

Aspirations, Negotiation, and Urban Marginality: A Sociological Overview of Climate Migration in India

Mr. Aniket Sarkar

MA Sociology, Centre for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

Climate change represents one of the most profound structural drivers reshaping internal population mobility across the Global South. This paper provides a comprehensive sociological overview of climate-linked internal migration in India, moving beyond simplistic narratives of deterministic environmental displacement to examine the complex intersections of ecological vulnerability, livelihood precarity, agency, and human aspirations. Utilizing multi-source data triangulation from primary national datasets, including the Census of India, National Sample Survey (NSS), Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), India Human Development Survey (IHDS), and state-level climate vulnerability metrics, the study synthesizes empirical patterns through a critical sociological framework. It examines how climate-induced agrarian distress triggers rural-to-urban trajectories, and how migrants actively negotiate informal labor markets, precarious housing, kinship networks, and exclusionary urban institutions upon arrival. The analysis demonstrates that while migration operates as an adaptive survival strategy, structural barriers in Indian cities reproduce differentiated forms of urban marginality heavily mediated by caste, class, and gender hierarchies. Finally, the paper evaluates the existing policy landscape, revealing a stark disconnect between climate adaptation strategies and urban migration governance.

Keywords: Climate change; Agrarian distress; Climate adaptation policy; Sociology of migration; marginality

1. Introduction

Climate change is no longer merely an ecological crisis; it is a profound sociological phenomenon reshaping the social fabric, demographic landscape, and economic structures of developing nations (IPCC, 2022). In India, where over half of the national labor force remains tied to climate-sensitive agricultural livelihoods, environmental stress acts as a severe threat multiplier (Balsari et al., 2020; MoSPI, 2022). Slow-onset environmental degradation such as prolonged droughts, changing monsoon regimes, groundwater depletion, and soil salinization alongside sudden-onset natural disasters like tropical cyclones and catastrophic flooding, systematically destabilize rural agrarian economies (Gupta, 2025; Roxy et al., 2015). Consequently, million rural households are forced to reconfigure their survival strategies, leading to accelerated internal migration toward urban industrial centers (Bajpai et al., 2026; World Bank, 2021).

However, conventional environmental research often treats climate migrants either as passive victims of

environmental collapse or as mechanical data points within push-pull economic models (Black et al., 2011; Gemenne, 2011). Such frameworks overlook the sociological realities of mobility. Migration is fundamentally mediated by human agency, social structures, household power dynamics, and individual aspirations (De Haan, 2002; Tacoli, 2009). Rural inhabitants do not merely flee ecological ruin; they actively negotiate their mobility choices to diversify income, escape hereditary caste oppression, and pursue social upward mobility in urban spaces (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Subramanyam & Bouma, 2024).

Upon entering destination cities, climate-linked migrants face an equally complex set of challenges. Indian urban centers are characterized by fragmented territorial governance, expansive informal labor markets, severe housing shortages, and entrenched social exclusion (Kundu, 2009; Lim, 2026). Migrants must navigate informal labor regimes, establish residence in precarious informal settlements, leverage kinship networks, and confront institutional barriers that restrict access to basic public services (Ghosh, 2022; Su et al., 2022). This paper provides a deep sociological analysis of climate migration in India, tracing the continuum from rural ecological distress to urban incorporation and the reproduction of differentiated urban marginality.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

To unpack these socio-environmental dynamics, this study addresses five fundamental research questions:

1. How are climate and environmental stresses associated with internal migration patterns across Indian states?
2. How do rural livelihood insecurity and human aspirations shape climate-linked mobility trajectories toward Indian cities?
3. How do climate-linked migrants negotiate informal employment, housing, social networks, and access to urban institutions?

