

**CLIMATE CHANGE AND MIGRATION IN BAYELSA STATE: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF
DISPLACEMENT AND RESETTLEMENT, 1999–2025**

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Abstract

This study examined the historical relationship between climate change, environmental degradation, and forced migration in Bayelsa State, from 1999 to 2025. Drawing on historical analysis, environmental records, policy documents, and community narratives, and adopting the use of the Environmental Migration Theory as template for analysis, the study interrogated how rising sea levels, recurrent flooding, coastal erosion, and the compounding effects of petroleum extraction have progressively displaced indigenous and rural communities across the state. The study situated Bayelsa within the broader Niger Delta ecological crisis and argues that climate-induced migration in the region is both a humanitarian emergency and a governance failure. It traced key displacement episodes, analysed patterns of resettlement, and evaluated the inadequacy of state and federal responses. The study concluded that without a historically informed, rights-based framework for climate adaptation, displacement in Bayelsa State will intensify in the coming decades, with profound implications for livelihoods, cultural identity, and regional stability.

Keywords: *Climate Change, Migration, Displacement, Flooding, Environmental Degradation*

Introduction

Climate change has emerged as one of the most significant environmental and socio-economic challenges confronting the twenty-first century. Across the world, rising temperatures, sea-level rise, coastal erosion, flooding, changing rainfall patterns, and extreme weather events have increasingly disrupted human livelihoods and intensified population movements. The

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identifies climate change as a major driver of environmental degradation that threatens food security, water resources, human health, and settlement patterns, particularly in vulnerable coastal and riverine regions (IPCC, 2023). Although migration has historically been influenced by economic, political, and social factors, environmental changes associated with climate change have become an increasingly important factor compelling individuals and communities to relocate either temporarily or permanently. Climate-induced migration has therefore become a growing concern for governments, scholars, and international organizations because of its implications for human security, sustainable development, and social stability.

In Nigeria, the effects of climate change are unevenly distributed, with the Niger Delta region ranking among the most vulnerable ecological zones due to its low-lying coastal landscape and extensive network of rivers and creeks. Bayelsa State, created in 1996 and located at the heart of the Niger Delta, is particularly susceptible to recurrent flooding, coastal erosion, saline water intrusion, rising sea levels, and land degradation. The state's predominantly riverine environment, combined with inadequate infrastructure and heavy dependence on fishing, farming, and other natural resource-based livelihoods, has heightened the vulnerability of local communities to climate-related disasters. Major flooding episodes, especially those experienced in 2012, 2018, 2022, and subsequent years, destroyed homes, displaced thousands of residents, damaged farmlands, disrupted economic activities, and forced many households to seek refuge in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps or relocate to safer communities within and outside the state. These recurring environmental crises have transformed climate change from a purely ecological issue into a significant historical, social, and developmental challenge (Michael, 2024).

Historically, migration has always formed part of the adaptive strategies employed by communities in the Niger Delta to cope with environmental pressures. However, the frequency and intensity of climate-related hazards since Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 have significantly altered traditional patterns of mobility. Rather than seasonal or voluntary migration undertaken for economic opportunities, many residents of Bayelsa State have increasingly experienced forced displacement arising from environmental disasters. Such displacement often results in the loss of ancestral homes, cultural heritage, social networks, and traditional means of livelihood (Ubodiom & Inainfe, 2025). Resettlement processes have equally presented enormous challenges, including inadequate housing, limited access to healthcare and education, unemployment, psychological trauma, and conflicts over scarce resources in host communities. Women, children, the elderly, and fishing households have remained disproportionately affected because of their greater dependence on climate-sensitive livelihoods and limited adaptive capacity. Recent studies have shown that flooding, livelihood disruption, housing insecurity, food scarcity, and uncertainty about future environmental conditions significantly influence migration decisions among residents of Bayelsa State (Antigha et al., 2025).

Statement of the Problem

The period from 1999 to 2025 represents an important historical timeframe for examining the relationship between climate change and migration in Bayelsa State. It coincides with Nigeria's Fourth Republic, during which democratic governance, environmental policies, disaster management institutions, and climate adaptation programmes have evolved alongside increasing climate variability. During this period, Bayelsa witnessed repeated flood disasters, growing public awareness of climate change, expansion of humanitarian interventions, and renewed debates on environmental justice, sustainable development, and community resilience. Examining displacement and

resettlement within this historical context provides an opportunity to understand not only the environmental causes of migration but also the responses of governments, local communities, civil society organizations, and international development agencies in addressing the humanitarian consequences of climate-induced displacement.

