

Climate change will force up to 113 million people to relocate within Africa by 2050—new report

November 7 2022, by Nicholas P. Simpson



A young Fulani pastoralist from the Tatki region of Senegal who must learn another craft because his future is uncertain. Credit: [Selim Harbi](#), [CC BY-NC](#)

Adapting to a world that is warmer than today is a huge undertaking, even if the most ambitious temperature ceiling is met. Increasing climate risks mean that millions of Africans could be uprooted or trapped where they are due to climate change.

Unfortunately, the world has made little progress on what it takes to adapt safely to life on a warmer planet. We still lack the scale and urgency of both collective and transformative action necessary to [cut greenhouse gases](#) as per the [Paris Agreement on Climate Change](#).

Heatwaves from human-caused [climate change](#) have already reduced global economic growth by [up to US\\$29.3 trillion](#) between 1992 and 2013. Africa's gross domestic product has been particularly hard hit. One estimate [shows gross domestic product](#) per capita for 1991–2010 in Africa was on average 13.6% lower than it could have been if [climate change](#) had not occurred.

Global heating [may rise](#) to between 2.4°C and 2.6°C by 2100. That presents [uninsurable risks](#), even for [rich countries](#).

For Africans, these changes will increase inequality and [disrupt businesses](#). They will also undermine agricultural systems and decades of development gains in [health and education](#). In addition, the changes are set to [cause losses and damage to Africa's unique heritage of outstanding and universal value](#). These impacts will increasingly affect those moving, staying, and communities receiving people on the move due to climate change.

All life on Earth will have to adapt if any industries are to survive for Africa's [future generations](#). There is a narrow window left to prepare and shift to adaptation in Africa.

A new report called [African Shifts](#) documents the current realities of climate-forced migration and displacement in Africa. The report paints possible scenarios for future population movements resulting from increasing [climate impacts](#). It also revises the discourse of migration and climate change. It uses the term "climate mobility" to capture the movement motivated by the adverse effects of sudden or slow-onset

climate impacts.

The report, launched by the [Africa Climate Mobility Initiative](#), aims to provide evidence, knowledge and policy recommendations to leaders gathering at the [COP27 climate change negotiations](#) in Egypt, where climate adaptation strategies are high on the agenda.

African Shifts, of which I am the lead drafting author, provides research, data and projections that support locally anchored solutions for climate adaptation in communities across Africa facing the impacts of forced migration. It uses likely and optimistic climate change and development scenarios to provide projections of climate mobility that are appropriate to Africa's development trajectory over the next 30 years.

Several new findings have been made and key actions proposed.

Findings

The report shows that:

- Most future climate-forced migration and displacement in Africa will take place within countries. This reflects current geographies of movement on the continent.
- The number of people moving to seek protection and better livelihoods will increase from 1.5% of Africa's population today to as many as 5% by 2050. This amounts to about 113 million people.
- Up to 2.5 million people could leave Africa's [coastal areas](#) due to sea level rise and other stressors. In the Horn of Africa, climate impacts could force up to 9% of the population—as many as 49 million people—to move in the decades ahead. This makes the

case for adequate planning to build local adaptive capacity, especially in smaller cities and towns. Adapting could enable more people to stay in their home communities.

- The movement of people across borders in response to climate change is expected to be relatively small. Cross-border climate mobility is forecast to reach a maximum of 1.2 million people by 2050 under a high greenhouse gas emissions scenario. This will be a small fraction of the continent's overall population and a small contribution to the total likely cross-border migration of 11 to 12 million people by 2050. This counters the prevailing narrative of populist leaders and media houses that peddle highly exaggerated numbers of people leaving Africa for high-income and distant countries.
- Importantly, for most on the continent, climate mobility is likely to be a response of last resort. Most Africans are attached to their land and homes and don't aspire to leave their communities. Half of the men and 40% of the women surveyed expressed hope and optimism for the future, despite experiencing severe climate disruptions. For many people relocation is too costly. As a result, some of the most vulnerable people remain in place, risking forced evacuation or becoming stranded. Those who move or are forcibly displaced often settle in new locations where they remain vulnerable and exposed to climate risks.

Key actions

The Agenda for Action accompanying the [African Shifts](#) report proposes key actions for the next eight years. These actions can support countries in achieving the aspirations of the [2030 Sustainable Development Goals](#) set up by the UN under the Paris Agreement. They

include:

Planning for mobility—Anticipate and plan for climate mobility. This includes permanent relocation, fostering social cohesion in affected communities, preventing immobility, driving economic growth, sustaining peace, and protecting people on the move. Next step is to integrate climate mobility in climate adaptation and finance commitments. This is achieved by recognising and supporting mobility as a legitimate strategy.

Empowering people—Inform people of [climate risks](#). This includes building climate change literacy, co-production of actionable climate information services and access to early warnings. Specifically, countries should amplify women's agency and harness the ambitions of the youth.

Transforming development—Build from the local by pursuing community-led solutions for climate-resilient development, disaster response and climate mobility across the continent.

Countries should also invest in resilient and connected cities. Build stronger ties across cities and with rural areas and economies.

Lastly, countries should pursue nature-positive development. Land, water, and other shared natural resources should be managed cooperatively and sustainably to support agricultural and ecosystem-based livelihoods and boost productivity. Reduce the environmental impact and harness ecosystems and biodiversity protection for economic development and climate resilience.

The report makes the case that inclusive development choices that reduce vulnerability and build [climate resilience](#) could enable people to stay in their home communities.

Hotspots

The report identifies potential "climate hotspots". These include specific cities that will grow or shrink due to climate mobility; borderlands that will see an increase in climate mobility; and rain-fed lowlands and coastal areas.

These areas need to build resilience in near-term actions and long-term strategies.

The steps proposed in the report can avert and minimise the risk of displacement and prepare communities for future arrivals, preventing escalating loss and damage in a warmer future.

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