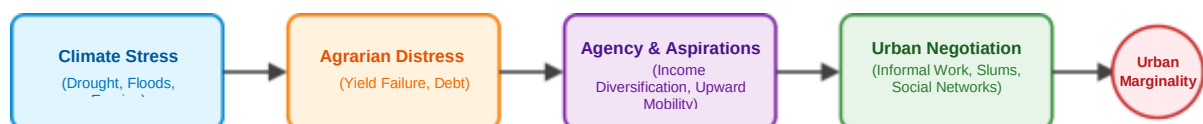


Diagram 1: Conceptual Continuum of Climate Migration and Urban Integration

Source: Conceptualized by Author based on Black et al. (2011), Deshingkar & Akter (2009), and Subramanyam & Bouma (2024).

4. How does climate-linked migration contribute to differentiated forms of urban marginality structured by caste, class, and gender?
5. How adequately do existing Indian climate adaptation, labor, and urban governance policies address the socioeconomic realities of climate migrants?

3. Methodology and Secondary Data Triangulation

This study adopts a descriptive and interpretive sociological research design grounded in multi-source secondary data triangulation (Su et al., 2022). Quantitative empirical trends are synthesized with qualitative literature to build a holistic analytical narrative. The empirical evidence draws from macro-level national datasets, environmental hazard registries, and policy reports (Census of India, 2011a; MoSPI, 2021, 2022; World Risk Index, 2024).

Table 1: Data Triangulation Framework and Analytical Dimensions

Analytical Dimension	Primary Secondary Source	Key Metrics & Indicators
Internal Migration Patterns	Census of India (2011a, 2011b); NSS 78th Round (NSSO, 2021)	Inter-state/intra-state flows, streams (rural-urban), duration of stay, primary reasons for movement.
Agrarian Distress & Livelihoods	Periodic Labour Force Survey (MoSPI, 2022); IHDS Data	Agricultural employment share, landlessness, crop failure incidence, rural wage stagnations.
Urban Informal Labor & Poverty	PLFS Annual Reports; NSSO Informal Sector Reports	Informal sector absorption, daily-wage rates, casual labor proportion, lack of social security.
Housing & Slum Conditions	NFHS-5 (2021); Census Slum Tables; Urban Reports	Informal settlement density, tenure precarity, access to clean drinking water and sanitation.
Climate Hazards & Vulnerability	IMD Data; IPCC (2022); NDMA Reports; IDMC (2023)	District climate vulnerability index, drought frequency, sea-level rise, disaster displacement numbers.
Policy & Institutional Response	NAPCC Reports; State Climate Action Plans (SAPCC); NITI Aayog	Adaptation funding allocation, migrant social safety net coverage, urban inclusion mandates.

Source: Compiled by Author from official national registries and academic literature.

4. Climate Stresses as Structural Push Factors

Environmental stress across rural India operates along two distinct temporal vectors: sudden-onset disasters and slow-onset ecological degradation (Berchin, 2017; Gupta, 2025). Sudden-onset hazards, such as severe tropical cyclones along the Bay of Bengal (e.g., Cyclones Amphan and Fani) or flash floods in the Himalayan river basins, trigger immediate displacement (IDMC, 2023). According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, disaster-related events forcibly displace millions of individuals annually in India, making the country one of the most disaster-prone zones globally (IDMC, 2023).

Conversely, slow-onset environmental changes exert a insidious, long-term pressure on rural livelihoods (Roxy et al., 2015). Declining annual rainfall variability, recurring droughts in monsoon-shadow regions like Marathwada and Bundelkhand, and saltwater intrusion into arable lands in coastal Odisha and Bengal systematically erode agricultural productivity (Bajpai et al., 2026; Ghosh, 2022). Small and marginal

farmers, who lack capital reserves or artificial irrigation infrastructure, experience escalating indebtedness, crop failures, and loss of land ownership (Das, 2023; MoSPI, 2022).

