

Climate Displacement in the Global South: Justice as Resilience

Dr Eric Shahzar

Abstract: This article examines climate displacement in the Global South as a question of justice, governance and unequal protection. It argues that displacement is not simply a natural consequence of climate change, but emerges where environmental stress interacts with weak institutions, poverty and political inequality. The article introduces the concept of environmental instrumentalism to explain how climate risks are selectively managed, often protecting capital assets, urban centres and politically valuable regions while leaving marginal communities exposed. It then develops a climate-infused veil of ignorance, building on Rawlsian theory to ask what kind of climate protection system would be chosen if decision-makers did not know their own position within the climate-risk order. The article proposes equity indicators to assess fair climate governance and uses illustrative examples from Pakistan, Kenya and the Philippines. The article therefore argues that fair climate governance must protect the most vulnerable communities before displacement becomes inevitable and irreversible.

Keywords: Climate displacement, Global South, Environmental Instrumentalism, Climate Justice, Resilience.

Introduction

Forced displacement has long been a feature of human history. Populations have been compelled to move due to war, persecution, famine and environmental shocks, reflecting the instability of social and political systems under pressure. What distinguishes contemporary displacement, however, is not simply its persistence, but its increasing entanglement with climate change and the structural inequalities that shape exposure to risk.

Climate change does not create displacement in isolation. Rather, it operates as a risk multiplier, intensifying existing vulnerabilities and accelerating movement across already fragile socio-political landscapes. Extreme weather events, rising sea levels, prolonged droughts and resource scarcity now interact with weak governance, poverty and institutional fragility to produce complex patterns of human mobility. The future trajectory is even more concerning. By 2050, climate change could force up to 216 million people to migrate within their own countries across six world regions, unless climate and development action reduces risk and vulnerability (World Bank 2021). This projection reflects a deepening asymmetry in the global distribution of climate risk. The Global South, despite contributing least to global emissions, remains disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards while possessing the weakest adaptive capacity.

Existing scholarship has made significant progress in identifying the drivers of displacement. Multi-causal approaches emphasise the interaction between climatic stressors, conflict and socio-economic vulnerability, highlighting the complexity of climate mobility (Draper 2022). Empirical research further demonstrates the sensitivity of displacement patterns to relatively small environmental changes, with even marginal increases in temperature or reductions in

rainfall producing disproportionate effects on human mobility (Thalheimer et al. 2023). While these contributions are critical, they tend to conceptualise displacement as the outcome of interacting forces rather than interrogating the political and institutional processes that determine whose risks are mitigated and whose are neglected.

This article advances a different perspective. It argues that climate displacement is not simply the product of environmental stress interacting with institutional weakness but is fundamentally shaped by power structures that govern the distribution of protection and exposure. In this sense, displacement reflects not only a failure of adaptation, but also a pattern of selective risk management in which certain populations are systematically prioritised while others are left vulnerable.

To develop this argument, the article makes three contributions. First, it introduces the concept of *environmental instrumentalism*, extending classical instrumentalist theory to show how climate governance can privilege capital assets, urban centres and politically valuable regions over marginalised communities. Second, it develops a *climate-infused veil of ignorance*, building on Rawlsian theory to propose a normative framework for evaluating the fairness of climate protection under conditions of uncertainty (Rawls 1971). Third, it operationalises this framework through a set of equity indicators, offering a practical governance tool to assess whether climate policies prioritise the most at-risk populations. The article then uses three illustrative Global South contexts, Ketu Bandar in Pakistan, the Tana River region in Kenya, and the New Manila International Airport project in the Philippines, to show how these concepts operate in practice. These examples are not presented as formal comparative case studies, but as analytical anchors demonstrating how environmental stress, institutional weakness and selective protection combine to produce displacement.

Hence, these contributions shift the analytical focus from explaining why displacement occurs to examining how systems of power determine who is protected and who is left exposed. In doing so, the article repositions climate displacement as a question not only of environmental change, but of justice, governance and political responsibility. It argues for justice as resilience.

