

Climate change and displaced children in Africa: A dual challenge to a sustainable future

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Abstract: This article analyses the complex interaction between climate change and the fundamental rights of internally displaced children in Africa, highlighting their challenges in an increasingly vulnerable context. It first examines the growing impact of climate phenomena on internal displacement, which exposes children to precarious living conditions, undermining their rights to a healthy environment, health, education and security. The article argues that these challenges underscore the urgent need for a response tailored to local and regional realities. Second, the article advocates a rigorous application of the principles of climate justice, grounded in the differentiated responsibility of states and international solidarity. It proposes sustainable solutions, combining local initiatives, international partnerships and inclusive climate policies, in order to protect the rights of displaced children in the context of climate change. The article recommends that adopting an integrated approach that respects children's rights may turn the challenges posed by climate change into opportunities to ensure a fair and resilient future for internally displaced children.

Key words: climate change; climate justice; children's rights; internal displacement; sustainable development

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1 Introduction

Climate change is a major driver of internal displacement in Africa, affecting millions of people each year.¹ According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, at least 1,85 million children in sub-Saharan Africa were displaced in their countries due to climate shocks in 2022, compared to one million the previous year.² Globally, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that between 2016 and 2021 more than 43 million child displacements were triggered by weather-related disasters, amounting to approximately 20 000 displacements per day.³ These alarming figures highlight the increased vulnerability of children to climate crises and their devastating impact on living conditions.

This situation exposes a double injustice for internally displaced children: on the one hand, their direct exposure to the impacts of climate change, such as the loss of their homes and the degradation of natural resources and, on the other, the violation of their fundamental rights, particularly the right to a healthy environment, as enshrined in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)⁴ and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Children's Charter),⁵ adopted by the African Union (AU) in 1990. While these children face immense challenges to their survival and development, their rights to a protected environment, essential for their well-being, are often neglected. Given its magnitude, this phenomenon falls within an international legal framework shaped by instruments such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC);⁶ the Paris Agreement;⁷ and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),⁸ all of which call for inclusive climate action that respects human rights, particularly those of children.⁹ The central issue addressed in this article is exploring how the principles of climate justice can be employed to protect the rights of internally displaced children and promote a healthy environment in Africa. To answer this question, the article examines the links between climate change and internal displacement, focusing on Africa, where climatic phenomena exacerbate the

1 World Bank 'Rising to the challenge: Success stories and strategies for achieving climate adaptation and resilience' (2024); World Bank 'Les migrants climatiques: visages humains d'un dérèglement planétaire' (2018); M Burzyński and others 'Climate change, inequality, and human migration (2022) 20 *Journal of the European Economic Association* 1145.

2 IDMC 'Internal displacements by conflict and disasters in 2022' (2023).

3 UNICEF 'Children displaced in a changing climate. Preparing for a future that's already underway' (2023).

4 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 20 November 1989, United Nations Treaty Series, vol 1577 3.

5 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990).

6 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 9 May 1992, S Treaty Doc 102-38, 1771 UNTS 107.

7 Paris Agreement, 12 December 2015, 3156 UNTS 79.

8 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 'Global Sustainable Development Report, 2015 edition' (2015), <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/publications/global-sustainable-development-report-2015-edition.html> (accessed 9 January 2025).

9 M Nowak 'UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: A commentary' (2021) 112; L Rajamani *International climate change law* (2017) 89.

challenges of already vulnerable populations. It also assesses the international and regional legal frameworks to ensure a healthy environment for these children, while highlighting the gaps in their implementation. Finally, the article proposes concrete solutions, drawing on local initiatives and principles of climate justice to mitigate the effects of climate change on the rights of displaced children.

The article seeks to inform policy makers, humanitarian organisations and development actors about the urgent and necessary actions required to ensure a sustainable future for internally displaced children in Africa, amidst the growing climate crisis. The 'right to a sustainable future' referred to here is the right of children to live in an environment that guarantees their physical, mental and social development in ecologically viable conditions.¹⁰ It is founded on the principles of intergenerational justice, environmental sustainability and international solidarity.