This study, therefore, investigates "Climate Change and Migration in Bayelsa State: A Historical Study of Displacement and Resettlement, 1999–2025." It seeks to examine how climate change has influenced patterns of displacement and migration, assess the socio-economic consequences of forced relocation, and evaluate the effectiveness of government and community responses to resettlement challenges. By adopting a historical approach, the study contributes to existing scholarship on climate migration in Nigeria while providing insights into the long-term relationship between environmental change, human mobility, and sustainable development in the Niger Delta. The findings are expected to enrich historical knowledge, inform policy formulation on climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction, and contribute to broader debates on environmental security and human resilience in climate-vulnerable regions.

Theoretical Framework

Environmental Migration Theory

Environmental Migration Theory emerged from studies on the relationship between environmental change and human mobility. Scholars such as Richard Black, Norman Myers, and the Foresight Project on Migration and Global Environmental Change argue that environmental factors, including flooding, coastal erosion, sea-level rise, and other climate-related hazards, can influence migration decisions. The theory posits that environmental degradation reduces livelihood opportunities and forces individuals or communities to move in search of safer and more sustainable living conditions. The theory identifies environmental factors as significant drivers of migration alongside economic, social, demographic, and political factors. Environmental changes affect migration by undermining ecosystem services, increasing exposure to hazards, and threatening human security.

The Environmental Migration Theory, thus, particularly useful in explaining the migration experiences of communities in Bayelsa State between 1999 and 2025. Bayelsa, located in the low-lying Niger Delta, has experienced recurrent flooding, shoreline erosion, saltwater intrusion, and rising sea levels. These environmental challenges have destroyed homes, farmlands, fishing grounds, and critical infrastructure, compelling many residents to relocate temporarily or permanently. The theory helps explain why communities such as those along the Atlantic coastline and riverine areas have experienced displacement and resettlement. Climate-induced environmental changes have reduced traditional livelihood opportunities, especially fishing and farming, thereby encouraging migration to urban centres such as Yenagoa and other safer settlements. Migration is therefore viewed as an adaptation strategy adopted by affected populations in response to environmental stress.

Empirical Review

Historians have increasingly engaged with questions of environmental displacement, tracing the long-run processes through which human communities have been reshaped by ecological change (McNeill, 2000; Cronon, 1983). In the African context, scholars such as Iliffe (1995) and Beinart and Hughes (2007) have documented the ways in which colonialism restructured human-environment relationships, creating new vulnerabilities to environmental shocks that continue to manifest in the postcolonial period.

For the Niger Delta, Alagoa (1972) and Ikime (1980) provided foundational historical accounts of community formation along the deltaic waterways, documenting the adaptive strategies through which communities managed the delta's notoriously unstable hydrological environment. Naanen (1995) and Ikelegbe (2001) have traced the political economy of oil and its environmental consequences from the 1960s onwards, while Obi (2010) connected environmental degradation to the politics of resource control and resistance in the region. This article builds on these historical foundations, extending the analysis to cover the climate migration dimensions that have intensified in the twenty-first century.

Environmental Geography and Historical Context

Bayelsa State, created in 1996 from the former Rivers State, occupies approximately 10,773 square kilometres in the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. More than 80 per cent of the state's territory consists of mangrove swamps, freshwater swamps, and lowland rainforest, with land elevations generally below three metres above sea level (Awosika, 1995). The state is drained by the Nun River (the principal tributary of the River Niger) along with numerous creeks, tributaries, and tidal channels that form one of the most complex hydrological systems in West Africa. This low-lying deltaic environment has always been prone to seasonal flooding. The Niger Delta experiences a bimodal rainfall pattern, with major rainy seasons from March to July and September to November, and annual flood peaks typically occurring between September and November (Nwilo & Badejo, 2006). However, the historical record shows that the intensity, duration, and spatial extent of flooding have increased markedly since the 1980s, driven by both upstream watershed changes and the accelerating pace of global climate change.