Climate Displacement in Action

Climate displacement has increasingly been recognised as a defining feature of the contemporary climate crisis, with a growing body of scholarship seeking to explain its scale, causes and implications. Existing literature has made significant progress in demonstrating that displacement is neither random nor solely environmentally determined. Instead, it reflects the interaction between environmental stressors and underlying socio-economic and political conditions, particularly in regions of the Global South where vulnerability is structurally embedded (IPCC 2022; World Universities Network 2024).

A central contribution of recent scholarship lies in the development of multi-causal or pluralist frameworks of displacement. Jamie Draper argues that climate displacement cannot be reduced to a single causal factor, but must be understood as the outcome of interacting drivers, including environmental change, conflict, governance failures and economic marginalisation (Draper 2022, 2023). This approach represents an important departure from earlier deterministic models that treated climate change as a direct and isolated trigger of migration. Instead, it recognises that environmental pressures operate within complex socio-

political systems, shaping and being shaped by existing inequalities and institutional dynamics.

Empirical research further reinforces the sensitivity of displacement to relatively small environmental changes. A study highlighted by the University of Oxford reports that even a 1°C increase in monthly temperature can lead to a dramatic rise in displacement, while relatively modest reductions in rainfall can significantly increase migration pressures (University of Oxford 2023). Such findings underscore that climate-related mobility is not only a response to extreme events, but also to gradual and incremental environmental shifts. These dynamics are particularly pronounced in regions where livelihoods are highly dependent on climate-sensitive resources, such as agriculture and water availability.

At the same time, a growing body of interdisciplinary work has sought to situate climate displacement within broader governance and policy frameworks. Research on climate mobilities in the Global South emphasises that patterns of movement are shaped by institutional capacity, development trajectories and adaptation strategies, rather than environmental factors alone (World Universities Network 2024). Similarly, recent studies highlight that climate-induced displacement is closely linked to governance failures, including inadequate planning, weak infrastructure and limited investment in vulnerable communities (Arce et al. 2024). Policy-oriented analyses further describe climate displacement as an immediate and escalating challenge in regions such as South Asia, where environmental stress intersects with demographic pressures and political constraints (Wilson Center 2023).

Within this emerging literature, a consistent theme is the uneven distribution of vulnerability. Climate risks are not experienced uniformly; rather, they are concentrated among populations that are already socio-economically marginalised. This article will argue that vulnerability is produced through historical patterns of inequality, uneven development and limited access to resources. However, while these accounts provide a compelling explanation of why certain groups are more exposed to climate risks, they often stop short of interrogating how decisions about protection and adaptation are made in practice. This limitation is particularly evident in discussions of adaptation and resilience. Existing frameworks frequently emphasise the need to enhance adaptive capacity and reduce vulnerability, yet they tend to treat adaptation as a broadly technocratic or managerial process. (Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin 2015) directly challenge this framing, arguing that adaptation is a socio-political process shaped by power, authority and competing visions of change. Similarly, (Sovacool, Linnér, and Goodsie 2015) show that adaptation initiatives may fail or produce undesirable outcomes where competing interests, institutional politics and unequal power relations are not properly addressed. These interventions are important because they reveal that adaptation is never simply about responding to climate risk; it is also about deciding whose risks matter, whose knowledge counts and whose lives are prioritised. The literature therefore reveals a critical gap. While multi-causal frameworks successfully explain how displacement emerges from the interaction of environmental and socio-political factors, and governance-based approaches highlight the role of institutional capacity and vulnerability, neither sufficiently addresses the question of how protection is distributed across different populations. In particular, there remains limited theoretical engagement with the role of power in shaping which communities are prioritised for climate protection and which are effectively left exposed to risk.

This article builds on existing governance-based approaches but departs from them by foregrounding power as the central organising principle of climate displacement. It argues

that displacement cannot be fully understood without examining how climate risks are selectively managed within political and economic systems. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from identifying the drivers of displacement to interrogating the distribution of protection, laying the foundation for the development of environmental instrumentalism and a climate-infused theory of justice in the sections that follow.

From Instrumentalism to Environmental Instrumentalism

The concept of instrumentalism provides a useful starting point for understanding how power operates in the organisation of social and political life. In its classical formulation, instrumentalism is closely associated with the work of Paul Brass, who argued that ethnic identities are not fixed or primordial, but are actively constructed, mobilised and reshaped through political processes. For Brass, ethnicity functions as a resource that elites can deploy to secure power, consolidate authority, or manage competition between groups (Brass 1991). Elites, operating within specific institutional and political contexts, selectively emphasise or suppress identity markers in ways that advance their strategic interests. Crucially, this process is not neutral. It reflects underlying asymmetries of power and access, whereby certain groups are mobilised, divided, or marginalised in accordance with broader political objectives.

