



Socio-Legal Analysis of climate change and internal displacement: Human rights implications in selected areas of Kano State

Abubakar Balarabe Kura, Badariyya Rabiu Abubakar

Department of Public Law, Faculty of Law, Northwest University, Kano, Nigeria

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Abstract

Climate change is one of the major factors driving internal displacement and migration globally. This menace has affected several local governments in Kano State, including Kumbotso, Kura, and Dawakin Kudu. This research examines the profound human rights implications of climate-induced internal displacement in these areas, which experience recurrent flooding almost every year. Using a hybrid research methodology that combines doctrinal and empirical approaches, the study analyzes existing literature, legal frameworks, and empirical evidence to interrogate how climate change causes internal displacement and the extent of its impact on human rights. Empirical data collected from selected affected communities are reviewed to assess the effects of displacement on social, economic, and cultural rights, such as the rights to food, water, adequate housing, and livelihood. The research aims to explore the extent of human rights violations during displacement caused by climate change and to evaluate the protections offered under existing legal frameworks. Findings reveal that many people are displaced due to climate change, with serious consequences for their socio-economic rights. The study concludes by providing targeted policy recommendations for the Nigerian government and the international community, advocating for a human rights-based approach that integrates climate adaptation and durable solutions for displaced populations, thereby ensuring their protection and dignity.

Keywords: Climate change, internal displacement, human rights, flooding, socio-economic rights

Introduction

The climatic shifts are not abstract environmental phenomena; they are existential threats that dismantle traditional livelihoods, undermine food security, and intensify competition for dwindling natural resources such as water and arable land. One of the most severe consequences of this environmental instability is the forced movement of people. Climate change has become a powerful driver of both violent conflict and internal displacement across West Africa, creating a complex humanitarian crisis that strains the capacity of affected states.^[1]

Selected areas of Kano State, namely Kumbotso, Kura and Dawakin Kudu situated at the southern edge of the Sahel, epitomise this crisis. The region's geographical proximity to the Sahara Desert makes it exceptionally vulnerable to desertification and land degradation, processes that are being significantly hastened by climate change.^[2] The dramatic depletion of Lake Chad, once a vital source of livelihood for millions, serves as a stark symbol of the region's ecological distress, directly impacting agriculture, fishing, and pastoralism.^[3] As productive land shrinks and water sources vanish, communities whose survival is intrinsically linked to the environment are forced to abandon their homes in search of sustenance and safety. Moreover, frequent floods washed away several villages and communities, thereby affecting the living conditions and livelihoods of the victims. This forced displacement due to environmental abnormality is reshaping the demographic and social landscape of selected areas of Kano State, creating a growing population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) whose plight is directly linked to the changing climate^[4]

The large-scale internal displacement driven by climate change in selected areas of Kano State constitutes a severe and escalating human rights crisis. While displacement itself is a traumatic experience, the conditions under which it occurs and the subsequent lack of adequate protection expose affected populations to a wide array of human rights violations. These individuals, uprooted from their homes and stripped of their livelihoods, face acute food insecurity, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, inadequate housing, and disrupted access to education and healthcare. This situation represents a direct infringement upon their fundamental economic, social, and cultural rights.

Climate change caused displacement creates a volatile environment where civil and political rights, including the right to life and security of person, are under constant threat.^[5] Vulnerable groups—particularly women, children, and the elderly—suffer disproportionately, facing heightened risks of violence, exploitation, and marginalization.^[6]

The core problem, therefore, is the systematic erosion of human rights among climate-displaced populations in selected areas of Kano State, amplified by inadequate governance and gaps in the legal protection architecture.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section establishes the literature review, theoretical and conceptual foundations for analyzing the human rights implications of climate-induced internal displacement in selected areas of Kano State, namely Kumbotso, Kura and Dawakin Kudu. It begins by defining and conceptualizing climate-induced displacement, distinguishing it from other forms of forced migration. Subsequently, it introduces the human rights-based approach as the core analytical framework. It then explores the complex and often volatile interplay between climate change and displacement, a nexus

particularly relevant to the selected areas under consideration. Finally, it identifies critical gaps in the existing academic literature, thereby situating this research's contribution to the scholarly discourse.

