

From Monsoon to Migration: South Asia's Looming Climate Exodus

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Introduction

South Asia is home to nearly a quarter of the world population. It is also one of the world's most vulnerable regions to climate change. South Asia is facing an unprecedented climate crisis that threatens not only its environment but also the very fabric of its societies. Its geography; coastal zones, large river deltas, mountainous regions, arid interiors etc. combined with dense populations, high dependence on climate-sensitive livelihoods like agriculture, fishing, forestry and limited adaptive capacity, makes it especially exposed. One central thread in this vulnerability is the changing monsoon, which historically shapes agriculture, water supply, livelihoods, and settlement patterns.



Image: The New York Times

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As the monsoon changes by becoming more erratic, more intense in some places, more dry in others—it increasingly becomes a trigger for displacement and migration. The transformation of the monsoon has become not only a meteorological event but also a social and humanitarian turning point; pushing millions towards a new kind of displacement. The scale of this movement—projected by the World Bank to reach over 40 million internal climate migrants in South Asia by 2050² under a pessimistic scenario demands urgent, sophisticated policy responses that recognize climate migration not just as a failure of adaptation, but as a critical, and often forced, form of human adjustment. In this context, South Asia’s unfolding story can increasingly be summarized as one of a shift “from monsoon to migration”—a climate-induced exodus in the making.

The Monsoon: Lifeblood and Looming Threat

The South Asian monsoon sustains nearly two billion people, underpinning major agricultural cycles and freshwater availability across India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives.³ Traditionally, it delivers seasonal rains that replenish rivers and farmland, driving 40% of global rice production and supporting the livelihoods of a vast rural population. But over recent decades, the monsoon has become increasingly erratic. Studies document weakening and delayed monsoon patterns alongside intensified rainfall episodes, resulting in both drought and flooding within the same season.

Climate change elevates this disruption. Rising temperatures in the Indian Ocean and South Asian landmass alter moisture patterns and atmospheric circulation, leading to weak and sporadic monsoons that challenge agricultural predictability. The consequences are severe. For instance, the 2024 monsoon season saw devastating floods in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, killing hundreds and displacing millions as heavy rains overwhelmed infrastructure and agricultural

² “Internal Climate Migration in South Asia.” n.d. World Bank. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/401511522303177090/internal-climate-migration-in-south-asia>.

³ Fiaz, Attiq, Ghani Rahman, and Hyun-Han Kwon. 2025. “Impacts of Climate Change on the South Asian Monsoon: A Comprehensive Review of Its Variability and Future Projections.” *Journal of Hydro-Environment Research* 59 (March): 100654. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jher.2025.100654>.

lands. These floods destroyed vital crops, homes, roads, and healthcare facilities, undermining food security and livelihoods across the region.⁴



Image: BBC

Simultaneously, weaker monsoons threaten the dryland areas due to insufficient precipitation. Erratic monsoons exacerbate drought conditions, reducing crop yields and provoking water scarcity in already vulnerable zones. This biphasic extreme—intense floods and droughts within short cycles—is a feature of climate change’s influence on South Asia’s monsoon cycle, magnifying instability in the region's socio-economic landscape.

Climate Change as a Migration Driver

Climate-induced migration in South Asia is not a monolithic phenomenon. It is a complex, multi-layered process driven by the intersection of environmental stressors and pre-existing socio-economic vulnerabilities. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reported that between 2010 and 2021, South Asia accounted for over 61 million disaster-related displacements,

⁴ “South Asia’s Deadly Monsoon Season.” 2024. The New Humanitarian. September 3, 2024.
<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2024/09/03/south-asias-deadly-monsoon-season>.

with floods and storms responsible for 90% of these.⁵ The destabilization formed by changing monsoon patterns directly connects to climate-induced migration, which is surging alarmingly in South Asia. Currently, over 40 million people across the region have been displaced due to climate-related disasters, a figure expected to grow drastically by mid-century. These numbers hold significant implications: migration driven by climate pressures exacerbates urban overcrowding, strains resources, and challenges social cohesion.

