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A Study on Climate Change and Internal Migration: An Emerging Economic Challenges

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Abstract

Climate change has become one of the most significant drivers of internal migration in developing countries, especially in India. Environmental degradation, frequent natural disasters, rising sea levels, droughts, floods, and loss of livelihoods force people to move from vulnerable regions to safer and economically viable areas. This project examines the relationship between climate change and internal migration through a law and economics framework. It analyses how environmental stress creates economic displacement, how existing legal frameworks respond to climate-induced migration, and whether current policies are adequate to protect the rights and economic security of migrants. The study aims to highlight the need for a comprehensive legal and economic policy to manage climate migration sustainably.

Keywords: Climate Change, Internal Migration, Economic Displacement, Environmental Law, Law and Economics, Sustainable Development, Climate Justice, Livelihood Security.

1. Introduction

Climate change is no longer only an environmental problem; it is also an economic and social crisis. Rising temperatures, unpredictable rainfall, floods, droughts, and cyclones have a survival becomes difficult, people migrate internally in search of work and safety. This internal migration has economic consequences such as urban unemployment, housing shortages, pressure on public services, and informal labour growth. Law and economics together help us understand how legal systems can reduce economic losses and protect vulnerable populations.

Internal migration caused by climate change has significant economic consequences. It increases pressure on urban infrastructure, housing, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Migrants often end up working in the informal sector with low wages, job insecurity, and poor living conditions. This not only affects the migrants themselves but also creates economic stress on host regions. From a law and economics perspective, climate-induced migration represents a transfer of environmental and economic costs from vulnerable communities to urban economies without adequate legal protection or policy support.

Despite the growing impact of climate change on migration, Indian legal frameworks do not specifically recognize or address climate migrants. Existing laws focus mainly on

environmental protection and disaster management, without providing long-term economic rehabilitation or social security to displaced populations. This creates a legal vacuum that worsens the economic vulnerability of migrants. Therefore, it is essential to study climate change and internal migration together under the law and economics approach to develop sustainable legal policies that ensure economic security, social justice, and environmental protection.

2. Statement of Problem

Climate change has become a major cause of internal migration in India, yet there is no specific legal recognition or comprehensive policy framework to address the economic and social problems faced by climate-induced migrants. Existing laws focus mainly on environmental protection and disaster management, but they do not provide long-term solutions for rehabilitation, livelihood security, housing, employment, and social protection. As a result, migrants are often pushed into informal work, poverty, and unsafe living conditions. The absence of clear legal responsibility for climate displacement creates policy gaps and weakens State accountability. Economic losses caused by forced migration are shifted onto vulnerable communities, increasing inequality and social instability. There is also poor coordination between environmental law, migration policy, and economic planning. This situation highlights the urgent need for an integrated law

and economics approach to ensure justice and sustainable development for climate migrants.

3. Review of Literature

Norman Myers (2002)^[1] first highlighted the concept of “environmental refugees.” He explains that climate change, land degradation, water scarcity, and food insecurity force people to migrate internally. Myers emphasizes that developing countries are most affected. He also points out that such migration increases economic instability in rural areas and pressures urban centres. Migration becomes a survival strategy, not a choice.

Nicholas Stern (2006) 2Stern explains that climate change reduces productivity and destroys livelihoods, particularly in agriculture. Economic losses from climate events force internal migration. He warns that unplanned migration can slow national economic growth. Stern highlights the need for climate adaptation strategies to reduce economic and migration pressure.

World Bank Authors (2018) 3World Bank reports explain that climate-induced internal migration is an emerging economic challenge. Unplanned migration increases unemployment, housing shortages, and informal settlements in cities. Managed migration, however, can contribute positively to economic development.

IPCC Authors (2014–2023) 4 IPCC explains that extreme weather events destroy livelihoods, especially in rural areas. Internal migration becomes unavoidable. Economic costs include loss of productivity, increased public expenditure, and urban pressure. IPCC highlights the need for climate adaptation policies and migration planning.