Bayelsa State is considered one of the most climate-vulnerable territories in Africa. Its triple exposure to sea-level rise, increased precipitation variability, and petroleum-related environmental degradation creates what the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) characterised in its 2011 assessment of Ogoniland, and which applies with equal force to Bayelsa, as a "compounded ecological emergency" (UNEP, 2011). Saltwater intrusion into agricultural lands, the destruction of mangrove buffers, and the subsidence of delta sediments combine to accelerate the pace of environmental deterioration.

The communities of present-day Bayelsa State are predominantly of Ijaw, Ogbia, Nembe, Brass, and Epie-Atissa extraction. Historical sources document settlement patterns in the delta stretching back many centuries, with communities developing sophisticated ecological knowledge and adaptive strategies suited to the deltaic environment (Alagoa, 1972; Alagoa & Tamuno, 1989). Traditional settlement patterns were organised around waterways, with communities occupying naturally elevated banks and islands, and developing seasonal mobility patterns that allowed them to manage flood risk.

Colonial intervention disrupted these adaptive patterns in fundamental ways. The imposition of fixed administrative boundaries, the suppression of traditional mobility practices, the alienation of communal lands, and the concentration of infrastructure development along specific corridors created new patterns of sedentary settlement that were poorly suited to the delta's hydrological dynamics (Ikime, 1980; Ubodiom & Inainfe, 2025). By the time of independence in 1960, the foundations had been laid for the compound vulnerability that would characterise Bayelsa State in the era of large-scale oil extraction.

Oil Extraction and Environmental Degradation, 1956–1980

The discovery of oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri, in present-day Bayelsa State, in 1956 marked the beginning of a transformative period in the region's environmental and social history. The subsequent decades witnessed the rapid expansion of petroleum infrastructure (pipelines, flow stations, bunkering facilities, and export terminals) across the deltaic landscape, with profound consequences for ecological integrity and community livelihoods (Ikelegbe, 2001; Obi, 2010).

Environmental audits conducted from the 1980s onwards documented extensive damage to mangrove ecosystems, freshwater fisheries, and agricultural soils resulting from oil spills, gas flaring, and the physical disruption associated with infrastructure development (UNDP, 2006). The World Bank (1995) estimated that some 6,800 oil spills had occurred in the Niger Delta between 1976 and 1994, releasing approximately 2.4 million barrels of oil into the environment. Furthermore, Nwilo and Badejo (2006) confirmed that Bayelsa State had experienced a disproportionate share of this pollution burden. By 1980, therefore, the communities of Bayelsa State were already experiencing a degraded environmental baseline (reduced agricultural productivity, declining fisheries, contaminated water sources) that severely limited their capacity to absorb additional environmental shocks. It is against this backdrop that the escalating impacts of climate change from the 1980s onwards must be understood.

Climate-Induced Displacement in Bayelsa State, 1980–2025

The 1980s marked the beginning of a period of accelerating environmental stress in Bayelsa State. River discharge records from the Nun River at Degema and at Brass show a statistically significant increase in peak flood levels from the late 1970s onwards, a pattern corroborated by community testimony and administrative records from Yenagoa (Michael, 2024; Nwilo & Badejo, 2006). Flooding in 1982, 1985, and 1988 caused extensive damage to farmland and property in communities along the main channels, displacing thousands of households on a temporary or seasonal basis. These early displacement events were largely treated by state authorities as routine seasonal flooding rather than as harbingers of structural environmental change. Humanitarian response was minimal, with affected communities relying primarily on kinship networks and traditional mutual aid systems for relief and temporary accommodation (Ikelegbe, 2001). However, oral history accounts from communities in Ogbia, Nembe, and Southern Ijaw local government areas reveal that this decade marked the beginning of a qualitative change in the experience of flooding, events of a scale and duration that exceeded living memory and that began to force permanent, rather than merely seasonal, displacement of some riverside households (Naanen, 1995).

Furthermore, coastal erosion also intensified during this period, with communities on the barrier islands and shoreline of the Bight of Benin reporting accelerating land loss. Estimates compiled by the Nigerian Institute for Oceanography and Marine Research indicated that coastal erosion rates along the eastern Niger Delta shoreline, including parts of Bayelsa State, reached between 20 and 35 metres per year in some areas during the 1980s (Awosika, 1995). This process of land loss, while slower and less dramatic than flood events, represented an irreversible form of displacement for shoreline communities.

