

Ecological Displacement and Moral Borders: Toward a No Border Ethics in a Collapsing World

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ABSTRACT

As the climate crisis accelerates, ecological degradation is making vast swaths of the planet uninhabitable. This slow-moving disaster is producing a wave of human displacement—millions forced from their homes by sea-level rise, drought, extreme weather, and environmental collapse. Yet those displaced are not being protected by the international legal system, and the countries most responsible for climate change are often the least willing to accept them. This paper argues that current frameworks around climate migration are both ethically and politically insufficient. Legal definitions such as "refugee" and "migrant" fail to capture the structural violence and involuntary nature of climate displacement, leaving people unprotected and stateless. Through a synthesis of philosophical argument, legal analysis, feminist theory, and ecosocialist critique, I propose a reparative, justice-oriented approach to climate migration rooted in the concept of "ecologically displaced people." Building from the failures of adaptation and resilience narratives, this paper explores how the Global North must bear a disproportionate obligation to provide refuge, land, and rights to displaced people—grounded in both needs and culpability. It further examines the capitalist logic of borders as tools of exclusion and labor control, ultimately proposing No Border politics and mutual aid as radical, necessary alternatives to a collapsing global order. In doing so, the paper aligns with red-green political frameworks to advocate a collective, anti-capitalist response to the ecological and moral emergency of climate displacement.

KEYWORDS: Climate displacement, climate migration, environmental justice, no borders, climate reparations, ecosocialism, mutual aid, Global North, ecologically displaced people, structural violence

1. Introduction

Our world is facing a crisis: climate change is gradually destroying the planet's ability to sustain long-term life. Future generations face potentially existential risks, driven by positive feedback loops that intensify as they unfold (Kareiva and Carranza 2018). Even short of full societal collapse or systemic breakdown, food insecurity, water scarcity, and resource-driven conflict will produce immense suffering—especially for those already most vulnerable. As ecological thresholds are crossed, entire regions may become uninhabitable. And what follows is the production of an often-overlooked impact: climate-induced human displacement (Wetzel et al. 2012).

Before considering solutions, it is crucial to clarify the scope of the crisis. According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, of the 59.1 million people displaced in 2021, the majority were due to climate-related impacts (a, 2022). And the sheer scope of this crisis is ever-expanding. Rising sea levels and extreme weather events are rendering entire “hotspots” uninhabitable, placing millions at risk of statelessness (UNHCR 2022). One estimate suggests that by 2050, 140 million people in the Global South could be displaced—part of a staggering 1.2 billion globally (Bellizzi et al. 2022).

Thus, this paper begins with a simple ethical insight: the states most responsible for climate change are not the ones being displaced by it. This asymmetry is not accidental. Climate injustice is geographical, racialized, and structural. Industrialized nations—especially those in the Global North—bear disproportionate responsibility for cumulative global emissions, yet have done little to welcome those displaced by the crisis they helped create (Friedrich et al. 2023). Those who contributed least to environmental degradation are now set to bear the greatest burdens—raising urgent questions about responsibility and obligation (Deivanayagam et al. 2023).

Moving forward, this paper interrogates failing legal categories and insufficient policy frameworks to reframe how we understand climate displacement and obligation. Drawing from philosophical, legal, feminist, and ecosocialist frameworks, I argue for a justice-based response to ecological displacement—one that centers refuge, repair, and redistribution, especially by states in the Global North. This requires rejecting the current paradigms of resilience and securitization, and instead embracing a politics grounded in solidarity, justice, and care. In its most radical formulation, this paper advances a No Border framework—not as utopian aspiration, but as ethical necessity.

2. The Vocabulary of Displacement

Although the United Nations and other international organizations recognize the damage of climate displacement, they often turn a blind eye when it comes to codifying that recognition into meaningful policy. When examining international migration law, “legally, climate refugees don’t exist” (Taha 2022). This legal erasure stems largely from the language embedded in international frameworks—language that enables states to sidestep their responsibilities (Kaplan 2023).