1. Conceptualizing Climate-Induced Displacement

The discourse surrounding human mobility in the context of climate change is characterized by a complex and often contested terminology. While popular media frequently employs terms like "climate refugee," this label lacks a formal legal basis in international law, which defines a refugee as someone fleeing persecution.^[7] The 1951 Refugee Convention does not recognize environmental degradation or climate-related disasters as grounds for persecution, creating a significant protection gap for those crossing international borders due to such pressures. Consequently, academic and policy circles have moved towards more precise, albeit varied, terminology such as "environmentally displaced persons," "climate migrants," or "persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change."^[8]

For this study, which focuses on movement within national borders, the most appropriate framework is that of internal displacement. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement define internally displaced persons (IDPs) as "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border."^[9] This definition explicitly includes disasters, which are increasingly understood to be exacerbated in frequency and intensity by climate change. Therefore, "climate-induced internal displacement" refers to the forced movement of individuals and communities within their own country due to the adverse effects of climate change.

These effects can be categorized into two primary types of environmental processes: sudden-onset events and slow-onset events. Sudden-onset events, such as extreme flooding or intense storms, often lead to immediate and large-scale displacement. In contrast, slow-onset events, which are particularly characteristic of the environmental crisis in Kano State, include processes like desertification, floods, land degradation, rising sea levels, and increasing water and food scarcity. These gradual processes erode livelihoods, degrade living conditions, and undermine community resilience over time, eventually compelling people to move as a coping strategy or last resort. This form of displacement is often more difficult to quantify and attribute solely to climate change, as it intertwines with a range of socio-economic and political factors. Understanding this distinction is crucial, as the drivers and patterns of displacement in Northern Nigeria are predominantly linked to these slow-onset environmental stressors, which systematically undermine the agricultural and pastoral livelihoods that sustain the region's populations.

2. Human Rights-Based Approach to Internal Displacement

A human rights-based approach (HRBA) serves as the central theoretical framework for this paper. This approach moves the analysis beyond a purely humanitarian or

environmental lens to frame climate-induced displacement as a critical human rights issue. The HRBA is grounded in the universal and inalienable principles of international human rights law, which stipulate that all individuals are entitled to certain fundamental rights and freedoms. States, as the primary duty-bearers, have the obligation to respect, protect, and fulfil these rights for all persons within their jurisdiction, including IDPs, regardless of the cause of their displacement.^[10]

When individuals are uprooted from their homes due to climate impacts, they are exposed to a heightened risk of a wide spectrum of human rights violations. The very act of displacement often results in the loss of property and livelihoods, leading to immediate threats to economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR). These include the right to an adequate standard of living, which encompasses the rights to adequate housing, food, and water, as well as the right to work and the right to health.^[11] Access to education for children is frequently disrupted, and cultural ties to ancestral lands are severed, implicating cultural rights. For instance, the destruction of homes and shelter directly infringes upon the right to adequate housing, a fundamental component of a life lived with dignity.^[12]

Moreover, displacement can severely compromise civil and political rights. Displaced populations may lose personal documentation, hindering their ability to vote, access justice, or enjoy freedom of movement. They often face discrimination and marginalization in host communities and can become targets of exploitation, trafficking, and violence, particularly in poorly managed displacement camps or informal settlements. The right to life itself can be at risk, not only from the direct impacts of climate-related disasters but also from the perilous conditions faced during and after displacement.^[13]

Crucially, the HRBA emphasizes the principles of non-discrimination and attention to vulnerability. The impacts of climate change and displacement are not felt equally across society. Marginalized and vulnerable groups—including women, children, the elderly, and indigenous communities—often bear a disproportionate burden.^[14] A human rights lens demands that protective measures and policy responses prioritize the specific needs and vulnerabilities of these groups, ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making processes that affect their lives. This framework provides a robust normative and legal basis for holding states accountable and for designing durable solutions that are not merely about providing temporary relief but are aimed at restoring dignity and ensuring the full enjoyment of human rights for all affected persons. It serves to bridge the legal gaps in international law by anchoring the protection of climate-displaced persons in the existing and extensive body of human rights obligations.

1.3 Gaps in the Existing Literature

While scholarly interest in the intersection of climate change, human mobility, and human rights has grown significantly, specific and localized analysis remains underdeveloped, particularly concerning internal displacement in sub-national contexts like Kano State. The existing body of literature reveals several critical gaps that this research aims to address.