Although Brass's analysis is rooted in the study of ethnic conflict, its broader analytical insight is directly transferable to other domains. At its core, instrumentalism highlights that social outcomes are not merely the product of structural conditions, but are shaped by the strategic actions of those in positions of authority. This perspective challenges approaches that treat complex phenomena as organic or inevitable, instead foregrounding the role of political agency in shaping outcomes. In the context of climate change, this insight becomes particularly significant. Just as identities can be mobilised or suppressed, so too can risks be distributed, prioritised or neglected through political and institutional decision-making.

Climate displacement has, as discussed in the previous section, made important advances in demonstrating that mobility outcomes are multi-causal, emerging from the interaction between environmental stress, conflict, governance and economic vulnerability. However, these approaches tend to focus on how displacement occurs rather than on how responses to climate risk are structured. In doing so, they risk underestimating the extent to which adaptation and protection are shaped by strategic prioritisation. Climate governance is not simply a technical exercise in risk reduction; it involves decisions about which populations, regions and assets are to be protected, and which are implicitly or explicitly deprioritised. Recent interdisciplinary work has begun to move towards recognising the importance of political economy in shaping environmental outcomes. For example, emerging research on climate responsibility within global production chains demonstrates how the costs and consequences of climate-related displacement are unevenly distributed across transnational systems of production and consumption (Arce et al. 2024). Such analyses highlight that vulnerability is not merely local, but is embedded within broader global structures that externalise risk onto less powerful regions. Similarly, scholarship in international studies and environmental governance increasingly emphasises that climate responses are conditioned by strategic interests, institutional incentives and power asymmetries, rather than being purely driven by humanitarian or ecological considerations.

Historical analyses further reinforce this point. In *Rivers Divided*, Daniel Haines demonstrates that the governance of the Indus Basin has been shaped less by abstract

concerns for environmental management and more by political, strategic and economic imperatives (Haines 2017). The river has been institutionalised as a resource to be controlled, allocated and contested, rather than as a system to be managed primarily in relation to environmental risk or human vulnerability. While Haines's focus is on interstate relations and irrigation politics, his analysis provides important context for understanding how environmental systems are embedded within broader structures of power and governance. Decisions about water allocation, infrastructure and management are not neutral responses to environmental conditions; they reflect political priorities that can produce uneven outcomes across populations.

A similar insight is developed in James C. Scott's critique of state-led development in *Seeing Like a State*. Scott argues that large-scale schemes to improve the human condition often fail because they prioritise simplified, top-down visions of order over the complex realities of local life (Scott 1998). In doing so, they frequently marginalise or displace vulnerable populations whose needs and practices do not align with state-centric models of planning. This critique is highly relevant to contemporary climate governance, where large-scale adaptation and development projects can similarly prioritise economic growth, infrastructure or strategic interests at the expense of local communities. Building on these insights, this article introduces the concept of environmental instrumentalism. This framework extends classical instrumentalist theory into the domain of climate governance by arguing that environmental risks and responses are not managed in a neutral or universally protective manner, but are instead selectively organised in line with political and economic priorities. Under conditions of environmental instrumentalism, climate risks are not simply experienced; they are governed in ways that reflect strategic calculations about value, visibility and importance.

In practice, this often manifests as a prioritisation of capital-intensive assets, urban centres and politically significant regions over marginal or peripheral communities. Adaptation measures such as flood defences, infrastructure investment and early warning systems are more likely to be directed towards areas that are economically valuable or politically salient, while rural, coastal or informal settlements may receive limited or delayed protection. This does not necessarily require explicit intent to harm; rather, it reflects a pattern of decision-making in which certain forms of loss are considered more acceptable than others. Displacement, in this context, becomes not merely an unintended consequence of environmental change, but a foreseeable outcome of selective protection.

This conceptual shift is critical for advancing the analysis of climate displacement. It moves the discussion beyond questions of causation towards questions of responsibility and justice, laying the groundwork for the normative framework developed in the following section.