First, international documents are often vague and exclusionary. The 1951 Refugee Convention—the cornerstone of international refugee law—extends protection to those with a “well-founded fear of persecution” who cannot safely remain in their home country (Apap 2019). The problem is that “persecution” is interpreted as requiring intentional discrimination—excluding the vast majority of those displaced by environmental degradation. This legal gap leaves people in regions like Barbuda, Haiti, and Cuba particularly vulnerable—facing rising rates of displacement without corresponding protection (Ginnetti 2015).

Because “refugee” fails to account for environmental harm, many scholars instead use the terminology of “climate migrant” (Taha 2022). But even this term falls short.

Because migration is often perceived as voluntary, the label “climate migrant” strips displaced people of the legal urgency needed for robust protection (Munoz 2020). Without the language of force or necessity, states are able to deny entry, arguing that people are allegedly moving by choice. Ultimately, both “refugee” and “migrant” are insufficient, and their use in international law enables misapplication and erasure of those most in need.

Second, inconsistency across national legal systems deepens this problem. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “international nongovernmental organizations have pushed states to adopt their own definitions” leading to a patchwork of legal interpretations (Howko-Johnson 2021). This decentralization has created incoherent policy. In the U.S., for instance, Haitian earthquake victims received long-term sanctuary, while other climate-displaced people were denied similar recognition. That reveals a neither-here-nor-there approach to aid. In New Zealand, a citizen of Kiribati sued the government to be recognized as a “climate change refugee.” Although the case met the textual requirements of the law, it was ultimately denied—underscoring how legal vagueness allows states to evade responsibility (Ni 2022).

Third—and most fundamentally—language matters. Even widely used terms like “climate refugee” and “climate migrant” obscure deeper questions of responsibility, agency, and power. Legally, the category of “refugee” is narrow and specific, tied to persecution on the basis of identity or belief. But more than that, “refugee” and “migrant” are not politically neutral terms. They are embedded in the racialized politics of immigration, particularly in the Global North. As Hiraide notes, these labels often trigger xenophobic responses in policy and media discourse, especially when applied to non-white or non-European people entering white-majority nations (2022).

Bureaucratic labels can strip people of their dignity by reducing them to legal categories. That is why any alternative terminology must begin with an emphasis on personhood. Using the word “people” reaffirms the humanity often erased in political and policy contexts. Yet simply saying “climate people” is too vague and lacks specificity, both in terms of the cause of displacement and the nature of the harm.

Adding “displaced” sharpens the causal focus. It highlights the involuntary nature of movement and foregrounds the structural, rather than personal, nature of displacement. As Hiraide argues, the term “displacement” shifts attention away from identity-based debates toward shared vulnerability. It also frames the crisis in collectivist terms—making it clear that displacement could happen to anyone, anywhere. That recognition fosters solidarity through mutual precarity (2022).

“Ecologically displaced people” offers a vocabulary that captures the ecological drivers of displacement while remaining rooted in a politics of recognition and care. Unlike “migrant” or “refugee,” it avoids implication of voluntariness, and unlike “climate,” it signals broader ecological collapse. Most importantly, it affirms a structural and ethical connection between environmental destruction and forced mobility—opening space for legal, political, and moral responsibility.

3. A Moral Obligation

The absence of protection for ecologically displaced people raises an unavoidable ethical question: are states obligated to help? The word “obligated” matters—it implies not just what should happen, but what must. An obligation is not contingent on convenience. It is a duty rooted in moral reasoning and political justice (McNamara 2006). Such an obligation rests on two primary foundations:

The first is the needs-based argument. Philosopher Samuel Hutchinson explains that “a right to a place on earth is necessary for [ecologically displaced people] to express their innate right to freedom” (Hutchinson 2021). Without a place to live, all other rights become inaccessible. Ecologically displaced people are forced to choose between remaining in their deteriorating home environment—often one rendered uninhabitable—or leaving in hopes of survival. If people no longer have a place to live, and if a state has the capacity to accept them, then that state ought to do so. To reject them is to deny them the foundation upon which all other freedoms rest.

