and the Kampala Convention in Africa.¹⁶

Yet beyond legal obligations lies a deeper moral imperative. Climate justice recognizes that those most affected by climate change often contributed the least to it. High-emitting nations and wealthier societies bear a responsibility to assist those displaced by the consequences of industrial development.^{7,17} Moral philosophers such as Caney and Gardiner underscore that principles of fairness and historical responsibility should guide our response to climate displacement.^{18, 19}

While the UNHCR provides international guidance, refugee status is granted by individual states. This creates inconsistencies in interpretation and application. Teitiota’s rejection in New Zealand highlights this dissonance. A harmonized global approach is needed. Regional agreements like the Cartagena Declaration provide models for more inclusive definitions that could be adapted globally.¹⁵

Recent scholarship highlights how integrating climate model projections into migration policy design is essential. Climate models not only help predict future hotspots of displacement but also inform adaptation planning and resource allocation.²⁰

What happens to a nation when its territory disappears? The erasure of land challenges our geographic notions of statehood. Can a nation without a physical territory still claim sovereignty? These questions demand a rethinking of international law, identity, and political belonging.¹⁶

Beyond policy, climate displacement raises spiritual and ethical questions. Faith communities often lead the charge in humanitarian work. From a Christian perspective, the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31) extends beyond borders. Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* reminds us to hear both “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” Climate-displaced persons embody both cries.



Global faith-based networks, such as the World Council of Churches, have called for just climate action that protects vulnerable populations. Eco-theologians like Sallie McFague argue that ecological responsibility and social justice are fundamentally intertwined, a message that reinforces the need for moral solidarity with climate refugees.²¹

Conclusion

The case of Kiribati and others like it show that climate displacement is not a distant scenario; it is a present reality. As legal definitions lag and borders harden, millions risk falling into the gaps. This is not just a policy problem; it is a human one. Climate displacement must be recognized not only as a legal gap but as a moral emergency.

We call for international reform, shared responsibility, and faith-driven compassion. Because while climate change does not respect borders, neither should our humanity.

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