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## Climate Refugees and Forced Migrations: Emerging Refugee Question in Lamwo District in Northern Uganda

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**Keywords:**

*Climate Refugees,  
Forced Migrations,  
Lamwo District,  
Northern Uganda.*

**Introduction:** This study examined the impacts of the February–May 2024 heatwave in South Sudan, highlighting the migration of climate refugees to the Palabek Refugee Settlement in Uganda. **Methodology:** It was based on a historical design and a qualitative approach, involving semi-structured questionnaires, key informant interviews and observation as the data collection methods. **Key findings:** Climate refugees (or climate-induced displaced persons) as individuals or groups forced to cross international borders due to the severe and escalating impacts of climate change. Extreme weather and worsening living conditions in regions like Juba, Magwii County, and Torit displaced ethnic groups such as the Nuer, Acholi, and Lango, exposing vulnerabilities tied to food insecurity, poverty, and political instability. The influx of refugees has strained Palabek’s social services, worsened environmental degradation, and fueled inter-tribal conflicts. Overcrowding in schools and inadequate infrastructure threaten education quality, while social tensions underline the need for culturally sensitive interventions and conflict-resolution strategies. Key entry points, such as the Nimule-Atiak-Gulu-Lokung route, facilitate multigenerational migration flows. **Conclusion and Recommendations:** The study advocates for regional policies addressing climate-induced migration through investments in environmental sustainability, education, and psychosocial support. The study believes effective management requires collaboration between governments, international organisations, and refugee-host communities to build resilience and address these multifaceted challenges.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Climate change stands as a major global challenge in the 21st century, causing widespread environmental, social, and economic upheavals. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and changing agricultural patterns are driving millions to relocate in search of safer environments, a process referred to as climate migration. "Climate change increases the intensity of extreme weather events, provoking migrations and displacements; thus, climate refugees are the subject of increasing attention worldwide" (Berchin et al., 2017, p. 147). However, there have been acceptances and rejections of the term "climate refugees". "The scientific community has long urged for the broadening of the refugee term, which remains identical since the 1951 Refugee Convention, despite strong evidence showing connections between forced migration and climate change worldwide" (Berchin et al., 2017, p. 147). UNHCR (2024) noted that "the climate crisis is a human crisis. How you experience it depends on who you are and where you live. Millions of people across the globe continue to be forced to flee their homes because of violence, conflict, and climate-related hazards. In fact, the number of forcibly displaced people in the world today has never been higher, doubling to more than 120 million people over the past 10 years" (UNHCR, 2024, p. 6).

To better understand these links, it is important to explore the relationships between conflict, climate change, and forced displacement. It is a relationship which is complex and multidimensional, depending on prevailing social, economic, and political conditions. The impacts of the climate crisis are intensifying the vulnerability

of people already displaced by war, violence, or persecution, making their lives even more precarious. Climate change and environmental degradation are characterised by an increase in very hot days, more rainfall with uncertainty and days with heavy precipitation, an increase in surface runoff, bio-diversity loss, a doubling in drought exposure, an increase in climate-related morbidity and mortality. This has led to an increase in total population, making the situation more complex, triggering or escalating the existing conflict (UNHCR, 2024, p. 12).

This paper attempts to historicize the phenomenon of climate refugees/environmental refugees, which are often used interchangeably. It aims to: a) unpack the concept and phenomenon of climate change, b) interrogate the emerging refugee questions in Lamwo District in Northern Uganda, c) assess the implication of the phenomenon of climate refugee for humanitarian intervention, and d) suggest appropriate approach to this question of and the phenomenon climate refugee. It argues that, to understand the concept 'climate refugee', it will require the phenomenon must be studied within a specific context. Based on this, the paper explored the concept of climate refugees in the context of Lamwo District in Northern Uganda, which, from 2017, has persistently experienced a noticeably increased influx of refugees from South Sudan during the months with hostile weather and climate.

**BACKGROUND****Theorising 'Climate Refugee':**

This paper attempts to explain climate change based on three theories: a) The environmental Determinism theory, which asserts that climate

change causes direct displacement. Whereas, this is true, it may be simplistic and often too linear (Peet, 1985, p. 325), b) the Multi-Causal Model asserts that migrations are triggered by multiple intersecting factors including climate which is a risk multiplier, and requires a policy coherence for development (PCD) if sustainable development is to be achieved (Verschaeve et al., 2016, p. 44; Vigil, 2024, pp. 1-2), and c) Political ecologists argue that displacement is linked to structural injustice and therefore climate justice must be central. Vigil (2024) noted that “the multi-scalar power relations influencing migration in the context of climate change have been underestimated” and “these interactions do not occur in socio-political vacuums” (Vigil, 2024, p. 1). However, advocates of the Human Rights Approach argue that climate migrants lack legal protection and will need new legal frameworks which will specifically address their plight (Van der Vliet, 2018). Similarly, the term climate refugee can be problematic as it is precise in use and a context-sensitive term.

De Capitani (2024) argues that there is an increasing migration of climate refugees. He reiterates that “The environmental crisis has added a new category of potential ‘enemies’ that populist governments and political leaders can use: climate refugees (De Capitani, 2024, p. 43; Della Valle, 2024, p. 43). Della Valle (2024) used the concept of ‘negative solidarity’, which was coined by sociologist Émile Durkheim, to criticise the type of social organisation advocated by the utilitarian philosophy that supported the rise of individualism, industrialism and capitalism. Durkheim called the form of social organisation imagined to be adequate by the utilitarians – a society based on competitive self-interest – ‘negative solidarity’. Negative solidarity is a social order based on contractual non-interference rather than willful commitment to a common goal, consisting “not in serving, but in not harming”. In this case, the motivation does not move toward common ends but merely makes things gravitate around it in an orderly way. This explains how international organisations such as the United Nations and the UNHCR operate and respond to

issues concerning climate change, forced migrations and the climate refugee phenomenon (Della Valle, 2024, p. 43).