Climate-Infused Veil of Ignorance: A Normative Framework for Climate Justice

The preceding section demonstrated that climate displacement is not simply the outcome of environmental stress and institutional weakness, but is shaped by political prioritisation and selective protection. This raises a deeper normative question: what would just climate governance look like if it were designed without prior advantage? To address this, the article turns to the work of John Rawls and reinterprets his concept of the veil of ignorance within the context of climate risk and displacement.

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls (1971) proposes that principles of justice should be determined behind a “veil of ignorance”, where decision-makers do not know their own social position, class, or status. The purpose of this thought experiment is to ensure impartiality. If individuals are unaware of whether they will be privileged or disadvantaged, they are more likely to design institutions that are fair to all. As commentators have noted, the strength of Rawls’s framework lies in its capacity to model fairness through uncertainty, forcing decision-makers to abstract from their own interests when determining just arrangements (Brock 1973). The veil therefore operates not merely as a philosophical device, but as a method for structuring rational choice under conditions where bias is removed. A simple analogy illustrates this logic. If one were tasked with designing a hospital without knowing whether they would occupy the role of a doctor, a patient, or a janitor, rational self-interest would lead to the creation of systems that protect dignity, safety and fairness across all positions. Under such conditions, it would be irrational to design a system that privileges one group at the expense of others, because one could ultimately occupy any of those roles. The veil thus ensures that fairness emerges not from altruism, but from prudential reasoning under uncertainty.

At the same time, Rawls’s framework has not been without critique. Scholars such as Roemer (2002) have questioned whether the veil sufficiently captures the demands of egalitarian justice, particularly in contexts where structural inequalities are deeply entrenched. These critiques are instructive, not because they undermine the utility of the veil, but because they highlight the importance of specifying the conditions under which it operates. In particular, they reinforce the need to extend Rawls’s framework into domains where risk and inequality are not merely social, but also environmental and spatial in character.

This article builds on these insights by introducing a climate-infused veil of ignorance. Under this extension, the relevant uncertainty is not only socio-economic status, but one’s position within the global climate-risk order. Decision-makers must assume that they could be born into any condition shaped by climate vulnerability: an urban elite protected by infrastructure, a marginal farmer dependent on rainfall, a coastal resident facing salinity intrusion, or an informal settler exposed to repeated environmental shocks. The veil is therefore recalibrated to account for the uneven distribution of climate risk across both global and local contexts.

The question then becomes: what kind of climate protection regime would rational actors design if they did not know where they would fall within this distribution of risk? The answer exposes the limitations of current governance structures. Contemporary climate policy often reflects patterns of selective protection, prioritising capital assets, urban centres and economically valuable regions. Such arrangements are difficult to justify under conditions of uncertainty. If decision-makers genuinely did not know whether they would occupy positions of privilege or vulnerability, they would not rationally endorse a system that systematically leaves certain populations exposed to displacement.

Instead, the logic of the veil points towards a model of universal protection, in which the basic conditions for safety and livelihood are secured across all social and geographical positions. This does not imply identical outcomes, but it does require that institutions be designed to minimise the risk of severe disadvantage, particularly for those most exposed to environmental harm. In this sense, the climate-infused veil reframes climate governance as a problem of distributive justice, rather than merely one of technical adaptation or risk management.

This normative framework also provides a critical lens through which to evaluate existing climate policies. Where protection is concentrated in economically valuable regions while marginal communities are left exposed, governance arrangements fail the test of impartiality. Where adaptation strategies are designed without regard to those most vulnerable to displacement, they reflect prior advantage rather than fair institutional design. The climate-infused veil thus reveals that current patterns of selective protection are not inevitable responses to environmental constraints, but choices that can be evaluated and challenged on normative grounds.

By extending Rawls's theory into the domain of climate risk, this section establishes the ethical foundation for the argument advanced in this article. It demonstrates that just climate governance requires more than managing environmental hazards; it requires designing institutions that protect individuals irrespective of their position within unequal risk landscapes. The following section operationalises this framework, translating its normative insights into a set of concrete criteria for evaluating climate policy and practice.