Keynes, J. M. (1936) 5John Maynard Keynes explained unemployment as a result of insufficient demand in the economy. He argued that urban youth are particularly vulnerable during economic downturns because job opportunities decline. Lack of employment leads to income insecurity and social instability. Keynes emphasized government intervention through public spending and employment generation. His theory provides a strong economic foundation for understanding urban youth unemployment

4. Research Gap

Existing literature widely discusses climate change and migration separately, but integrated economic analysis of internal migration caused by climate change remains limited, especially in developing countries like India. Most studies focus on international migration, while internal migration receives less policy and academic attention. There is also a lack of region-specific and empirical data linking climate-induced migration with employment, urban poverty, and economic inequality. Furthermore, legal and policy frameworks addressing climate migrants within national borders are insufficiently studied. The long-term economic consequences of climate-driven internal migration on urban infrastructure, labour markets, and social welfare systems remain under-explored. Hence, there is a clear gap in understanding climate change as an emerging economic challenge through internal migration.

5. Object of Study

i) To examine the relationship between climate change and internal migration by analysing, how environmental degradation, natural disasters, and changing climate patterns directly affect livelihoods and force people to relocate within the country for economic survival and

safety.

- ii) To study the economic impact of climate-induced migration on migrants as well as host regions, including issues of unemployment, poverty, informal labour, housing shortage, and pressure on public infrastructure and resources.
- iii) To analyse the adequacy of existing legal frameworks in India in addressing climate-related displacement, rehabilitation, compensation, and protection of the rights of internally displaced persons.
- iv) To evaluate the role of the State and its constitutional obligations in ensuring social justice, economic security, and environmental protection for climate-affected populations.
- v) To assess how a law and economics approach can contribute to better policy formulation by integrating legal principles with economic efficiency and sustainable development goals.
- vi) To suggest suitable legal and policy reforms that can provide long-term solutions for

6. Methodology

This research is based on both doctrinal and non-doctrinal research. The source of the data is collected from various newspaper, journals, magazines, books, reports, and e-resources. The sample size of the respondent included are 102. This research is based on a stratified random sample. The jurisdiction of the research is Chennai. This research uses some of the important statistical methods, such as the average method and percentage method. The duration of the research is three months.

7. Significance of the Study

This study is significant to my government as it highlights how climate change-driven internal migration is emerging as a major economic challenge affecting employment, urbanization, infrastructure demand, and public service delivery. By examining the economic pressures created by population movements from climate-vulnerable areas to safer regions, the study provides useful insights for policy formulation, development planning, and climate adaptation strategies. It is also significant to my use as it enhances understanding of the link between environmental change and economic stability, supporting informed analysis, research, and practical decision-making related to sustainable development and national resilience.

8. Hypothesis

- i) **H₁:** Climate change-related factors such as extreme weather events, sea-level rise, and declining agricultural productivity are major drivers of internal migration within countries.
- ii) **H₂:** Climate-induced internal migration most significantly affects economic and social sectors such as agriculture, urban infrastructure, labour markets, and public services.

9. Limitation of Study

The study is subject to certain limitations which must be acknowledged for a proper understanding of its scope. This research mainly relies on secondary data such as books, journals, reports, and official publications, which may not always reflect the most recent developments. The availability of accurate and updated data on climate-induced internal migration is limited, making it difficult to measure the exact

scale of the problem. The study is confined primarily to the Indian context and therefore its findings may not be fully applicable to other countries. It does not include extensive fieldwork or primary surveys due to time and resource constraints. The interdisciplinary nature of the topic also makes it challenging to cover all economic, social, and legal aspects in complete depth. Variations in climate impacts across different regions of India are not fully explored. Legal interpretations may change with future judicial decisions and policy reforms. Economic impacts are discussed broadly and not through detailed statistical analysis. The study also cannot account for all future climate uncertainties. Hence, the conclusions are based on available data and existing legal frameworks