However, the Post-colonial theorists concerned with the phenomenon-climate migration and refugees argue that the two terms are not apolitical as they are entangled in histories of colonialism, resource extraction and racial capitalism. Therefore, to them, the term climate refugee is inadequate, often failing to account for structural violence and systematic inequality. To post-colonial scholars, borders and refugee regimes are colonial tools reproducing historical hierarchies and exclusions. Therefore, it calls for reparative justice, including climate reparations, decolonial governance and policies and the redistribution of resources and rights. However, it recognises that institutions like the United Nations and its agencies reproduce Western-centric or Euro-centric frameworks that fail to protect or recognise climate-displaced people of developing countries.

### **Unpacking the Concept ‘Climate Refugee:**

Academics, policy analysts, and the public have pointed to the fact that we are experiencing a “global ‘polycrisis’ which Hoyer et al. (2023), described as: “a series of interconnected and interacting threats - climate change and ecological disasters, rising economic inequality and political polarization, violent conflict” (Hoyer et al. 2023, p. 1), and climate refugee or ‘environmental refugee’ among others. All these threats present novel challenges, which have become an inherent part of the human experience, and have often converged with other socio-cultural pressures; triggering polycrises in the past as today. The current polycrisis has often ignored the lessons offered by historical occurrences and examples. Studies exploring past environmental crises often focus on a few well-known cases of severe stress contributing to apparent societal collapse. Some studies generally focus on a single event or specific social formation, seeking to establish temporal correlations between environmental hazards and major societal transformations. Hoyer et al. (2023), therefore, argue that while the resulting findings are of basic interest, they

typically do not offer insights generalizable (Hoyer et al. 2023, p. 1). UNHCR (2024) acknowledges “the intersection between climate change, conflict and forced displacement. Although complex and multidimensional, these linkages are undeniably influencing the way people experience forced displacement and whether they are forced to move again” (UNHCR, 2024, p. 6).

The term 'Refugee' was originally used to refer to the Huguenots. It has its roots to Latin, although the term refugee came directly from the French word *réfugié* with specific reference to Protestants who fled France following the revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes, the law that granted religious liberty and civil rights to the Protestant Huguenots for nearly a century (Merriam Webster Dictionary). Over 400,000 French Protestants fled France, with many migrating to Protestant England. That place of safety sought by refugees was called a refuge, and it came from the Latin word *refugium*, which means “the act of taking refuge” or “a place of refuge or asylum.” In this case, the term ‘Refuge’ literally meant “shelter” and a figurative “sanctuary.” *Refugium* came from the verb *refugere* (“to run away” or “to escape”), originating from *fugere* (“to flee” or “to avoid”). The term refuge was used by the great lexicographer Samuel Johnson in his work: “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.” The idea of fleeing is part of other words that share *fugere* as their ultimate Latin root. *Fugitive* was used to describe “one who flees or escapes” and the adjective “fleeing”. However, with time, it also meant “wandering” or “moving from place to place” without the urgency or danger of escape. The term *fugitive* took on more figurative meanings, such as “elusive” (“fugitive ideas”) or “likely to change” (“fugitive colours”). It is a synonym of “fleeting” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Aristotle described the refugees as the stateless ones (Brown, 2019, p. 119). The field of refugee studies emerged in the 1970s (Malkki, 1995, p. 507).

The idea of an ‘ecological refugee’ was first mentioned in 1948 (Vogt, 1948, p. 114). Its more

recent and first ‘official’ derivation was a UNEP report in 1985 by El-Hinnawi. He used the term ‘environmental refugee’ to highlight the potentially devastating impacts of unchecked development, pollution and so on (Vogt, 1948, p. 114; McAdam, 2011, p. 4). “Environmental lobby groups today use the language of ‘climate refugees’ to draw attention to the most deleterious aspects of carbon emissions” (McAdam, 2011, p. 4).

Lester Brown popularised the term “environmental refugees” in 1970; however, the discussion concerning the category started in 1985, when El-Hinnawi (1985) published a paper on the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). He claimed that environmental refugees are “those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardize their existence and/or seriously affects the quality of their life” (El-Hinnawi, 1985, pp. 4–5). Severe degradation as a consequence of climate change, included “water related climatic hazards”. Although seasonal migrations are not new, there is an intensification of migrant flows due to environmental events and the country’s social and economic constraints (Berchin, 2017, p. 149).

Myers (1997) considers environmental refugees as the people who feel extremely unsafe on their own territory because of climatic hazards, e.g., droughts, deforestation, and have no other option but to flee to somewhere secure, with few expectations to go back to their homelands (Myers, 1997; Berchin, 2017, p. 148).

McAdam (2010), presenting a paper at the High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges, raises the critical question: “Are people climate change ‘refugees?’” (McAdam, 2010, p. 1). She argues that “the term ‘refugee’ is a legal term of art. The legal definition of a ‘refugee’, and the rights and entitlements which a refugee is owed, are set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees, and its



1967 Protocol. A ‘refugee’ is defined as someone who:

Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951).

Lambert (2014) argues that, “the question of whether arbitrary deprivation of nationality constitutes persecution for a determination of refugee status has received increased attention in recent jurisprudence. He argues that, “no systematic argument has been made to date on the ordinary meaning of words, context, object and purpose of Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, as it applies to stateless refugees” (Lambert, 2014, p. 1). This is an important question because, in addition to the imperatives of refugee protection, the absence of determination procedures and a protection regime specifically for stateless persons, in many jurisdictions, makes refugee and/or complementary protection the only options. Lambert (2014) argues that a refugee is determined by his/her “legal status as a refugee or a stateless person”. Whereas it is not a substitute for nationality in the sense of a legal status of citizenship, it guarantees a range of basic rights. Divergent State practice on whether to grant refugee status to a person who claims to have been persecuted on the basis of having been denied the right to nationality, also requires analysis (Lambert, 2014, p. 1). The 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness together form the foundation of the international legal framework to address statelessness. Statelessness refers to ‘a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law (Lambert, 2014, pp. 1-2).