First, much of the legal and academic discourse has focused on cross-border movement and the debate surrounding the

term "climate refugee" This has centered on the inadequacies of the 1951 Refugee Convention and proposals for new international treaties or protocols. While this is a vital conversation, it has often overshadowed the more immediate and statistically larger phenomenon of internal displacement. The vast majority of people displaced by climate impacts move within their own countries, yet the specific human rights challenges they face as IDPs have received comparatively less detailed examination. The literature often discusses the applicability of general human rights principles but lacks in-depth case studies analyzing how these rights are violated on the ground in specific climate-induced IDP contexts.

Second, there is a tendency in some studies to treat climate change as a monolithic, deterministic driver of displacement. Such approaches can oversimplify the complex causality at play, failing to adequately integrate the socio-economic, political, and conflict-related factors that mediate climate impacts. While the climate-conflict nexus is increasingly recognized, empirical research that systematically traces the causal pathways from specific climate stressors (e.g., desertification, floods) through to resource competition, displacement, and subsequent human rights violations in a specific states like Kano State is still limited. A more nuanced analysis is needed to understand how climate change acts as a "threat multiplier" within a particular fragile ecosystem.

Third, while the international legal framework concerning displacement and human rights is well-documented, there is a lack of critical assessment of national-level policy and legal responses. The effectiveness of Nigeria's domestic policies on climate change, disaster management, and internal displacement in protecting the rights of its climate-displaced citizens has not been sufficiently scrutinized.

Finally, the disproportionate impact of climate-induced displacement on specific vulnerable groups, such as women and children, is often acknowledged in general terms but requires more focused empirical investigation. Research is needed to detail the specific types of human rights violations these groups face—such as loss of means of livelihood, right to shelter, right to food, right to health, adequate living standard, or denial of education—within the IDP camps and host communities of Kano State.

By focusing specifically on climate-induced internal displacement in Kano State through a human rights lens, this research contributes a much-needed, empirically grounded case study to the broader literature. It moves beyond the general debate on "climate refugees" to analyze the lived realities of IDPs, assesses the adequacy of the national response framework, and untangles the complex interplay of climate and human rights in one of the vulnerable regions

Research Design and Method

The research design for the study is a mixed method that involves both surveys and interviews. Primary and secondary data collection are used. The data is collected through questionnaires and interviews as a primary source, while textbooks, journals and the internet are used as secondary sources. The questionnaire is administered in the selected areas of Kano State, viz Kumbotso, Kura, and Dawakin Kudu LGAs, facing internal displacement caused by environmental factors (floods). This is achieved by obtaining the primary empirical data directly from internally

displaced persons and Kano State officials handling disaster management cases, and secondary data obtained from governmental agencies.

The research used both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The quantitative data is obtained through a survey by administering a questionnaire to internally displaced persons, and qualitative data is obtained by conducting interviews with government officials and traditional rulers in the affected area.

Population and Sampling Technique

The population of this study consists of two groups. The first group consists of victims of internal displacement, and the second group consists of government officials and traditional rulers of the affected area.

The purposive sampling technique is used in forming the study population. The study is conducted in the three Local Government areas of Kano State, which include Kura, Kumbotso and Dawakin Kudu. The area was selected because it experiences floods almost every year during the rainy season.

The study engaged a total of 100 flood victims in the area through a survey method of data collection: thirty participants from Kura and Dawakin Kudu, and forty from Kumbotso.

On the other hand, the research engaged four government officials and six traditional rulers through interviews. This constituted the study population size.

Areas covered by the Research

The rainy season in Nigeria typically occurs annually, with the highest concentration of rainfall between June and September. Many states experience heavy rains from July to October, resulting in significant flooding that devastates various communities. These floods caused extensive damage to infrastructure, crops, and shelters, severely affecting livelihoods and displacing households. Climate variability and human-induced factors have recently exacerbated the situation, leading to increased displacement across Nigeria, particularly in Kano. This research focuses on three local government areas of Kano State: Kura, Dawakin Kudu, and Kumbotso.

Discussion

Reports from the affected areas, along with data collected by the Kano State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), other relevant institutions, and physical interviews, indicate that shelter was the most critical need, with the entire affected population requiring assistance. The floods have rendered many households homeless, underscoring the urgent need for both temporary and durable housing solutions to ensure safety and dignity. Food security is also a pressing concern, with nearly all affected locations (98%) prioritizing food assistance. The destruction of crops, food reserves, and livelihoods has created a dire need for emergency food supplies to address hunger and prevent malnutrition. More than half of the locations (61%) reported a need for essential non-food items, including basic household necessities such as clothing, bedding, and cooking equipment, which are vital for restoring normalcy and improving living conditions.^[15]

