

POLICY BRIEF

Climate Change, Conflict, and Migration Nexus in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan

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**American
Friends
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Committee**

Abbreviations

AACC	All Africa Conference of Churches
AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
AU	African Union
CEPO	Community Empowerment for Progress Organization
HoA	Horn of Africa
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NUP	National Unity Platform
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SIPAD	Sustainable Initiative for Peace and Democracy
SOLO	Somali Lifeline Organization
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
YPS	Youth Peace Security

Executive Summary

Climate change, conflict, and migration are deeply intertwined drivers of vulnerability across Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan. Recurrent droughts, extreme flooding, and environmental degradation intensify competition over land, grazing, and water, while armed conflict disrupts livelihoods and fuels mass displacement. As families lose access to food, water, and land, migration becomes an inevitable coping mechanism yet one that often generates new tensions in already fragile settings.

Climate shocks across the three study countries have displaced millions of people:

- Somalia: 2.9 million internally displaced by the 2023 El Niño floods (UNHCR, 2024).
- Sudan: 10.5 million internally displaced persons following the conflict beginning in April 2023 (UNHCR, 2025).
- Ethiopia: Over 23.6 million people affected by drought-related food insecurity in 2022 (IPC/FAO, 2022).

These dynamics form a reinforcing cycle: Climate stress → resource scarcity → conflict → displacement → renewed scarcity.

Although the African Union (AU) and Inter Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have adopted progressive climate and mobility frameworks (e.g., Kampala Ministerial Declaration on Migration, Environment and Climate Change IGAD Free Movement Protocol), implementation is weak, and cross-border governance remains fragmented. Gender, youth, disability, and child-specific vulnerabilities are under-addressed, creating gaps in inclusive climate and migration governance.

This policy brief offers evidence-based findings and actionable recommendations national, regional, and international aimed at strengthening resilience and governance in the three study countries. It emphasizes climate justice, institutional reform, cross-border cooperation, and inclusive approaches that protect women, youth, children, and persons with disabilities.

Introduction

This policy brief presents findings from research conducted by the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in partnership with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), funded by Bread for the World (BftW). The study analysed the nexus between climate change, conflict, and migration in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, three of the most climate-vulnerable and conflict-affected countries in the Horn of Africa.

Drawing on desk reviews, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), quantitative datasets (UNHCR, IOM, FAO), and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping, the study explored how climate shocks interact with conflict dynamics to influence migration patterns and resource scarcity. It further investigated governance frameworks, institutional responses, and gaps requiring urgent attention.

Context & Rationale

Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan face converging crises driven by environmental stress, protracted conflict, and fragile institutions. Climate change manifests in drought cycles, unexpected floods, desertification, and erratic rainfall, leading to the collapse of agricultural and pastoral livelihoods.

Ethiopia continues to face overlapping climate and conflict stressors, with multi-year droughts in the Southern and Eastern regions devastating livestock, reducing pastureland, and undermining agricultural production. These environmental shocks are further compounded by localized conflicts in Oromia, Amhara, and Afar, which have driven repeated waves of displacement and disrupted livelihoods. As rural systems weaken, rapid rural-to-urban migration is placing significant strain on basic services and infrastructure in Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa, and other major towns.

Somalia remains highly vulnerable to climate extremes and insecurity, with the 2023 El Niño floods displacing 2.9 million people across 36 districts (UNHCR, 2024) and destroying critical infrastructure. Persistent conflict involving Al-Shabaab continues to restrict mobility, limit humanitarian access, and heighten protection

risks for displaced populations. Additionally, recurrent drought cycles have decimated livestock central to pastoralist livelihoods driving increasing levels of rural-urban migration as communities seek safety, water, and income opportunities.

Sudan is experiencing one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, driven by the ongoing conflict that began in April 2023 and has displaced an estimated 10.5 million people (UNHCR, 2025). Climate-induced shocks, including droughts and erratic rainfall, have combined with conflict-related disruptions to push 24.6 million people into acute food insecurity (FAO, 2025). Widespread violence and insecurity continue to restrict access to farmlands, grazing areas, and water points, leaving communities with shrinking livelihood options and deepening dependence on humanitarian assistance.

In all three countries, women, children, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and minority groups experience disproportionate impacts including heightened exposure to gender-based violence, livelihood loss, and social exclusion.

Findings

- **Climate Change Intensifies Resource Scarcity and Conflict**

Across Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, climate change is the leading driver of food, water, and land scarcity.