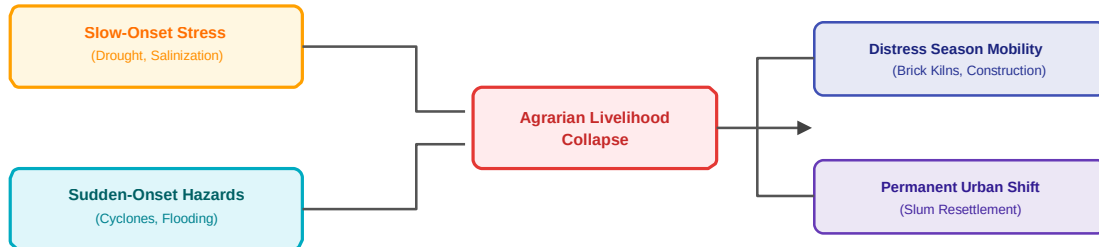


Diagram 2: Dual Vectors of Environmental Hazards and Migration Typologies

Source: Conceptualized by Author based on Roxy et al. (2015) and IDMC (2023).

5. Aspirations, Agency, and Mobility Decisions

While environmental stress creates the structural imperatives for departure, the decision to migrate is not a unilinear reaction (Tacoli, 2009). Sociologically, migration represents an exercise of human agency wherein individuals and households evaluate their aspirations against constrained rural opportunities (De Haan, 2002; Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). For younger generations in rural India, agricultural labor is increasingly viewed not only as economically unviable but as socially undesirable due to its association with stagnation and traditional caste-based feudal hierarchies (Subramanyam & Bouma, 2024).

Urban migration is thus transformed into a deliberate strategy for economic diversification and social advancement (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). Rural households selectively deploy family members to urban industrial hubs—such as Delhi NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Surat, and Tiruppur—to generate remittances that offset rural agricultural risks (Lim, 2026; Subramanyam & Bouma, 2024). Aspirational mobility allows households to invest in children's education, repay high-interest informal loans, and construct permanent housing in their native villages (Subramanyam & Bouma, 2024).

6. Urban Incorporation and Informal Negotiations

Upon arrival in metropolitan regions, climate-linked migrants enter a complex web of negotiations to secure survival. Lacking formal education, institutional credentials, or localized political capital, they are overwhelmingly absorbed into the informal economy (Lim, 2026; MoSPI, 2022).

Table 2: Urban Informal Sector Absorption of Climate Migrants

Sector	Nature of Employment	Structural Vulnerabilities & Precariousness
Construction & Infrastructure	Daily-wage casual labor, sub-contracted bricklaying, earthmoving.	Extreme physical hazard, lack of safety equipment, seasonal wage theft, zero health insurance.

Urban Sanitation & Waste Work	Contractual street sweeping, manual sewer cleaning, informal waste picking.	Deep social stigma, alignment with low-caste occupations, severe health hazards (Subramanyam & Bouma, 2024).
Domestic Work & Care Sector	Live-out or live-in house cleaning, cooking, child care (predominantly female).	Unregulated working hours, low wage rates, vulnerability to verbal/physical abuse, lack of legal contracts.
Informal Manufacturing & Garments	Sweatshop labor, textile dyeing, small-scale assembly units.	Piece-rate wages, cramped working conditions, exposure to chemicals, debt bondage risks.

Source: Synthesized from PLFS Data (MoSPI, 2022) and Lim (2026).

Securing urban housing constitutes another major arena of negotiation. Denied access to formal real estate markets due to exorbitant costs and strict tenure requirements, climate migrants settle in informal slums, informal settlements, or industrial peri-urban fringes (Kundu, 2009; NFHS-5, 2021). These settlements are frequently situated on ecologically precarious lands—such as low-lying floodplains, railway buffers, or swamp contours—exposing migrants once again to urban environmental hazards like urban flooding and extreme heatwaves (Su et al., 2022).

