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## SPECIAL ISSUE / ARTICLE

# The Cost of No Category: Legal Invisibility and Climate-Driven Displacement in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

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**ABSTRACT:** This article investigates how the absence of an integrated, rights-bearing policy category for climate-driven displacement shaped the response to the 2024 floods in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Anchored in the concept of borderscapes, Saskia Sassen's notion of expulsions, and Milton Santos's understanding of the unequal use of territory, the study approaches displacement not only as a humanitarian problem but also as a governance challenge produced by administrative fragmentation. Through a case study combining legal and policy documents, public communications, media and monitoring sources, secondary indicators, and reflexive field material, the article shows that Brazilian civil-defence categories such as desabrigado and desalojado were essential for emergency action but did not constitute an interoperable climate-displacement status capable of following people across sectors and municipalities. The findings reveal fragmented governance between federal, state, and municipal levels, unequal territorial capacities, and discontinuities in access to income support, housing, documentation, services, and reconstruction. The article argues that the 'non-category' problem is not literal absence of administrative labels, but the absence of a portable rights framework that recognises displacement as a trajectory. It proposes integrating climate displacement into Brazil's disaster management, social protection, housing, and territorial planning systems through a flexible, anticipatory, and rights-oriented framework.

**KEYWORDS:** borderscapes, climate displacement, legal invisibility, Rio Grande do Sul floods, territorial governance

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## 1. Introduction

Climate change has become one of the defining challenges of the twenty-first century, reshaping not only natural ecosystems but also social, political, and territorial dynamics. In this context, borders - understood in

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their physical-political, administrative, and symbolic dimensions - become critical analytical spaces because extreme events can abruptly reorganise mobility, access to services, and the territorial reach of public authority. This article examines these processes through the severe floods that struck Rio Grande do Sul, southern Brazil, in May 2024. The disaster inundated cities and rural areas, interrupted transport and essential services, displaced large numbers of residents, and placed exceptional pressure on housing, health, social protection, civil defence, and territorial management.

The choice of Rio Grande do Sul is justified by the scale of the event and by the analytical visibility it gives to the problem of climate-driven displacement. More than two million people were affected according to contemporaneous accounts, while official and subsequent technical assessments documented mass evacuation, shelter use, housing destruction, and prolonged disruption across most municipalities in the state (Lopes, Malinoski, and Gonzatto 2024; Rio Grande do Sul 2025). Rather than treating all affected residents as migrants, this article distinguishes between exposure to disaster and displacement: the relevant population is composed of people compelled to leave their habitual residence temporarily or permanently because remaining or returning was unsafe, impossible, or incompatible with access to essential services. The event was therefore one of the largest episodes of internal disaster displacement in recent Brazilian history.

The central research question is: how did the legal-administrative treatment of displacement shape access to protection and the reorganisation of territory during and after the 2024 floods? The article's argument is that the principal gap was not a complete absence of disaster categories. Brazilian law already recognises, among others, *desabrigado* and *desalojado*. The problem was that these categories were primarily event-management classifications and did not amount to a single, interoperable and rights-bearing category capable of following a climate-displaced person across municipalities and policy sectors. This distinction matters because eligibility for shelter, emergency income, housing, documentation, education, health care, and reconstruction was administered through different instruments, databases, and territorial jurisdictions.

Three concepts organise the analysis. Borderscapes identify borders as lived, negotiated, and institutionally produced spaces rather than only lines separating sovereign territories. Sassen's notion of expulsions directs attention to structural processes that remove people from secure access to housing, livelihoods, and valued territory, including processes intensified after a disaster by market and reconstruction dynamics (Sassen 2014). Santos's analysis of the unequal use of territory highlights how technical networks, public services, information, political command, and economic opportunity are distributed unevenly in space (Santos 2006). Read together, these concepts make it possible to connect legal invisibility to territorial experience: administrative discontinuities can operate as internal borders, while unequal territorial capacities determine who can move, where they can find protection, and whether return becomes viable.

The article makes two contributions. Empirically, it reconstructs the interaction between forced mobility, emergency governance, public narratives, and uneven territorial capacity in the Rio Grande do Sul floods. Conceptually, it reframes the 'non-category' problem as a politics of classification and portability. Borderscapes provide the experiential register of this politics; Sassen and Santos explain why the consequences are socially selective and territorially unequal. The sections that follow develop this framework, clarify the Brazilian normative context, make the methodological procedures explicit, and then apply the framework to the case and its policy implications.