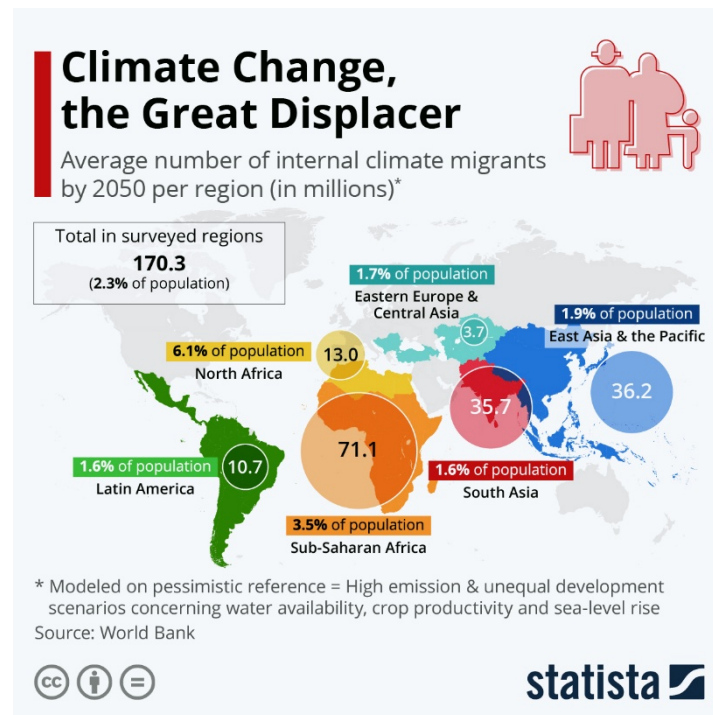


Image: Statista

Displacement routes are often within national borders, from rural, agriculturally dependent areas to urban centers little prepared for sudden population influxes. For example, recurrent flooding and salinization of farmland in coastal Bangladesh force affected communities to move inland, often to Dhaka, the capital, aggravating its already critical housing and infrastructure deficits. Similar patterns are observed in India and Pakistan, where climate disasters drove millions from Punjab, Balochistan, and other provinces in 2023 and beyond.⁶

⁵ "A Business Case for Investment in Prevention and Solutions in Asia and the Pacific Disaster Displacement." n.d. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/823176/disaster-displacement-asia-pacific.pdf>.

⁶ "Climate-Induced Migration: A Growing Crisis in South Asia." 2025. Diplomatist. 2025.



A family with their belongings wade through rain waters following rains and floods during the monsoon season in Jamshoro, Pakistan. Image: Reuters

Climate-induced migration disproportionately impacts marginalized groups—low-skill populations, women, and minorities who often lack resources to adapt or relocate with dignity. For displaced Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh’s Cox’s Bazar camps, climate change compounds their vulnerabilities by worsening hazards such as floods and landslides, triggering secondary displacements within and across borders.⁷

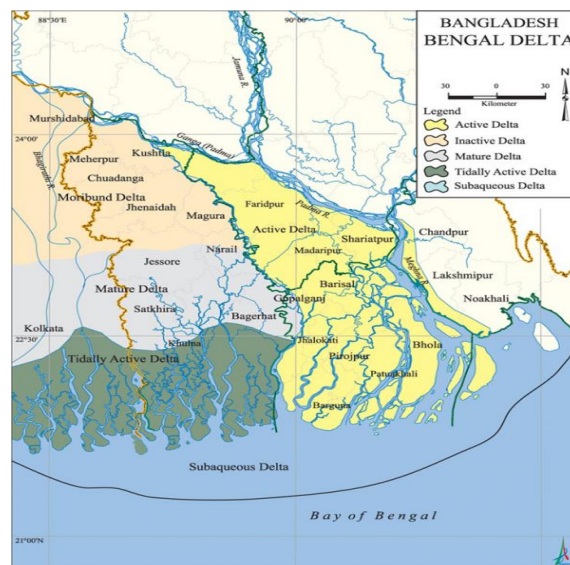
Coastal Vulnerability: Bangladesh and the Drowning Deltas

Nowhere is the monsoon’s volatility more consequential than in the densely populated low-lying deltas and coastal plains of Bangladesh and eastern India. The Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta

<https://diplomatist.com/2025/02/14/climate-induced-migration-a-growing-crisis-in-south-asia/>.