Operationalising Climate Justice: Equity Indicators as a Governance Framework

The climate-infused veil of ignorance developed in the previous section provides the normative foundation for assessing climate protection. However, if the framework is to have practical value, it must be capable of evaluating real-world governance. The equity indicators proposed here translate the logic of the veil into a governance audit tool. They ask whether climate policies are designed from a position of impartiality, or whether they reproduce existing hierarchies by protecting economically valuable spaces while leaving vulnerable communities exposed.

The first indicator is the *distribution of protection*. Climate protection must be assessed not only by the existence of adaptation measures, but by their allocation. A state may invest in flood defences, early warning systems or resilient infrastructure, yet still fail the test of justice if these protections are concentrated in cities, commercial zones and capital-intensive assets. The relevant question is therefore distributive: do protective measures reach those most exposed to climate risk, or do they reinforce existing spatial and economic inequalities? This matters because adaptation can generate strong social and economic benefits when directed effectively. The Global Commission on Adaptation found that investment in areas such as early warning systems, climate-resilient infrastructure, dryland agriculture, mangrove protection and water resources can deliver substantial net benefits (Global Commission on Adaptation 2019). The justice question, however, is not simply whether adaptation works, but who receives it first.

The second indicator is *vulnerability-first budgeting*. Under a climate-infused veil, rational decision-makers would not allocate resources primarily according to economic visibility or political influence, because they would not know whether they themselves would occupy a protected or exposed position. Public spending should therefore prioritise communities at greatest risk of displacement, including coastal populations, marginal farmers, informal settlers and climate-sensitive rural livelihoods. This is particularly important given the scale of the adaptation finance gap. The United Nations Environment Programme estimates that adaptation costs in developing countries are approximately US\$215 billion per year this decade, while finance needed to implement domestic adaptation priorities is estimated at US\$387 billion per year (UNEP 2023). Scarcity makes prioritisation unavoidable; the

normative issue is whether that prioritisation follows vulnerability or power. Vulnerability-first budgeting can also be implemented through anticipatory social protection, where resources are released before impacts peak based on forecast triggers. During Bangladesh's 2020 floods, when reports noted that roughly a third of the country was under water, households that received timely anticipatory cash were 36% less likely to go a day without eating than comparable households that did not receive the transfer (World Economic Forum 2023).

The third indicator is *displacement and relocation justice*. Climate governance should aim to prevent displacement where possible, rather than treating movement as an inevitable adjustment to environmental change. Where relocation becomes unavoidable, it must be supported through land, housing, livelihood protection, compensation and legal security. Relocation without these safeguards can simply transfer vulnerability from one site to another, particularly where displaced populations are absorbed into informal urban settlements without adequate services or rights. The urgency of relocation justice is underscored by the scale and persistence of internal displacement. IDMC reports 83.4 million people living in internal displacement at the end of 2024, including 9.8 million displaced by disasters (IDMC 2025). This strengthens the case that policy must focus on durable solutions, not only emergency movement, if displacement is to be prevented from becoming chronic precarity. This indicator therefore links climate protection to dignity. A policy that moves people out of danger but abandons them to precarity does not satisfy the requirements of justice or resilience.

The fourth indicator is *meaningful participation*. Communities affected by climate risk and adaptation decisions must be involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies that affect them. Participation should not be reduced to consultation after decisions have already been made. It must include genuine engagement with women, Indigenous communities, rural groups, informal settlers and other populations whose knowledge of local risk is often excluded from technocratic planning. The IPCC has emphasised that climate-resilient development requires attention to vulnerability, adaptation capacity and human systems, rather than purely technical responses to environmental hazards (IPCC 2022). This supports the argument that just adaptation depends on governance processes that recognise lived experience and local agency.

The fifth indicator is transparency and *anti-corruption monitoring*. Climate finance, adaptation contracts, compensation schemes and relocation decisions must be publicly traceable. Without transparency, climate protection can be captured by elites, diverted towards politically connected actors, or used to legitimise projects that reproduce exclusion. This is especially important in the Global South, where institutional fragility and unequal access to decision-making can intensify the risk of selective protection. Transparency is therefore not an administrative add-on; it is central to climate justice because it allows affected communities, civil society and courts to scrutinise whether protection is being allocated fairly.