## 2. Borders, Borderscapes, Expulsions, and Unequal Territorial Capacity

Borders have long been a central concern in political geography and international relations, but contemporary border scholarship has moved beyond the idea of the border as a static territorial line. Paasi (1998, 2003) and Amilhat Szary (2015) emphasise borders as institutional and social processes embedded in identities, practices, and relations of power. The borderscapes approach extends this shift by asking how borders are

experienced, represented, contested, and reproduced in everyday life. Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007) foregrounded hidden geographies and politics at territorial edges; Brambilla (2015) subsequently stressed the critical potential of borderscapes for examining the multiplication of bordering practices, while dell'Agnese and Amilhat Szary (2015) highlighted the spatial, visual, and experiential dimensions through which borders are continuously made and remade.

This processual approach is especially relevant under climate stress. Floods, droughts, coastal erosion, and sea-level rise can transform the material conditions on which territorial organisation depends: roads become impassable, river channels change, neighbourhoods become uninhabitable, and public-service networks cease to operate. Recent international-law work on sea-level rise likewise treats territorial change and the protection of affected populations as interdependent problems rather than separate questions (International Law Association 2024; International Law Commission 2025). The relevance for Rio Grande do Sul is not that sea-level rise caused the May 2024 disaster, but that climate-related environmental change can destabilise the apparently fixed relationship between population, territory, and public authority.

Borderscapes also help avoid reducing mobility to the act of crossing an official boundary. Banki and Pasha (2025) conceptualise borders through formal and informal practices that restrict access to territories, resources, and rights. This insight can be transferred cautiously to internal disaster governance: registration requirements, municipal databases, shelter rules, road closures, service catchment areas, and eligibility criteria may create practical thresholds between those who can access protection and those who cannot. At the same time, the language used to describe mobility matters. Johnson, Jacobsen, and Ehrkamp (2024) show how fluid metaphors such as 'flows' and 'floods' of migrants can naturalise mobility and obscure political agency. For this reason, the present article uses movement and displacement descriptively and does not treat displaced people themselves as a fluid pressure on receiving territories.

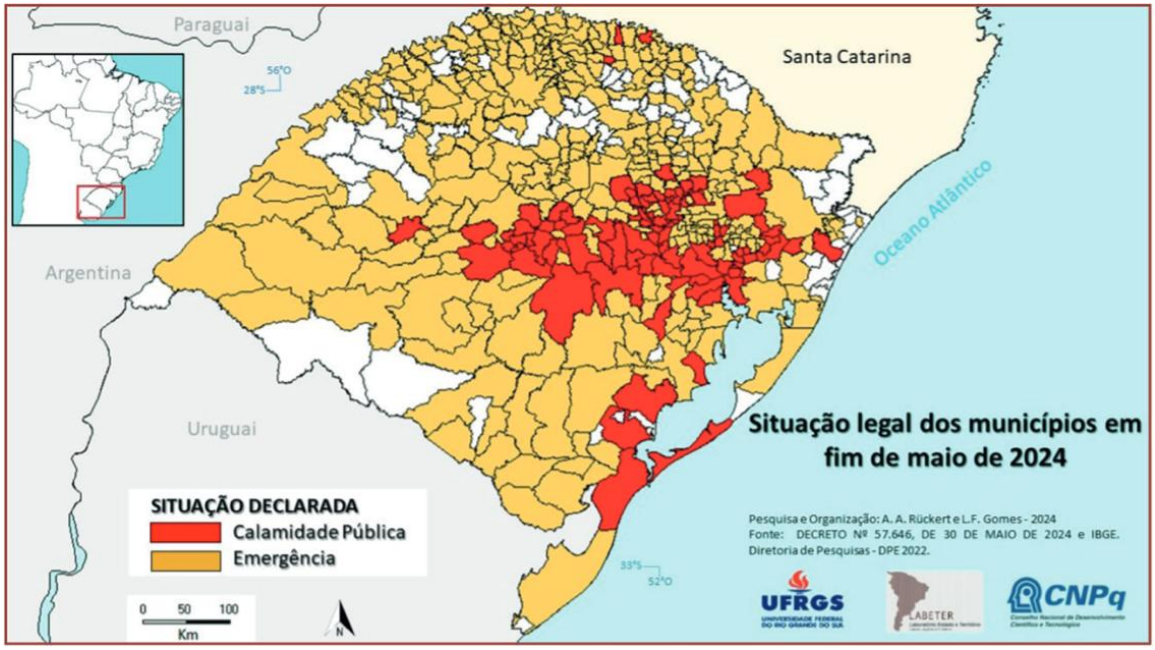
Sassen's concept of expulsion adds a structural dimension to this account. Expulsion does not refer only to formal removal. It describes systemic processes through which individuals, households, or places are pushed outside stable social and economic arrangements (Sassen 2014). A climate disaster can accelerate such processes without being their sole cause. Before the flood, unequal income, housing location, infrastructure, and access to mobility shaped exposure. After the flood, prolonged uninhabitability, the cost of reconstruction, loss of livelihoods, reclassification of risk areas, and appreciation of safer real-estate markets could turn an emergency evacuation into a longer-term exclusion from previous places of residence. The reported rise in property values in higher and non-flooded areas of Porto Alegre is analytically relevant here: it shows how a new geography of safety may also become a geography of affordability and exclusion (Quesada 2024).