Lambert (2014) noted that this definition is part of customary international law, and it is concerned with whether a person has a nationality, and not with how a person became stateless. Accordingly, under the 1954 Stateless Status Convention, ‘where a deprivation of nationality may be contrary to rules of international law, this illegality is not relevant in determining whether the person is a national ... rather, it is the position under domestic law that is relevant’. Article 1(1) of the 1954 Convention is connected to the right to nationality itself; it is not concerned with whether this nationality is effective in the sense of whether the individual can exercise the rights attached to nationality (Lambert, 2014, p. 2). This paper argues that, whereas there are legal interpretations of the term refugee, there is an overlap between statelessness, political refugee and climate refugee status. Similarly, there exists an interrelationship between human rights and refugee law, and it suggests an appropriate and consistent approach to refugee status and statelessness based on elements of good practice (Lambert, 2014, p. 3).

The UN General Assembly acknowledges States’ obligations to meet their protection responsibilities towards refugees, stateless people and internally displaced persons (UNGA Resolutions on the Office of the UNHCR 61/137). Similarly, “persons arbitrarily deprived of nationality are protected by international human rights and refugee law, as well as by instruments on statelessness,” and ‘the arbitrary deprivation of nationality disproportionately affects persons belonging to minorities’ (UNGA Resolutions on the Office of the UNHCR 61/137).

Lambert (2014) argues that ‘the key issue is the extent to which ‘persecution is understood to be concerned fundamentally with serious violations of human dignity’ in the jurisprudence of domestic courts. This question has been fundamentally engaged on by courts when examining claims based on ethnic and racial discrimination of Farsi Kurds, Roma, Rohingya of Myanmar, refugees from Bhutan, the Bidoons in the Gulf States, and Dominicans of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic. Lambert further asserts that denationalisation done arbitrarily, including on

discriminatory grounds, is prohibited under international law, such as the international human rights law. Deprivation of nationality leading to statelessness is regarded as contrary to international norms of human rights law, stateless law and possibly also refugee law (Lambert, 2014, p. 11).

### **The Question of Nationality, Statelessness and Refugee:**

This paper argues that the lack of State protection is linked to the deprivation of nationality, and the perpetuation of statelessness and refugeehood. The possession of effective nationality and the ability to exercise integral rights to nationality can help to prevent forced displacement and refugeehood (Lambert, 2014, p. 13). Historically, the problem of statelessness was more inclusive than the problem of refugees in the post-World War I and later during the coming into force of the denationalization decree of the Nazi regime, 1941. Whereas statelessness and refugeehood faced similar challenges, both received protection and assistance from international refugee organisations. The non-refugee stateless persons were thought to be quite few in numbers, and this led some academics and drafters of the 1951 Refugee Convention to conclude that formal statelessness was a necessary criterion for refugee status; statelessness per se gave rise to refugee status. However, this interpretation has been contested (Lambert, 2014, p. 13).

Categories such as refugees, stateless persons and displaced persons had not yet been clearly defined at the time. The original idea of a Protocol relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, attached to the 1951 Refugee Convention, was meant to reflect the link between stateless persons and refugees, but practical considerations prevented the Conference of delegates to consider both issues of refugees and statelessness, being postponed until 1954 (Lambert, 2014, p. 14). Lambert argues that, whereas, there can be some overlap between stateless persons and refugees but the two classifications are and should remain distinct, as some refugees may also be stateless and some stateless persons may be refugees, but for the great

majority of them, this is no longer the case. Most refugees today are not stateless, and most stateless persons are not refugees (Lambert, 2014, p. 15).

During the drafting of the 1951 Refugee Convention, states decided to leave the issue of statelessness, which had covered non-refugee stateless persons. They agreed to focus exclusively on refugees who were also stateless. Henceforth, statelessness, the condition of being without citizenship, was distinguished from the condition of being a refugee, as the causes of statelessness were diverse. The UNHCR identified three kinds: a) Causes linked to the dissolution and separation of States and transfer of territory between States such as the post-colonial formation and secession of States in Asia and Africa, b). the technical causes through the operation of citizenship laws or administrative practices, and the third cause of statelessness is discrimination and arbitrary deprivation of nationality, for example, ethnic and racial discrimination of Farsi Kurds, Roma, Rohingya of Myanmar, refugees from Bhutan, the Bidoons in the Gulf States, Dominicans of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic. In this situation, discrimination is often both a cause of statelessness through the arbitrary deprivation of nationality and the effect of statelessness on the person, including the denial of human rights through discriminatory acts (Lambert, 2014, p. 14).

Lambert (2014) noted that to identify refugees as stateless can weaken refugees' right to return to their country of origin in safety and in dignity, and undermine claims against their States of origin for the redress of their rights as citizens, for instance, hold accountable their state of origin for the crimes that caused their displacement or secure the restitution of lost property (Lambert, 2014, p. 15).

### **Rejections and Acceptance of the Phenomenon 'Climate Refugee':**

#### ***Acceptance of the Term Climate Refugees:***

Numerous recent reports by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academics and international organisations have focused on 'climate refugees. This is a shift from a discourse

of ‘political refugees’ to ‘climate refugees’, in which organisations perceive migration as a failure of both mitigation and adaptation to climate change, to one of ‘climate migration’, in which organisations promote migration as a strategy of adaptation (Romain Felli, 2013, p. 337).

The idea of a ‘climate change refugee’ is a comparatively new one. Despite the fact that regional and international migration triggered by environmental factors has been normal and common throughout human history, the first significant discussions on climate change-related migration and movements started only in the 1990’s, when the discussion was mostly undertaken by scientists interested in climate change, not by those doing social sciences and humanities, legal, practical, or normative work on refugees and forced migration (McAdam 2012, pp. 1–3; Lister, 2014, p. 618).