These indicators should not be understood as separate checklist items. They are interconnected dimensions of a single governance framework. A failure of transparency can distort budgeting. Weak participation can lead to relocation policies that ignore livelihood realities. Unequal distribution of protection can deepen displacement pressures and reinforce

political exclusion. Conversely, when these indicators operate together, they provide a practical method for assessing whether climate governance is moving towards universal protection or reproducing environmental instrumentalism.

The framework can be applied to national adaptation plans, climate finance allocation, infrastructure investment, early warning systems and relocation programmes. Its purpose is not to replace existing climate policy tools, but to add a justice-based audit: are policies protecting those most at risk, or those most valuable to the state and market? This question is central to the argument of this article. If climate displacement is shaped by selective protection, then justice requires more than adaptation in general. It requires adaptation that is deliberately structured around vulnerability, accountability and equal concern. The following section applies this framework to selected Global South contexts to demonstrate how environmental instrumentalism operates in practice.

Environmental Instrumentalism in Practice: Illustrative Global South Contexts

The following examples are not presented as formal comparative case studies, but as illustrative anchors that demonstrate how environmental instrumentalism operates across different Global South contexts. Their purpose is to show how climate displacement is produced not by environmental stress alone, but by the interaction between climatic hazards, institutional weakness and selective systems of protection.

Keti Bandar, located by the Arabian Sea in Pakistan's lower Indus Delta, illustrates slow-onset displacement. In this context, sea-level rise, salinity intrusion, coastal erosion and cyclone exposure gradually undermine the viability of settlement and livelihood. The significance of Keti Bandar is that displacement does not appear as a sudden event, but as a cumulative process through which habitability is steadily eroded. This supports a pluralist account of displacement because movement is produced by several interacting factors: ecological change, poverty, weak infrastructure, fragile livelihoods and limited adaptive investment. It also reflects environmental instrumentalism because coastal communities remain peripheral to national adaptation priorities. Pakistan's climate displacement crisis has been linked to fragmented policy responses, insufficient funding, weak early warning systems and a lack of district-level planning, with the coastal Indus Delta identified as a zone of increasing climate-driven migration pressure (Shahzar 2025). The issue, therefore, is not only that the coastline is exposed to climate risk, but that protection is unevenly distributed.

The Tana River region in Kenya demonstrates a different but related dynamic. Here, displacement risk is shaped by flooding, livelihood vulnerability and historically produced exposure. Okoko's study of flood vulnerability in the Tana River shows that vulnerability among ethnic groups is connected to historical development patterns and the implementation of laws, rather than being reducible to natural hazard exposure alone (Okoko 2022). This matters because environmental stress interacts with social and institutional conditions that determine who is able to absorb risk and who is forced into precarity. In the broader Tana River context, competition over land, water and grazing resources has also intensified tensions between farming and pastoralist communities. This is not a simple case of climate causing conflict. Rather, it shows how climatic stress can amplify existing vulnerabilities where governance systems fail to mediate access to resources fairly. The case therefore supports the article's pluralist account of displacement while also showing how selective or historically unequal protection can deepen climate insecurity.

The Philippines example, particularly the New Manila International Airport project in Talip, Bulakan, illustrates environmental instrumentalism in a development context. The project has been justified through narratives of infrastructure, growth and national development, yet research on the affected fishing communities shows that the airport caused community displacement and raised concerns about environmental degradation in Manila Bay (Catane et al. 2024). The same study notes that residents perceived the project itself as a greater threat to their way of life than natural hazards, and that the project's environmental impact assessment raised concerns about transparency, social acceptance and possible policy loopholes. This example is important because it shows that displacement may be produced not only by climate hazards, but by development strategies that reorganise vulnerable coastal spaces for capital-intensive projects while transferring social and ecological risk to local communities.

Taken together, these examples show why climate displacement must be analysed through both causation and distribution. Ketu Bandar illustrates slow-onset environmental decline combined with weak adaptation. Tana River demonstrates how vulnerability is historically and institutionally produced in hazard-prone settings. The Philippines example reveals how development can actively redistribute environmental risk onto marginal communities. In each context, displacement is not simply a natural consequence of climate change. It is shaped by decisions about whose lives, land and livelihoods are worth protecting. These illustrative contexts therefore support the central argument of this article: climate displacement in the Global South is best understood as a multi-causal crisis intensified by environmental instrumentalism, where selective protection determines who is secured and who is left exposed.