Some critics argue that states are only responsible for their own citizens, and thus not liable for people beyond their borders. But this line of reasoning itself is circular. The only difference between a citizen and a non-citizen is that one was granted legal status while the other was not. If a displaced person were accepted and given a path to citizenship, they could contribute to society just like anyone else (Wellman and Cole 2011). Thus, citizenship should not be used as a moral shield to justify exclusion. Rather, states have a duty to extend belonging to those who need it the most.

The second argument is grounded in culpability. The Global North, through centuries of industrialization and carbon emissions, has played a central role in driving climate change. And yet, the vast majority of those displaced by environmental catastrophe are from the Global South—regions like Haiti, Cape Verde, Fiji, Mumbai, and Ho Chi Minh City (Táiwò and Cibralic 2020). In contrast, states like the United States, China, and EU members have historically contributed the most to global emissions (Friedrich et al. 2023). In many cases, these same states continue to refuse any form of reparations or relocation efforts (Slow 2023). When the countries most responsible for climate collapse refuse to offer refuge or repair, they deepen the global inequalities they helped create.

Ultimately, both the needs-based and culpability-based approaches point to the same conclusion: states, particularly in the Global North, are morally and politically obligated to accept ecologically displaced people. This is not an act of generosity. It is a recognition

of shared humanity and a call to repair the systems that caused the harm in the first place. While this obligation is clear in both moral and political terms, contemporary climate discourse frequently avoids such commitments. Instead, it turns to euphemistic narratives of "adaptation" and "resilience"—terms that reframe displacement not as injustice, but as opportunity.

4. The Limits of Resilience

Although many scholars and policy institutions promote resilience as a solution to climate change, this narrative conceals a dangerous abdication of responsibility. The rhetoric of “adaptation” reframes displacement not as a failure, but as a logical—even necessary—response to ecological degradation (Black et al. 2011; Barnett and Webber 2010). In doing so, it depoliticizes the crisis, presenting it as an unfortunate but manageable adjustment, rather than a structural injustice requiring redress.

Sakdapolrak et al. warn that presenting migration as adaptation creates the illusion that climate displacement is both natural and neutral (2016). But displacement is neither natural, nor voluntary—nor an acceptable cost. These frameworks erase the violence of displacement and allow powerful states to evade accountability. Worse still, they allow governments to claim success by showing that people have “adapted” to catastrophe—without ever asking why they had to.

The focus on resilience shifts responsibility away from the Global North, allowing it to maintain harmful practices under the guise of adaptation. It enables a policy agenda that accepts harm as inevitable and shifts responsibility onto the victims. Migration is reframed as a coping mechanism, rather than a symptom of injustice. As Gönenç and Çetin argue, environmental justice—not resilience—should guide our response to climate displacement. Where resilience focuses on surviving damage, environmental justice demands prevention and redress (2022).

Resilience discourses also obscure the long history of failed or nonexistent mitigation efforts. Instead of challenging the systems that caused the crisis, they ask the displaced to bear its consequences. But we cannot build a just world by praising resilience while denying support. We must recognize displacement for what it is: a symptom of environmental violence that demands a structural, not adaptive, response.

5. The Existing Legal Order

Ecological displacement is no longer a speculative threat—it is an inevitability. Without using precise language to develop a new (and accountable) framework for migration, immense damage may occur to the lives and dignity of ecologically displaced people. Faced with unclear international norms, many are forced to leave home without knowing whether they'll be accepted elsewhere—often resorting to irregular migration. In such cases, the moral justification for crossing borders illegally may be strong, but the legal risks remain severe. The United Nations reports that climate change increases high-risk behavior—including reliance on smugglers—thereby deepening vulnerability to trafficking, exploitation, and abuse (IOM n.d.).

This desperation creates the conditions for entering into dangerous and exploitative migration systems. A 2021 analysis found that millions of ecologically displaced people are already vulnerable to “modern slavery”—which includes human trafficking, forced labor, prostitution, debt bondage, and child labor (Dok 2021). States must act before such desperation becomes the default. The legal system's failure to account for climate-based claims has thus created not only a category of unrecognized people, but a moral crisis that continues to deepen.