Santos provides the complementary territorial lens. Territory, in his approach, is not an empty container but an unevenly organised system of objects, networks, techniques, institutions, and uses (Santos 2006). 'Unequal territorial capacities' in this article therefore refers to concrete differences in the ability of places to absorb a shock and sustain rights: road and utility resilience, shelter and housing availability, local administrative capacity, access to health and social assistance, fiscal and technical resources, information systems, and the capacity to receive displaced populations. These capacities are relational. A municipality may be physically less affected by flooding yet become administratively strained when thousands of displaced residents arrive; conversely, a heavily affected municipality may lose precisely the infrastructure needed to register and assist its residents.

The Rio Grande do Sul floods made those asymmetries visible. The Taquari and Sinos Valleys and the Metropolitan Region of Porto Alegre suffered severe infrastructure and housing losses, while receiving areas on the northern coast experienced sudden pressure on water, housing, energy, transport, and local services. Approximately 242,000 homes were affected in the Porto Alegre metropolitan region, compared with around 22,000 in the Taquari Valley and 46,000 in the Sinos Valley in the geospatial assessment used here (Possantti,

Müller, and Ruhoff 2024). These absolute numbers should not be read as a simple ranking of vulnerability, but they demonstrate that the scale and type of demand differed sharply across territories.

**Figure 1 – Municipalities in the State of Rio Grande do Sul under declared states of Public Calamity and Emergency as of May 31, 2024**




*Legend: Red (Public Calamity). Orange (Emergency). Source: Rückert, Vicente, and Gomes (2024, 4).*

Retrospective evidence reinforces the unequal-territory argument. The IBGE's experimental Special Survey on the 2024 Floods in Rio Grande do Sul (PEERS), collected between September 2025 and February 2026, was designed to compare damage, service interruptions, support, work, study, and living conditions across affected areas (IBGE 2026). It found structural housing damage concentrated disproportionately among lower-income households: households with monthly income up to R$2,000 represented 31.4 per cent of households reporting structural damage, compared with 16.9 per cent among those without reported structural damage. The survey is post-disaster and therefore not part of the contemporaneous event corpus, but it provides an independent retrospective check on the article's claim that exposure and recovery burdens were distributed unevenly.

The literature on climate-related mobility also requires a clear distinction between internal displacement and international refugee protection. The expression 'climate refugee' remains common in public debate, but it is not a stand-alone legal status under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Recent scholarship emphasises that disasters and climate change can interact with persecution, conflict, human-rights risks, and non-refoulement obligations, but the applicable international protection pathways depend on the circumstances of the individual case (McAdam 2021; Cantor et al. 2024). The European Parliament's updated briefing similarly notes the absence of an agreed legal definition of 'climate refugee' and the limits of the Refugee Convention as a direct climate-displacement instrument (Mentzelopoulou 2026). This distinction is central to the present case: the empirically documented governance challenge was overwhelmingly internal and required protection by the Brazilian state within its own territory.