Conclusion: From Justice as Fairness to Justice as Resilience

This article has argued that climate displacement in the Global South cannot be understood as a natural or unavoidable consequence of environmental change. Climate hazards matter, but they do not operate in isolation. Displacement emerges where environmental stress interacts with institutional fragility, unequal political economies and selective systems of protection. The central question, therefore, is not only why people move, but why some communities are protected while others are left exposed.

The article has developed this argument through the concept of environmental instrumentalism. Building on instrumentalist approaches to power, it has argued that climate governance is not a neutral process of risk management. Rather, protection is often distributed according to political and economic priorities. Capital assets, urban centres and strategically valuable regions may receive adaptation investment, while marginal farmers, coastal communities, informal settlers and low-income populations remain exposed to recurring risk. In this sense, displacement is not merely a failure of adaptation. It is a foreseeable outcome of governance systems that tolerate unequal exposure to harm.

The article has also advanced a normative response through the climate-infused veil of ignorance. By extending Rawls's idea of designing institutions without knowledge of one's own position, the article has argued that climate justice requires decision-makers to imagine that they could occupy any position within the climate-risk order. They could be an urban elite protected by infrastructure, but they could also be a coastal resident facing salinity, a marginal farmer dependent on rainfall, or an informal settler exposed to floods. Under such

uncertainty, a rational and fair system would not prioritise assets over lives, nor would it accept protection as a privilege attached to geography, class or political visibility.

The equity indicators developed in the article translate this normative claim into a practical governance framework. Distribution of protection, vulnerability-first budgeting, relocation justice, meaningful participation and anti-corruption monitoring provide a way to assess whether climate policies actually protect those most at risk. These indicators shift attention from adaptation in the abstract to adaptation as a distributive practice. A policy cannot be considered just simply because it builds resilience somewhere; it must be evaluated according to whose resilience it builds, whose vulnerability it reduces, and whose displacement it prevents.

The illustrative contexts examined in the article reinforce this argument. Ketu Bandar shows how slow-onset environmental decline becomes displacement when protection is absent or delayed. Tana River demonstrates that climate stress interacts with historically produced vulnerability and weak institutional mediation. The Philippines example shows how development itself can become a vehicle for transferring environmental risk onto marginal communities. Across these contexts, displacement is not simply caused by climate change. It is produced through the unequal governance of climate risk.

The article therefore proposes a shift from justice as fairness to justice as resilience. This does not abandon fairness; it extends it into a climate-disrupted world. Justice now requires institutions that secure the basic conditions of safety, livelihood and dignity for those most exposed to environmental harm. Climate protection must be treated as a universal entitlement, not a politically allocated privilege. If decision-makers would not accept unequal protection from behind a climate-infused veil of ignorance, they should not defend it in practice.

Acknowledgment

The author declares that this article is part of their independent research. This article has never been published in any research journal.

AI Acknowledgment

The author acknowledges the use of Microsoft 365 Copilot (university-provided) to assist with proofreading, improving written expression and readability, and supporting citation-format consistency checks during manuscript preparation (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365-copilot>).

The prompts used included: “Check for grammar errors”, “Convert in-text citations and the reference list to Chicago Manual of Style (Author–Date)””, “Identify mismatches between in-text citations and reference entries” and “Check for duplicate, missing, or inconsistently formatted URLs/DOIs.” The output from these prompts was used solely for language polishing, formatting consistency, and drafting suggested edits; it did not replace the author’s essential scholarly tasks (argument framing, interpretation, or substantive analysis).

The author confirms that they are the sole author of this article and take full responsibility for the content, including verifying all references against the original sources, consistent with COPE-aligned expectations described in Common Ground’s publication ethics guidance.

Informed Consent

The author declares that informed consent was not required as there were no human participants involved.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Arce, Guadalupe, Ángela García-Alaminos, Mateo Ortiz, and Jorge Zafrilla. 2024. “Attributing Climate-Change-Related Disaster Displacement Responsibilities along Global Production Chains.” *iScience* 27 (11): 111124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2024.111124>.
- Brass, Paul R. 1991. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Brock, Dan W. 1973. “The Theory of Justice.” *University of Chicago Law Review* 40 (3): 486–499.