10. Results and Discussion

Part 1: Doctrinal Research

i) Introduction ^[2]:

Climate change is a complex phenomenon involving shifts in temperature, rainfall, sea levels, and the frequency of extreme weather events.¹ Over the past few decades, these changes have intensified due to human activities such as industrialization, deforestation, and fossil fuel consumption.² Although climate change is first and foremost an environmental issue, its impacts extend deeply into social, legal and economic spheres.³

One significant outcome of climate change is internal migration — the movement of people within national borders from one region to another.⁴ When migration is driven by environmental stress rather than voluntary economic choice, it becomes a matter of human security, governance, and economic stability.⁵ Climate-related internal migration leads to widespread consequences, including labour displacement, stress on urban infrastructure, and altered demographic dynamics.

This paper uses a doctrinal research method to explore how climate change affects natural resources, triggers internal migration, and creates economic challenges. Doctrinal research focuses on legal principles, policy frameworks, and judicial interpretations that govern natural resource protection, human rights, and migration. It critically analyses doctrines, statutes, and case law to understand how legal systems conceptualize and respond to climate-induced migration.

ii) Climate Justice and Equity Considerations

Climate-induced internal migration raises serious concerns of equity because populations that contribute least to greenhouse gas emissions often suffer the harshest consequences. Vulnerable groups such as small farmers, coastal communities, and marginalized populations face displacement due to environmental degradation beyond their control. The principle of climate justice emphasizes that environmental burdens must not be disproportionately imposed on disadvantaged groups ^[3]. From a doctrinal perspective, constitutional guarantees of equality and distributive justice require the State to adopt adaptation and rehabilitation policies that prioritize vulnerable communities.² Climate migrants must therefore be treated as rights-holders entitled to protection rather than as informal settlers or economic burdens ^[4].

iii) Constitutional Dimensions of Climate Migration

Constitutional rights such as the right to life, dignity, and livelihood provide a strong doctrinal basis for addressing

climate-induced displacement. The Supreme Court of India in *Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar* held that the right to a clean environment forms part of Article 21 of the Constitution ^[5]. Subsequent judicial interpretations have expanded Article 21 to include livelihood security and environmental protection ^[6]. If climate change renders land uninhabitable or destroys means of subsistence, it can be argued that constitutional rights are indirectly violated. Thus, constitutional law can evolve to recognize climate migration as a matter of enforceable fundamental rights.

iv) Internal Displacement and Human Rights Framework

Although climate migrants are not recognized under the 1951 Refugee Convention, international human rights norms provide guidance for protecting internally displaced persons. The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) recognize displacement caused by natural disasters and emphasize state responsibility for protection and resettlement. ^[7] While these principles are not legally binding, they influence domestic legislation and policy formulation. Integrating such standards into national frameworks would ensure that climate-displaced persons receive humanitarian assistance, access to services, and protection from arbitrary displacement.

v) Doctrinal Foundations: Natural Resources and Public Trust

a) The doctrine of Public Trust ^[8]

The Doctrine of Public Trust is a foundational legal principle asserting that natural resources (like air, water, forests, and wildlife) are held by the State as a trustee for present and future generations ^[9]. Under this doctrine, the government must protect and preserve resources for public use and environmental balance. Derived from common law traditions and echoed in constitutional interpretations, it imposes a fiduciary duty on the State to ensure sustainable resource management.

This doctrine holds particular relevance in the context of climate change. With extreme weather events degrading land, water supplies, and agricultural productivity, the failure to uphold public trust obligations results in loss of livelihoods and displacement. When people lose access to essential resources, migration becomes a survival strategy rather than a voluntary choice.

b) Principles Embedded in Public Trust

Doctrinal research identifies several key principles derived from public trust:

- **Intergenerational Equity:** Natural resources must be preserved for future generations.
- **Sustainable Development:** Economic progress should not compromise environmental health.
- **Precautionary Principle:** Lack of full scientific certainty should not delay preventive measures.
- **Polluter Pays Principle:** Those responsible for environmental degradation must bear the costs.