The grim picture of millions of climate refugees fleeing their destroyed habitats and flowing into northern havens has been all too prevalent over the last few years as the ‘human face’ of climate change (Romain Felli, 2013, p. 337). Biermann et al. (2008) argue that displacement caused by climate change is a form of coerced migration, meaning that these people and their land are both affected by the damaging and irreversible effects of climate change (Biermann et al., 2008, p. 148). Therefore, they have to involuntarily flee from their homeland, receiving the status of climate refugees (Hodgkinson et al., 2009). They observe that there is a discussion whether this category should be labelled as “climate refugees” or “forced climate migrants”. According to Brown (2007), the word refugee provides an emotional sensitivity and openness to the public, whereas the word “migrant” has an adverse implication, suggesting these people move spontaneously seeking a considerably better quality of life (Biermann et al., 2008, p. 148).

Though the concept of climate refugees is not legally recognised, discussions concerning these definitions are mounting as the global climate change intensifies. Consequently, these refugees

began to be popularised: climate refugees. A climate refugee is one who has been forced to leave their home or country due to the effects of severe climate events, which exposes them to the perception of insecurity, which forces them to seek asylum in other regions or countries. They are forced to rebuild their lives in other places, despite the conditions through which they are submitted. Despite the efforts to address climate change, there is a lack of commitment from the international community to resolve the displacement issues of the climate refugee dilemma. The recognition of the climate change refugee concept could lead to the construction of a proper protection regime, regulating them with clear and specific measures. Therefore, the legal acceptance of climate refugees is undeniably vital, so that those who are unable to return to their habitat due to climate-related hazards receive necessary assistance (Biermann et al., 2008, p. 149).

UNHCR (2024) reiterates that “The plight of displaced populations, and the communities hosting them, has often been underreported and their voices excluded and marginalised”. The current realities and the immense scale reveal that 90 million displaced people are living in countries with high-to-extreme exposure to climate-related hazards, and nearly half out of all forcibly displaced people are bearing the burden of both conflict and the adverse effects of climate change. These include countries like South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Yemen, and Somalia (UNHCR, 2024, p. 6).

Therefore, this study conceptualises climate refugees (or climate-induced displaced persons) as individuals or groups compelled to leave their homes and communities across international borders, due to the severe and escalating impacts of climate change. These impacts manifest as extreme weather events (e.g., heatwaves), progressive environmental degradation (e.g., deforestation, resource scarcity), or other climate-related stressors like drought that render their dwelling places unsustainable, unsafe, or uninhabitable. Despite the lack of specific legal

recognition under current international refugee frameworks, their displacement is a direct consequence of environmental factors, leading to increased vulnerability, particularly when their situation is generalised with that of political refugees.

### ***Rejections of the Term Climate Refugees:***

There have been rejections of the term climate refugees despite its usage since 1948. Black (2001), in his 'Environmental Refugees: Myth or Reality?', questions whether these environmental/climate refugees existed. Scholars of critical geographical, developmental, and migration literature have launched substantial critiques on the concepts of 'environmental migration' or 'environmental refugees' (Black, 2001; Oels, 2010; Gill, 2010; Hartmann, 2010). The concepts of environmental/climate refugees were criticised by scholars for being too deterministic and for reducing a complex set of migration causes to a unilateral environmental 'push' factor. However, when the 'environmental migration' models grew more sophisticated as scholars incorporated different views on the causality of migration, distinguishing between types of 'environmentally induced migration' and advocating a different set of policies, along with a critique of the environmental migrant/ refugee concept that followed these changes with an argument that critiques less the epistemological nature of the model and critiques more the broader cultural representations and political implications of the environmental/climate migrants/refugees literature (Gill, 2010). The popular science journal *New Scientist* found no sound basis for the widely circulated numbers of 'climate refugees' (Pearce, 2011, p. 6; Romain Felli, 2013, p. 338).

McAdam (2010) reiterates the following: a) the refugee definition only applies to people who have already crossed an international border, and that much of the anticipated movement in response to climate change is internal, and does not meet the preliminary requirement, b). There are difficulties in characterising 'climate change' as 'persecution'. 'Persecution' entails violations of human rights that are sufficiently serious, either

(McAdam, 2010, p. 1). She further argues that, although adverse climate impacts such as rising sea levels, salination, and increases in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, including storms, cyclones, floods, are harmful, they do not meet the threshold of 'persecution' as defined by the law. The problem is identifying a 'persecutor' in the context of climate change. For example, the government of South Sudan is not responsible for climate change and developing policies which increase its negative impacts on particular sectors of the population (McAdam, 2010, p. 2). McAdam (2010) further argued that the 'international community', and industrialised countries in particular, whose failure to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions which has triggered climate change are the "persecutors".

These are the very countries to which movement might be sought if the land becomes unsustainable. Similarly, whereas Convention refugees flee their own government or private actors that the government is unable or unwilling to protect them from, a person fleeing the effects of climate change is not escaping his or her government, but rather is seeking refuge from countries that have contributed to climate change. This presents yet another problem in terms of the legal definition of 'refugee': in the case of South Sudan, whose government remains able and willing to protect its citizens (McAdam, 2010, p. 2). McAdam further noted that even if the impacts of climate change could be characterised as 'persecution', the Refugee Convention requires such persecution to be based on an individual's race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group. Persecution alone is not enough, yet the challenge is that the impacts of climate change are largely indiscriminate, rather than tied to particular characteristics such as a person's background or beliefs. Although climate change more adversely affects some countries, by the nature of their geography and resources, the reason is not linked to the nationality or race of their inhabitants. An argument that people affected by its impacts could constitute a 'particular social group' would be difficult to establish, because the law requires that



such a group must be connected by a fundamental and undisputable characteristic other than the risk of persecution itself (McAdam, 2010, pp. 2-3).

The 1967 Protocol to the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees definition does not cover people fleeing their homes because of environmental disruption and climate change. Those fleeing disruption caused by climate change are not considered to be persecuted, and therefore, have no well-founded fear of persecution. However, the danger caused by climate change is indiscriminate, and is not 'on account of' one of the 'protected grounds'— race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Given this, two essential elements of the refugee definition are missing in the case of those fleeing the impact of climate change (Lister, 2014, p. 620).