2 Climate change as a threat to displaced children

The discourse on climate migration in Africa highlights the growing impact of climate change on internal displacement,¹¹ with particularly severe consequences for children. Extreme climatic events such as droughts, floods and desertification¹² have become more frequent and intense due to global warming.¹³ These events severely affect ecologically fragile regions, notably the Sahel, where accelerated desertification and prolonged droughts reduce arable land, forcing rural populations to migrate.¹⁴ In West Africa, North Africa, the Horn of Africa and some areas of Southern Africa, recurrent floods and tropical cyclones displace hundreds of thousands of people yearly.¹⁵ These internal migrations illustrate a dynamic that is expected to intensify.¹⁶ According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), these displacements could double by 2050, highlighting the urgent need for tailored responses.¹⁷ This observation

10 GA Mastaki & A Nzohabonayo 'Recognition and constitutional guarantee of the right to the environment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo' (2023) *Beijing Law Review* 14.

11 J Schade 'Les migrants des politiques climatiques: nouveaux défis face aux déplacements générés par le changement climatique' (2013) 88 *Cultures & Conflits* 85.

12 Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons 'Vision and thematic priorities: Addressing new challenges and strengthening achievements' UN Doc A/HRC/53/35 (2023) para 82; Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants' UN Doc A/77/189 (19 July 2022) para 14, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77189-report-special-rapporteur-human-rights-migrants> (accessed 7 August 2025).

13 World Bank 'Rising to the challenge: Success stories and strategies for achieving climate adaptation and resilience' (2024); M Burzyński and others 'Climate change, inequality, and human migration' (2022) 20 *Journal of the European Economic Association* 1145.

14 IPCC 'Climate change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change' (2022).

15 World Meteorological Organisation 'Africa suffers disproportionately from climate change and adaptation costs. Press Release' (2024).

16 KR Kanta and others 'Groundswell: Preparing for internal climate migration' (2018).

17 IOM & AUC 'Africa Migration Report: Connecting the threads – Linking policy, practice and the welfare of the African migrant' (2024), <https://publications.iom.int/books/africa->

is corroborated by the World Bank, which estimates that 86 million people in Africa, including a significant proportion of children, could become internal climate migrants over the next three decades.¹⁸ These projections demonstrate the scale of the challenges in mitigating the impacts of these displacements.

Among the affected populations, children are particularly vulnerable. Due to their young age and dependence on essential services, they experience disproportionate and multifaceted impacts.¹⁹ These migrations often expose them to precarious living conditions, increasing the risks of forced labour and school abandonment.²⁰ Their fundamental rights, particularly access to health care, education and adequate protection, are severely compromised.²¹ Children in displacement camps and transit areas often face overcrowded conditions and a lack of adequate resources.²² This situation exposes them to preventable diseases such as malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory infections, exacerbating their vulnerability.²³

In educational terms, access to quality education is severely disrupted, with temporary schools often underequipped and staffed insufficiently to meet demand.²⁴ Furthermore, displaced children, particularly girls, are exposed to increased risks of exploitation, early marriage and forced labour, exacerbating gender inequalities.²⁵ Long-term consequences accompany these immediate impacts. Interruptions in schooling undermine the future economic opportunities of displaced children, limiting their ability to contribute to the socio-economic development of their communities.²⁶ Trauma related to uprooting, chronic stress and climate disasters worsens their psychological fragility, increasing the risks of mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety. Furthermore, the disintegration of traditional social structures, which previously provided essential support networks, heightens these vulnerabilities.²⁷

In response to these challenges, while encouraging, current efforts remain insufficient. While initiatives such as the AU Kampala Convention aim to protect internally displaced persons,²⁸ their implementation remains uneven and limited.

migration-report-second-edition (accessed 4 January 2025).

18 World Bank 'Groundswell: Preparing for internal climate migration' (2021).

19 Mastaki & Nzohabonayo (n 10) 8.

20 UNICEF 'The climate crisis is a child rights crisis: Introducing the children's climate risk index' (2021).

21 As above.

22 UNICEF 'The state of the world's children 2021: On my mind – promoting, protecting, and caring for children's mental health' (2021) 34-35.

23 As above.

24 Save the Children 'Education in emergencies: Challenges for displaced children in Africa' (2020) 15.

25 CARE International "'To protect her honour': Child marriage in emergencies' (2015), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/59751> (accessed 7 August 2025).