In Ethiopia, the 2020–2023 drought significantly reduced pastureland and water points, intensifying competition and catalyzing conflict among pastoralist communities (FAO, 2025).

Somalia faced widespread destruction of cropland and water systems due to severe flooding, which triggered large-scale displacement and placed immense pressure on already overstretched host communities (UNHCR, 2024). In Sudan, conflict-related blockades compounded ongoing climate shocks, restricting access to essential resources and pushing millions into acute hunger and deepening food insecurity (FAO IPC, 2025). Climate change amplifies pre-existing inequalities, especially among women and marginalized pastoralist communities. Lack of access to land, weak governance, and the absence of inclusive decision-making exacerbate these vulnerabilities.

- **Migration Trends Driven by Climate and Conflict**

Migration is increasingly protracted, structural, and cross-border. In Ethiopia, drought-induced migration continues to affect the Afar, Somali, and Oromia regions, with annual climate-related displacement estimated at approximately 409,000 people (UNHCR, 2024). Somalia experiences large-scale mobility driven by environmental shocks, which displaced 2.9 million people in 2023, while ongoing conflict contributes to an additional 800,000 displaced annually (IOM, 2024). Sudan now faces the world's largest internal displacement crisis, with 10.5 million internally displaced persons as a result of conflict and compounding climate pressures (UNHCR, 2025).

Migration patterns reflect a shift from seasonal movement to permanent relocation, especially among youth who no longer see viable futures in rural livelihood

- **Impact on Resource Scarcity**

The study found that climate change, conflict, and migration collectively explain approximately 67.5% of shortages in food, water, and land availability across the three countries (FAO, 2025). Drought destroys crops, depletes pasture, and dries critical water sources, undermining agricultural and pastoral livelihoods. At the same time, conflict restricts mobility to farmlands and grazing corridors, preventing communities from accessing essential resources and disrupting food production. As a result, migration becomes a coping mechanism, but the influx of displaced populations places additional pressure on already limited resources within host communities, further deepening vulnerability and competition. These drivers reinforce one another, deepening humanitarian need and social tension.

Policy Gaps & Challenges

Key Gaps at a Glance

1. Weak cross-border cooperation and delayed ratification of key migration protocols,
2. Inadequate implementation of climate and migration frameworks,
3. Insufficient early warning and climate information systems,
4. Gender, youth, child, and disability exclusion,
5. Limited institutional capacity and fragmented governance,
6. Conflict actors' impunity regarding environmental degradation.

Fragmented Cross-Border and National Frameworks

Although Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan have adopted Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and a range of sectoral policies on climate adaptation, migration governance, and disaster management, coordination across government institutions remains weak, resulting in fragmented and often reactive responses to the interconnected challenges of climate change, conflict, and displacement. None of the three countries have ratified the Niamey Convention on Cross-Border Cooperation, an important African Union framework that could strengthen joint management of shared resources, pastoral mobility routes, and borderland conflict prevention.

This gap is especially significant given the cross-border nature of climate impacts and population movements in the region. Within migration governance, only Ethiopia has submitted a progress report on the implementation of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), earning recognition as a GCM Champion Country (UN, 2024), while Somalia and Sudan have struggled to operationalize their commitments due to conflict, institutional weaknesses, and competing national priorities.

Institutional Weaknesses

Governance structures responsible for climate adaptation, migration management, and conflict prevention in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan largely operate in silos, with limited coordination or information-sharing across ministries and agencies. This fragmentation weakens the effectiveness of national responses, as climate shocks, displacement, and insecurity are deeply interconnected and require integrated planning. Border management systems are similarly under-resourced, lacking adequate personnel, infrastructure, and technology to facilitate safe, orderly, and predictable mobility. As a result, communities especially pastoralists and displaced populations face significant challenges when moving across borders in search of safety, water, or grazing land. Weak border governance also heightens protection risks, contributes to irregular migration, and undermines opportunities for cross-border cooperation essential to managing shared climate and security pressures.

Exclusion of Vulnerable Groups

Women, children, youth, and persons with disabilities (PWDs) face deep and persistent structural barriers that limit their ability to cope with and adapt to the impacts of climate change, conflict, and displacement. Women often lack formal land ownership and face discriminatory gender norms, restricting their access to adaptation finance, agricultural inputs, and livelihood opportunities.