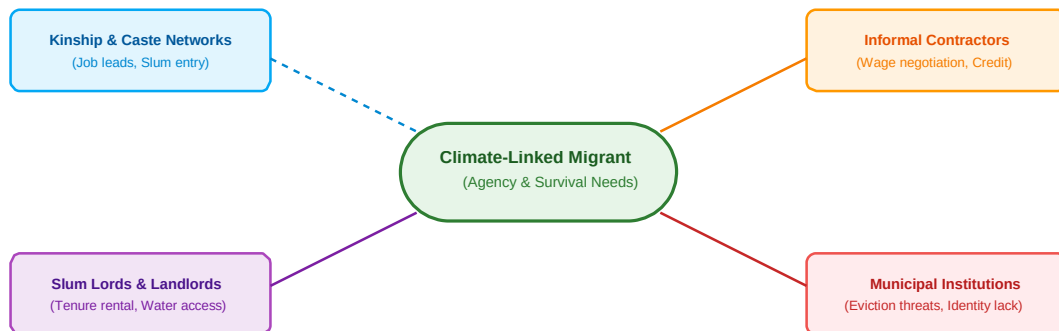


Diagram 3: Structural Web of Urban Informal Negotiations

Source: Conceptualized by Author based on Kundu (2009) and Lim (2026).

7. Differentiated Urban Marginality

Urban incorporation does not equalize socioeconomic opportunities; rather, it reproduces differentiated forms of urban marginality structured along pre-existing social hierarchies (Subramanyam & Bouma, 2024). Caste identities follow migrants into the urban sphere. Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) migrants are disproportionately concentrated in the most degraded occupations—such as manual sanitation work, waste processing, and hazardous brick-kiln labor—where traditional notions of purity and pollution are subtly re-enacted (Subramanyam & Bouma, 2024).

Gender operates as a further compounding axis of marginalization (Ghosh, 2022). Female climate

migrants often face a double burden: engaging in arduous domestic or construction labor while bearing full responsibility for household reproductive labor under extremely poor living conditions (Ghosh, 2022; PSFRESEARCH, 2026). In informal settlements lacking piped water infrastructure, women spend hours queueing at public tankers, exposing them to physical strain and conflict (Subramanyam & Bouma, 2024).

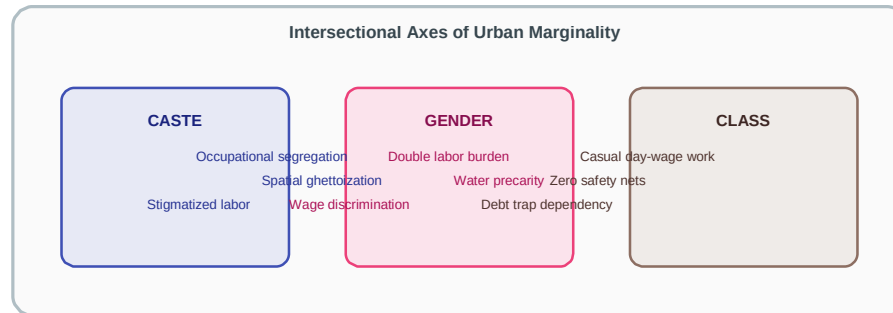


Diagram 4: Intersectional Triad of Urban Marginality Reproduction

Source: Conceptualized by Author based on Subramanyam & Bouma (2024) and PSFRESEARCH (2026).

8. Policy Inadequacies and Governance Vacuum

India's current policy architecture exhibits a severe institutional divide between climate adaptation planning, labor welfare, and urban development governance (Migration Policy Institute, 2020; NITI Aayog, 2021). National climate strategies such as the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCC) focus predominantly on in-situ agricultural adaptation, treating out-migration as an unwanted symptom of adaptation failure rather than an active survival mechanism (MoEFCC, 2021; NITI Aayog, 2021).

Table 3: Institutional Vacuum Across Policy Domains

Policy Arena	Dominant Governance Framework	Key Policy Gaps regarding Climate Migrants
Climate Change Policies (NAPCC, SAPCC)	Focuses on in-situ rural resilience, watershed management, disaster response.	Fails to recognize climate mobility as adaptation; offers zero urban integration support for climate migrants.
Urban Governance & Development (AMRUT, Smart Cities)	Prioritizes capital infrastructure, formal housing, and city Beautification.	Views informal settlements as illegal encroachments; excludes non-domiciled migrants from municipal services.
Labor & Social Security Policies (Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act)	Regulatory registration of interstate labor through formal contractors.	Widespread non-enforcement; failure to capture independent climate-linked casual workers (Ministry of Labour, 2020).

Source: Compiled by Author from NITI Aayog (2021) and MoEFCC (2021).