Finally, disaster governance scholarship increasingly stresses that emergency relief cannot be analytically separated from social protection and longer-term recovery. Betts (2010) and Martin (2014) highlighted governance gaps around environmentally influenced mobility, while de Clercq and Olivier (2026) argue more recently that humanitarian, development, and social-protection systems remain too compartmentalised to manage displacement as a continuous process. This diagnosis closely resembles the problem observed in Rio Grande do Sul: agencies and programmes responded, but often through sequential, sector-specific instruments. The analytical task is therefore not to equate fragmentation with state absence, but to examine where institutional hand-offs, territorial jurisdictions, and policy classifications failed to preserve continuity of protection.

Taken together, the framework yields three propositions for the empirical analysis. First, a borderscape emerges where material disruption and administrative practices create new thresholds of access, safety, and belonging. Second, expulsions become visible when temporary displacement is converted into durable exclusion from housing, livelihoods, or place. Third, the effects of both processes depend on unequal territorial capacities in the Santosian sense. Legal invisibility links the three: when a person's displacement trajectory is not legible across policies and territories, access to rights becomes contingent on repeated reclassification at each institutional boundary.

## 3. The Non-Category Problem: Legal Invisibility and Climate-Driven Displacement

The 2024 floods revealed a paradox of classification. People affected by the disaster were highly visible to public authorities, but they were visible through different administrative lenses: victims, evacuees, shelter users, desabrigados, desalojados, low-income beneficiaries, residents of risk areas, owners or tenants of damaged housing, workers seeking emergency access to savings, or families eligible for reconstruction measures. Classification is indispensable to public administration because categories make populations legible, establish eligibility, allocate responsibility, and structure data (Bowker and Star 1999). The critical issue is therefore not whether categories existed, but whether they captured the displacement trajectory in a way that preserved rights across time, sectors, and municipalities.

At the international level, the distinction between refugee status and internal displacement clarifies the relevant duty of protection. Refugee law is principally concerned with persons outside their country who satisfy specified protection criteria. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, by contrast, expressly encompass persons forced or obliged to leave their homes because of natural or human-made disasters without crossing an internationally recognised state border (United Nations 1998). The Guiding Principles are influential soft law rather than a self-executing Brazilian administrative status. They provide a protective standard but do not, by themselves, create the interoperable domestic registers, benefit rules, and intergovernmental responsibilities needed to accompany a household from evacuation to temporary shelter, return, reconstruction, or permanent relocation.

The term 'climate refugee' is thus used here only when discussing public discourse or international protection debates, not as a legal label for the population studied. UNHCR treats climate change as a factor that can compound displacement and protection risks, while IOM uses broader environmental-migration terminology without purporting to establish a new refugee status (UNHCR 2023; IOM 2019). McAdam (2021) and Cantor et al. (2024) further show that the legal consequences of disasters and climate change vary according to whether movement is internal or cross-border and whether other protection grounds are present. The documentary corpus for this study did not produce a sufficiently verifiable count of international relocation to Argentina or Uruguay. Cross-border climate mobility is therefore treated as a prospective governance issue, whereas internal climate displacement is the immediate empirical problem analysed here.

Brazil already possessed a substantive disaster-governance architecture before the 2024 floods. Law 12,608/2012 instituted the National Policy for Protection and Civil Defence (PNPDEC) and the National System for Protection and Civil Defence (SINPDEC), covering prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery and requiring integration with territorial planning, health, environment, climate, water, infrastructure, education, and other sectoral policies (Brasil 2012). Law 14,750/2023 strengthened this framework and formally defined *desabrigado* as a person forced to leave a dwelling who requires shelter provided by SINPDEC, and desalojado as a person forced to leave a dwelling who does not necessarily require such shelter (Brasil 2023). These definitions are important and the revised argument explicitly recognises them.

The gap exposed in 2024 lay elsewhere. *Desabrigado* and *desalojado* are essential operational categories, but they do not by themselves constitute a climate-displacement status with guaranteed continuity across social assistance, housing, health, education, labour, documentation, and municipalities of origin and destination. The Auxílio Reconstrução illustrates both the value and the limits of existing categories. The federal benefit was a one-off R$5,100 payment for families registered as *desabrigadas* or *desalojadas* in affected municipalities; operationalisation depended on municipal submission of family data, confirmation by the household through Gov.br, federal data checks, and payment by Caixa (MIDR 2024; Caixa Econômica Federal 2024). This architecture mobilised assistance at scale, but it also demonstrates how access depended on the interoperability of municipal registration, federal digital identity, and programme-specific eligibility.