⁷ “Impact of Climate Change on the Migration and Displacement Dynamics of Rohingya Refugees Research Report.” 2024. https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/334_Research-Report-Climate-Change-Rohingya.pdf.

is home to more than 170 million people. This delta is already experiencing accelerated erosion, saltwater intrusion, and tidal flooding. Rising sea levels, driven by melting Himalayan glaciers and thermal expansion, are steadily submerging arable land. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), South Asia's coastal regions could see sea-level rises of up to one meter by the end of the century, displacing tens of millions. In Bangladesh alone, the World Bank projects that by 2050, around 13 million people could be displaced internally by climate change impacts, with the majority forced to leave coastal districts such as Khulna, Barisal, and Satkhira.⁸ For these communities, migration is not an abstract future risk but an ongoing survival strategy. Each monsoon season brings renewed fear that homes and fields will vanish under water, compelling families to move to urban slums or inland regions.



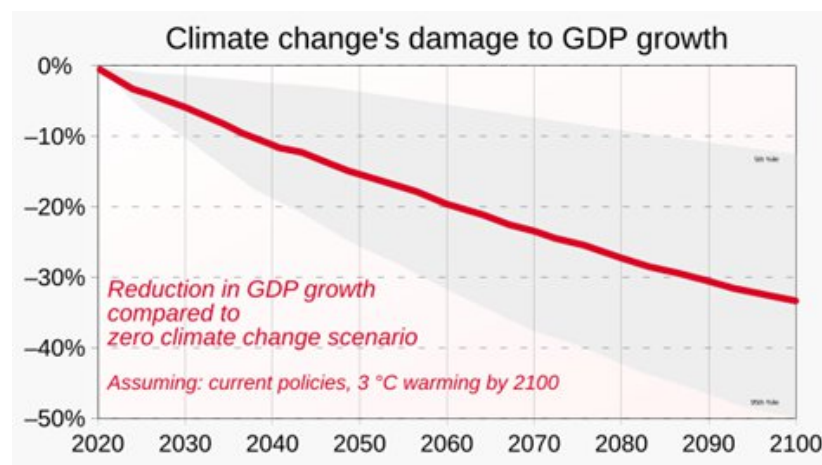
The Bengal Delta Map. Source: Banglapedia

Impacts on Human Security and Regional Stability

⁸ Verschuur, Jasper, Olivia Becher, Tom Schwantje, Mathijs Van Ledden, Swarna Kazi, and Ignacio Urrutia. n.d. "Welfare and Climate Risks in Coastal Bangladesh the Impacts of Climatic Extremes on Multidimensional Poverty and the Wider Benefits of Climate Adaptation." <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099317103212330683/pdf/IDU00c1858fc0d675043970a2740e6b087827d9f.pdf>.

Migration triggered by climate stressors deepens socioeconomic vulnerabilities. The sudden loss of livelihoods due to crop failures, livestock deaths, and infrastructure damage forces families into poverty traps, reducing food security and increasing health risks. Migrants frequently encounter legal and social hurdles in host communities, facing challenges in integration, employment, and access to services. This deteriorates mental health, cohesion, and economic stability, perpetuating cycles of deprivation.

The influx of migrants strains the already deficient urban infrastructure of South Asian cities, including housing, water, sanitation, and healthcare. This rapid, unchecked urbanization contributes to the growth of informal settlements, increasing the number of the urban poor who lack basic services and are often relegated to the most climate-vulnerable areas within the city. Climate change already threatens significant economic losses for South Asia. McKinsey Global Institute estimates that without strong mitigation, slow-onset climate impacts alone could cost the region nearly 9% of its GDP by 2100.⁹



Source: Wikiwand

Forced and undocumented migration exacerbates this, as migrants often face precarious working conditions, exploitation, and a lack of social and legal protection, essentially existing outside the domain of national law. Their human rights are compromised, and their stories of loss and devastation remain largely unrecorded and invisible to the state.

⁹ "Climate Induced Migration in South Asia – Impact of Loss and Damage - CANSA." 2019. Cansouthasia.net. 2019. <https://cansouthasia.net/10th-november-2021-migration/>.