When these principles are ignored or inadequately implemented, communities dependent on natural resources become vulnerable to climate impacts. This vulnerability displaces populations, especially in rural and coastal regions.

vi) Climate Change as a Driver of Internal Migration

Climate change affects natural resources in multiple ways:

- **Agriculture:** Changing rainfall patterns and increasing

temperatures reduce crop yields.

- **Water Resources:** Droughts diminish water available for drinking and irrigation.
- **Coastal Areas:** Sea-level rise and erosion threaten settlements and fertile lands.
- **Forests:** Climate stress increases forest loss, affecting forest-dependent communities.

These environmental impacts intersect with socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Member households lose income, food security, and social stability. The inability to sustain livelihoods forces people to migrate internally — from rural to urban areas or from environmentally stressed zones to safer regions.

From a doctrinal perspective, while there is no specific legal category for “climate migrants,” existing human rights doctrines suggest a right to life with dignity, safe environment, and livelihood security. When climate impact erodes these rights, internal migration emerges as a consequence of state failure to protect fundamental rights and resources.

vii) Judicial Responses: Case Law Analysis:

Judicial interpretations have played a role in expanding doctrines related to resource protection and environmental justice. Notable cases include:

a) Public Trust and Environmental Protection

M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath (1997): Reinforced the doctrine of public trust and held that natural resources are under the State’s fiduciary duty.

M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (Ganga Pollution Case): Emphasized the need to protect rivers as life-support systems for communities.

b) Right to Environment as a Fundamental Right

Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar (1991): Held that the right to a clean environment is part of Article 21 (Right to Life).

Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India (1996): Introduced sustainable development and precautionary principles in Indian environmental law.

Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2000): Examined displacement and environmental protection, emphasizing the need to balance development with ecological concerns.

These cases establish legal doctrines that can be extended to argue for the protection of climate migrants, though they do not address migration directly. They show judicial willingness to interpret rights expansively, which could influence future climate-migration jurisprudence.

viii) Relevant Case Law:

a) **M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath (1997)** ^[10]: In this case, the Supreme Court of India applied the *Public Trust Doctrine* and held that natural resources like rivers, forests, and air are held by the government in trust for the public and cannot be transferred for private ownership or commercial use if it harms the environment. The case arose when a private company, Span Motels, was allowed to alter the course of the Beas River for its benefit. The Court ruled that the government’s action was improper and emphasized that the State has a duty to protect natural resources for public use.

b) **Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar (1991):** In this case,

the Supreme Court recognized that the right to live in a pollution-free environment is a part of the fundamental right to life under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. The petitioner alleged that industrial waste discharged into the Bokaro River was causing pollution. Although the Court dismissed the petition on grounds of personal interest, it firmly established that citizens have the right to approach the Court under Article 32 for protection against environmental pollution.

c) **Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India (1996)** ^[11]: This landmark judgment introduced the *Precautionary Principle* and the *Polluter Pays Principle* into Indian environmental law. The case concerned pollution caused by tanneries in Tamil Nadu, which contaminated water sources and agricultural land. The Supreme Court held that industries are responsible for compensating victims and restoring environmental damage. It declared that sustainable development is part of Indian law and must balance economic growth with environmental protection.

d) **Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2000)** ^[12]: This case dealt with the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River and the displacement of local communities. The petitioners challenged the environmental clearance and rehabilitation measures. The Supreme Court allowed the construction of the dam to continue, stating that development projects are necessary for national interest, but it emphasized that proper environmental safeguards and rehabilitation of displaced persons must be ensured. The judgment highlighted the balance between development and environmental protection.

Part 1: Non Doctrin Research

Non-doctrinal research in this study was conducted through empirical methods such as surveys and questionnaires to understand the impact of climate change on internal migration. A total of respondents was selected for the study, representing 102 participations. The demographic analysis shows that 69 percentage of respondents were male and 33 were female. This gender distribution reflects the trend that men are more likely to migrate internally for employment opportunities, while women’s migration may be limited by social and family responsibilities. The data collected helped in understanding real-life migration patterns and economic challenges.