After Short-lived environmental problems such as the effects of hurricanes, earthquakes, or floods, people are expected to return to their homes once the danger has passed, and helping in restoring such communities to functioning levels when granted will mitigate statelessness and displacement. Temporary protection will suffice for those forced from their homes because of environmental problems (Lister, 2014, p. 622). McAdam (2012) notes, there is a lack of verifiable data in the projections of millions of people crossing international borders. It is not based on sound estimates and empirical study, therefore, causing unnecessary anxiety, panic and backlash against those displaced across international borders as they are not unprotected. Furthermore, if people are able to relocate safely within their own country, there is no reason to provide protection in another country (McAdam, 2012, pp. 4–5).

The critical issue is how does human rights law apply to climate change? Climate change may impact on a number of human rights: a) Extreme weather events affect right to life, b) Increased food insecurity and risk of hunger affects Right to adequate food, right to be free from hunger, c) Increased water stress affects Right to safe drinking water, d) Stress on health status affects

Right to the highest attainable standard of health, and Sea-level rise and flooding affects Right to adequate housing. However, human rights principles are presently recognised as giving rise to a protection obligation on the part of a receiving country (McAdam, 2010, p. 4).

### **The Implication of the Phenomenon of 'Climate Refugee' for Humanitarian Intervention**

UNHCR (2024) noted that “as climate-related hazards increase in the coming decades, the risks for displaced people and their hosts will grow significantly. By 2040, the number of countries facing extreme climate-related hazards is expected to rise from three to 65, the vast majority of which are hosting displaced populations. Extreme heat will also rise significantly, with most refugee settlements and camps projected to experience twice as many days of dangerous heat by 2050” (Van Den Hoek et al., 2024; UNHCR, 2024, p. 7). Furthermore, “As climate shocks and stresses impact the homelands and destinations of forcibly displaced people, they increasingly find themselves with no escape route. Climate change is increasing the challenges displaced people face in finding durable solutions, and thereby increasing the risk of protracted, recurrent, and onward displacement. By the end of 2023, over 70 per cent of refugees and asylum-seekers came from highly climate-vulnerable countries that are also least ready to improve their resilience (Shoshan, 2024), jeopardising their opportunities for return” (UNHCR, 2024, p. 7).

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) acknowledged that Climate change is one of the factors threatening the Earth's ecosystem, causing entire communities to migrate (IOM, 2009). In looking at the effect of environment on forced migration, the concept of 'environmentally displaced persons' (EDPs) emerged as an attempt to avoid the term refugee, which has emotional appeal, characterising them as the people who are endangered by environmental and ecological disruptions. The consequence is that they end up being forcibly displaced from their territory (Gorlick, 2019). Currently, what mostly concerns advocacy groups, social scientists and researchers

regarding environmental refugees is not a lack of a precise definition, but a lack of legal status and normative protection. This lacuna impacts their ability to address the forced displacement due to environmental distress as well as promote measures to improve the lot of groups exposed to displacement risk (IOM, 2009; Berchin, 2017, p. 148).

### **Suggested Appropriate Approach to This Question of the Phenomenon of Climate Refugees:**

Lister (2014) noted that Climate change is a complex and brutally difficult problem. Therefore, no one approach is likely to provide a total contribution necessary to bring changes. It is therefore important to see how refugee law might be extended to help some of those at risk of climate change, and these changes should be based on the logic of the UN Refugee Convention (Lister, 2014, pp. 628-9).

UNHCR (2024) recommends: a) protection of displaced people fleeing in the context of climate change impacts and disasters by applying and adapting existing legal tools, b) inclusion of the voices and specific needs of displaced populations and host communities in climate finance and policy decisions, c). Invest in building climate resilience where needs are greatest, especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings and d). Accelerate the reduction of carbon emissions to prevent climate disaster and to avert and minimise further displacement (UNHCR, 2024, p. 8). The report further indicates that 3 in 4 forcibly displaced people live in countries with high-to-extreme exposure to climate-related hazards. Most refugee settlements and camps are projected to experience twice as many days of dangerous heat by 2050 (UNHCR, 2024, p. 9).

This paper argues that, with the complexity of the impact of climate change on migration, it calls for the adoption of a multi-disciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, Trans disciplinarity and International cooperation.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Uganda is home to about 1, 852,002 million refugees as of April 30, 2025 (UNHCR, Report 2025). Lamwo has a population of 213,156 (UBOS Report, 2024). This includes 73,806 refugees settled in the Palabek Refugee Settlement within Lamwo District, with a diversity of about 27 South Sudanese ethnic communities. This highlights the complexity of managing multi-ethnic refugee populations (UNHCR Report, 2025). From 2023, Lamwo District and Palabek Refugee Settlement have been experiencing an increased influx of South Sudanese nationals triggered by the impact of climate change and environmentally related displacement. Extreme weather and worsening living conditions in the South Sudan regions of Juba, Magwii County, and Torit displaced ethnic communities such as the Nuer, Acholi, and Lango, exposing them to vulnerabilities tied to food insecurity, poverty, and political instability. The climate refugees arrived in the district through the porous borders of the Agoro hills. This has led to the emergence of 'climate refugees' as a new phenomenon in forced migration, creating significant vulnerabilities among the refugees and host communities. This is affecting the humanitarian interventions as some of the new arrivals do not go through the UNHCR and OPM (Office of the Prime Minister) refugee reception and registration points at Nimule-Atiak-Gulu-Lokung transit route and Waligo checkpoint. This often resulted in the unexpected rise in the number of learners in the refugee settlement schools, increased pressure on the health facilities and environmental resources, especially in the months of February to May.

Whereas there has been an increased influx of South Sudanese into Lamwo District triggered by the effects of climate change, often their actual population is not known, as they are registered as political refugees. Although there is a rising awareness of the role climate change plays in driving migration, there is a clear lack of consensus on the term 'climate refugee' and comprehensive policies and frameworks specifically designed to address the needs of climate migrants in Palabek Refugee Settlement.