Catane, S. G., J. R. R. Flora, J. W. M. Carag, J. B. Capino, C. M. Go, and A. L. L. Panganiban. 2024. "Development in an Environmentally Critical Coastal Area: The Risk Perception on Natural Hazards and the New Manila International Airport by Fishing Communities in Taliptip, Philippines." *Ocean & Coastal Management* 253: 107127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2024.107127>.

Draper, Jamie. 2022. "Climate Change and Displacement: Towards a Pluralist Approach." *Global Discourse* 12 (1): 1–18.

Draper, Jamie. 2023. *Climate Displacement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eriksen, Siri H., Andrea J. Nightingale, and Hallie Eakin. 2015. "Reframing Adaptation: The Political Nature of Climate Change Adaptation." *Global Environmental Change* 35: 523–533. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2015.09.014/>.

Global Commission on Adaptation. 2019. *Adapt Now: A Global Call for Leadership on Climate Resilience*. September 2019. <https://gca.org/reports/adapt-now-a-global-call-for-leadership-on-climate-resilience/>. Accessed April 27, 2026.

Haines, Daniel. 2017. *Rivers Divided: Indus Basin Waters in the Making of India and Pakistan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). 2025. *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025*. Geneva: IDMC. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2025/>. Accessed April 5, 2026.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2022. *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>. Accessed April 27, 2026.

Okoko, A. N. 2022. "The Legacy of Vulnerability to Floods in the Tana River, Kenya." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 71: 102821. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212420922000528/>. Accessed March 12, 2026.

Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Roemer, John E. 2002. "Egalitarianism against the Veil of Ignorance." *Journal of Philosophy* 99 (4): 167–184.

Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Shahzar, Eric. 2025. *The Broken Ground: Unpacking Pakistan's Climate Displacement Crisis*. Islamabad: Jinnah Institute. <https://jinnah-institute.org/publication/the-broken-ground-unpacking-pakistans-climate-displacement-crisis/>. Accessed April 10, 2026.

Sovacool, Benjamin K., Björn-Ola Linnér, and Michael E. Goodsite. 2015. "The Political Economy of Climate Adaptation." *Nature Climate Change* 5: 616–618.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate2665>.

Thalheimer, Lisa, Moritz P. Schwarz, and Felix Pretis. 2023. "Large Weather and Conflict Effects on Internal Displacement in Somalia with Little Evidence of Feedback onto Conflict." *Global Environmental Change* 79: 102641.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2023.102641>.

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). 2023. *Adaptation Gap Report 2023: Underfinanced. Underprepared—Inadequate Investment and Planning on Climate Adaptation Leaves World Exposed*. Nairobi: UNEP.
<https://doi.org/10.59117/20.500.11822/43796/>. Accessed April 27, 2026.

University of Oxford. 2023. "Small Temperature Rise Can Cause Large-Scale Forced Migration, Study Shows." February 23, 2023. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2023-02-23-small-temperature-rise-can-cause-large-scale-forced-migration-study/> Accessed April 12, 2026.

Wilson Center. 2023. "Climate-Induced Displacement: South Asia's Clear and Present Danger." <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/climate-induced-displacement-south-asias-clear-and-present-danger>. Accessed April 12, 2026.

World Bank. 2021. "Climate Change Could Force 216 Million People to Migrate Within Their Own Countries by 2050." Press release, September 13, 2021.
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/09/13/climate-change-could-force-216-million-people-to-migrate-within-their-own-countries-by-2050>. Accessed April 20, 2026.

World Economic Forum. 2023. "Just-in-Time Cash Transfers Make Vulnerable Communities More Resilient to Climate Shocks." <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/03/just-in-time-cash-transfers-makes-vulnerable-communities-resilient-to-climate-shocks/>. Accessed April 27, 2026.

World Universities Network. 2024. "Climate Mobilities in the Global South: Comparative Perspectives for Adaptation Policies." <https://wun.ac.uk/wun/research/view/climate-mobilities-in-the-global-south-comparative-perspectives-for-adaptation-policies/>. Accessed April 27, 2026.