

Start to move

How climate change influences migration
and what this means for the Netherlands



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Summary

Report written by the Advisory Council on Migration and the Scientific Climate Council of the Netherlands.

How climate change influences migration

Climate change can lead to the voluntary or forced migration of people.

Communities worldwide are increasingly faced with the consequences of climate change, including hurricanes, storms, floods, wildfires, loss of arable land due to sea-level rise and desertification, water and food shortages, loss of income, health problems, and potentially rising instability and conflict. This deteriorates living conditions, either suddenly or gradually, which may lead people to leave their homes. Globally, examples of such climate-related migration are becoming more common.

Climate-related migration refers to the movement of one or more individuals away from their habitual place of residence, at least partially due to climate change. Climate change is rarely the sole cause of migration: multiple factors – such as the socioeconomic, cultural, and political context in which people live, as well as household and individual characteristics – determine whether people migrate. When climate change plays a role amongst these factors in migration, this is termed climate-related migration. Climate-related migration can occur over short or long distances and may be temporary or permanent. Climate-related migration can be voluntary or forced. The term climate-related displacement is commonly used when climate-related migration is forced. In practice, distinguishing between voluntary and forced migration is challenging, as climate change typically influences migration indirectly and gradually, making it unclear how much agency individuals had in their decision to leave. In this report, we refer to climate-related displacement only in cases where people are suddenly forced to leave their homes due to extreme weather events, such as storms, floods, wildfires, or extreme drought. In situations where living conditions deteriorate indirectly or gradually due to climate change, we use the term climate-related migration, recognising that in those cases it is not clear whether migration is voluntary or forced.

Not everyone affected by climate change will migrate. Multiple factors determine whether people migrate, and the opportunities for local climate adaptation also play a significant role. These factors vary by individual and depend on their living environment. Not everyone experiencing the effects of climate change can or wants to migrate. As a result, the relationship between climate change and migration is complex and highly context dependent.

As the impacts of climate change intensify, the likelihood of migration increases for millions of people worldwide. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, millions of people already live in areas where living conditions are deteriorating due to climate change. Climate change is accelerating, and its effects will worsen in the coming decades. If little or no action is taken to mitigate or adapt to these impacts, the risk of migration will grow.

Rationale and purpose of this thematic report

It is advisable that the Netherlands prepares for a future with potentially more climate-related migration. Globally, climate-related migration is gaining prominence on the political agenda, including at the annual climate negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. However, in Dutch politics and policy, the topic has received limited attention so far, partly due to its complexity and the uncertainties surrounding its future trajectory. There are compelling reasons to devote more attention to climate-related migration, both domestically and internationally. Because of the uncertainties around climate-related migration, early action is essential to allow sufficient time to gather knowledge, analyse (climate) risks, and explore options to address climate-related migration.

This signal report consolidates existing knowledge, provides insight into underlying mechanisms, risks and uncertainties, and identifies themes on which the Netherlands can take action. With this report, the Advisory Council on Migration and the Netherlands Scientific Climate Council aim to equip policymakers, practitioners, and civil society with the latest knowledge on climate-related migration and to provide potential steps at the national, European, and international levels.

Scale and trends

Recent insights into the scale and trends of climate-related migration offer starting points for the Netherlands to prepare for a world with potentially more climate-related migration.

Climate-related migration occurs globally, but its exact scale remains uncertain. On average, approximately 24 million people are displaced annually by extreme weather, particularly in Africa, East Asia, and the Pacific. While extreme weather cannot always be directly attributed to climate change, its frequency and intensity are increasing due to climate change. It is difficult to determine how many people migrate due to the gradual and indirect effects of climate change, due to the complex relationship between climate change and migration, and due to a lack of data, monitoring and research. Consequently, there are no reliable estimates of the current number of climate-related migrants worldwide. However, it is clear that climate-related migration is already occurring on every continent. Projections for future climate-related migration vary widely, ranging from 44 to 216 million people by 2050.

Climate-related migration is most prevalent—and expected to increase the most—in regions where climate risks are high and resources for climate adaptation are limited. Climate adaptation measures (such as strengthening water management systems and urban greening) can reduce climate risks and, consequently, the likelihood of migration. Most people prefer to adapt to climate change in their own communities and remain where they are. However, adaptation is not always possible, either due to physical limits to adaptation or due to limited resources. The latter is particularly evident in low- and middle-income countries, where climate change is already exerting significant pressure on living conditions. Examples include arid regions facing water scarcity. The most climate-related displacement due to extreme weather is expected in low-lying coastal areas in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific due to flooding and storms. In Africa, most climate-related migration is anticipated due to the gradual and indirect impacts of climate change,

such as water and food shortages caused by temperature increases and desertification. Small island states are particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise due to their low elevation, which is expected to drive climate-related migration as well.

Like other forms of migration, most climate-related migration occurs over short distances, within the same country or to neighboring countries in the region.