This arises from the gap in policy within the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees, and its 1967 Protocol, which leads to inadequate support for refugees facing climate change and environmental pressures, worsening problems of food insecurity, water shortages, and economic instability (UNHCR, 2023). The settlement's limited infrastructure and resources further heighten the vulnerability of those affected by climate change. Without targeted interventions aimed at building resilience, such as sustainable water management systems, climate-resilient farming practices, and effective disaster preparedness, the well-being of refugees in Palabek remains at serious risk (World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, the lack of coordinated efforts between international organisations, the Ugandan government, and local communities hinders the successful implementation of climate adaptation strategies, leaving refugees without sufficient protection and support (OCHA, 2023). Finally, the lack of a common consensus on the legal status of the climate refugees creates a human rights challenge to this category of persons.

Additionally, the socio-economic impacts of climate-induced migration in Palabek are not fully understood, raising concerns about potential threats to social cohesion and stability within the refugee settlement and host communities. The absence of data-driven insights and inclusive planning processes limits the development of sustainable solutions to address the complex relationship between climate change and displacement. Consequently, there is an urgent need to close the existing conceptual and policy gaps, develop comprehensive climate adaptation frameworks, and implement effective strategies that protect and empower climate migrants in Palabek Refugee Settlement. This research, therefore, sought to unpack the concept 'climate refugee', identify the specific challenges faced by climate migrants in Palabek, evaluate the effectiveness of current humanitarian responses, and offer actionable recommendations to enhance resilience and support for displaced populations impacted by climate change.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed the qualitative research approach with a historical design to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges of climate-related migration of refugees at Palabek Refugee Settlement and host communities in Lamwo District, Uganda. It focused on unpacking the concept of climate refugees and the dynamics of migrations caused by climate change and its impacts on both refugees and the host community. Historical data was used to provide context on the refugees' origins, trace the timeline of climate-driven migration, understand the "climate refugee" identity from their perspective, and document their long-term lived experiences with environmental change. The researchers used oral histories and life-story interviews with refugees and host communities to gather personal narratives of environmental change and migration. They supplemented this with key informant interviews and participant observation of living conditions, education, health, and social life. By identifying common themes and cross-referencing with archival records, they developed a historically grounded understanding of how climate change has shaped experiences in the Palabek Refugee Settlement.

Palabek Settlement was purposely selected as the research site because it receives a large number of refugees from South Sudan, many of whom are believed to be climate migrants. The rising numbers have led to increased pressure on local resources and social services, including schools, healthcare, and environmental resources.

A total of 97 participants were purposively sampled for the study using the snowball and networking method. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation. This is a point when no new information or data is obtained from the participants. The sample was drawn from nine zones (zones 1 to 9), one secondary school, and five primary schools within the settlement, all identified as receiving a huge influx of climate refugees. The participant composition included: 4 staff from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), 9 zonal leaders, 12

teachers, 60 learners from the selected schools, and 12 local community members.

Three main data collection methods were used: Semi-structured interviews with the refugee learners, teachers and the community to explore their migration reasons, living conditions, access to services, and social relationships. This tool was essential for capturing personal narratives and subjective experiences of young refugees affected by climate-induced displacement. Key informant interviews were conducted with the OPM staff and zonal leaders, who had in-depth knowledge about the settlement's administration, refugee integration processes, and challenges related to climate migration. These interviews provided valuable contextual and policy-level insights into the refugee response mechanism. Participant observation, guided by a structured checklist, allowed the researchers to directly assess the physical living conditions, educational infrastructure (especially schools), health facilities, and social interactions within the community. It also enabled the collection of environmental data, such as the extent of deforestation, sanitation conditions, and water accessibility, all of which were crucial for understanding the broader environmental and infrastructural impacts of climate migration.

This research prioritised ethical practices by obtaining both written and verbal informed consent from all participants. This ensured they understood the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and how their data would be used for publication. Respect for refugees' and participants' identity was paramount, and the researchers involved the community, sharing findings and seeking their input. Participant privacy and confidentiality were maintained through data anonymisation and secure storage. The data, gathered from interviews and focus groups, underwent a rigorous analysis process. This involved transcribing and discussing the content in depth, followed by open, descriptive, and interpretive coding to identify thematic segments: a) unpack the concept and phenomenon of climate change, b) interrogate the emerging refugee questions in Lamwo District in Northern

Uganda, c) assess the implication of the phenomenon of climate refugee for humanitarian intervention, and d) suggest appropriate approach to this question of and the phenomenon climate refugee. The study interpreted these themes within the refugee context, acknowledging nuances, contradictions, and unexpected findings, while also checking for biases and considering diverse perspectives. Participant quotes were integrated into the reporting to support the study's objectives and theories, ensuring the overall credibility and reliability of the article.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data from this study reflects the significant impact of climate change, particularly heat waves, on migration patterns and the displacement of communities in South Sudan. The migration of people due to extreme weather events, such as the February–May 2024 heat wave, underscores the increasing number of climate migrants and climate refugees from South Sudan to Palabek Refugee Settlement in Uganda.

