

WORKING PAPERS

Addressing the Governance Gap for Climate-Induced Displacement through Institutionalism

Irmak Kurtulmuş

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Abstract

Estimates suggest that by 2050, rising sea levels, droughts, and more frequent intense tropical cyclones due to climate change could displace between 50 million and 1 billion individuals. Despite increasing attention to the interplay between climate change and migration, there is a lack of an international entity dutied to protect the rights of individuals displaced by climate change. This working paper seeks to understand the reason behind the slow development of global governance for climate refugees. It addresses the governance gap in protecting climate-induced displacees by applying an institutionalist lens. It explores the discrepancy between the increasing recognition of climate displacement and the lack of a global protection body. The study examines political and normative barriers to institutionalizing protection for climate displacees, proposing a combination of rational choice and sociological institutionalism as a framework to understand the absence of a global regime.

Keywords: climate-induced displacement, institutionalism, global governance

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Introduction

There is an extensive study of global environmental governance, particularly in addressing climate change, from different fields ranging from ecological scientists to scholars in international relations (Bernstein, 2001; Abbott & Snidal, 2010). The inception of the global environmental regime dates back to the 1970s (Bernstein, 2001, p.3). However, it is only in recent times that research has shifted towards the nexus between climate change and migration, including the safeguarding of migrants displaced by climate change (Simonelli, 2016; Behrman & Kent, 2018; McLeman & Gemenne, 2018; Piguet, 2013; IPCC, 2007). Projections indicate that between 50 million and 1 billion individuals could be displaced by 2050 as a result of escalating sea levels, droughts, and increased frequency of severe tropical cyclones, all linked to rising CO₂ emissions (Myers & Kent, 1995; Myers, 2005; IOM, 2019; Christian Aid, 2007; Bettini, 2013). Observing this growing migration trend driven by climate change, the UNHCR has identified climate change displacement as a "megatrend that will exacerbate other megatrends" (UNHCR, 2015). Likewise, the IPCC explicitly predicted that "[Global warming] may trigger massive population movements, resulting over the years in significant disturbances to settlement patterns and social instability in certain regions" (IPCC, 1990, p.20), although such large-scale displacement has not yet occurred to the extent envisaged.

Acknowledging the challenge of pinpointing the exact factors linking climate change to displacement (Abel et al., 2019; Black et al., 2001; Castles, 2002; Hugo, 2011), both academics and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have recognized the ongoing reality of migration, both voluntary and forced, due to climate effects (IPCC, 2007; Bogardi & Warner, 2009; Warner, 2010; Simonelli, 2016). Regions like the Carterets in Papua New Guinea, Kiribati and Tuvalu in the Pacific, the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, arid areas of Africa, and the delta regions in Asia are already witnessing displacement triggered by climate change (UNFCCC, 2014; Simonelli, 2016). Research shows that around 60 million individuals in Africa and Asia's "climate change hotspots" have been forced to abandon their homes (Biermann, 2018). According to UNHCR, about 60 million people worldwide reside in "climate change hotspots" where environmental degradation is already driving displacement. In response to the escalating numbers of climate change migrants, countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti have started offering *prima facie* refugee status to those fleeing drought-stricken areas (Ibid, p.267). Taking into account slow-onset climate processes such as desertification and rising sea levels as drivers of migration, these emphasize that climate change impacts the movement of people not only through sudden disasters but also through gradual environmental degradation. (IOM, 2022)

Countries disproportionately impacted by climate change repercussions have created forums to pursue non-binding resolutions for their displaced populations. Notable among these are the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), the Nansen Initiative, the Platform on Disaster Displacement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC). Additionally, numerous well-established INGOs now offer programs focused on displacement caused by climate change, providing states with informal frameworks to address climate-driven migration. Examples include the Paris Climate Agreement (2015), IOM's Migration, Environment and Climate Change (MECC) Division, the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States under the auspices of UNHCR, and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018). These initiatives, mostly established within the last decades, prove a growing global awareness and assertion of the connection between climate change and displacement, as more people are forced to flee their homes due to environmental changes each day. However, none of these initiatives have proposed a protection-based system specifically for those displaced by climate change (Simonelli, 2016; Jakobsson, 2018; Behrman & Kent, 2018;

Hunter, 2018). The Global Compact for Migration, for instance, addresses climate change as a migration driver by encouraging resilience, adaptation, and planned relocation pathways, but it creates no binding protection obligations for climate-displaced persons.

Despite the growing recognition of the climate–migration interplay entering mainstream discourse (Biermann, 2018), there remains a clear governance gap: no international entity is formally obligated to protect the rights of individuals displaced by climate change. This working paper seeks to understand why global governance for climate "refugees" has been slow to develop despite mounting evidence of its necessity. In other words, given that forced migration due to climate change is already a reality in some regions, and the association between climate change and displacement has been widely acknowledged for the past two decades, why does a governance gap persist regarding a specific protection regime for those displaced by climate change? What explains the discrepancy between the growing number of initiatives addressing the climate–migration nexus and the absence of a global protection authority for climate-displaced individuals? Could this be attributed to a political deadlock stemming from the power disparity between the Global South—which is and will continue to be more severely impacted by climate change—and the Global North, which is less immediately affected by the human consequences of environmental degradation? Or is it due to insufficient advocacy and normative development to foster the establishment of a global regime to protect climate-displaced individuals?

Placing these questions within regime-complex scholarship also provides an explanation why climate-mobility governance remains fragmented. Climate change sits inside a *regime complex*—a weakly institutionalized, cross-cutting ensemble of non-hierarchical and partially overlapping bodies (UNFCCC, WIM/TFD, Paris Agreement, Sendai, PDD)—that generates coordination problems and weak, lowest-common-denominator outcomes (Keohane & Victor, 2011; Raustiala & Victor, 2004). In parallel, cross-border mobility is not governed by a singular migration regime but by a migration/refugee regime complex encompassing the Refugee Convention/UNHCR, IOM's managerial instruments (e.g., the GCM), regional accords, and state practice—domains animated by divergent logics (protection versus management) and distinct club goods (Betts, 2010; Hollifield, 2012). Thinking in terms of three overlapping circles—environment (UNFCCC-led), refugee protection (UNHCR-led), and migration management (IOM/GCM)—reveals thin intersections: some shared tools (planned relocation, human-mobility references under loss-and-damage; protection principles like non-refoulement at the margins of human rights law) but no common *protection mandate* for climate-displaced persons.