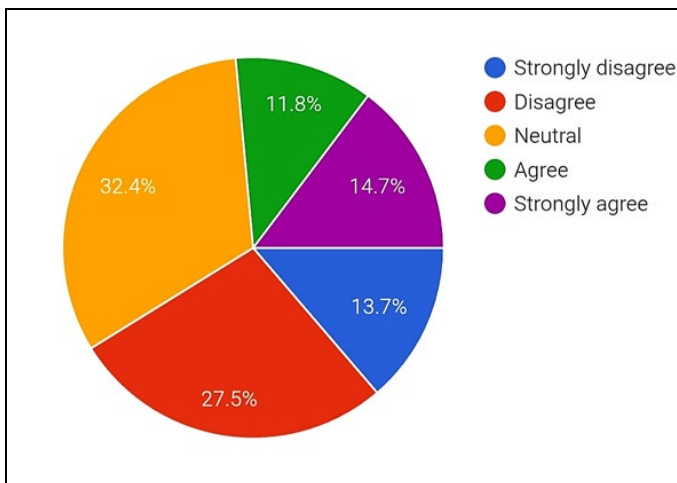
The responses indicated that climate-related factors such as drought, floods, and loss of agricultural income influenced migration decisions. Male respondents largely reported moving to urban areas in search of employment, whereas female respondents highlighted concerns related to household stability and economic insecurity. The findings also showed that migrants often faced low wages, informal employment, and lack of social protection. This demonstrates that internal migration creates economic and social pressures both for migrants and host communities.

Overall, the non-doctrinal research provides practical insight into how climate change affects migration behaviour and economic conditions. The gender-based data reveals unequal participation and different experiences among respondents. Such empirical findings strengthen the study by supporting theoretical assumptions with real observations. Therefore, the survey results play an important role in understanding migration trends and recommending policies for sustainable development and economic protection.

Table 1: Government policies are effective in managing climate change related internal migration

Particulars	Male	Female	Transgender	Total
Strongly agree	8(7.84)	7(6.86)	0(0.00)	15(14.7)
Agree	6(5.88)	6(5.88)	0(0.00)	12(11.8)
Neutral	15(14.71)	18(17.65)	0(0.00)	33(32.4)
Disagree	13(14.00)	15(14.71)	0(0.00)	28(27.5)
Strongly disagree	6(5.88)	8(7.84)	0(0.00)	14(13.7)
Total	48(47.06)	54(52.94)	0(0.00)	100(100)

Source: Primary data:

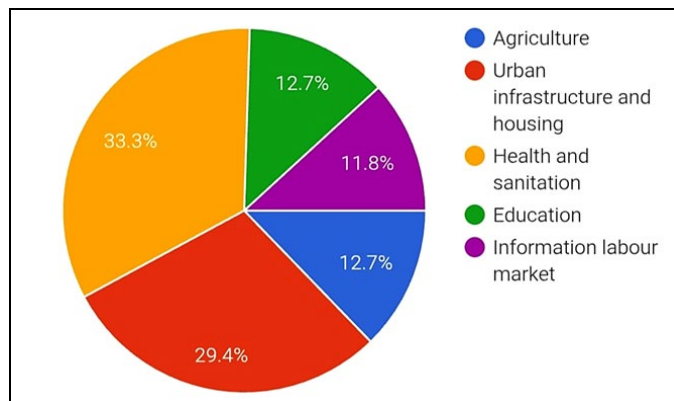


The table indicates mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness of government policies in managing climate change-related internal migration. A significant proportion of respondent's 32.4 percent of the responses, expressed a neutral opinion, suggesting uncertainty or limited awareness about policy outcomes. Meanwhile, 27.5 percent of the responses, disagreed and 13.7 percent of the responses, strongly disagreed, indicating notable dissatisfaction with existing measures and their implementation. In contrast, 11.8 percent of the responses, agreed and 14.7 percent of the responses, strongly agreed, reflecting moderate confidence among some respondents. The gender distribution remains relatively balanced across response categories, with slightly higher female participation. Overall, the findings suggest that while some policy efforts are recognized, a considerable share of respondents remain unconvinced about their effectiveness in addressing climate-induced migration challenges.