The people affected by the climate change-induced floods include 3,137 individuals in Dawakin Kudu LGA, 2,908 in Kumbotso LGA, and 2,851 in Kura LGA.^[16]

Most people living in the research area —about 60 per cent—depend on agriculture, particularly crop and vegetable production, as their primary means of livelihood. An additional source of income is petty trade and small-scale local businesses, which help sustain their living conditions during the off-farming period. ^[17] Some farmlands were completely destroyed, while a larger portion was partially damaged. The major crops affected include rice, millet, guinea corn, maize, and beans. ^[18] About 40% of respondents interviewed revealed that their houses were completely destroyed, while 50% indicated that their houses were partially damaged but in need of repair. ^[19] The houses of the remaining 10% were unaffected by the flood and remained habitable. ^[20]

The affected victims were relocated to temporary camps in primary and secondary schools as alternative shelters. The living conditions in these camps are extremely poor; although government agencies such as SEMA and FEMA provided blankets and other sleeping materials, the supplies are grossly inadequate to meet the needs of the large number of victims. ^[21] Many children and women in the camps were malnourished due to the lack of sufficient food and medical care. Some victims whose houses were completely destroyed by the flood also lost valuable documents, including national identity cards, voter cards, land title documents, and school certificates, among others. ^[22] The economic activities in the affected area were paralyzed because the mini-markets operating within the village communities were either destroyed by the flood, or the people supplying local goods such as vegetables were displaced, or their crops were washed away. Primary healthcare facilities and schools became inoperative because the buildings were submerged in water or repurposed as temporary camps.

In Kura LGA, about 196 households were internally displaced, affecting 1,186 individuals. In Kumbotso LGA, 217 households were displaced, affecting 1,308 individuals. In Dawakin Kudu LGA, 253 households were displaced, affecting 1,524 individuals. ^[23]

Even though the government made promises to rehabilitate the areas and restore life for the affected victims, those promises have not been fulfilled. Apart from the quick response during the tragedy and the provision of short-term accommodation in temporary camps, government agencies abandoned the victims, leaving them to struggle in finding alternative means of livelihood. ^[24]

Analysis of Human Rights Violations in the Study Area

Floods, as one of the factors causing climate change-induced internal displacement, disrupt people's ability to enjoy a myriad of fundamentally recognized social, economic, and cultural rights. The flood disaster largely forced people from their homes, lands, and livelihoods, leaving them vulnerable and weakened because their security, economic stability, and social and cultural identity were destabilized. A careful review of the study area's report provides an opportunity to examine and analyze the extent of human rights violations experienced by victims of flood disasters and other climate change-induced displacement.

One of the effects of flood and climate change-induced displacement is interference with recognized Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ESCR). These rights, although argued to be non-justiciable under the Nigerian

Constitution, remain essential to human dignity and well-being, ^[25] but are considered by many commentators as pivotal to societal well-being and standards of living. Their compromise would force many communities to abandon their ancestral lands and traditional ways of life.

Displacement caused by floods and other climate change factors affects the right to an adequate standard of living, which includes the rights to food, water, and housing, Land and livestock, as the primary means of survival for farmers and pastoralists, can also be severely impacted by such displacement. ^[26] Apart from causing displacement, the floods also led to desertification, as the water washed away arable land, resulting in acute food insecurity. Our discussion above, indicates that many farmlands in the study area have been destroyed by the flood. It may take several years before these farms can be fully restored. ^[27] Many people displaced by the flood are sheltered in temporary camps, which are often congested and lack access to potable water, healthcare, and proper sanitary conditions. The inadequacy of these provisions poses a serious risk of communicable diseases, threatening both the right to health and the right to an adequate standard of living. ^[28]

Major economic activities of the victims are disrupted during disasters such as floods, pushing many out of their jobs and livelihoods. Their rights to work and to sustain a livelihood are severely affected. They encounter significant barriers to entering new labor markets, including a lack of formal education, discrimination, and competition for scarce low-wage jobs. This loss of livelihood not only deepens poverty but also erodes individual and community self-sufficiency, fostering dependency on humanitarian aid that is often insufficient and unreliable. ^[29]

Forced eviction or relocation due to climate change disasters, such as floods, has tremendously impacted societal structures and social cohesion. Many communities have been dispersed into temporary camps or neighbouring villages. Traditional and historical cultural activities may also be disrupted. Because people attach deep significance to their cultural identity and ancestral heritage, the consequence is a loss of cultural practices and long-standing agricultural traditions passed down through generations. The disruption of community life and the scattering of family members erode the social capital essential for resilience. This cultural and social disintegration represents a profound, though often overlooked, violation of the rights of affected populations. ^[30]