Urban governance frameworks, exemplified by programs like the Smart Cities Mission, prioritize capital-intensive infrastructure and formal urban order (Kundu, 2009). Informal migrants are frequently categorized as illegal encroachers, subjecting them to periodic slum demolitions and spatial evictions that destroy accumulated social and physical assets (Migration Policy Institute, 2020).

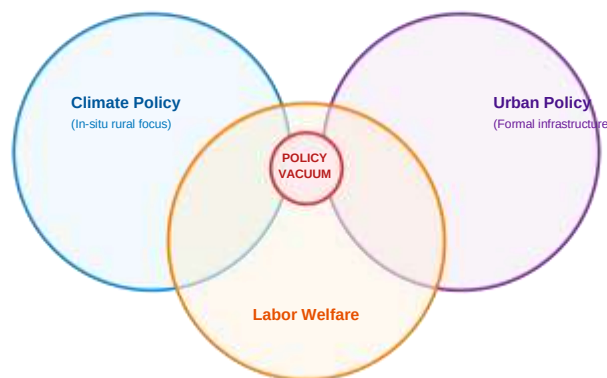


Diagram 5: Policy Integration Disconnect and Institutional Vacuum

Source: Conceptualized by Author based on NITI Aayog (2021) and MoEFCC (2021).

9. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Climate-linked internal migration in India is a multifaceted sociological phenomenon located at the intersection of ecological degradation, agrarian distress, human agency, and urban structural exclusion. This study demonstrates that while climate stresses serve as powerful drivers of departure, migration is actively shaped by rural households as an aspirational adaptation strategy. However, upon arrival in Indian cities, migrants confront deeply exclusionary informal labor and housing markets that reproduce differentiated forms of marginality based on caste, class, and gender.

To address these institutional failures, the paper proposes three policy interventions:

1. **Inter-State Social Protection Portability:** Expand national identity mechanisms (such as One Nation One Ration Card) to ensure universal access to public distribution food grains, subsidized healthcare, and social safety nets regardless of geographic location (NITI Aayog, 2021).
2. **Climate-Inclusive Urban Planning:** Reorient municipal governance to integrate informal settlements into urban planning, providing secure land tenure, basic sanitation, and clean drinking water to climate-impacted urban populations (Su et al., 2022).
3. **Recognition of Climate Mobility in Policy Frameworks:** Formally acknowledge climate-induced displacement and migration within State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCC), establishing targeted rehabilitation and skill-building frameworks for climate-vulnerable communities (MoEFCC, 2021).

References

1. Bajpai, R., Purbey, A., DeWaard, J., Sharma, D., Swarnkar, P., Regules, R., Nevarez, R., Jennath, A., Singh, Y., Singh, C., Bazaz, A., Saggurti, N., & Mishra, A. (2026). Climate-induced internal migration in India: Looking into the past to understand the present. *Regional Environmental Change*, 26(1), Article 75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-026-02564-4>
2. Balsari, S., Dresser, C., & Leaning, J. (2020). Climate change, migration, and civil strife. *Current Environmental Health Reports*, 7(4), 404–414. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40572-020-00291-4>
3. Berchin, I. I. (2017). Climate change and forced migrations: An effort towards recognizing climate refugees. *Geoforum*, 84, 147–150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.06.016>
4. Black, R., Bennett, S. R., Thomas, S. M., & Beddington, J. R. (2011). Climate change: Migration as adaptation. *Nature*, 478(7370), 447–449. <https://doi.org/10.1038/478447a>
5. Census of India. (2011a). D-Series: Migration tables. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
6. Census of India. (2011b). Primary census abstract for total population and slum population. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
7. Das, D. (2023). Deconstructing climate change and migration narratives in the Indian Ocean World. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 19(1), 89–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2023.2256524>
8. De Haan, A. (2002). Livelihoods and poverty: The role of migration—a critical review of the migration literature. *Journal of Development Studies*, 38(5), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220380412331285427>
9. Deshingkar, P., & Akter, S. (2009). Migration and human development in India (Human Development Research Paper 2009/13). United Nations Development Programme.
10. Dreher, T., & Voyer, M. (2015). Climate refugees or migrants? Contesting media frames on climate justice in the Pacific. *Environmental Communication*, 9(1), 58–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2014.932818>
11. Gemenne, F. (2011). Why the numbers don't add up: A review of estimates and predictions of people displaced by environmental changes. *Global Environmental Change*, 21, S41–S49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.09.005>
12. Ghosh, C. (2022). Climate change, livelihood disruptions, and rural–urban migration in India: A sustainable livelihood and climate justice perspective. *Asian Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 5(2), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.54392/ajir2224>
13. Gleick, P. H. (2014). Water, drought, climate change, and conflict in Syria. *Weather, Climate, and Society*, 6(3), 331–340. <https://doi.org/10.1175/WCAS-D-13-00059.1>
14. Gupta, D. (2025). Climate-induced migration in India and Bangladesh: A systematic review of drivers, impacts, and adaptation mechanisms. *Climate*, 13(4), Article 81. <https://doi.org/10.3390/cli13040081>
15. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. (2023). Global report on internal displacement 2023: Internal displacement and climate change. IDMC.
16. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2022). Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC. Cambridge University Press.
17. International Organization for Migration. (2020). World migration report 2020. IOM.
18. Kundu, A. (2009). Exclusionary urbanisation in Asia: A macro overview. *Economic and Political*