Children and youth who constitute the majority of displaced populations experience disrupted education, heightened protection risks, and limited access to psychosocial support, leaving them without the skills or stability needed to recover from repeated shocks. Persons with disabilities are disproportionately excluded from early-warning systems, evacuation plans, public

information campaigns, and humanitarian assistance due to physical inaccessibility, communication barriers, and social stigma. Across all three countries, these groups remain largely absent from decision-making spaces at local and national levels, resulting in policies and programs that do not adequately reflect their needs or priorities. This exclusion undermines resilience, weakens community recovery, and perpetuates cycles of vulnerability across generations.

Policy Recommendations

National Governments (Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan)

Governance and Policy Integration

- Institutionalize multi-sectoral coordination across climate, migration, peace, and humanitarian agencies.
- Ratify and operationalize the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons and the Niamey Convention.

Inclusive Protection Measures

- Design inclusive climate adaptation programs that prioritize:
 - Women (land rights, GBV prevention, livelihood diversification)
 - Youth (green economy employment, mobility pathways)
 - Children (child-sensitive climate protection, education continuity)
 - Persons with Disabilities (accessible early-warning systems, targeted humanitarian support)

Strengthen Early Warning & Data Systems

- Expand the use of IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Center (ICPAC) climate tools at local levels.
- Improve national disaster preparedness and migration tracking.

Regional & Continental Bodies (AU, IGAD)

- Accelerate implementation of the IGAD Climate Adaptation Strategy (2023–2030).
- Harmonize climate, migration, and peace policies across IGAD Member States.
- Support cross-border grazing agreements and water-sharing mechanisms.
- Establish a climate and mobility monitoring mechanism aligned with the African Union Transitional Justice Policy's (AUTJP) prevention and non-discrimination principles.

International Policymakers

European Union (EU)

- Expand Global Gateway investments to support climate-resilient infrastructure in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan.
- Support implementation of IGAD's Free Movement Protocol through technical assistance.
- Increase funding for climate-related displacement programming.

United States (USA)

- Through USAID, scale climate-smart agriculture and pastoralist resilience programs.
- Through the U.S. Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), strengthen protection for climate- and conflict-displaced populations.
- Support governance reforms that enhance climate accountability and anti-corruption oversight.

Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) and Civil Society

- Use faith networks as trusted platforms for dialogue, early warning, and resilience-building.
- Advocate for climate justice, human rights, and inclusive governance.
- Support local peace committees and climate peace hubs to address resource-based disputes.

Emerging Opportunities

- IGAD Climate Adaptation Strategy (2023–2030) for coordinated regional response.
- African Climate Facility (ACF) mobilizing USD 50 billion annually for African-led climate solutions.
- Faith-based networks (AACC, AFAN-CJ) advancing climate justice and migration governance.
- Increasing political attention to loss and damage financing.

Conclusion

Climate change, conflict, and migration presents urgent, interconnected challenges in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan. Addressing them requires coordinated action across national, regional, and international levels with an emphasis on justice, inclusion, accountability, and resilience.

Climate governance must be understood as a moral, developmental, and rights-based priority. As faith communities, policymakers, and regional bodies work together, the region has an opportunity to transform vulnerability into resilience and lay the groundwork for long-term peace, justice, and dignified mobility.

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About the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) promotes a world free of violence, inequality, and oppression. Guided by the Quaker belief in the divine light within each person, we nurture the seeds of change and respect for human life to fundamentally transform our societies and institutions. We work with people and partners worldwide of all faiths and backgrounds to meet urgent community needs, challenge injustice, and build peace. Through its Africa Regional Office in Kenya, AFSC promotes projects in Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, and Zimbabwe, with an evidence-based advocacy component for policy change in the Horn of Africa, with an office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. AFSC has decades of experience leading advocacy, evidence-based research, and worldwide civil society strengthening programs. AFSC brings Global South leaders and Civil Society Organizations through the Dialogue and Exchange Program to learn and exchange ideas every year. Due to the challenging situation in the Horn of Africa, AFSC focused intensely on this region to link up with existing civil society networks and Faith Leaders to contribute with its specific expertise.

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About the All Africa Conference of Churches, AACC:

AACC (All Africa Conference of Churches) is a continental ecumenical body that accounts for over 200 million Christians across the African continent. AACC is the largest association of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and Indigenous churches in Africa, and a member of the worldwide ecumenical network. As an ecumenical body, AACC is a fellowship of 214 members comprising Churches, National Christian Councils (NCCs), theological and lay training institutions, and other Christian organizations in 43 African countries. With eleven programmatic focus areas, AACC's current strategy ensures that churches and other Christian institutions in Africa significantly contribute to the realization of the Continental and Global sustainable development agendas, such as the 17 SDGs and the AU Agenda 2065: "The Africa We Want."

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