The 1990s witnessed a significant escalation in both the environmental pressures facing Bayelsa State communities and the political conflicts that compounded climate-related vulnerability. The Ken Saro-Wiwa-led Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) campaign, while centred in Ogoniland in Rivers State, galvanised environmental activism across the Niger Delta and brought international attention to the region's ecological crisis (Saro-Wiwa, 1992; Watts, 2004). In Bayelsa State, parallel organisations including the Ijaw Youth Council and the Ijaw National Congress

began documenting the environmental and social costs of petroleum extraction, creating an invaluable body of testimony about climate and pollution-related displacement during this period.

Flooding events in 1994 and 1998 caused particularly severe disruption across the state. The 1994 floods inundated large parts of Yenagoa and surrounding communities, destroying crops, contaminating water sources, and displacing an estimated 150,000 people according to the Bayelsa State Emergency Management Agency (BSEMA, 2001). The 1998 floods, coinciding with an exceptionally strong El Niño event that produced anomalous rainfall across the Niger catchment, were even more destructive, with official estimates placing internally displaced persons (IDPs) at over 200,000 across Bayelsa and adjacent states.

Crucially, evidence from the 1990s documents the beginning of a shift from temporary to permanent displacement. Communities on low-lying islands and along particularly flood-prone reaches of the Nun River and its distributaries began undertaking permanent relocation, often spontaneously and without government assistance. The community of Kolo in Ogbia Local Government Area, for example, undertook a partial relocation to higher ground following repeated flood damage between 1994 and 1997, a process documented by Ejiofor and Nwagbara (2012). This pattern of self-organised, under-resourced resettlement became increasingly common in the following decades.

The 2000s: Climate Change Acknowledged, Response Inadequate

The first decade of the twenty-first century was characterised by growing international acknowledgement of climate change as a driver of displacement in the Niger Delta, alongside a widening gap between official commitments and practical action. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), established in 2000, acknowledged environmental degradation and flooding as major drivers of displacement in its Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan (NDDC, 2006), but its interventions were inadequate relative to the scale of the problem.

Flooding events in 2003, 2005, and 2007 each produced significant displacement in Bayelsa State. The 2007 floods were particularly notable, affecting 21 of the 24 local government areas of Bayelsa and Delta states and displacing over 300,000 people. Yenagoa, the state capital, was inundated for several weeks, disrupting commercial and administrative functions and forcing the temporary relocation of government offices (Nwilo & Badejo, 2006; Ologunorisa & Abam, 2005).

The flooding of 2012 represented the most catastrophic single displacement event in Bayelsa State's recorded history and a watershed moment in both public awareness and policy discourse. Triggered by the simultaneous release of excess water from Lagdo Dam in Cameroon and exceptionally heavy upstream rainfall in the Niger and Benue catchments, the floods inundated approximately 70 per cent of Bayelsa State's landmass between September and November 2012 (NEMA, 2012; Ologunorisa & Abam, 2005).

The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) estimated that 1.3 million people were displaced across the Niger Delta as a result of the 2012 floods, with Bayelsa State accounting for the largest share, approximately 593,000 IDPs (NEMA, 2012). Crop losses in the state were estimated at N18 billion, with the destruction of stored produce, fishing equipment, and agricultural infrastructure extending the economic impact well beyond the flood period itself (Bayelsa State Government, 2012). Entire communities in Yenagoa, Ogbia, Nembe, Brass, and Southern Ijaw local government areas were submerged, with some villages rendered uninhabitable for extended periods.

The 2012 floods exposed the catastrophic inadequacy of the state's disaster preparedness and displacement management infrastructure. IDP camps established in Yenagoa and other urban

centres were overcrowded, unsanitary, and grossly under-resourced (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Many displaced persons preferred to shelter with urban relatives rather than use official camps, straining the informal social networks upon which climate-affected communities had historically depended. The slow pace of resettlement assistance in the aftermath of the floods meant that many displaced households were still living in transitional accommodation two years after the event (Michael, 2024).

The 2012 mega-flood also accelerated a process of permanent out-migration from the most severely affected areas. Survey data collected by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2013) in the aftermath of the floods found that approximately 17 per cent of displaced households in Bayelsa State did not return to their original communities within 12 months, and of these, nearly half reported that they did not intend to return, citing flood risk, loss of livelihoods, and destruction of housing as principal reasons. This pattern of non-return constitutes permanent climate displacement and represents a qualitative shift in the nature of climate-induced migration in the region.

