The Climate We Don't Count

Migration, Cities, and Hidden Instability

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Overview

Every year, millions of people leave climate-affected regions for cities, and by the time they arrive they are counted as economic migrants. The distinction often drawn between climate migration and economic migration is unreliable, and that unreliability is consequential, because it is what keeps climate's footprint in urban instability uncounted. When climate-driven migrants are absorbed into cities and recorded as economic migrants, the climate origin of the instability that follows disappears from the frameworks meant to address it. Much of what registers as "economic" migration, "economic" grievance, and "economic" unrest is in fact climate-driven.

The Climate We Don't Count makes that connection visible. It shows that the pathway from climate event to urban political contention does not simply run through economic hardship. It runs through the interaction between climate-driven migration and the precarious urban economies that absorb it. Migration alone does not produce contention, and economic shocks alone do not produce contention. When climate-displaced workers concentrate in urban economies that are themselves vulnerable to disruption, the conditions for protests, strikes, and other collective contention emerge. Throughout, the "conflict" the book examines is urban political contention, not armed conflict.

Argument and Contribution

The book's central move is to stop sorting migrants by a contested motive (climate versus economic) and to organize the analysis around a property of the climate event itself, its sudden or gradual onset. Onset is recorded and observable, it can be measured from the hazard's own temporal profile, and it separates cases that behave differently. Sudden-onset events such as floods and cyclones and gradual processes such as drought, declining yields, and salinity produce different migration patterns, different urban pressures, and different policy needs, but they share the same underlying logic. Climate stress becomes economic stress, which becomes political stress.

The contribution is first conceptual. A large literature links climate stress to conflict and shows that its effects run through economic conditions and urbanization. The book names the mechanism this work leaves implicit. Climate stress reaches cities through migration, and the categories used to record that migration determine whether its climate origin stays visible. The book also treats the economic driver as precarity rather than absolute scarcity, which shifts the question from competition over a shrinking resource to how precarious urban economies absorb climate-displaced labor. That connects the argument to political ecology and to anti-reductionist work on the Bengal delta, where climate harm is understood as mediated by political economy. Finally, the book is distinct from recent work on disasters and armed conflict. Its outcome is urban political contention, its identification rests on a quasi-experiment, and its core claim is the categorization argument.

Evidence and Design

The argument is built across four scales of evidence, each doing different work.

- **Comparative analysis of eight countries.** Qualitative comparative analysis, including Bangladesh,

Benin, Guatemala, and Lebanon, identifies the configurations of economic structure, governance, and urbanization under which the pathway reaches urban contention. Economic structure emerges as the key condition.

- **Original survey data from Guatemala.** A survey of climate-affected populations examines how climate and economic motives combine in individuals' own decisions to migrate, supplying the book's micro-foundations.
- **A quasi-experiment in Bangladesh.** A triple-differences design exploits variation in flood exposure and garment-sector concentration to isolate the interaction between climate-driven migration and economic precarity, showing that the two together produce urban contention where neither does alone. A version of this chapter is published in the *Review of International Political Economy* (2025).
- **A cross-national analysis of about 150 countries.** Global displacement records matched to climate disaster data test whether climate events systematically drive displacement, using geophysical hazards as a placebo and distinguishing sudden from gradual onset, and then whether climate-driven movement interacts with economic precarity to predict unrest.

Chapter Outline

1. Introduction: Climate, Migration, and Urban Instability. Opens on the book's organizing claim, that the distinction between climate and economic migration is what keeps climate's footprint in urban instability uncounted, and sets out the questions, design, and structure of the book.

2. Theoretical Framework: From Scarcity to Precarity, and the Logic of Onset. Moves the discussion from neo-Malthusian scarcity to economic precarity, introduces sudden versus gradual onset as the organizing category, and develops the political economy of knowledge behind the title claim. Migration categories sort people into refugees fleeing persecution or economic migrants, with no category that registers climate, so movement driven by entangled climate and economic pressures is recorded as economic. The chapter specifies that the argument concerns displacement-driven migration, not voluntary movement.

3. Comparative Analysis: When the Pathway Reaches Contention. Uses qualitative comparative analysis across eight countries to identify which combinations of economic structure, governance, and urbanization allow the climate-migration pathway to reach urban contention, and where it does not.

4. Guatemala: Climate and Economic Motives in the Decision to Migrate. Draws on original survey data to examine the expectations, grievances, and motives of climate-affected populations, and how climate and economic considerations combine in the decision to move.

5. Bangladesh: Economic Precarity, Migration, and Urban Contention. Presents the quasi-experimental evidence from Bangladesh's garment sector. Neither migration nor economic shocks alone produce contention, but together they do. The chapter situates the findings in the gendered garment workforce, the aftermath of the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, and short-term displacement after cyclones.

6. Cross-National Patterns: Establishing the Phenomenon at Scale. Tests the pathway globally in two stages, from climate events to displacement and from displacement and economic precarity to unrest, establishing that the pattern is not specific to any single case.

7. Discussion and Policy: A Staged Response to Climate-Driven Migration. Develops a policy framework that disaggregates responses by onset type and by point in the pathway, from livelihood support and disaster relief at origin to housing, integration, and price stabilization at destination. Because climate-driven migrants are counted as economic migrants, adaptation rarely reaches them at any stage, and protection frameworks built for persecution offer them nothing.

8. Conclusion: A Growing Source of Urban Instability. Returns to the book's central warning. The structural conditions documented in Bangladesh and Guatemala are intensifying across the climate-vulnerable world, which makes the categorization failure a growing and largely unmeasured source of

urban instability.

Status

An earlier version of the manuscript was a finalist for the Oxford University Press Early Career Researcher First Book Prize, and the revised project is now under contract with Cambridge University Press.

Readership

The book is written for researchers and graduate students in environmental politics, migration studies, conflict studies, and international relations, and its combination of a quasi-experiment, comparative analysis, original survey data, and cross-national models also suits graduate and advanced undergraduate courses on climate, migration, and political economy. Its staged, onset-based policy framework speaks to practitioners working on climate adaptation, migration, and urban resilience.