### Areas Most Affected by the Heat Wave in South Sudan

Across all key informant interviews, participants reported that the regions of Juba, Magwii County, Torit, Agoro, and Ikuitos County were the most affected by the heat wave. According to Okuj (2025), the 19<sup>th</sup> February 2025 report by Eye Radio revealed that temperatures in Juba and most of the country increased from 41 degrees Celsius in March 2024 to 45 degrees Celsius. Key informants confirmed that these areas have historically been vulnerable to extreme climatic events, which exacerbate existing challenges such as food insecurity, poverty, and political instability. Prolonged heat waves in these areas likely led to a collapse in agricultural production, scarcity of water resources, and deteriorating living conditions, pushing residents to seek refuge elsewhere. Clearly, these areas highlight that both urban (for example, Juba) and rural regions were impacted, pointing to the widespread nature of the climate crisis. One of the refugee learners who arrived from Juba reported that;



*“This year, 2024, our school was closed for two weeks because of the heat (102°F), which affected our education. Some of the girls I studied with at Yapa National Secondary School never went back to school as their fathers forced them to get married. The ones we crossed with to Uganda are still lucky to be at school.”*

Urban dwellers, despite more developed infrastructure, were not immune to the heat wave's devastating effects, indicating the insufficiency of adaptive measures. Undoubtedly, heat waves are becoming more frequent due to climate change, and affected populations are likely to continue migrating to avoid life-threatening conditions. This study contends that this displacement emphasises the need for regional climate adaptation strategies and cross-border cooperation in managing climate-induced migration. This therefore aligns with the Multi-Causal Model, which asserts that migrations are triggered by multiple intersecting factors, including climate, which is a risk multiplier.

### **Ethnic Communities That Fled South Sudan during the Heat Wave**

The interviews with the Zonal leaders at the settlement revealed that the displacement of Nuer, Lango, and Acholi ethnic groups from South Sudan during the heat wave reflects the communal nature of migration, where entire ethnic groups are forced to leave their ancestral lands due to uninhabitable conditions. The migrations align with the broader trends of climate-induced displacement in fragile states. The group's historical and cultural connection to the land further exacerbates the trauma of displacement, as the communities lose their homes and cultural identities. The exodus of the Nuer and Acholi, who have historically been involved in internal conflicts, raises concern about social integration and potential ethnic tensions in the refugee settlement. This is seen in the intra-ethnic conflict within the Nuer group in the settlement. Similarly, the clashes between the Nuer and the Dinka ethnic group, and the refugees and host communities over resources. In a key informant interview with

an OPM staff, it was revealed that the Lango people, known for their humility and friendliness, are a marginalised group experiencing ongoing challenges, particularly socio-economic marginalisation in host communities. This was corroborated by three leaders in the zones where the Lango reside.

### **Refugee Ethnic Communities in Palabek Refugee Settlement**

Palabek Refugee Settlement is home to a diverse group of refugees, with the Acholi being the majority, followed by the Nuer, and other groups such as the Lango, Lotuko, Dinka, and Congolese. There are noted behavioural differences between these ethnic communities, with the Acholi described as strong-willed in character, and the Lango and Lotuko as humble and friendly. The diversity of the ethnicities in Palabek Refugee Settlement highlights the complexity of managing multi-ethnic refugee populations. The behavioural issues mentioned, especially among the Acholi and Nuer youth, are thought to stem from a combination of trauma from displacement, poor living conditions, and a lack of adequate psychosocial support. This situation is worsened by the negative impact of climate change. This study argues that effective management of such a diverse population and interventions to climate-triggered migrations require culturally sensitive interventions that account for historical grievances, cultural differences, and social tensions. Integrating behavioural education and conflict-resolution mechanisms within schools and social services would be key to fostering peaceful coexistence among these groups.

### **Categories of Migrants into Uganda**

The major migrants included students, children, women, and youth, indicating that this displacement is multigenerational and affects entire family units. The heavy movement along these entry points reflects the desperation of affected populations, triggered by the impact of climate change. This further highlights the inadequacies of the South Sudan government and development partners in providing interventions for the citizens that mitigate the effects of climate

change. This causes the exposed communities to migrate to neighbouring countries, including Uganda, with more favourable climatic and social conditions. The vulnerable groups, especially women and children, are disproportionately impacted by such migrations, as they often face greater risks of exploitation, malnutrition, and health issues.

### The Entry Points to Uganda

Migrants entered Uganda primarily through the Nimule-Atiak-Gulu-Lokung transit route and Waligo checkpoint. While arriving at the Lokung reception point, the migrants register themselves as refugees in order to allow entrance and acquire the available services at the settlement. Despite the Office of the Prime Minister's reception staff recognising that new arrivals are fleeing climate change impacts, current legal and policy limitations mean these climate refugees must be registered as political refugees for convenience, as they are also coming from a conflict background (interview with OPM staff). Therefore, the UNHCR and the government of Uganda need a robust intervention in the legal and policy framework to include climate refugees who are forced to migrate due to the effects of climate change, and similarly, voluntarily return after two to three months to their home country when the climate normalises. Special attention should also be given to children and students to minimise disruption in their education and ensure their mental and physical safety, through local intervention such as community water sources and social services.

### Effects of Climate Migration at Palabek Refugee Settlement

The study revealed that the effects of the migration crisis on Palabek Refugee Settlement are vast, including population increase, limited social services, congestion in schools and health facilities, deforestation, water pollution, and social conflicts. The increased demand for resources and services is overwhelming the settlement's capacity to respond to basic needs. This intensifies the vulnerability of both political and climate

refugees, including the host communities. These effects include:

#### Population Increase and Strain on Social Services:

The influx of refugees is straining the already limited social infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools. The overcrowding of schools, with some students studying under trees and tents, shows the dire need for expanded educational facilities. For instance, at Paluda S.S, a learner reported that;

*"The first time I joined this school, the local community was welcoming. Ironically, I struggled interacting with fellow learners, especially the non-Nuer refugee students, due to limited fluency in English, which is the recognised language at the school. I was lucky the school teachers here do not beat learners, otherwise, I think the lack of language skills would have forced me to exit the school."*

The situation frequently results in discrimination against refugees, largely because they're seen as a different race and are in vulnerable circumstances. These challenges, they explained, hinder their educational goals and can even cause trauma.

**Environmental Effect:** The destruction of green spaces through deforestation for fuel is not only degrading the local environment but also contributing to a feedback loop that worsens climate vulnerability. In an interview with the Zonal leader of Zone 1, he lamented that;

*"Ever since the heat-wave in March-May, the influx of refugees here has increased the demand for natural resources, especially wood for fuel and construction materials. This has led to widespread deforestation in the settlement, because most of these people rely on firewood and charcoal for cooking. In some cases, the local landlords have given away this land to the refugees, who overcultivate the areas they are given, and poorly dispose of human waste and plastics in the settlement."*

This finding directly links the March-May climate event (heatwave) to an increase in refugee arrivals.