People migrating due to climate change often move from rural areas to other rural areas in the region or to nearby cities, reinforcing the global trend of urbanisation. Climate-related migration is thus primarily internal, or occasionally between neighboring countries. An exception is small island states, where climate-related migration may occur over longer distances. There is currently little empirical evidence that large-scale intercontinental migration occurs due to climate change, such as from outside Europe to Europe.

Climate-related migration is expected to increase also within Europe and within the Netherlands.

In Europe, climate-related migration is becoming more common, particularly displacement due to floods and wildfires. Indirect and gradual effects of climate change, such as sea-level rise and changing precipitation patterns, may lead to migration from coastal areas inland, particularly in Southern Europe. Within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, climate-related migration has already occurred on Sint Maarten after Hurricane Irma and in Enschede and Limburg following heavy rainfall and flooding. Overall, little research has been conducted on climate-related migration within the Kingdom of the Netherlands or within Europe.

Climate-related migration can lead to deteriorating living conditions for migrants and to increased global instability.

When people migrate, they hope for better living conditions at their destination. This is more likely when migration is well-prepared. However, migrants or displaced persons may end up in locations where living conditions are worse than in their previous homes, and where climate risks are equally high or even higher. This is particularly the case when people settle in informal settlements, such as slums on the outskirts of cities. Migrants risk becoming trapped in a vicious cycle of marginalisation and repeated displacement. Women, children, the elderly, and people living in poverty are especially vulnerable. Climate change can also contribute to greater instability and conflict globally. It puts pressure on the availability of basic needs such as water and food, and scarcity of such resources is a known risk factor for tensions and conflict. Conflict may in turn drive migration. Additionally, climate-related migration can create tensions in receiving communities by putting pressure on already scarce resources in those communities.

What the Netherlands can do

To prepare for a future with potentially more climate-related migration, the Netherlands can take steps at the national, European, and international level. Since most climate-related migration is internal, preparing for climate-related migration is primarily a national responsibility. This also applies to the Netherlands. In addition to this national responsibility, high-income countries with historically high greenhouse gas emissions such as the Netherlands, bear a responsibility towards low- and middle-income countries in addressing the consequences of climate change, including climate-related migration. We outline four themes on which the Netherlands can act:

1. **Preparing for climate-related migration within European Netherlands and the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.** Both the European and the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom face increasing climate risks. Extreme weather has already led to displacement in the European part of the Netherlands and on Saint Martin. In the short term, it is important to be prepared for extreme weather to manage temporary displacement and prevent damages from climate change. In the long term, it is useful to gain more insight into climate change as a driver of migration within the Kingdom, as currently little knowledge exists on this topic. Adaptation policies also remain critical across the Kingdom. In the European part of the Netherlands, adaptation could be strengthened by discussing what policy measures can still be implemented in different parts of the country and how this affects where citizens can live in the future. The Netherlands could learn from countries with more experience in the managed relocation of people and infrastructure to areas with less climate risks, such as New Zealand.
2. **Promoting research and monitoring of climate-related migration and displacement within and towards Europe.** The Netherlands can advocate at the European level for research and monitoring to gain more insight into climate-related migration within Europe and towards Europe. Under the new European Asylum and Migration Pact that came into force in June 2026, there is an opportunity to strengthen joint monitoring. Enhanced cooperation under the Pact also offers opportunities to make EU-level agreements on whether and how to support climate-related migrants and displaced persons.
3. **Strengthening contributions to climate resilience in low- and middle-income countries.** It remains important to invest in climate adaptation and enhancing living conditions in low- and middle-income countries. The Netherlands should uphold climate finance commitments. Additionally, the Netherlands can strengthen bilateral cooperation with countries by, for example, leveraging Dutch expertise in scenario development to map climate-related migration at the local level. It is also crucial that Dutch and European partnerships with low- and middle-income countries regarding migration are coherent with partnerships regarding climate adaptation. For some countries, free movement of people within the region is a way to cope with a changing climate, and this could be hindered by restrictive migration policies. Finally, the Netherlands could integrate efforts on climate adaptation with those on peace and security to support the most fragile states.
4. **Collaborate for the (global) legal protection of climate-related migrants and displaced persons.** There are currently no binding global agreements on the legal protection of people who migrate or are displaced due to climate change. Discussions are ongoing about whether such agreements should be established and, if so, what they should entail. The establishment of such agreements is a multilateral political decision. It is also possible that existing human rights treaties give right to residence for international migrants if climate change leads to life-threatening situations in countries of origin in the future. If the Netherlands wishes to prepare for this possibility, further research could examine the extent to which existing human rights treaties might lead to such claims. Additionally, the Netherlands could consider offering (temporary)

protection to climate-related migrants and displaced persons through national policy. Some countries, such as Australia, Spain, and IGAD member states (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda), already do this. The Netherlands could learn from these countries and collaborate with them to support migrants.