While some states and institutions have attempted to expand protections—through temporary relief or non-refoulement principles—these efforts remain fragmented, unclear, and weakly enforced (United Nations Office of the High

Commissioner b). Ecological displacement challenges existing law because states choose to maintain ambiguity in order to avoid obligation. This ideological emphasis on resilience legitimizes state inaction; it is designed to preserve the status quo—and it will continue unless radically reimagined.

6. Radical Futures

Ideological frames of the status quo do not exist in a vacuum. They directly shape legal regimes, which reflect and reinforce the political desire to avoid binding responsibility. As a result, international law remains a site of ambiguity—less a shield for the displaced, more a tool of avoidance. This failure across legal, moral, and economic systems demands more than reform—it requires a complete paradigm shift. It requires a reimagining—a refusal of the paradigms that created the crisis. The following subsections offer not singular solutions, but intersecting lenses through which just, liberatory climate migration policy might emerge. Instead of attempting to reform the system, they are refusals of the systems that have failed.

6.1. Reparative Justice

If ecological displacement is the symptom, then structural injustice is the underlying condition. Reparative justice offers a framework for moving beyond adaptation and resilience toward collective repair. As Olúfẹmi Táíwò argues, this requires a shift from damage control to justice (2022). Climate justice, in his formulation, compels us to confront not only emissions, but empire—the racial, economic, and political hierarchies that make certain lives more expendable than others.

Thomason, in his review of Táíwò's work, emphasizes that the climate crisis intensifies the legacies of colonialism and slavery—systems whose afterlives must be central to any just response (2022). Displacement is not only the outcome of ecological

catastrophe, but also of centuries of extraction, dispossession, and exclusion. To speak of reparative justice, then, is to name and confront those intertwined histories.

Yet dominant policy discourse continues to frame migration as a form of resilience—suggesting that migrants can adapt by sending remittances, forming diasporic networks, or integrating into new environments. This framing, however, reduces human lives to economic functions. As Gönenç notes, portraying migration as “beneficial” for the displaced justifies inaction; if migration is framed as opportunity, there is no need to address the systems that made staying impossible in the first place (2022).

Instead, climate justice demands that we center those most affected and design systems that prevent further displacement. This requires redistribution, enforceable legal protections, and structural transformation. Crucially, it also requires naming the Global North’s responsibility—not merely as a lapse in moral leadership, but as a historical and material debt. Without that recognition, we risk a future of climate apartheid, in which the wealthy are protected and the poor are abandoned (UNICEF 2019; Táíwò and Cibralic 2020). Reparations, in this sense, are not optional. They are the precondition for any meaningful climate ethics.

6.2. Feminist Care

A radical ecological feminist lens offers critical tools for understanding the full scope of ecological displacement—particularly the gendered dimensions that mainstream climate policy often obscures. One underexamined issue that ecofeminism highlights is “male-out migration,” where men leave rural or climate-vulnerable areas in search of economic opportunity, leaving women behind to manage households under increasingly hazardous environmental conditions (Gaard 2015). These dynamics of vulnerability—who stays, who migrates, and who suffers—are deeply gendered.

Gaard's research shows that women and children are up to fourteen times more likely to die in ecological disasters than men—a statistic that underscores the intersection between environmental harm and gender-based violence (2015). Dominant climate responses, however, routinely ignore the role of patriarchy and heteronormativity in shaping both vulnerability and policy failure. An ecofeminist framework challenges these omissions by centering care, interdependence, and a dismantling of masculinist control over nature and society.

Ecofeminism is not only about consequences; it is about causes. Gaard argues that overconsumption, reproductive control, and extractive capitalism are not gender-neutral phenomena but products of patriarchal systems. Incorporating queer and feminist politics into climate discourse—particularly frameworks rooted in collective well-being and gender diversity—can help build more equitable policy responses.

Rajabhoj similarly emphasizes that ecological degradation disproportionately impacts women, especially in the Global South, where environmental harm is inseparable from threats to health, safety, and autonomy (2021). From arsenic exposure to soil erosion and drought, these harms disproportionately target those already made vulnerable by gendered, racialized, and economic hierarchies.