This paper aims to address these questions through the perspective of institutionalism, which scrutinizes the origins, stability, and change of institutions (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Fioretos, 2011). A key focus of institutionalism is the process (or absence) of institutionalization. Institutionalization is "the process whereby social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action" (Meyer & Rowan, 1991, p.42). Institutionalism's focus on the process of institutionalization provides an appropriate toolkit to answer the research question, which centers on the reasons behind the lack of an institutionalization process for an international body responsible for protecting climate displacees.

Studies within global environmental governance have often employed institutionalist theories, but research predominantly revolves around applying a select few institutionalism models to various entities within this field (Young, 2006; Raustiala & Victor, 2004; Keohane & Victor, 2011). Rational choice institutionalism and historical institutionalism are the most frequently examined in relation to global environmental governance (Fioretos, 2011; Bernstein & van der Ven, 2017). This paper aims to enhance the institutionalist discourse on global governance by determining which

institutionalism approach most effectively explains the absence of institutionalization in protecting climate displacees.

I propose that a combination of rational choice institutionalism and sociological institutionalism is optimally suited to address this question. The imbalance of power and resources between the resource-rich Global North and the less influential Global South, which suffers significantly from climate change impacts, provides an initial explanation for the global governance gap. Rational choice institutionalism, focusing on actor interests and power dynamics, is well-suited to understanding the dynamics of global power and interest relations in the context of migration and environmentalism. Meanwhile, the absence of a definitive norm linking climate change to human rights, a shortage of advocates and "norm entrepreneurs" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), and the preference for non-protection-driven platforms over potential bodies with protection mandates contribute to the global governance gap concerning the rights and protection of climate displacees (Geddes et al., 2012). Sociological institutionalism's focus on norms helps elucidate why the lack of a clear norm regarding climate displacees weakens the potential for institutionalization in the migration–environment nexus, while rational choice institutionalism highlights the significance of state interests and global power disparities.

Given the current governance gap, norm-building is likely to proceed polycentrically—through a regime complex of regional, state-led, and non-state initiatives—rather than via a single grand bargain (Ostrom, 2009; Keohane & Victor, 2011). Because most climate-related mobility is internal or to neighbouring states, regional and domestic frameworks can incubate practice and harden soft law: the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) and the AU Kampala Convention (2009) already ground disaster-related internal displacement; in the Pacific, the Framework for Resilient Development (2017–2030) links climate risk reduction, mobility, and development; and cross-border disaster displacement has been advanced by the Nansen Agenda (2015) and the Platform on Disaster Displacement. Courts and human-rights bodies are also articulating edges of a protection floor (e.g., *Teitiota v. New Zealand*, HRC 2020, on climate-related non-refoulement). These venues can trial minimum guarantees—due process and consent in planned relocation, portability of basic social protection, climate-harm–sensitive non-refoulement, and safe regional mobility channels—while international organizations orchestrate convergence across forums (Abbott & Snidal, 2010). This is a pragmatic route to build shared norms that can later anchor a more global structure.

The following sections will define the unique situation of climate change displacees, distinguishing them from refugees or other migrants, and clarify what the global governance gap for climate displacees entails. Thereafter, I present a comprehensive overview of institutionalism and advocate for the most convincing institutionalist approach to explaining the governance gap for climate displacees. The analysis is situated within the existing literature on climate-induced migration and global governance, aiming to contribute to that literature by explaining why institutionalization has not occurred in this domain.

Who is a climate change displacee?

Simonelli (2016) defines "climate displacees" as "those who will be forced to leave their current homes due to continual environmental deterioration and secondary concerns (those, i.e., conditions affecting their livelihoods or having other economic and social impacts) from the processes of climate change, migrating inside or outside of their home country" (p.53). Defining who climate change displacees are is important to prevent them from falling into the category of

neither refugees nor (voluntary) immigrants (Hodgkinson, 2009; Piguet, 2013; CARE, 2016). However, it is not always easy to determine the roots of these "secondary concerns."

As mentioned previously, the global frameworks governing refugees, migration, and environmental issues—as embodied in the policies and activities of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) respectively—fail to offer protection to those displaced by climate change. This is because the category of climate-change displaced populations does not align with the definitions of beneficiaries of these international organizations (CARE, 2016; Biermann, 2018; Türk, 2015). This mismatch is the source of the global governance challenge in addressing forced migration due to climate change.

The conventional legal understanding of refugeehood is narrowly confined to individuals who escape their countries by crossing international borders due to a well-founded fear of state-led persecution, and thus, it excludes climate refugees (Castles, 2002). The core tenets of international refugee status—persecution and the necessity to cross an international border—are not met in the climate displacement context. Many contend that this framework is not suited for climate displacees, who often remain within their home countries and whose "persecution" cannot be easily attributed to their governments (CARE, 2016; Biermann, 2018; Gemenne, 2015; Chazalnoel & Ionesco, 2018). Furthermore, assigning responsibility to the governments of countries affected by climate change for climate-induced harm raises ethical and practical concerns, indicating that the condition of persecution does not apply to climate displacees. Given this context, experts have emphasized that the 1951 Refugee Convention, the cornerstone of the global refugee regime, does not encompass migrants forced to move due to climate change (Chazalnoel & Ionesco, 2018; Piguet, 2013; Hunter, 2018; Zetter & Morrissey, 2014). Some scholars classify climate-induced displacement under the broader notion of "survival migration"—people fleeing existential threats not covered by the refugee regime (Betts, 2013)—which further illustrates how climate displacees fall into a conceptual gap outside current legal protections. Consequently, the UNHCR, which is tasked with safeguarding the rights of refugees and seeking durable solutions for them, does not consider climate change-induced migrants within its scope of responsibility (Chazalnoel & Ionesco, 2018; Hall, 2013), rendering these populations vulnerable to future problems related to climate change-driven migration.

While UNHCR does not directly take responsibility for the climate displacees, various United Nations (UN) entities and global refugee-related platforms have recently acknowledged the connection between climate change and forced migration. For instance, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016) explicitly recognizes the critical intersection of migration with environmental and climate change factors, noting that environmental factors often intertwine with other migration drivers (Biermann, 2018). This represents a significant acknowledgment in an official UN document of the multi-causal nature of climate-related migration, suggesting that a multifaceted approach is necessary to tackle climate–migration nexus issues. Hall (2013) emphasizes that although UNHCR initially showed reluctance to engage directly with climate-induced displacement due to its established mandate focusing exclusively on persecution-based displacement, increasing global awareness and political salience of climate issues has gradually led UNHCR to reconsider its role and acknowledge climate displacement as an area warranting attention. Additionally, the Declaration highlights the significance of other global, state-driven efforts related to climate change and the environment, such as the Paris Climate Agreement, the MICIC initiative, and the Nansen Initiative. It is reasonable to assert that numerous global actors recognize the predicament of those displaced by climate change; yet, as Simonelli (2016) points out, the wide-ranging and vague nature of the definition of climate change displacees continues to present obstacles to establishing a dedicated global entity for climate-forced migrants.

Similar to the global refugee regime, those displaced due to climate change do not come under the purview of any formal international migration governance. Although the individuals displaced by climate change are not classified as migrants who receive protection from IOM, the organization positioned itself strategically as a principal actor in this field by attempting to create a more congenial climate for migration management solutions such as planned relocation and temporary migration schemes (Hall, 2016). However, its utility continues to be limited by lacking a formal protection mandate for climate-displaced migrants (Ibid). So, IOM has been lobbying its member states for about a decade to recognize the migration-environment nexus as one of the policy concerns to incorporate climate mobility into global agendas even when there is no protection mandate. In addition to its focus on migration management, IOM has been researching climate change's impact on migration since 2008 (Simonelli, 2016). The establishment of IOM's Migration, Environment, and Climate Change (MECC) Division in 2015 further reflected member states' demand for concentrated efforts on the migration–environment nexus. IOM characterizes its role in this area as centralizing environmental migration in international, regional, and national discourse—encompassing policy, advocacy, research, capacity building, and operational activities. The MECC has effectively garnered funding and developed solutions for migrants driven by natural disasters (Behrman & Kent, 2018). In particular, the establishment of MECC has now been *consolidated through IOM's Institutional Strategy on Migration, Environment and Climate Change, 2021-2030*, which operationalizes three pillars—policy/operational support, evidence, and partnerships—and explicitly links planned relocation, disaster displacement, and climate-responsive mobility pathways (IOM, 2021). Although it offers an institutional roadmap within IOM for scaling practice and financing connectors across the climate–migration interface, global protection obligations remain thin as there has been any specific mandate or binding agreement that explicitly acknowledges and caters to the needs of climate displacees. While IOM responds to natural disasters and assists affected communities, a formal distinction of climate change–affected forced migrants from other disaster-displaced migrants has yet to be established (Behrman & Kent, 2018).

Furthermore, the Global Compact for Migration recognizes climate change as a driver of migration but does not create obligations to provide protection. Instead, it encourages states to find pragmatic ways forward through planned relocation, adaptation strategies, and pathways for regular migration, thereby leaving protection responsibilities largely undefined and voluntary. Many studies concentrate on migrants forced to relocate due to natural disasters, proposing temporary and circular migration methods as a means to sustain seasonal livelihoods. However, this emphasis does not encompass those displaced by slow-onset climate change effects like sea-level rise or desertification (Chazalnoel & Ionesco, 2018). The World Migration Report 2022 of IOM shows how recent assessments underscore that slow-onset events (e.g., gradual desertification, erosion, and rising sea levels) are increasingly contributing to displacement, a challenge not fully addressed by the current migration framework while it highlights that unlike sudden environmental events, slow-onset changes provide communities with time to plan and gather resources, often resulting in internal migration rather than cross-border movement. As most climate-related mobility is internal or to neighbouring states, this elevates the strategic importance of subnational arrangements and regional instruments alongside international cooperation (Martin 2010). The chapter also states the difficulties of linking migration to climate change alone, recognizing the intertwining of environmental, economic, and social forces.

The UNFCCC serves as the primary international entity focusing on environmental issues and efforts to mitigate climate change, engaging a broad spectrum of stakeholders from private entities to states. Like the UNHCR and IOM, the UNFCCC acknowledges the importance of people displaced by climate change but does not offer them protection. In 2010, the Cancun

Adaptation Framework marked the first official recognition by the UNFCCC of climate change-induced displacement, bringing climate displacees onto its agenda. Yet within the UNFCCC, the acknowledgment of climate displacees has primarily revolved around a narrative of loss and damage rather than protection—focusing on those forced or who choose to relocate due to environmental factors as victims of loss. This perspective was further formalized in the 2012 Decision on Loss and Damage in Doha (Chazalnoel & Ionesco, 2018, p.108). The year 2015 represented a pivotal moment in policy developments concerning climate-driven migration. Developments around the Paris Climate Agreement and the Nansen Initiative's global consultation led to the creation of a Task Force on Displacement under the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) for Loss and Damage (Biermann, 2018, p.65). However, this task force has no operational role and is limited to studying and making non-binding recommendations to "avert, minimize, and address" displacement. Currently, the broader context of climate-induced displacement falls under the WIM framework. While these developments indicate an increasing acknowledgment of climate-induced forced migration as a critical issue for various actors, establishing a dedicated entity to safeguard the rights and protection of climate displacees remains an unaddressed aspect of global environmental politics.

The intersection of climate change-induced displacement with the regimes for environmental protection, refugee protection, and migration management highlights the relevance of each global system in exploring the absence of a protective regime for those displaced by climate change. Each of these regimes encompasses structures and processes pertinent to human mobility caused by climate change—such as the UNFCCC's WIM, IOM's MECC Division, and UNHCR's incorporation of climate in the New York Declaration—yet none of these frameworks is equipped with the authority to provide legal protection or to foster new, sustainable solutions for those affected.

Additionally, there is a lack of international legislation specifically addressing climate-displaced individuals, as they do not fall into traditional categories of refugees or migrants. International human rights law currently does not acknowledge climate displacees as a distinct group whose rights have been infringed (Mixed Migration Platform, 2017). Only the UN Human Rights Committee's landmark decision in *Teitiota v. New Zealand* (2020) has begun to establish a link between climate change and states' non-refoulement obligations, suggesting that returning people to life-threatening climate degradation could violate their right to life. So, despite the acknowledged connection between climate change and migration in recent decades, individuals displaced due to climate factors are left without dedicated international protection, remaining susceptible to the adverse impacts of climate change (Zetter & Morrissey, 2014; Jakobsson, 2018; Jayawardhan, 2017). Notably, various scholars and policy advocates have proposed new international instruments or expanded definitions to fill this protection gap (e.g., Biermann and Boas, 2010; World Refugee Council, 2019), but such reforms have not gained traction within international governance frameworks. In practice, even efforts to incorporate climate displacement into existing agreements have faltered – for example, negotiations to include climate-displaced people in the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees were swiftly abandoned due to fears that expanding the refugee definition could dilute obligations toward traditional refugees. The Global Compact for Migration shunted the issue and framed it in terms of adaptation and voluntary movement rather than protection. As a result, climate-induced migrants remain in legal and institutional limbo.

From a regimes perspective, the problem is not merely definitional but structural. The environmental circle offers risk-reduction and finance (adaptation, loss-and-damage) without beneficiary-level status; the refugee circle offers status and rights but is narrowly tied to persecution across borders; and the migration circle offers access pathways and management

toolkits but no protection floor. The sparse overlaps—e.g., UNFCCC references to displacement, UNHCR's cautious engagement, IOM's MECC—create *coordination* without *authority*. In regime-complex terms, this produces forum-shopping and mandate-shifting by states, systematically favoring soft law and ad hoc responses over a dedicated protection regime for climate-displaced persons (Keohane & Victor, 2011; Betts, 2010). This lens also clarifies why responsibility-sharing underperforms. Where regime complexes lack hierarchical rules or central enforcement, distributional conflicts dominate and powerful states block costly obligations; the result is under-provision of global public goods and reliance on discretionary burden-sharing (Keohane & Victor, 2011; Thielemann, 2003). In the climate-mobility nexus, the justice claim (major emitters bearing larger responsibilities) collides with migration control preferences, and the thin set of shared norms across the three circles—precaution, human rights, and “migration as adaptation”—has not congealed into a robust, cross-domain protection norm. Until a thicker inter-domain normative core emerges (e.g., extending non-refoulement to serious climate harm and operationalizing planned relocation as a rights-based tool), the regime complex will continue to deliver coordination without protection

Having outlined who climate change displacees are and why they fall outside current protection regimes, the analysis now turns to an institutionalist lens to explain why this global governance gap persists. The following section leverages institutionalism theories in international relations to shed light on the failure to institutionalize protection for climate displacees, drawing on multiple strands of institutionalism to examine the problem from different angles.

Understanding Climate Displacement through Institutionalism

The literature on institutionalism in international relations provides profound insights into the global governance gap affecting climate displacees. Bernstein's (2002) integration of institutionalist and norm-based perspectives shed light on the rise of global “liberal environmentalism.” Liberal environmentalism, as defined by Bernstein, refers to a governance paradigm involving environmental concerns and protection objectives pursued in harmony with liberal economic order and norms without fundamentally challenging that economic order. This examines how liberal values have molded prevailing ideas in global environmental politics, hence it helps to understand our governance gap. Here, focused scrutiny is given to how each institutionalist literature strand enhances our comprehension of the institutional void facing populations displaced by climate change effects.

Political science deeply engages with institutions, understanding their pivotal role as “the organization of political life makes a difference” (March & Olsen, 1984, p.747). Institutionalism is conceptualized as the examination of institutions' stability and transformation, where institutions are understood as state-created rules and practices for world politics management (Keohane, 2017). The emergence of rational choice, normative/sociological, historical, and constructivist institutionalism in the 1990s marks a significant shift from the older focus on formal government structures to a nuanced view of the dynamic interplay between actors and institutions (Fioretos, 2011; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Lowndes, 2010; Mackay et al., 2010; Rhodes et al., 2008). This paper introduces four approaches—rational choice, historical institutionalism, sociological institutionalism, and discursive institutionalism—but centers primarily on discursive and historical institutionalism in order to explain the governance gap on climate-induced displacement. While rational choice and sociological institutionalism serve as important background frameworks, the other two offer the most insight into (i) how ideas and narratives either support or repudiate climate driven mobility within a fragmented climate-refugee-migration regime complex, and (ii) how

legacies of prior bargains (path dependence, sequencing) channel today's responsibility-sharing outcomes. Each of these approaches is examined in the following subsections, and their relevance to the failure to institutionalize a global protection regime for climate displacees is humbly evaluated.

Rational Choice Institutionalism

Rational choice is widely regarded as a methodological paradigm that attributes individual and group decisions to the pursuit of objectives within certain limitations, according to Snidal (2013). This theoretical framework posits that the strategic decision-making of actors, influenced by a context-dependent analysis of costs and benefits, forms the core of rational choice institutionalism. Such micro-level strategic actions by individuals are pivotal in shaping broader political dynamics, positioning institutions as "structures of voluntary cooperation created by actors in order to overcome collective action problems and increase their interests (Ostrom, 1990) either by reducing uncertainty (North, 1990) or by restructuring incentives to cooperate" (Mackay et al., 2010, p.574).

Scholars of rational choice argue that the formation and stability of institutions stem from the rational choices of individuals aiming to optimize benefits or mitigate losses within given contexts. Institutions are basically "the rules of the game in a society" and structure the interests (Kenneth & Weingast, 1994). Their functions and stability are crucial for reducing transaction costs and providing states with insights into the behavior of others (Keohane, 2017). The significance of institutions extends to influencing power dynamics and interests, underscoring their role in maintaining continuity through coordination mechanisms and rules. Furthermore, institutional analysis has expanded to encompass their roles as structures of power and control, highlighting the varying power dynamics among actors (Lowndes, 2010).

When considering the principles of maximizing benefits and minimizing uncertainties in potential cooperative ventures, the absence of an institutional framework for climate displacees can be attributed to the preferences and interests of states. States must endorse norm-based agreements for them to be effective, and their willingness to collaborate in the emergence and maintenance of such an institution is crucial. The significance of power dynamics in enabling states to pursue their interests is acknowledged. It is observed that the endorsement of global initiatives by influential or reputable countries tends to encourage broader participation (Snidal, 2013; Keohane, 1984). Keohane and Victor (2011) discuss how a state's power, influenced by its decision-making impact and economic standing, alongside beneficial asymmetries in interdependence, facilitates better negotiation positions, driving the creation of international institutions for cooperative advantage. The reluctance of the Global North, a major contributor to climate change but minimally affected by its consequences, to ratify significant environmental governance agreements underscores the effect of power imbalances on the potential of establishing an entity for climate displacees (Zetter & Morrissey, 2014). Indeed, states might prefer to avoid endorsing new norms and institutions dedicated to climate displacees. The fact that the issue of climate displacees is addressed by different regimes and institutions also allows states to engage in 'forum shopping' by selecting the most suitable regime and institution, such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) or the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to achieve a favorable outcome (Alter and Meunier, 2009; Betts, 2011). Although rational-choice institutionalism highlights the calculative nature of political actors, it has limitations in explaining institutional change, particularly endogenous change (Hay, 2008; Snidal, 2013). Changes in institutions are often precipitated by exogenous shocks or bounded rationality, which renders actors vulnerable to short-sighted cost-benefit calculations. Introducing better alternatives

can shift actor preferences, potentially redefining the institution to ensure actors' benefits. Therefore, change is typically initiated externally, with rational choice theorists not addressing endogenous changes. In contrast, sociological institutionalism, emphasizing norms and cultural practices, offers insights into aspects overlooked by rational-choice institutionalism.

Rational choice institutionalism has faced criticism for not thoroughly addressing the dynamic process and time path (Snidal, 2013). Snidal highlights a critical gap in this approach, stating that "this is a particular shortcoming of the cooperation literature where the central question of when or how there will be a transition between equilibria — from anarchy to cooperation, or from one cooperative arrangement to another — is thereby ignored" (p.14). This critique is especially relevant to how environmental politics and the issue of climate displacement intersect, as governance frameworks have increasingly engaged with regional and state-led initiatives addressing climate displacement, such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development, Platform on Disaster Displacement, Migrants in Countries in Crisis initiative, Climate Vulnerable Forum, and the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States.

Hence, rational choice institutionalism has traditionally maintained a static and functionalist perspective, concentrating primarily on the formation of institutions rather than their change (Hall & Taylor, 1996). However, recent advancements in the field have acknowledged these limitations, offering a more dynamic understanding of institutional understanding. Researchers have delved into the endogenous change within institutions and how institutions adapt (or are intentionally designed) through changing or deliberately restructuring to address failures or enhance their function (or respond to their failure to generate desired behavior). Despite these insights, the approach largely focuses on individual actions. Applying this framework to the scenario of climate displacees reveals its inadequacy in explaining the absence of a global regime for climate displacees, largely because such a regime does not align with the interests of the Global North, which faces less immediate pressure from climate change compared to the Global South and the world's poorest countries (CARE, 2016; German Watch, 2017; Jakobsson, 2018). Nonetheless, the emergence of regional and state-led initiatives challenges the rational choice perspective, which struggles to account for these developments due to major powers' reluctance.

The initiatives led by the Global South states have significantly influenced global environmental governance, illustrating that the dynamics of state interaction in the domain of migration and climate change cannot be defined as dichotomous. Bernstein (2001) challenges the rational choice institutionalism's binary perspective on state relations within environmentalism, arguing that this framework oversimplifies the complex nature of these relations, which should instead be viewed as existing on a continuum. This perspective challenges the assumption that institutions form solely to serve state interests, recognizing the complex power dynamics at play, and outcomes of state actions are considered either "agreement/no agreement, action/no action, or cooperation/conflict" (p.10). Such state-driven initiatives have fostered a middle ground of interaction among states, addressing climate-induced migration not through outright conflict or complete agreement but via a nuanced approach. This complexity underscores the inadequacies of rational choice institutionalism in addressing the nuanced realities of global governance gaps for climate displacees.

Normative/Sociological Institutionalism

In contrast to the rational choice theory's overemphasis on rational choice, sociological institutionalism contextualizes the agency by placing cultural context at the forefront, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and adhering to expected norms and appropriate behaviors within institutional frameworks. (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Mackay et al., 2010). This approach suggests that actors are guided by cultural norms, cognitive frameworks, and traditions rather than solely by efficiency in addressing collective issues. Institutions emerge from cultural influences and the reciprocal relationship between actors and institutions (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Thanks to their focus on the interaction between agency and structure, sociological institutionalism highlights the importance of cognitive and symbolic templates in understanding institutional dynamics, shifting the focus from solving collective action problems to understanding institutions as embodiments of socio-cultural understanding of "the way the world works" (Thelen, 1999, p.386, Rhodes et al., 2008; Mackay et al., 2010). The concept of "logic of appropriateness" (Campbell, 1989) or "codes of appropriateness" (Mackay et al., 2010) underlines that institutional stability and change are driven by expectations and conventions about how things are expected to work.

Adhering to expectations encapsulates the routine and socially constructed understanding of individual and collective behavior. The spread of norms, habitual practices, institutional frameworks, identities, and the cultural context of institutions are pivotal in explaining their stability and change (March & Olsen, 1989). Krasner (1983) views norms as behavior standards defined by rights and duties, whereas Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996) see them as shared beliefs about appropriate actions linked to specific identities. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) highlight norms as benchmarks for appropriate behavior of a given identity, emphasizing the sense of duty and moral imperative. Sociological institutionalists argue that institutions emerge from human actions, shaped by "processes of negotiation, conflict, and contestation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991)" (Mackay et al., 2010, p. 275).

Sociological institutionalism's perspective, which emphasizes norms and the concept of appropriateness, offers a compelling explanation for changes in institutional policies and structures. The theory posits a discrepancy between the ideals of the individuals within an organization and its practices (Olsen & Brunsson, 1993). It delves into how the interplay between culture, norms, agency, and institutions provides a nuanced understanding of power dynamics. However, it is criticized for overlooking power imbalances and conflicts, suggesting that "processes of interpretation are also processes of contention" (Mackay et al., 2010, p.279). Additionally, it is seen as limited in explaining the institutional change within the institution, independent of shifts in the external cultural and ideational milieu (Hay, 2008; Fioretos, 2017).

Sociological institutionalism demonstrates that institutional change mirrors shifts in the broader cultural context. This approach suggests that an organization's social legitimacy stems from its adherence to prevailing norms, leading to the adoption of new practices aligned with cultural expectations. In examining the slimy development of a protection body for migrants displaced by climate change, it becomes clear that norm-related factors play a crucial role. The global human rights norms concerning natural disasters are often criticized for being weak or newly emerging at best (Jakobsson, 2018; Behrman & Kent, 2018; Simonelli, 2016; Chazonel & Loesco, 2018; Black et al., 2011). Moreover, as Mearsheimer (2019) argues, the erosion or decline of the liberal international order—characterized by increasing skepticism toward multilateralism and global cooperation—may further hinder the development of robust global norms and institutions, including those aimed at protecting climate-displaced migrants. In sociological institutionalist

terms, the "cultural context" has not been favorable for a norm of climate refugee protection to bloom.

The literature on sociological institutionalism highlights two primary factors behind the weak human rights norms in the context of climate change. Firstly, the definition of climate displacees and the norms for protecting their rights are seen as vague and overly broad (Jakobsson, 2018). The study by Behrman and Kent (2018) critiques the global norms for their unclear definitions and the practical implications of these norms for addressing displacement caused by climate change. They raise critical questions regarding the identification of climate-induced migrants, differentiation from other environmental migrations, the design of protection instruments, and the broader policy implications. This debate showcases the challenge of defining climate displacees due to the varied nature of displacement, encompassing different migration durations and the spectrum from voluntary to forced migration. The complexity and diversity in understanding climate-induced displacement highlight the difficulties in advocating for an international protective body without a clear consensus on who qualifies as climate displacees. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) stress the importance of clear and specific norm formulations over ambiguous and complex ones for successful norm establishment.

The second factor, the absence of a robust norm regarding climate displacees, relates to the ambiguous definition of forced migration due to climate change. The literature on norms indicates that for norms to be successfully institutionalized globally, they must align with existing norms or fit the "world-time context," as Finnemore and Sikkink describe (Jakobsson, 2018). However, the realms of human rights and climate change do not readily accommodate the specific norms for climate displacees. As previous sections have shown, the established global regimes of refugeehood, migration, and environmentalism have not recognized the grounds for norms protecting climate displacees. Given the analytical strength of sociological institutionalist perspectives in addressing the slow emergence of norms around climate displacement, this paper proposes that this strand of the literature is most suited to unravel the complexities of the global governance gap affecting migrants displaced by climate change.

Lastly, examining the role of Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) concept of the 'norm life cycle' illuminates why global norms around climate-induced displacement have remained weak. (Jakobsson, 2018). According to this framework, norms progress through three distinct stages: norm emergence, where norm entrepreneurs actively advocate for a new standard; norm cascade, where a critical mass of actors adopts and promotes the norm, leading to broader acceptance; and internalization, where the norm becomes widely accepted and is taken for granted (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). To be precise, the actors named as norm entrepreneurs are a network of advocates, diplomats, international organization staff, and state officials with the influence to shape global policy. In the case of climate displacement, the norm is stuck at the initial emergence stage. Although certain actors have attempted to advocate for recognizing climate-induced migrants by framing strategies – such as referring to "climate refugees" to draw empathy or "migration as adaptation" to find positive narratives, their efforts have struggled to achieve broader adoption due to definitional ambiguities, competition among varying narratives (humanitarian, security, developmental), and resistance from powerful states reluctant to assume additional obligations. Constructivist international relations theory posits that for a norm to gain international acceptance and become institutionalized, it must be championed and spread by these entrepreneurs. (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). This principle holds true for the issue of climate-induced migration. Consequently, the normative proposition that climate displacees require formal international protection has not reached the 'cascade' stage, leaving the issue marginal within international governance frameworks.

Jakobsson (2018) also states a decrease in activity from norm entrepreneurs advocating for global governance mechanisms for climate displacees post the Paris Climate Agreement 2015. She observes that even the central norm entrepreneurs in this area did not, after 2015, promote the specific norm of a protection obligation for climate-induced migrants with much force. Their advocacy lost momentum. Jakobsson (2018, p.63) concludes that "...even these central entrepreneurs were not promoting the aspect of enhanced protection for climate-induced migrants very forcefully, which left this norm proposition in limbo – it made its way onto the political agenda but has since been relegated to the periphery of political discussions." Indeed, after a busy time of attention around 2015 (with the Nansen Initiative report, the Paris Agreement's Task Force on Displacement, etc.), the subsequent years saw dwindling advocacy and the issue sliding off center stage. This decrease in activity from norm entrepreneurs post-2015 is critical to the explanation (Jakobsson, 2018). Around 2015-2016, the global agenda had other issues, such as the Syria/Iraq war and refugee flows, a spate of terrorist attacks, and a general securitization of migration in political discourse. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic and other geopolitical crises (e.g., Ukraine). These issues diverted political attention and discursive space away from emerging issues like climate displacement. Even committed entrepreneurs may have struggled to be heard in a crowded, security-focused global discourse. The institutionalization of migration governance into the two Global Compacts (Refugees and Migration) in 2018 arguably "fixed" the agenda in a way that left climate displacement as an acknowledged but secondary topic, with limited room for new initiatives (Jubilut & Casagrande, 2019). In short, the failure of entrepreneurs to push the norm beyond the emergence phase can be partly attributed to an unfavorable international context and possibly strategic choices. Yet, for this paper, it is enough to show that the role of norm entrepreneurs contributes to understanding the reasons behind the global governance gap.

Sociological institutionalism helps us understand institutional change—or, as here, the lack of it—as reflective of broader shifts in the cultural context and normative environment. The international community's willingness to establish new institutions depends significantly on shared norms about what is considered appropriate and related to climate-induced migrants; the normative support required to create a dedicated protection institution remains weak. It might be said that states may not have reached the point where protecting climate-displaced populations carries the same moral obligation or sense of appropriateness. Although there is a shift in how the issue is perceived—by reframing climate displacement as a pressing humanitarian crisis or by increasing moral pressure as climate impacts intensify—this seems inadequate.

Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism has addressed significant gaps in prior institutional theories by offering insights into the reasons behind institutional stability. It delineates how institutions emerge, remain stable, and change by examining the historical contexts and specific temporal and locational factors that influence actors' preferences and cultural practices within these institutions (Mahoney et al., 2009). This approach emphasizes the critical importance of temporal analysis in understanding institutional dynamics.

Historical institutionalism examines the role of historical factors in shaping the preferences within institutions, which, in turn, influence broader historical change and development patterns (Katznelson & Weingast, 2005; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; March & Olsen, 1996; Fioretos, 2011; 2017; Keohane, 2017). This approach posits that institutions are the product of earlier regulations and decisions, which establish initial preference patterns. The sequence and timing of historical socio-political events critically inform subsequent institutional developments, as existing preferences impact future behaviors and interest calculations. Concepts like "path dependency"

(Hall & Taylor, 1996), "layering" (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010), "self-reinforcement" (Keohane, 2017), "lock-in effect," (Fioretos, 2001), "cascade-effect" (Fioretos, 2011, 2017; Blyth, 2003), and "punctuated equilibrium" (Hay, 2008) highlight the significance of established routines, norms and conventions for the stability and change of institutions. After institutions have been established, overcoming 'path dependency' becomes a significant challenge (Mackay et al., 2010).

Bartley (2007) highlights the critical role of earlier historical and social contexts in influencing the formation of institutional structures, arguing that new institutions do not emerge in a vacuum but are instead shaped by preceding arrangements. The existing framework determines the political possibilities and resources for newly emerging institutions. Thus, the likelihood of new institutional emergence is deeply embedded in their specific historical milieu, emphasizing the significance of broader social structures in facilitating or hindering the emergence of norms and institutions (Bartley, 2007; Bernstein & van der Ven, 2017). This emphasis on the importance of the broader social structures is particularly relevant in discussing the absence of a global mechanism for addressing climate-induced displacement, where pre-existing frameworks for refugeehood, migration, and environmentalism limit the space for creating new regimes for climate displacees. These pre-existing frameworks generate a "cascade effect" that hinders the mobilization of necessary resources and ideas, making establishing a new regime seem unattainable for key stakeholders. Many scholars point out instances where UNHCR, IOM, and UNFCCC appear to resist recognizing the necessity for a dedicated entity to address the needs of individuals displaced by climate change (Jakobsson, 2018; Hodgkinson et al., 2009; Gemenne, 2015; Hunter, 2018). Additionally, while historical institutionalism sheds light on why current regimes and stakeholder decisions preclude new institutional formations for climate displacees, it falls short of explaining "why certain decisions were made in the first place" (Bernstein and Ven der Ven, 2017, p. 308).

Power has been interrogated through the lens of path dependency, seen as a capacity to shape future directions (Mackay et al., 2010). Historical path dependency positions some actors as "institutional winners," enabling them to preserve their advantages (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Despite critiques of historical institutionalism for focusing too much on stability, its more dynamic aspects consider the dual nature of institutions: they limit actors while being shaped by "deliberate political strategies, of political conflict, and of choice" (Thelen & Steinmo, 1992, p.10). Ikenberry's "After Victory" (2001) illustrates this approach in international relations by exploring how states navigate power imbalances to establish global order, favoring law-based constitutional arrangements due to historical precedents, thereby marking a dynamic turn in historical institutionalism in IR.

In sum, historical institutionalism offers insight into why certain institutional arrangements fail to arise. It explains the climate displacement governance gap by pointing to path-dependent inertia: the international system's division into separate regimes for climate, refugees, and migration has "locked out" the possibility of a dedicated climate displacement regime so far. The decisions and non-decisions at key historical moments – such as the design of the 1951 Convention, the 1992 UNFCCC, and more recently the 2018 Compacts – set us on a trajectory where climate displacees fall through institutional cracks. Those prior decisions were not made with climate displacement in mind, and now they inadvertently constrain current options. Historical institutionalism thus complements the rational and sociological analyses by adding that even if interests and norms were aligning for a change, the institutional path matters: turning the proverbial ship of existing institutions is slow and difficult. At the same time, historical institutionalism alone is not sufficient. It describes why change didn't happen (stability) but can underexplain how change might eventually occur. In this case, it underscores that the lack of institutionalization is due in part to "history matters"—global governance evolved without accommodating climate migrants—but it

doesn't by itself tell us what could trigger a break from that history. For that, we might need to incorporate insights from the other approaches to examine.

Constructivist/Discursive Institutionalism

Constructivist/discursive institutionalism emphasizes the significance of ideas and discourses in shaping institutions. While it shares some similarities with sociological institutionalism's emphasis on cultural conventions, cognitive templates, and norms, it uniquely delves into the ideational sources of institutional change and the role of discourses in constructing institutional culture, continuity, and crises. This approach underlines the influence of ideas and discourses on shaping actors' interests and behaviors, as highlighted by numerous scholars (Campbell & Pedersen, 2001; Abdelal et al., 2006; Blyth, 1997, 2002, 2003). Hay (2008) suggests that this focus stems from an interest in understanding "institutional disequilibrium" (p.60), prioritizing the dynamics between ideas, discourses, and actors over the mere content of ideas.

In the realm of constructivist institutionalism, ideas and discourses are crucial, with institutional change being driven by 'sentient actors' who seek to change institutions through "deliberation, contestation, as well as consensus-building about ideas" (Schmidt, 2010, p.12). This approach highlights how ideas and discourses not only contribute to the construction and understanding of power but also to its reconfiguration within institutions. It underscores the role of ideas and discourses in constructing, shaping, and deconstructing power relations and exercising power, offering a nuanced perspective on power dynamics. (Schmidt, 2010).

In applying constructivist/discursive institutionalism to the climate displacement governance gap, we examine how climate-induced migration has been framed and discussed in international policy circles and how those dominant discourses have either facilitated or impeded institutionalization. As the discourse around climate and migration has been contested and evolving, different narratives exist: a humanitarian narrative that emphasizes victims in need of help, a security narrative that portrays climate migration as a threat to stability, an adaptation narrative that frames migration as a form of resilience, and a justice narrative that links climate migration to the responsibility of major emitters. Which discourse gains prominence can significantly influence whether states feel compelled to act collectively or not (Methmann & Oels, 2015)

A critical discourse that several scholars have identified is the securitization of climate migration. Bettini (2014) and Baldwin et al. (2014) examine how the notion of "climate refugees" has often been couched in security terms – as a looming crisis of mass migration that could threaten national and international security. This securitized discourse tends to alarm the public and policymakers about potential waves of destabilizing migrants. Constructivist institutionalism would argue that such a discourse, if dominant, is conducive to policy responses that focus on containment and control rather than protection. Indeed, if states view climate-induced migration primarily as a security challenge, they are more likely to invest in border security, preventative adaptation in place, or ad-hoc responses to disasters rather than embracing a new rights-based regime that facilitates movement. As climate migration is discursively represented as a security threat, states become more reluctant to engage in norm-building around protecting those migrants (Bettini, 2014).

Another discursive factor is agenda-setting and attention. According to sociological institutionalism, global attention is a resource, making it challenging for climate migration discourse to remain consistently prominent (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). From a constructivist institutionalist perspective, the narrative of a "climate refugee crisis" did temporarily attract

considerable media and political attention, especially around 2007 when headlines such as "Climate refugees could reach 200 million" emerged prominently (Brown, 2008; Bettini, 2013). Bettini (2013) critiques this specifically as contributing to the `mythologization` and alarmist framing of the issue rather than promoting actionable responses.

As mentioned before, after 2015, the dominant discourses in global migration governance notably shifted towards addressing the Syrian refugee crisis and broader international migration compacts, relegating climate-related migration to a less prominent position (Nash, 2019). Consequently, the discourse surrounding climate migration became increasingly subdued, adopting a more technical framing through concepts such as loss and damage rather than urgent crisis language (Warner & van der Geest, 2013; McNamara & Jackson, 2019). The specific discourse of "climate refugees" gradually diffused into broader migration discussions, diluting its initial urgency and specificity (McAdam, 2020).

In sum, constructivist/discursive institutionalism argues that the governance gap is caused by the absence of a strong, unifying discourse that could inspire institutional entity for climate displaced individuals. This viewpoint proposes that future research and advocacy should concentrate on analyzing and modifying the language used to discuss climate-induced displacement, with the aim of influencing institutional change.

Conclusion

Climate-induced displacement introduces novel challenges into the field of international relations, highlighting the need for new research directions in global environmental politics within IR scholarship. This area of study is becoming increasingly relevant as emerging research suggests environmental factors, including climate change, significantly influence migration patterns. However, the absence of an international framework for protecting climate displacees remains underexplored.

This paper aims to bridge this gap by offering an institutionalist perspective on the discrepancy between the protection needs of climate displacees and the lack of global governance addressing their rights. It explores how combining rational choice and sociological institutionalism offers a comprehensive understanding of the global governance gap in climate change-induced migration, emphasizing the role of power and inequality in international humanitarian efforts. Rational choice institutionalism sheds light on how significant power disparities and conflicting interests (particularly between a vulnerable global south and a more powerful global north) have prompted influential actors to oppose the establishment of a binding agreement that they believe would be detrimental to their interests. In contrast, sociological institutionalism highlights that there is currently no established international norm for safeguarding climate-induced migrants. This is due to the absence of a widespread consensus and moral imperative that could drive the institutionalization of such protections. The lack of a dedicated institution or legal status for climate displacees is due to the combination of material disincentives and normative ambiguity, which lies at the core of the issue. Other institutionalist perspectives also contribute to an explanation for a governance gap. Historical institutionalism reveals that the previous institutional pathways – the isolated growth of refugee, migration, and climate regimes – have limited the current options, resulting in a governance structure that is not well-equipped to address cross-cutting issues such as climate displacement. Constructivist/discursive institutionalism argues that prevailing ideas and discourses, like the securitization of climate migration and the absence of a convincing protection narrative, have influenced state preferences and public opinions, frequently hindering

progress towards a new regime. All these perspectives suggest that the governance gap is not caused by a single reason but the combination of various factors: strategic power politics, the slow evolution of norms, institutional inertia, and discursive framing all play a part.

In any research, there is always room for improvement and opportunities for scholars to critically delve into the proposed academic pursuit. Future studies could explore how the gradual development of global governance for climate displacees is influenced by institutional discourse and the interaction among various practice communities under a broader normative framework. Investigating the reciprocal influence between institutional discourse and protection mechanisms for climate displacees, the impact of international security literature on climate change and migration dynamics, and how different humanitarian practice communities, like peace providers, interact with refugee and environmental communities, are all valuable inquiries. Addressing these questions can enhance our comprehension of the interplay between humanitarian norms, global environmental politics, institutional theory, and the historical evolution of practices and norms.

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