This is a critical point, as it highlights the growing phenomenon of "climate refugees" or climate-induced displacement. It implies that harsh environmental conditions are making certain areas uninhabitable or unsustainable, forcing people to seek refuge elsewhere.

**Social Conflict:** The presence of inter-clan and tribal conflicts, theft, and drug abuse illustrates the social tension and insecurity that often arise in overcrowded and resource-scarce environments. A member of the host community noted, "*The social-conflict tensions are higher amongst the Nuer clans, and in some rare cases, between the Nuer and Dinka ethnic groups.*" The presence of these conflicts, whether internal or external to the host community, inevitably creates instability, fear, and potentially burdens on local resources and social structures. The "social-conflict tensions" mentioned directly impact the well-being and stability of the entire area.

This study argues for the immediate priority to address the overcrowding in schools and improve the availability of healthcare services. Longer-term solutions must focus on improving climate-conducive social infrastructure and environmental sustainability, such as promoting alternative energy sources to curb deforestation and prevent further ecological damage. Additionally, conflict-resolution mechanisms need to be established to mitigate ethnic and clan-related tensions.

### Impact of the Heat Wave on Schools

Several schools within the refugee settlement have been heavily impacted. In an interview with the OPM staff, it was revealed that Ogili Hill Nursery and Primary School, Awich Primary School, World View Primary School and Beyogoya Primary School were largely overcrowded. The use of inadequate learning spaces in these schools, such as under tree shades, are critical concerns. Paluda Secondary School also saw significant increases in enrollment, especially for the senior one class, where the school registered a record number of about 500 learners.

The study found that while school overcrowding in Palabek refugee settlement at the time of this

study points to high population density, revealing how crucial education is for displaced children seeking refuge and a hopeful future. Consequently, this inadequate infrastructure is expected to compromise educational quality, intensifying the lasting effects of displacement on these communities. Equally, addressing educational challenges in the settlement demands immediate action: improving school infrastructure, increasing teacher numbers, and supplying learning materials. Furthermore, expanding collaborations with international organisations and donors could be crucial to ensuring displaced children receive a quality education despite their difficult situation.

### Refugee Arrests and Deaths

Key informants from OPM, Zone 1, Zone 3 and Zone 4 reported that by March 30, 2024, there had been 77 arrests (mainly in Zone 3) and 3 deaths (youth aged 19–25, in Zones 3 and 8). These arrests and deaths reflect the heightened tensions within the refugee community, particularly among the youth, which compelled the security organs in the district to call for a beef-up in security. The concentration of arrests and deaths in specific zones, particularly among the Nuer, suggests that there may be unresolved ethnic tensions, gang activity, or socio-economic stressors fueling insecurity. Youth involvement in conflict and crime is often linked to feelings of disenfranchisement, lack of employment, and trauma from their displacement. As a result, programs targeting youth empowerment, education, and livelihood opportunities are critical to reducing violence and improving social cohesion. Mental health support and trauma-informed interventions should also be prioritised to help address the underlying causes of unrest.

### CONCLUSION

The study brings out the concept of 'climate refugees' and the legal and policy gaps in defining and managing climate refugees. This has led to acceptance and rejection of the concept 'climate refugees', causing their generalisation with political refugees, making them more vulnerable than political refugees. The study defines climate

refugees (or climate-induced displaced persons) as individuals or groups forced to cross international borders due to the severe and escalating impacts of climate change. The study concludes that climate change-induced migration profoundly affects South Sudanese refugees in Palabek Refugee Settlement, leading to environmental degradation, strained social services, inter-tribal conflicts, and educational crises. To address this, comprehensive policies are essential, focusing on environmental sustainability, enhanced social infrastructure, and conflict resolution strategies that respect the diverse cultural and social contexts of displaced populations. Equally, successful refugee settlement management will depend on strong partnerships between local governments, international organisations, and the refugee communities themselves. Lastly, legal and policy responses must involve a combination of strategies, rather than an either/or approach. Physical adaptation in the home country needs to be financed and developed, and migration options, including opportunities for economic, family and educational migration, need to be accepted as a rational and normal adaptation strategy, rather than as a sign that adaptation has failed. The study believes that while climate-induced movement can be a sign of vulnerability, it can also be a means to achieve security and attain human rights, especially when it is able to be planned.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Enhance Climate Resilience in Vulnerable Communities:** Governments and international organisations should prioritise building climate-resilient infrastructure in regions vulnerable to climate-induced migration, particularly in developing countries. This includes sustainable housing, water management systems, and disaster preparedness measures.

**Strengthen Humanitarian Responses to Climate Migration:** Humanitarian agencies should adapt their frameworks to address the growing complexities of climate-induced displacement. This involves integrating environmental factors into migration policies and ensuring that responses

are not limited to short-term relief but also promote long-term sustainability.

**Support Climate Adaptation Programs in Refugee Settlements:** In areas like Uganda's Palabek Refugee Settlement, climate adaptation programs should be introduced to help refugees and host communities develop sustainable livelihoods. This includes training in climate-smart agriculture and renewable energy solutions.

**Promote Regional and Global Cooperation on Climate Migration:** Countries, especially those in vulnerable regions, need to collaborate on policies that address climate migration. International support and funding for adaptation and relocation programs should be increased, particularly for developing nations.

**Implement Inclusive Economic Policies for Displaced Populations:** Governments should ensure that displaced populations, particularly climate migrants, have access to economic opportunities. Policies that promote integration, education, and job creation for migrants can help reduce the long-term impact of displacement.

**Invest in Research on Climate Migration:** More research is needed to better understand the drivers and impacts of climate migration. Governments and academic institutions should support studies that explore sustainable solutions and pathways for displaced communities, particularly in high-risk areas like Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

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