In this sense, ecofeminism and reproductive justice converge. Both demand that women—especially women of color, Indigenous women, and rural women—be placed at the center of climate decision-making. Lysaker argues that to truly “reach beyond the family,” climate ethics must reconceive kinship and care to include the planet itself (2023). A feminist vision of climate reparations would not merely supplement existing strategies; it would transform them—pursuing joint migration and mitigation policies that see the present not only as crisis, but as an active site of systemic injustice demanding immediate redress.

6.3. Ecosocialist Reimaginings

To fully understand the crisis of ecological displacement, we must interrogate the political economy that enabled it—namely, capitalism. The conditions for both environmental collapse and systemic inaction are not incidental. They are the outcomes of an economic system that prioritizes profit over people, accumulation over sustainability, and extraction over equity. Particularly in its neoliberal form, capitalism not only produces environmental degradation, but forecloses the political tools needed to respond justly.

Patrick Bond (2022) advocates for ecosocialism as a structural response to this crisis. Unlike market-driven “green solutions,” ecosocialism targets the foundational contradictions of capitalism itself. Ian Angus (2016) similarly contends that fossil capitalism is not a flaw in the system—it is the system. From industrial development to global inequality, the drivers of climate catastrophe are embedded in the logic of capital. Those who contributed least—particularly in the Global South—now face the worst consequences, often without protection or redress.

Capitalism also distorts the narrative of displacement. Migration is reframed as an individual economic choice, abstracted from structural violence. Faber and Schlegel (2017) describe how post-Katrina redevelopment in New Orleans displaced low-income Black communities under the guise of rebuilding—revealing how disaster can be used to facilitate gentrification. Similar dynamics are visible at the U.S.–Mexico border, where migrants are funneled into the most dangerous areas of the desert in the name of protecting national “economic integrity.”

These examples illustrate how ecological displacement becomes an opportunity for capital accumulation or political leverage. Neoliberal regimes use exclusion to regulate labor markets, preserve hierarchies, and externalize responsibility. Migration is

tolerated only when it aligns with the interests of capital—when it supplies cheap labor or enables symbolic performances of benevolence without disrupting structural inequality (Faist 2022).

At the global level, capitalism entrenches environmental injustice. Many countries in the Global South face the compounded burdens of ecological degradation, institutional underdevelopment, and massive debt—legacies of colonial extraction. The IPCC notes that 95% of weather-related disaster deaths occur in developing countries (2012). These deaths are not natural disasters; they are policy outcomes enabled by centuries of systemic exploitation.

Borders, within this system, are not neutral institutions. They function as tools of control: enabling the extraction of foreign labor and resources while denying sanctuary to those displaced by that very extraction. Politicians in the Global North frequently frame open migration as a threat to domestic workers—while simultaneously benefiting from the low wages and legal precarity imposed on migrants (Young 2022). These contradictions reveal how deeply capitalism depends on exclusion and dispossession to sustain itself.

Carmen Gonzalez calls for an intersectional analysis—one that traces the connections between race, class, environmental harm, and global political economy (2020). Ecosocialism offers that synthesis. It names displacement not as an isolated failure, but as a structural necessity within a system designed to extract and exclude. Accepting ecologically displaced people, then, is not just a humanitarian gesture. It is a material step toward dismantling the very conditions that rendered their displacement inevitable.

6.4. No Borders

Given the structural failures of the legal order and the violence of the capitalist state, incremental reform is insufficient. No policy fix can resolve a crisis that is produced by the very systems meant to address it. What is needed is a paradigmatic shift—a reimagining of political belonging, mobility, and obligation. This brings us to the most radical, yet perhaps most coherent, proposal: No Border politics.

Myles Young articulates a vision of the “no borders body politic,” grounded in mutual aid, community governance, and political transformation (2022). Rather than treating borders as neutral features of modern states, he argues that they are sites of violence—mechanisms for managing populations and protecting capital. As Laine (2021) explains, borders are historically contingent and ethically arbitrary, often reflecting patterns of colonial domination rather than any defensible moral distinction.

Critics often frame No Border politics as naive or unsafe, suggesting that open borders would increase threats such as terrorism, trafficking, or crime. But Phillip Cole challenges this framing, distinguishing between morally arbitrary and non-arbitrary exclusions (2011). Most border policies are grounded not in specific risks, but in citizenship itself—a status with no moral justification for exclusion as explained prior. Ande Troutman adds that criminal organizations, such as cartels, already exploit border enforcement; restrictive policies do not prevent harm—they often fuel it (2019). In this light, open borders may reduce such violence by removing the conditions that make clandestine movement profitable.

Sager further notes that various regional blocs—the EU, MERCOSUR, and the Nordic Passport Union—already operate with internal open-border systems (2022). These examples challenge the notion that open movement is unfeasible or destabilizing. In practice, the resistance to open borders is more psychological than structural, more ideological than logistical.

The strength of No Border politics lies in its moral clarity. It dispels the legal ambiguity that enables delay, denial, and deferral. Within this framework, people do not need to be categorized as refugees, migrants, or victims to access safety. Movement itself is treated as a right, not a privilege to be granted by the state. This undermines the moral scaffolding of immigration law and exposes how exclusion is politically constructed—not ethically justified.

Young emphasizes that this vision must be accompanied by a redistribution of power. Mutual aid is not merely an ethic of care; it is a strategy of disruption. Drawing on models such as the Black Panther Party, he argues that community-run systems for housing, food, and health can challenge state authority and shift agency to those most affected by crisis. Border abolition, then, is not just a demand—it is a method. It is resistance through infrastructure, solidarity through survival.

Realism is often invoked to discredit abolitionist frameworks. But realism itself is a political tool—a claim made in the interests of those already in power. In a world of accelerating ecological collapse and deepening inequality, the truly fantastical belief is that minor reforms will be enough. No Border politics is not utopian; it is proportionate. It responds to the crisis at the scale at which it exists.

Ecologically displaced people do not need permission to move. They need rights, safety, and recognition. A world without borders is not just a moral aspiration—it is a political imperative. If justice is to mean anything in the face of collapse, it must be grounded in freedom of movement, solidarity, and the dismantling of systems built to exclude.

7. Conclusion

Reparations are needed, but they must be reparations of life: the right to survive, to move, to belong. Ecologically displaced people are not displaced by chance. They are displaced by systems—capitalist, colonial, patriarchal—designed to extract, exclude, and exploit. Their displacement is not a natural disaster. It is a political failure.

The Global South, which has contributed the least to climate change, bears the overwhelming burden of its effects—rising seas, failed crops, eroded homes, and lost futures. As politicians debate the meaning of “climate refugee,” entire nations face the loss of land, identity, and future. The longer we delay, the more expansive and irreversible the harm. Climate change is not a distant threat. It is here—already displacing millions. And without action, it will displace millions more.

What is required is more than legal inclusion. It is a reorientation of politics toward solidarity, recognition, and justice. The term “ecologically displaced people” is not just semantic. It is an attempt to humanize, to clarify, and to make visible those who are otherwise erased by bureaucracy. But language is not enough. We must transform the systems that produced the crisis.

The politics behind adaptation, the rhetoric of resilience, and the current legal frameworks are all inadequate. They enable continued dispossession while cloaking it in the language of progress. True justice requires reparation, redistribution, and restructuring. It requires a break from the logic of borders, scarcity, and exclusion.

Even the most well-intentioned reforms will fail if they remain trapped within the very systems that produced the harm. That is why, after surveying legal, feminist, and ecosocialist approaches, this paper turns to No Border politics. No Borders is not a fantasy—it is the logical culmination of our ethical commitments: to autonomy, to care, to survival. It is the least we owe to those whose homes have been lost, whose futures have been stolen, and whose lives are now left in limbo.

Thus, to accept ecologically displaced people is to be nothing greater than just. And justice, in the face of planetary collapse, can no longer wait.

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