Table 2: Most impactors by climate-induced internal migration

Particulars	Male	Female	Transgender	Total
Agriculture	6(5.88)	7(6.86)	0(0.00)	13(12.7)
Urban infrastructure and housing	14(13.73)	16(15.69)	0(0.00)	30(29.4)
Health and sanitation	16(15.69)	18(17.65)	0(0.00)	34(33.3)
Education	6(5.88)	7(6.86)	0(0.00)	13(12.7)
Informal labour market	6(5.88)	6(5.88)	0(0.00)	12(11.8)
Total	48(47.06)	54(52.94)	0(0.00)	102(100)

Source: Primary data

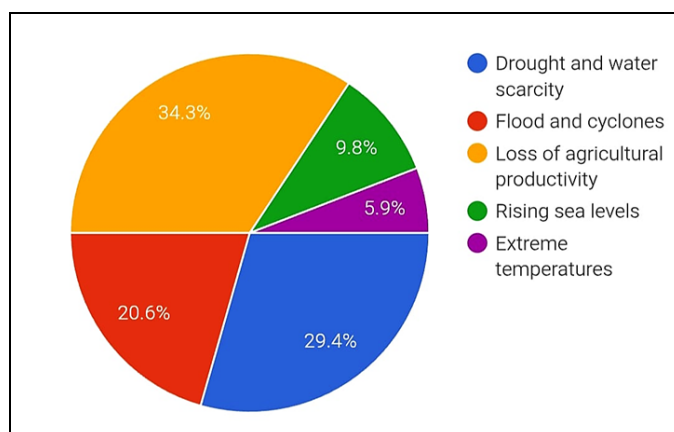


The table shows that health and sanitation is the most impacted sector by climate-induced internal migration, accounting for 33.3 percent of the responses, indicating concerns about public health and sanitation pressure in migrant-receiving areas. Urban infrastructure and housing follow with 29.4 percent of the responses, reflecting overcrowding, housing shortages, and strain on basic urban services. Agriculture and education each record 12.7 percent of the responses, showing moderate effects such as livelihood loss and disruption in children's schooling due to migration. The informal labour market accounts for 11.8 percent of the responses, highlighting employment insecurity and increased competition for low-skilled jobs. Gender participation is relatively balanced, though female respondents slightly outnumber males, suggesting strong awareness among women regarding migration impacts. Overall, the findings indicate that climate-induced migration creates multidimensional sectoral challenges, particularly in health and urban systems.

Table 3: Factors of climate change that mainly force people to migrate internally

Particulars	Male	Female	Transgender	Total
Drought and water scarcity	14(13.73)	16(15.69)	0(0.00)	30(29.4)
Floods and cyclones	10(9.80)	11(10.78)	0(0.00)	21(20.6)
Loss of agricultural	16(15.69)	19(18.63)	0(0.00)	35(34.3)
Rising sea levels	5(4.90)	5(4.90)	0(0.00)	10(9.8)
Extreme temperatures	3(2.94)	3(2.94)	0(0.00)	6(5.9)
Total	48(47.06)	54(52.94)	0(0.00)	102(100)

Source: Primary data



The table indicates that loss of agricultural productivity is the most significant factor driving climate-induced internal migration, accounting for 34.3 percent of the responses, highlighting the impact of declining crop yields and livelihood insecurity. Drought and water scarcity follows with 29.4 percent of the responses, reflecting the role of water shortages in compelling households to relocate. Floods and cyclones represent 20.6 percent of the responses, demonstrating the influence of sudden disasters and property damage on migration decisions. Rising sea levels account for 9.8 percent of the responses, indicating moderate concern in vulnerable coastal areas. Extreme temperatures record the lowest share at 5.9 percent of the responses, suggesting comparatively limited but emerging influence. The gender distribution is relatively balanced, with slightly higher female responses across most factors. Overall, the findings show that livelihood-related environmental stresses remain the primary drivers of internal migration.