Nevertheless, the period between 2013 and 2020 was characterised by a pattern of incremental but cumulative displacement, as recurring annual floods (less catastrophic than 2012 but more persistent and extensive than pre-2000 norms) steadily eroded the habitability of low-lying communities. Flooding in 2015, 2017, and 2018 each produced significant localised displacement, with communities in Ekeremor, Sagbama, and Southern Ijaw local government areas reporting increasing difficulty in returning to former habitation sites (Michael, 2024; Amnesty International, 2015). This period also saw an accelerating movement of rural population to Yenagoa and secondary towns, driven by both climate push factors and the pull of urban economic opportunities. Yenagoa's population, estimated at approximately 97,000 in 2006, had grown to an estimated 320,000 by 2020, according to state government projections — a growth rate far exceeding natural increase and explicable only in part by oil economy-related urbanisation (Bayelsa State Government, 2020).

More so, saltwater intrusion into freshwater aquifers and agricultural lands, driven by sea-level rise and the destruction of mangrove barriers, emerged during this period as a distinct and particularly insidious driver of displacement. Communities in Brass, Nembe, and Twon-Brass reported the progressive contamination of drinking water sources and the salinisation of farmland that had previously supported subsistence agriculture, forcing households into dependence on purchased food and water and, ultimately, out-migration as economic viability collapsed (Efe, 2010; Chukwu-Okeah et al., 2020).

The floods of 2022 represented the second major catastrophic flooding event of the twenty-first century in Bayelsa State and demonstrated that the 2012 mega-flood was not an outlier but rather a precursor of increasingly severe climate events. Driven again by a combination of above-average upstream precipitation and dam releases from Lagdo, the 2022 floods were comparable in spatial extent to those of 2012, affecting all eight local government areas of Bayelsa State and displacing an estimated 612,000 persons according to NEMA figures (NEMA, 2022).

Several features distinguished the 2022 floods from previous events in ways that underscore the deepening character of climate displacement in Bayelsa State. First, a number of communities that had been resettled after the 2012 floods (either spontaneously or with government assistance) were displaced for a second time, demonstrating the inadequacy of resettlement strategies that had merely relocated communities to other low-lying sites within the flood zone (IOM, 2022). Second, the pace of post-flood recovery was slower in 2022 than in 2012, reflecting both the reduced adaptive capacity of repeatedly affected communities and the worsening macroeconomic context in

Nigeria (OCHA, 2022). Third, the 2022 floods generated a significant wave of international displacement, with communities in border areas of Bayelsa and Delta states reporting movement into neighbouring Imo, Anambra, and Edo states, and some households migrating to Lagos and Abuja, indicating a widening of the geographic scope of climate displacement (IOM, 2022).

The period from 2023 to 2025 has been characterised by a set of emerging trends that point towards the future trajectory of climate-induced migration in Bayelsa State. First, flooding in 2023 and 2024 continued the pattern of recurrent high-magnitude events, with the state experiencing significant inundation in both years and the cumulative displacement burden compounding. Second, climate projections produced by the Nigerian Meteorological Agency (NIMET) and international bodies indicate that sea-level rise in the Niger Delta is proceeding at approximately 3.5 millimetres per year — broadly consistent with global average rates but compounded by deltaic subsidence that raises effective relative sea-level rise to between 10 and 25 millimetres per year in parts of the delta (Awosika, 1995; Brown et al., 2018).

Third, a policy window opened with the enactment of Nigeria's Climate Change Act of 2021 and the launch of the National Internally Displaced Persons Policy in 2022, creating for the first time a legal framework for addressing climate displacement. However, the implementation of these instruments at the state level has been slow and uneven, and the resources committed to Bayelsa State remain grossly disproportionate to the scale of the challenge (OCHA, 2022; Antigha et al., 2025). Fourth, civil society organisations, indigenous rights groups, and displaced communities themselves have become increasingly vocal advocates for a rights-based approach to climate adaptation and resettlement, generating important pressure for policy reform while also documenting displacement patterns that official sources have underreported (Amnesty International, 2021; IDMC, 2023).