Policy Blind Spots: The Missing Climate-Migration Nexus

At the policy level, South Asian governments are only beginning to recognize climate migration as a distinct challenge. While most have developed National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and disaster risk frameworks, few explicitly address migration or displacement. Bangladesh's Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (2009) and its revised National Adaptation Plan (2023) stand out as exceptions, as they integrate planned relocation and urban adaptation. Yet implementation remains constrained by limited funding and institutional capacity. India's policy response remains fragmented, with migration treated largely as a socio-economic issue rather than a climate one. Pakistan's climate policies have prioritized mitigation and disaster management, but internal displacement from floods and droughts remains largely unmanaged. At the regional level, cooperation has been weak despite the transboundary nature of climate impacts. Shared river systems, such as the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Indus, require coordinated basin management, yet political tensions often impede collaboration. The absence of a regional framework for climate-induced migration under SAARC or BIMSTEC leaves a critical gap in collective preparedness.

The international community has also failed to adequately address climate-induced displacement. The 1951 Refugee Convention does not recognize "climate refugees," leaving millions without legal protection if they cross borders. Within South Asia, cross-border migration due to environmental pressures is already a sensitive political issue, particularly between Bangladesh and India. Restrictive border regimes risk criminalizing climate migrants rather than assisting them. Meanwhile, global climate finance remains woefully inadequate. Despite commitments under the Paris Agreement, adaptation funding to South Asia falls far short of need. A 2024 UNFCCC assessment found that the region received only a fraction of the USD 100 billion annual target pledged by developed nations, and less than 10% of that funding directly supports migration-resilience projects.¹⁰ The "loss and damage" fund established at COP28 offers a glimmer of hope, but operationalization remains slow.

¹⁰ "COP29: Key Outcomes on Displacement and Implications for Climate Policy." 2024. IDMC - Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. 2024. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/policy-analysis/cop29-key-outcomes-on-displacement-and-implications-for-climate-policy/>.

Policy and Adaptation: Pathways to Resilience

Addressing South Asia's climate exodus calls for multi-layered adaptation strategies targeted at the root causes and immediate effects of the crisis. Governments must strengthen early warning systems and invest in climate-resilient infrastructure to mitigate flood and drought impacts. Enhanced meteorological forecasting and community preparedness can reduce disaster-related displacement.

Agricultural adaptation is critical. Promoting sustainable farming methods, diversification of income sources, and water-efficient practices empower communities to withstand monsoon variability and protect livelihoods, thereby reducing forced migration. Skill-building and economic diversification programs in rural areas increase resilience by offering alternatives to climate-sensitive livelihoods.

Social protection mechanisms must ensure that displaced populations receive adequate legal protection, healthcare, and housing to integrate successfully into new environments. Recognizing climate migrants in legal frameworks and providing pathways for their inclusion can alleviate social tensions and vulnerabilities.

At the regional level, collaboration within South Asia is essential. Climate change is transboundary; floods, droughts, and subsequent migration flows often cross national borders. Coordinated disaster response, shared data and resources, and joint adaptation plans empower countries to buffer shared risks more effectively. International assistance—financial, technical, and policy-oriented—will play a vital role in helping South Asian countries build adaptive capacity and social safety nets.

Conclusion

Science projects that by 2050, hundreds of millions in South Asia will live in severe climate hotspots, with climate migrants possibly exceeding 60 million people region-wide. The scale and speed of this exodus necessitate urgent action to avoid humanitarian crises and political instability. It requires integrating climate adaptation into national development and urban planning,

prioritizing sustainability and equity. Climate change is no longer a distant threat; the increasing intensity of monsoon disruptions and resulting human displacement represent a present crisis with cascading social, economic, and security consequences. Addressing this requires not only mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions globally but also localized, forward-looking resilience strategies. The path forward requires a radical re-evaluation of migration—not as a crisis to be managed, but as a profound human response to a changing planet that must be supported and guided. Failure to act now, by investing in local resilience, facilitating safe and planned migration, and establishing robust regional governance, will not only lead to a humanitarian catastrophe but will also undermine the long-term stability and development prospects of the entire South Asian subcontinent. The choice is stark: allow a climate-driven exodus to become a source of perpetual crisis, or harness human mobility with foresight and compassion as part of the regional adaptation to a new climatic reality.