11. Testing of Hypothesis:

H₁: Which sectors are most impactors by climate-induced internal migration.

The table shows that health and sanitation is the most impacted sector by climate-induced internal migration, accounting for 33.3 percent of the responses, indicating concerns about public health and sanitation pressure in migrant-receiving areas. Urban infrastructure and housing follow with 29.4 percent of the responses, reflecting overcrowding, housing shortages, and strain on basic urban services. Agriculture and education each record 12.7 percent of the responses, showing moderate effects such as livelihood loss and disruption in children's schooling due to migration. The informal labour market accounts for 11.8 percent of the responses, highlighting employment insecurity and increased competition for low-skilled jobs. Gender participation is relatively balanced, though female respondents slightly outnumber males, suggesting strong awareness among women regarding migration impacts. Overall, the findings indicate that climate-induced migration creates multidimensional sectoral challenges, particularly in health and urban systems.

H₂: Factors of climate change that mainly force people to migrate internally

The table indicates that loss of agricultural productivity is the most significant factor driving climate-induced internal migration, accounting for 34.3 percent of responses, highlighting the impact of declining crop yields and livelihood insecurity. Drought and water scarcity follows with 29.4 percent of the responses, reflecting the role of water shortages in compelling households to relocate. Floods and cyclones represent 20.6 percent of the responses, demonstrating the influence of sudden disasters and property damage on migration decisions. Rising sea levels account for 9.8 percent of the responses, indicating moderate concern in vulnerable coastal areas. Extreme temperatures record the lowest share at 5.9 percent of the responses, suggesting comparatively limited but emerging influence. The gender distribution is relatively balanced, with slightly higher female responses across most factors. Overall, the findings show that livelihood-related environmental stresses remain the primary drivers of internal migration.

12. Conclusion

Climate change has emerged as a major driver of internal migration, creating deep economic challenges for source and destination regions. Doctrinal analysis shows that while

existing legal principles like public trust and human rights provide a foundation for environmental protection, they are insufficient to address the specific needs of climate migrants. To meet this emerging challenge, legal doctrines must evolve. Statutory reform, combined with judicial interpretation and policy integration, is essential for protecting vulnerable populations and ensuring economic resilience. Climate change and internal migration are deeply interconnected issues that demand urgent attention. Environmental degradation undermines livelihoods and forces populations to relocate, resulting in economic pressures on receiving regions and vulnerability for migrants themselves. Without proper legal and institutional support, migration may lead to unemployment, housing shortages, and inequality. Economic analysis highlights the importance of efficient allocation of resources and investment in climate adaptation measures to reduce displacement. Legal frameworks must evolve to recognize environmental migrants and ensure their protection through welfare policies and rights-based approaches. Overall, addressing climate-induced migration requires coordinated efforts between environmental regulation, economic planning, and social justice measures. Sustainable development, effective governance, and proactive policymaking are essential to reduce risks and transform migration challenges into opportunities for economic resilience.

13. Suggestions

Hereby, the research carried out offers the following suggestions:

- i) Governments should implement climate adaptation policies in vulnerable areas. This reduces environmental damage and prevents forced internal migration.
- ii) Rural employment and livelihood programs must be strengthened. Providing local opportunities can minimize economic displacement.
- iii) Legal frameworks should protect the rights of climate migrants. Access to housing, healthcare, and education ensures social security.
- iv) Urban planning should accommodate incoming migrants through infrastructure and housing. Proper management prevents overcrowding and unemployment.
- v) Investment in sustainable agriculture and water management is essential. It helps communities remain resilient against climate impacts.

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