Patterns of Resettlement and Community Responses

The dominant pattern of resettlement in response to climate-induced displacement in Bayelsa State has been spontaneous, self-organised, and largely unassisted by government. Displaced households and communities have made resettlement decisions based on kinship ties, land availability, economic opportunities, and proximity to familiar ecological and cultural environments. This pattern reflects both the dynamism of Niger Delta communities and the chronic inadequacy of state-managed resettlement (Ejiofor & Nwagbara, 2012; Chukwu-Okeah et al., 2020).

Urban relocation to Yenagoa and other towns has been the most common trajectory of spontaneous resettlement, particularly for younger, more educated, and economically mobile household members. This pattern of selective displacement has had significant consequences for the demographic composition and social structure of source communities, which have become progressively older, poorer, and more female as climate pressures have intensified. The feminisation of climate displacement in Bayelsa State (women constituting a disproportionate share of those who remain in flood-affected rural areas and those who undertake unassisted displacement to urban margins) is a dimension of the crisis that has received insufficient attention in both policy and scholarly literature (Obinna, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

Nonetheless, government-managed resettlement initiatives in Bayelsa State have been limited in number, partial in coverage, and frequently unsuccessful in practice. The most significant effort was the Bayelsa State Government's post-2012 flood resettlement programme, which identified several relocation sites and constructed prefabricated housing for a portion of the displaced population. However, evaluations of this programme have documented persistent

problems with site selection, infrastructure provision, land tenure security, and livelihood restoration (Antigha et al., 2025; IOM, 2013).

A consistent finding across post-disaster resettlement evaluations in Bayelsa State is the failure to involve displaced communities meaningfully in planning decisions, leading to resettlement sites that are poorly located relative to existing social networks, markets, and livelihoods (IOM, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2012). The abandonment of government-constructed resettlement housing, a phenomenon documented in both the post-2012 and post-2022 contexts, reflects the mismatch between top-down resettlement planning and the complex needs and preferences of displaced communities.

Despite the escalating scale of climate displacement, communities in Bayelsa State have demonstrated considerable resilience and innovation in developing adaptive strategies. These include the construction of elevated platforms and stilted housing adapted to flood conditions; the development of floating agriculture techniques borrowed from other delta communities; the diversification of livelihoods away from flood-vulnerable activities; and the strengthening of urban-rural remittance networks that enable rural communities to maintain livelihoods while absorbing climate shocks (Alagoa, 1972; Chukwu-Okeah et al., 2020).

However, there are compelling grounds for concern about the long-term sustainability of these adaptive strategies in the face of accelerating climate change. The financial and social resources required to sustain repeated adaptation are finite, and communities that have been displaced multiple times face a progressive erosion of adaptive capacity. Research by the Brookings Institution (2011) on climate migration in delta regions identified a phenomenon of "adaptation debt" — the accumulated depletion of resources, social capital, and ecological knowledge resulting from repeated climate-related crises — that may describe the situation of many Bayelsa State communities by the mid-2020s.

State and Federal Policy Responses

Nigeria's formal policy response to climate-induced displacement in the Niger Delta evolved slowly and inadequately relative to the scale of the challenge. The country acceded to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1994 and subsequently developed a series of National Communications to the UNFCCC documenting its climate vulnerability. However, these instruments contained limited provisions for protecting and assisting climate-displaced populations, and their implementation in states such as Bayelsa was fragmentary at best (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2003; NIMET, 2020).

The Niger Delta Development Commission Act of 2000, while creating an institutional mechanism for addressing the developmental backlog of the region, did not establish an explicit mandate for climate adaptation or displacement management. NDDC's master planning process acknowledged environmental degradation as a driver of social dislocation but lacked the legal instruments and financial resources needed to operationalise a comprehensive climate migration response (Antigha et al., 2025). The Federal Government's National Emergency Management Agency, while providing critical relief services after major flood events, operated primarily in a reactive mode and lacked the capacity for proactive displacement prevention or planned resettlement.

The catastrophic scale of the 2012 floods served as a limited policy catalyst, prompting a range of governmental and inter-governmental responses. The Federal Government constituted a Presidential Committee on Flood Relief and Rehabilitation, and the World Bank provided emergency financing for flood recovery (World Bank, 2013). Bayelsa State Government enacted emergency

provisions and established a flood response coordination mechanism, while international organisations including IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF, and the Red Cross deployed emergency relief operations.