26 World Bank (n 18) 67.

27 L Atwoli, J Muhia & Z Merali 'Mental health and climate change in Africa' (2022) 19 *BJPsych International* 86-89, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bji.2022.14> (accessed 25 May 2025).

28 African Union African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) (2009).

Existing humanitarian programmes primarily focus on immediate assistance but often lack the resources to address long-term needs, such as strengthening educational and healthcare infrastructures. Additionally, national and regional policies do not always integrate the impacts of climate change into their internal migration management strategies.²⁹

To effectively protect displaced children in Africa, it is imperative to strengthen climate resilience and social protection systems. This involves targeted investments in education, health care and the protection of displaced children. Enhanced cooperation between governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international agencies is also necessary to develop policies that consider children's specific needs.³⁰ Moreover, promoting sustainable solutions, such as adopting climate-resilient agricultural practices, could reduce forced displacement by improving food security for the most vulnerable communities.³¹

3 Climate change and rights of internally displaced children

Climate change, by intensifying extreme weather events, profoundly challenges the enjoyment of the fundamental rights of internally displaced children, particularly their rights to a healthy environment.³² Although recognised in various international and regional legal instruments, this right remains insufficiently implemented in the context of internal displacement.³³ The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) mandates that state parties ensure that every child is provided with an environment conducive to physical, mental and social development.³⁴ Furthermore, the African Children's Charter reinforces this obligation by affirming that children have the right to living conditions that foster their growth and well-being.³⁵ However, these provisions remain largely theoretical, especially for children displaced by the effects of climate change.³⁶ Current data highlights the magnitude of the issue: 820 million

29 African Union ECOSOCC 'Cadre de politique migratoire pour l'Afrique (CPMA)' (2022), <https://ecosocc.au.int/sites/default/files/files/2022-07/policy-booklet-migration-policy-framework-africa-mpfa-fr0.pdf> (accessed 17 August 2025).

30 International Organisation for Migration *Institutional strategy on migration, environment and climate change 2021-2030* (2021) 18, <https://publications.iom.int/books/institutional-strategy-migration-environment-and-climate-change-2021-2030> (accessed 25 May 2025).

31 World Bank 'Climate-smart agriculture implementation brief: A summary of insights and upscaling opportunities through the Africa Climate Business Plan' (2020), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/242111592504568447/pdf/Climate-Smart-Agriculture-Implementation-Brief-A-Summary-of-Insights-and-Upscaling-Opportunities-through-the-Africa-Climate-Business-Plan.pdf> (accessed 25 May 2025).

32 GA Mastaki 'L'anthropocentrisme face à l'émergence du droit à un environnement sain en République Démocratique du Congo' (2025) 2 *Parlons Terre Et Biodiversité* 1.

33 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 'General Comment 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change', <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/crcgc26-general-comment-no-26-2023-childrens-rights> (accessed 6 May 2025).

34 Art 24 CRC.

35 Art 14 African Children's Charter.

36 Q Kilmartin 'Climate justice, environmental justice, and sexual and reproductive health and rights' (2024) *Centre for Reproductive Rights*; Terre des hommes Foundation Lausanne

children, over one-third of the global child population, are directly affected by the consequences of climate change,³⁷ with 240 million (one in ten) being highly exposed to coastal flood risks, often leading to displacement.³⁸ This vulnerability is expected to worsen due to the continued rise in global temperatures and the increasing unpredictability of climatic patterns.³⁹ In this context, the UN General Comment 26 underscored the systemic threat posed by the climate emergency and environmental damage to children's rights, as defined by the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁴⁰

Environmental risks impact all aspects of children's lives: their immediate surroundings, homes, places of residence, and all the spaces that host them.⁴¹ More than 99 per cent of children globally are exposed to at least one climate or environmental risk factor,⁴² with almost half of all children residing in one of the 33 countries identified as highly vulnerable to climate change.⁴³ Among the most affected children, those under five years of age are particularly fragile, with a quarter of deaths in this age group directly attributable to environmental pollution.⁴⁴

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Children's Committee) has developed specific guidelines and recommendations, notably in its General Comments, highlighting the importance of protecting children from the effects of climate change.⁴⁵ These regional standards reinforce the obligation of African states to adopt child-sensitive environmental policies. Moreover, the jurisprudence of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee), particularly through its individual communications such as *Sacchi v Argentina*,⁴⁶ and the position of the African Children's Committee, notably in its *Continental study on the impact of climate change on children's rights in Africa*,⁴⁷ provide valuable interpretations of states' obligations to protect children from environmental risks.

³⁷ 'Climate injustice for children: How climate crisis affects access to justice and children's rights' (2023).

³⁸ UNICEF (n 20).

³⁹ As above.

⁴⁰ As above.

⁴¹ UN General Comment 26 (n 33) para 10.

⁴² Defender of Rights 'Child report: The right of children to a healthy environment' (2024), https://www.defenseurdesdroits.fr/sites/default/files/2024-11/ddd_rapport-annuel-enfants_2024_20241022.pdf (accessed 20 May 2025).

⁴³ UNICEF (n 20).

⁴⁴ Notre affaire à tous (association) 'Comprendre le lien entre changement climatique et droits fondamentaux' (2023).

⁴⁵ WHO 'Inheriting a sustainable world? Atlas on children's health and the environment' (2017), <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241511773> (accessed 6 April 2025).

⁴⁶ African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child *Continental study on climate change and children's rights in Africa* (2024) 52, <https://www.acerwc.africa/sites/default/files/2025-04/Continental%20Study%20On%20Climate%20Change%20and%20Children%20Rights%20in%20Africa.pdf> (accessed 7 August 2025).

⁴⁷ *Sacchi & Others v Argentina* Communication 104/2019, CRC Committee (22 September 2021) UN Doc CRC/C/88/D/104/2019, <https://climatecasechart.com/non-us-case/sacchi-et-al-v-argentina-et-al/> (accessed 7 May 2025).

⁴⁸ African Committee Continental Study (n 45).

In *Sacchi*, the CRC Committee emphasised that environmental degradation can violate children's rights to life, health and development.⁴⁸ Similarly, the African Children's Committee has urged states to adopt child-sensitive climate policies and highlighted the need for urgent action to protect displaced children from climate-related harms.⁴⁹ Recent Concluding Observations from both bodies, including those on Israel⁵⁰ and Nigeria,⁵¹ underscore the necessity of integrating climate concerns into national child protection frameworks. These observations explicitly stress that displaced children affected by climate crises must be guaranteed effective access to a healthy environment, quality education and adequate healthcare services.

All these affected and displaced children are often forced to reside in camps or transit zones, facing unsanitary and precarious environments. These sites, often makeshift and deprived of basic infrastructure, face severe shortages of safe drinking water, adequate sanitation systems and sanitary facilities.⁵² Consequently, these children are exposed to an increased risk of preventable diseases such as cholera and respiratory infections linked to overcrowding.⁵³ According to a UNICEF report, in sub-Saharan Africa, 45 per cent of displaced children suffer from infections due to the unsanitary conditions of their environment.⁵⁴ This precarious situation constitutes a clear violation of their rights to a healthy environment and their rights to health, two interdependent pillars enshrined in international legal instruments.⁵⁵

In addition to its physical effects, an unsanitary environment also impacts the psychological and emotional well-being of displaced children. The unstable living conditions marked by insecurity, stress and prolonged exposure to degraded environments heighten their sense of marginalisation and abandonment.⁵⁶ These factors undermine their mental well-being and hinder their harmonious development,⁵⁷ contradicting the objectives of international frameworks to

48 *Sacchi* (n 46) para 10.

49 African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child Resolution 18/2022 on Integrating a Child Rights-Based Approach to Climate Change Responses (2022), https://www.acerwc.africa/sites/default/files/2022-10/Resolution-No-182022-on-Integrating-a-Child-Rights-Based-Approach-to-Climate-Change-Responses_0.pdf (accessed 7 August 2025).

50 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations on the Combined Fifth and Sixth Periodic Reports of Israel 13 September 2024 UN Doc CRC/C/ISR/CO/5-6 para 22, <https://docs.un.org/en/CRC/C/ISR/CO/5-6> (accessed 7 August 2025).

51 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of Nigeria (11 June 2010) UN Doc CRC/C/NGA/CO/3-4 paras 34 & 70, <https://docs.un.org/fr/CRC/C/NGA/CO/3-4> (accessed 7 August 2025).

52 WHO 'Health impacts of climate change and displacement' (2020) Technical Brief 3.

53 As above.

54 UNICEF 'Children in displacement' (2021) 7.

55 D Cubie 'Human rights, environmental displacement and migration' in R McLeman & F Gemenne (eds) *Routledge handbook of environmental displacement and migration* (2018) 341, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315638843> (accessed 25 May 2025).

56 As above.

57 Garcia-Moreno and others 'Psychological dimensions of forced displacement' (2020) *Child Psychology Review* 22.

protect children.⁵⁸ Despite the existence of a robust legal framework, the implementation of these standards remains largely inadequate. Humanitarian responses to internal displacement are often fragmented, and efforts to guarantee a healthy environment for displaced children face limited resources and ineffective coordination between national and international actors.⁵⁹ The slow implementation of the Kampala Convention, adopted by the AU to protect internally displaced persons, highlights this failure. Displaced camps, rarely equipped to meet the specific needs of children, lack adequate sanitation systems and waste management, further exacerbating already precarious living conditions.⁶⁰

To bridge the gap between recognised rights and the reality on the ground, urgent and appropriate measures are needed. These measures include the construction of sustainable infrastructure in displaced persons' camps, such as ecological sanitation systems and waste management programmes,⁶¹ as well as better coordination between governmental and humanitarian actors.⁶² African governments must also adopt a child rights-based approach in their internal displacement response policies, ensuring that all children benefit from dignified living conditions regardless of their migration status. Moreover, increased investments in community-based climate resilience initiatives are crucial to mitigate the impacts of forced displacement and promote healthier and more inclusive environments.⁶³

Hence, the rights of children to a healthy environment, although enshrined in international and regional legal instruments such as the CRC and the African Children's Charter, remain an unfulfilled promise for internally displaced children. The consequences of climate change exacerbate their vulnerabilities, depriving them of an environment essential to their harmonious development. It is imperative for governments and humanitarian actors to collectively assume their responsibilities and transform these rights into tangible realities.

4 Climate justice and sustainable solutions

Climate justice has emerged as a key issue in the context of internally displaced children in Africa, a group particularly vulnerable to the devastating impacts of climate change. This fundamental principle of justice, which intrinsically links the notions of responsibility and intergenerational solidarity, unfolds along two complementary axes, namely, the national and international axes. On a

⁵⁸ Save the Children 'Child rights in crisis' (2021) 14.

⁵⁹ World Bank 'Climate resilience for vulnerable populations' (2022) Policy Report 18.

⁶⁰ Plan International & Save the Children & UNICEF & Children's Environmental Rights Initiative 'Falling short: Addressing the climate finance gap for children' (2023).

⁶¹ WHO (n 44) 4.

⁶² UNICEF (n 20) 8.

⁶³ IPCC 'Climate change impacts, adaptation and vulnerability' (2022) AR6 WGII 5.

national level, climate justice gives states full recognition of their responsibilities concerning the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions they generate.⁶⁴ These emissions, often resulting from industrialisation and polluting activities, directly contribute to the climate disruptions that disproportionately affect displaced populations, whose living conditions are exacerbated by extreme climatic events. On an international level, an evident polarisation between the Global North and South emerges, with developing countries, particularly in Africa, facing a disproportionate burden of the consequences of climate disruptions. In this context, these states call for the recognition of the climate debt of industrialised countries, which are regarded as the historical culprits of massive GHG emissions since the Industrial Revolution.⁶⁵ Therefore, a retrospective responsibility is assigned to developed countries for their causal role in climate disruption, while a prospective⁶⁶ responsibility now falls upon them to mitigate the current and future effects of these changes, especially regarding internally displaced children, who represent one of the most vulnerable segments of society.

The effects of climate change on internally displaced children in Africa are clear and continue to intensify as extreme events such as prolonged droughts and devastating floods become more frequent and severe. These children, often from already impoverished and precarious populations, are deprived of a healthy environment and access to fundamental services such as education,⁶⁷ health care⁶⁸ and protection from violence and abuse.⁶⁹ They are exposed to significant health risks while being deprived of their most basic rights.⁷⁰

In this regard, climate litigation has led to a progressive recognition of the importance of environmental rights. In a decision made on 9 April 2024, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that, while states' obligations to reduce GHG emissions primarily aim to protect present generations, future generations will bear the consequences of state inaction without having the opportunity to intervene in the decision-making process.⁷¹ This principle of intergenerational justice, an actual call to the collective conscience, implies that each generation is obligated to preserve a viable environment for future generations.⁷² This concept also resonates in domestic law, as evidenced by the French Constitutional Council's ruling in 2023,⁷³ emphasising the need to ensure, in accordance with

64 Z. Wüthrich 'La justice climatique: entre forte normativité et faible politisation: une enquête pragmatiste' PhD thesis, Université Paris-Est Créteil Val-de-Marne, 2024.

65 Larrère 'Inégalités environnementales et justice climatique' (2015) 79 *Responsabilité & Environnement* 74, <https://www.anales.org/re/2015/re79/RE-79-Article-LARRERE.pdf> (accessed 5 April 2025).

66 As above.

67 Art 28 CRC.

68 Art 24 CRC.

69 Art 19 CRC.

70 Defender of Rights (n 41) 16.

71 CEDH, 9 avril 2024, n° 53600/20, Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz et autres c/ Suisse.

72 Defender of Rights (n 41) 16.

73 French Constitutional Council Decision 2023-1066 QPC of 27 October 2023, <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/decision/2023/20231066QPC.htm> (accessed 5 April 2025).

the Preamble to the Charter for the Environment,⁷⁴ not only the capacity of future generations to meet their needs, but also the ability of other peoples to enjoy a quality environment.⁷⁵ In this context, pending the International Court of Justice's ruling on the precise obligations of states regarding climate change mitigation, it is important to note that, unless proven otherwise, African states bear the responsibility of guaranteeing the protection of their citizens' fundamental rights, especially that of internally displaced children to live in a healthy and secure environment.⁷⁶

Through their adherence to international instruments, such as the 2015 Paris Agreement, which requires states to reduce their GHG emissions and strengthen their adaptation capacity in response to climate impacts, states have committed not only to limit their contribution to the environmental crisis, but also to adopt policies to protect internally displaced children. These international commitments must now be translated into concrete and measurable actions. In particular, African states must implement effective climate adaptation strategies to enhance the environmental resilience of displaced communities and offer them a less uncertain future in the face of the devastation of climate change.

Despite international commitments, effective climate policy implementation remains largely insufficient in many regions of the African continent, particularly those that are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. This inadequacy becomes even more pronounced in high-risk areas, where displaced communities are particularly exposed to climate hazards. As a result, African states are obligated to show stronger political will to adapt their climate policies to the specific needs of internally displaced children. These policies must integrate concrete strategies and tailored measures to reduce climate risks and ensure decent living conditions for displaced children, which align with their fundamental rights. In this sense, adopting climate adaptation strategies specifically designed for this vulnerable population is essential.⁷⁷

At the local level, several community initiatives are already providing tangible and sustainable solutions. Reforestation projects have restored severely degraded ecosystems, improved air and water quality, and combated soil erosion in regions such as the Sahel. These actions have contributed to the restoration of agricultural lands and created safer environments conducive to the stability of displaced communities.⁷⁸ Consequently, internally displaced children directly

⁷⁴ France *Charter for the environment* (2005) art 7, <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/en/charter-for-the-environment> (accessed 5 April 2025).

⁷⁵ Decision 2023-1066 QPC Constitutional Council France 27 October 2023.

⁷⁶ This is a positive obligation, derived from art 24 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which recognises the right of every African to live in a healthy and favourable environment.

⁷⁷ Paris Agreement (n 7) art 2.1(c) emphasises adaptation and enhancing the resilience of vulnerable populations (such as internally displaced children).

⁷⁸ C Benson and others 'Climate change and African development: The role of local solutions' (2016) *African Journal of Climate Change and Sustainability* 10.

benefit from these efforts, enjoying a healthier and more secure environment, conducive to their physical development and psychological well-being.⁷⁹ Additionally, access to renewable energy, such as the installation of solar panels in refugee camps, has significantly improved the living conditions of children by ensuring a reliable energy supply, while minimising the environmental impact of deforestation. Simultaneously, the rehabilitation of local ecosystems, through sustainable resource management, constitutes another resilience lever for vulnerable communities. Integrated water and land management projects have enhanced the ability of populations to cope with recurring climate disasters.⁸⁰ These local solutions not only help mitigate the effects of climate change but also provide displaced children with a more stable environment, thereby ensuring the protection of their rights to health, security and education.

However, given the scale of the climate challenge, these local initiatives must be supported by strengthened international cooperation. International actors play a crucial role in providing immediate humanitarian assistance while facilitating the establishment of sustainable solutions. Agencies such as UNICEF, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and local NGOs offer indispensable support in implementing national strategies, ensuring that the rights of internally displaced children are integrated into climate change response policies. Their role goes beyond emergency aid. They actively contribute to integrating long-term solutions, respecting child rights principles, particularly through climate risk management and improvements in sanitation and educational infrastructures.

From this standpoint, African states, working in partnership with international actors and NGOs, must intensify their efforts to protect the rights of internally displaced children in the face of climate change impacts.⁸¹ This involves establishing inclusive climate policies that consider the specific needs of these children, particularly in the areas of health, education and protection. Effective coordination between governments, humanitarian actors and international agencies is essential to maximise the impact of interventions and reduce the health, psychological and socio-economic risks faced by displaced children. In this regard, adequate funding and strong political will are critical to ensure the effective implementation of solutions that address the impacts of climate change, while providing a safe and healthy environment for future generations.⁸²

Climate justice should be the guiding principle of actions undertaken to protect the rights of internally displaced children in Africa. This principle rests on the notion that the countries most accountable for climate disruption have a duty to act in solidarity with the most vulnerable populations. In Africa, this means

79 UNICEF 'L'impact du changement climatique sur les enfants déplacés: Rapport' (2023) 12.

80 JR May and others *Global environmental constitutionalism* (2014) v-v.

81 UNICEF 'The state of the world's children: Children in a digital world' (2017) 60-62.

82 World Bank 'Climate change and migration in Africa: Protecting children's rights (2021).

ensuring that the rights of displaced children are fully respected and integrated into all political and humanitarian responses to climate change.⁸³ Climate policies must ensure that these children have access to a healthy environment, adequate sanitation infrastructure and facilitated access to education, while considering local and regional priorities. Ultimately, these actions must be implemented within the framework of sustainable development strategies to ensure a stable and secure future for internally displaced children.

5 Conclusion

The climate crisis and its impacts on internally displaced children in Africa reflect a dual injustice: on the one hand, historical inequalities between states, exacerbated by the north-south divide; on the other, the structural vulnerabilities affecting the most marginalised groups, particularly children. In the face of these intensifying challenges, law emerges as a vital instrument for ensuring a fair and sustainable transition. As both a legal and ethical paradigm, climate justice entails differentiated responsibilities among states, grounded in the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. It calls for binding commitments, financial and technological solidarity mechanisms, and the explicit recognition of the rights of displaced children within national and international normative frameworks. Such recognition is not merely a legal obligation but a moral imperative, consistent with the principles of intergenerational equity. From an operational perspective, the climate crisis underscores the urgency of integrating environmental standards, human rights and sustainable development goals. This necessitates reforming global legal governance, placing the rights of future generations and vulnerable populations at the heart of public policy. Climate adaptation strategies must be proactive and tailored to the specific needs of displaced children, in line with the commitments made under the Paris Agreement.

Moreover, the interplay between local initiatives, state obligations and international assistance constitutes a decisive lever for strengthening the resilience of affected communities. Reforestation projects, access to renewable energy and sustainable resource management demonstrate that local solutions can yield global benefits, merging climate justice with social justice. Ultimately, the protection of internally displaced children must not be viewed as a temporary humanitarian measure. It should become a foundational pillar of legal and political strategies addressing climate change. The right to a sustainable future, enshrined in the highest aspirations of international law, demands a rigorous and forward-looking consideration of the needs of displaced children.

83 J Williams and others 'Africa and climate justice at COP27 and beyond: Impacts and solutions through an interdisciplinary lens' (2023) 5 *UCL Open: Environment* 09, <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444/ucloe.000062> (accessed 7 August 2025).