Weekly, 44(48), 48–58.

19. Lim, K. F. (2026). Fragmented governance, informal migrant workers and post-pandemic economic resilience: Perspectives from the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi, India. *Journal of Economic Geography*, Advance Article. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbaf063>
20. Migration Policy Institute. (2020). Climate change, displacement, and managed retreat in coastal India. *MPI Journal*.
21. Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. (2021). Third national communication to the UNFCCC. Government of India.
22. Ministry of Labour and Employment. (2020). Report on working conditions of inter-state migrant workers in India. Government of India.
23. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. (2021). Energy statistics and environmental indicators 2021. Government of India.
24. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. (2022). Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) annual report 2021-2022. Government of India.
25. National Disaster Management Authority. (2020). National disaster management plan 2020. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
26. National Family Health Survey. (2021). National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21: India report. International Institute for Population Sciences.
27. NITI Aayog. (2021). Climate vulnerability assessment for adaptation planning in India using a common framework. Government of India.
28. National Sample Survey Office. (2021). Migration in India: NSS 78th round (2020-2021). Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India.
29. Population Council. (2026). District-level migration projections and climate exposure in South Asia. Knowledge Commons.
30. PSFRESEARCH. (2026). Internal migration in urban India: Invisible workers, informal economy & policy challenges. PSF Research Reports.
31. Rigaud, K. K., de Sherbinin, A., Jones, B., Bergmann, J., Clement, V., Ober, K., Schewe, J., Adamo, S., McCusker, B., Heuser, S., & Midgley, A. (2018). Groundswell: Preparing for internal climate migration. World Bank.
32. Roxy, M. K., Kapoor, R., Terray, P., Murtugudde, R., Ashok, K., & Goswami, B. N. (2015). Drying of Indian subcontinent by rapid Indian Ocean warming and a weakening land-sea thermal gradient. *Nature Communications*, 6, Article 7423. <https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms8423>
33. Su, Q., Chang, H. S., & Pai, S. E. (2022). A comparative study of the resilience of urban and rural areas under climate change. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(15), Article 8911. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19158911>
34. Subramanyam, N., & Bouma, D. (2024). Migrating injustices in the small city: Drought-impacted interstate migrant workers' experiences in Tiruppur's sanitation sector. *Climate and Development*, 17(2), 107–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2024.2330978>
35. Tacoli, C. (2009). Crisis or adaptation? Migration and climate change in a context of high mobility. *Environment and Urbanization*, 21(2), 513–525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247809342182>
36. World Bank. (2021). South Asia development update: Shaping a green recovery. World Bank Group.
37. World Risk Index. (2024). WorldRiskReport 2024: Focus on climate change and displacement. Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft.