

THE GREAT CONVERGENCE: MIGRATION, POPULISM, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 20th February 2026 Accepted: 01st March 2026 Published: 07th March 2026 Keywords: global community, climate refugees, global mobility and climate justice.	In the third decade of the 21st century, the global community faces a "polycrisis"-a set of intersecting challenges where the whole is more dangerous than the sum of its parts. This paper analyses the causal linkages between anthropogenic climate change, the resultant surge in forced displacement, the political rise of exclusionary populism, and the subsequent erosion of international human rights norms. By examining current data from 2024-2025, the study argues that the failure to establish a legal status for "climate refugees" has created a protection gap that populist leaders exploit to undermine multilateralism. The paper concludes with a call for integrating "climate justice" into international law to stabilize democratic institutions. This research paper examines the "polycrisis" emerging from the intersection of climate-induced displacement, the rise of exclusionary populism, and the resulting erosion of international human rights protections. By analysing current global trends, the study identifies a critical legal gap for "climate refugees." It argues for proactive policy interventions, specifically the Climate Passport, to transition from reactive border security toward a multilateral, rights-based framework for global mobility and climate justice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global landscape is defined by a volatile feedback loop. Scientific evidence now confirms that climate change is no longer a future threat but a present driver of human mobility. As of 2026, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reports that disaster-related displacements have consistently outpaced conflict-driven movement. This mass mobility has coincided with a global “populist wave”. From the Americas to Europe and Southeast Asia, populist movements have instrumentalized migration as an existential threat to national identity and economic security.

This intersection poses a fundamental challenge to the post-WWII human rights regime. As nations retreat into protectionism, the universalist principles of the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights are being replaced by “sovereignism”. This paper explores these dynamics through four interconnected lenses: the environmental drivers of movement, the populist response, the human rights deficit, and the path toward policy integration.

2. CLIMATE CHANGE AS THE CATALYST

Climate change serves as a “threat multiplier”, exacerbating existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Unlike sudden-onset disasters (hurricanes, floods), slow-onset processes such as desertification and sea-level rise are creating permanent inhabitation crises.

2.1 The Scale of Displacement

Current projections from the World Bank’s *Groundswell* report suggest that by 2050, upwards of 216 million people could be internally displaced due to climate factors. In 2026, we see the “Hotspots of Mobility” becoming more pronounced in the Sahel, South Asia, and Central America.

- **Case Study: The Pacific Islands.** Nations like Tuvalu and Kiribati face total submergence. The 2023 Falepili Union between Tuvalu and Australia represent a landmark-the first bilateral treaty acknowledging climate-induced migration as a permanent necessity.
- **Case Study: The Dry Corridor.** In Central America, consecutive years of drought have collapsed subsistence farming, forcing thousands to migrate toward the U.S. border, where they encounter increasingly militarized responses.

3. THE POPULIST SURGE AND THE “CRISIS” NARRATIVE

The rise of contemporary populism is deeply rooted in the “instrumentalization of migration”. Populist leaders-whether in the Global North or South-often employ a “thin-cantered ideology” that divides society into “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, with migrants framed as the tools of the latter.

3.1 Framing the “Invader”

Populist rhetoric frequently transforms the climate migrant from a victim of global emissions into an “invading outsider”. In Europe, parties like the Freedom Party in the Netherlands or the National Rally in France have successfully framed migration as a threat to the “cultural integrity” of the nation. This “politics of nostalgia” promises a return to a pre-globalized, ethnically homogenous past-a promise that gains traction as climate-induced resource scarcity drives more people across borders.

3.2 Scepticism as Strategy

Interestingly, many populist movements are also characterized by climate scepticism. By framing climate science as an “elitist” agenda designed to tax the working class (as seen in the *Gilets Jaunes* movement or anti-Net Zero rhetoric in the UK), populists block the very mitigation strategies that could reduce future migration flows. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle: blocking climate action ensures more migration, which in turn fuels more populist support.

4. THE HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION GAP

The most alarming consequence of this convergence is the erosion of human rights. The current international legal framework, primarily the 1951 Refugee Convention, is ill-equipped for the 21st century.

4.1 The “Climate Refugee” Legal Void

Under current international law, a “refugee” is someone fleeing persecution based on race, religion, or politics. It does not recognize environmental degradation as a valid ground for asylum. This leaves millions in a legal “no-man's land”.

- **The Right to Life and Standard of Living:** Climate change directly violates Article 25 of the UDHR (Right to an adequate standard of living). However, without a binding “Climate Passport” or updated convention, states are not legally obligated to admit those whose lands are no longer habitable.

4.2 The Erosion of Multilateralism

Populist governments have begun to view international human rights bodies (like the UNHRC) as infringements on national sovereignty. In 2024 and 2025, we observed a trend of states opting out of global compacts, such as the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*, arguing that migration management is an exclusive domestic prerogative.

5. ANALYSING THE INTERSECTIONS

To understand the gravity of the challenge, we must look at the data through a comparative lens.

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Impact on Migration</i>	<i>Populist Response</i>	<i>Human Rights Implication</i>
Sea Level Rise	Permanent loss of territory.	Border fortification; “Sovereignty” claims.	Loss of nationality; “Statelessness”.
Agricultural Failure	Rural-to-urban shift; cross-border labour migration.	Economic protectionism; scapegoating for unemployment.	Violation of the right to food and work.
Extreme Heat	Health-driven “seasonal” migration.	Resource hoarding (water/energy).	Right to health; increased mortality in transit.

6. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The contemporary challenges of migration, populism, human rights, and climate change are not separate silos but a single, integrated crisis of global governance. The rise of populism is a symptom of the liberal order's failure to protect the vulnerable from the fallout of a changing planet.

The Path Forward:

1. **Expanding Refugee Definitions:** The international community must move toward a protocol that recognizes climate-induced displacement, providing a legal pathway for those whose home states can no longer guarantee the "Right to Life".
2. **Climate Finance as Stability:** Developed nations must fulfil the "Loss and Damage" fund commitments established at recent COPs. Providing adaptation funds to the Global South is not just a moral duty but a pragmatic necessity to reduce forced migration and, by extension, the fuel for populist backlash.
3. **Human Rights-Based Climate Action:** Policies must transition from "border security" to "human security".

Policy Proposal: The Climate Passport

The Climate Passport is a proposed legal instrument designed to provide a "pathway to citizenship" for individuals whose countries of origin have become uninhabitable due to climate change. Unlike traditional asylum, which reacts to past persecution, the Climate Passport is a proactive tool for "migration with dignity".

Origin and Inspiration: The Nansen Passport

The concept is modelled after the Nansen Passport, created in 1922 by the League of Nations for stateless refugees after World War I. Similarly, the Climate Passport aims to:

- **Grant Legal Status:** Provide internationally recognized identification to those whose home states may no longer exist (e.g., SIDS like Tuvalu).
- **Ensure Freedom of Movement:** Allow holders to cross borders safely and legally to seek employment and residency.

Mechanism: The "Polluter Pays" Principle

To overcome the populist resistance described earlier, the passport would be operationalized through a "Common but Differentiated Responsibility" (CBDR) framework:

1. **Issuance:** Passports would be issued by an UN-affiliated body (such as the IOM or a newly formed Climate Displacement Authority).
2. **Hosting Quotas:** Destination countries would accept holders based on their historical carbon emissions. High-emitting nations-which have contributed most to the climate crisis-would bear a proportional responsibility to host the displaced.
3. **Rights and Integration:** Holders would receive "climate citizenship" or "golden passports" not through wealth, but through the right to survival, including access to labour markets and healthcare.

In conclusion, the survival of the human rights project in the 21st century depends on our ability to address the root cause-climate change-while simultaneously resisting the exclusionary narratives that seek to solve global problems through national isolation.

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