However, critics including Human Rights Watch (2012) and Amnesty International (2015) documented persistent failures in the official response, including discriminatory allocation of relief materials, exclusion of the most remote and vulnerable communities, inadequate protection of women and children in IDP camps, and a near-complete absence of the longer-term livelihood restoration and planned resettlement assistance that effective displacement management requires. The recurrence of large-scale displacement in 2022 under broadly similar conditions suggests that the policy lessons of 2012 were not adequately translated into institutional change.

More so, the enactment of Nigeria's Climate Change Act in September 2021 represented the most significant legislative development in the country's climate governance history. The Act established a National Council on Climate Change, mandated the preparation of a National Climate Change Action Plan, and for the first time created legal obligations for federal and state governments with respect to climate adaptation (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021). The companion National IDP Policy, launched in 2022, similarly represented a formal acknowledgement of internal displacement as a governance challenge requiring systematic response (Government of Nigeria, 2022).

The practical significance of these instruments for climate-displaced communities in Bayelsa State remains, as of 2025, limited. The state's Climate Change Action Plan, required under the 2021 Act, had not been finalised as of the time of writing. Funding allocations for climate adaptation in the state's budget have remained negligible relative to identified needs, and the IDP policy's provisions for planned resettlement and livelihood restoration have not been translated into operational programmes. International climate finance instruments, including the Green Climate Fund and the Loss and Damage Fund established at COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh in 2022, represent potential sources of additional resources for Bayelsa, but accessing these funds requires institutional capacity that the state has yet to develop (Ubodiom & Inainfe, 2025; IDMC, 2023).

Recommendations

The following are some of the recommendations advanced for the study.

- i. The Bayelsa State Government should finalise and resource a Climate Change Action Plan that specifically addresses displacement prevention, planned resettlement, and livelihood restoration for climate-affected communities.
- ii. The Federal Government should ensure that Bayelsa State receives a priority allocation from Nigeria's national climate finance envelope and from international climate funds, including the Loss and Damage Fund.
- iii. Civil society organisations and community-based groups in the state should be supported and resourced to document displacement, advocate for affected communities, and participate meaningfully in adaptation planning.
- iv. Academic institutions, including the Federal University Otuoke, Niger Delta University, University of Africa etc., should prioritise interdisciplinary research on climate migration in the Niger Delta, ensuring that policy decisions are informed by rigorous empirical analysis.
- v. Finally, the international community (including development partners, UN agencies, and climate finance institutions) should recognise Bayelsa State's compounded climate vulnerability and engage more systematically with the governance dimensions of the displacement crisis.

Conclusion

This study traced the historical evolution of climate-induced displacement in Bayelsa State from the early flood years of the 1980s through the mega-floods of 2012 and 2022 to the emerging patterns of cumulative and potentially permanent displacement that characterise the current decade. Several conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, climate-induced displacement in Bayelsa State is not a recent or episodic phenomenon but a deepening structural condition rooted in the state's extreme climatic vulnerability, the legacy of petroleum-related environmental degradation, and the chronic failure of governance at state and federal levels. The escalating scale and frequency of displacement events between 1980 and 2025 represent a historical trajectory rather than a series of discrete disasters. Second, the compound character of climate vulnerability in Bayelsa, the interaction of global climate change, oil pollution, mangrove destruction, delta subsidence, and institutional weakness, means that conventional disaster response approaches are wholly inadequate. Addressing climate displacement in the region requires integrated environmental, development, and rights-based interventions that address the underlying drivers of vulnerability rather than merely responding to its manifestations. Third, the patterns of spontaneous, self-organised resettlement that have characterised community responses to climate displacement in Bayelsa State represent a significant under-documented dimension of the crisis. Future research and policy must engage more systematically with the strategies, capacities, and needs of displaced communities themselves, rather than treating displacement as a problem to be managed from above. Fourth, the historical record examined in this article underscores the urgent need for a historically informed and rights-based approach to climate adaptation planning in Bayelsa State. The failure of previous resettlement initiatives to achieve durable solutions reflects in large part the absence of such an approach, the neglect of community consultation, land tenure security, livelihood restoration, and cultural continuity that are the hallmarks of effective planned relocation.

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