Apart from the encroachment on ESCR during displacement, civil and political rights are also affected, such as the rights to life, liberty, and personal security. Although the relocation process may be peaceful, the government's lack of foresight in managing disasters or taking preventive measures threatens the lives and liberty of victims. Survey reports indicate that poor drainage management is one of the major causes of flooding in the area, and many lives have been lost as a result. ^[31] The government's inaction clearly jeopardizes the victims' rights to life and liberty.

The overcrowded camps, unsuitable environments, and lack of security personnel make these shelters vulnerable to attacks by hoodlums or to constant conflicts among victims competing for scarce resources. The outcome of such attacks and fights may result in significant loss of life. ^[32] In these precarious environments, the state's capacity to protect its citizens is often weak, leaving communities vulnerable to attacks and creating a climate of fear.

The freedom of movement of victims is frequently curtailed due to restrictions in camps, and they may not be allowed to move freely—particularly young children and women—because of the risk of drowning in submerged areas. Furthermore, they may face hostility from host communities who view them as competitors for scarce resources, or they may be confined to camps with limited freedom to come and go. A durable solution—whether return, resettlement, or local integration—remains an elusive goal for many.^[33]

Additionally, displacement can affect the civic and political rights of victims, particularly their right to vote and to be elected. During disasters such as floods, essential documents—including voter cards—may be destroyed, creating obstacles to exercising the right to vote. National identification cards, birth certificates, school certificates, and other critical documents may also be lost, serving as further barriers to the enjoyment of civil and political rights.

^[34] In most instances, it is very difficult to replace these essential documents due to the lack of special attention and the challenges surrounding document replacement in Nigeria. As a result, many people become marginalized within their own state, unable to access essential services because of the loss of critical documents.^[35]

Even though the survey report did not document any cases of sexual assault against women and children in the study area, other literature reviewed indicates reported cases of sexual exploitation of victims. Many individuals take advantage of the victims' vulnerable condition to exploit them sexually, often in exchange for undue benefits during the distribution of aid materials.^[36] This signifies a clear violation of women's rights protected by the Constitution and other international human rights instruments.

The disruption caused by displacement also affects children's rights, particularly the right to education. Thousands of children are forced out of school either because their schools have been destroyed or repurposed as temporary camps. Malnutrition and unhygienic environments further undermine children's right to health.^[37]

Findings and Recommendations

From the above research, the following are the findings

1. Floods as a climate change factor affect communal settings of the various communities, which necessitate relocation and displacement of people to find alternative shelter and livelihoods.
2. The relocation and displacement caused by the floods trigger violations and human rights abuses of the victims, particularly Social, economic and cultural rights. Government policies and programmes in IDPs' camps do not guarantee or adequately protect the human rights of the victims. The government is mostly concerned with short-term relief for victims without projecting the consequences of displacement on victims' human rights.

Recommendation

Government policies should be designed in such a manner to guarantee and protect human rights during disaster management, such as floods. The government should be more concerned with long-term and sustainable protection of human rights in IDPs.

Conclusion

This paper has comprehensively analyzed the human rights implications of climate-induced internal displacement in kumbotso, Kura and Dawakin Kudu areas of Kano State, establishing a clear and urgent nexus between environmental degradation, forced migration, and the erosion of fundamental rights. The research confirms that climate change is not a distant threat but a present-day driver of displacement in many areas of Kano State. The primary environmental manifestations—desertification, erratic rainfall, and floods have systematically undermined the agrarian and pastoralist livelihoods that sustain the majority of the population. This environmental precarity directly fuels resource scarcity, intensifies competition over land and water.

The analysis revealed that the human cost of this displacement is measured in widespread and severe violations of human rights. For those forced from their homes, the rights to an adequate standard of living, including access to food, water, and housing, are severely compromised. The loss of ancestral lands and livelihoods constitutes a profound violation of economic, social, and cultural rights, stripping individuals of their economic independence and cultural identity. Furthermore, the conditions within many informal settlements and camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) are dire, creating environments where civil and political rights, such as the right to security of person, are under constant threat. Vulnerable groups, particularly women and children, bear a disproportionate burden, facing heightened risks of gender-based violence, exploitation, and disruptions to education and health.

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