The same discontinuity appears when displacement lasts longer than an emergency decree. A family can leave an inundated municipality, stay with relatives elsewhere, lose documents or work, return temporarily, and later discover that its neighbourhood has been reclassified as a risk area. Each transition may activate a different policy instrument and a different territorial authority. If the state records only shelter occupancy, damaged property, or a one-off benefit, the displacement trajectory disappears administratively even though its effects persist. Legal invisibility, as used in this article, names this loss of continuity: the person is not literally invisible to the state but becomes fragmented across databases and categories that do not travel together.

This point also strengthens the link with borderscapes. A municipal boundary becomes an administrative border when benefit access, health registration, housing support, or documentation must be renegotiated after relocation. A digital registration rule can act as a border when service access depends on records anchored in the municipality of origin. A risk-zone designation can become a border between return and non-return. These are not equivalent to international borders, but they are bordering practices in the sense that they distribute access to territory, resources, and rights. Legal invisibility is therefore the institutional face of the borderscape experienced by displaced households.

The Brazilian framework has continued to evolve after the disaster. Decree 12,652/2025 established principles, guidelines, and objectives for the first National Plan for Protection and Civil Defence, later instituted for 2025-2035. The plan emphasises information management, integrated data, monitoring, preparedness, response, recovery, social participation, and cross-sectoral coordination (Brasil 2025). This post-dates the 2024 event and should not be projected backwards as if it governed the initial response. It is nevertheless relevant as institutional learning. At the same time, Bill 1,594/2024 proposes a National Policy for Environmental and Climate Displaced Persons with explicit rights in humanitarian response, health, education, work, social assistance, housing, and access to justice. As of 25 August 2026, the bill remained pending in the Chamber of Deputies under an urgency procedure, awaiting the creation of a temporary commission and ready for plenary scheduling (Câmara dos Deputados 2026). Its continued pendency confirms that a dedicated climate-displacement rights framework is still under construction.

The 'non-category' thesis should therefore be read precisely. Brazil did not face the floods without concepts, laws, institutions, or assistance. It faced them without an integrated category and data architecture that treated climate displacement as a rights-bearing trajectory across the emergency, transition, and recovery phases.

Naming such a category would not eliminate institutional inequalities by itself. It would, however, establish a common unit around which registers, responsibilities, portability rules, and long-term monitoring could be organised.

## 4. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative embedded case-study design centred on the 2024 Rio Grande do Sul floods. The principal unit of analysis is the institutional recognition and treatment of displacement across federal, state, and municipal governance, with embedded attention to three mechanisms: categorisation and eligibility, territorial capacity and intergovernmental coordination, and the narratives through which displaced populations were represented. A case-study design is appropriate because the research question concerns how legal rules, administrative practices, material disruption, public narratives, and mobility interacted during a bounded crisis rather than the estimation of a population-level causal effect.

The core empirical window runs from May 2024 to February 2025. This period captures the emergency, the principal transition from mass evacuation and sheltering to reconstruction, and the public-communication corpus analysed below. Field observations and semi-structured conversations were undertaken between May and September 2024 in the Metropolitan Region of Porto Alegre, the Taquari Valley, the Sinos Valley, the northern coast of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and selected border localities. Participants encountered in this exploratory field component included displaced residents, government authorities and operational responders, civil-society actors, and environmental specialists. Because the fieldwork occurred under emergency conditions and was not maintained as a closed, formally recruited interview roster, the revised article does not report an interview N, does not claim saturation, and does not use frequencies from these conversations. They are treated as contextual and triangulating material rather than as a stand-alone interview dataset.

The documentary corpus was assembled purposively to cover the policy chain through which displacement became visible or disappeared: civil-defence and legal instruments, social-protection and emergency-benefit rules, state and municipal communications, reconstruction and geospatial monitoring, utility and mobility indicators, and media reporting with direct relevance to evacuation, host-area pressure, service disruption, aid, housing, and reconstruction. Later sources from 2025-2026 - notably the National Plan for Protection and Civil Defence, the current status of Bill 1,594/2024, and the IBGE PEERS survey - are used only as post-disaster institutional or retrospective evidence and are clearly distinguished from the contemporaneous event corpus.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. First, documentary items were indexed by date, producing institution, territorial level, municipality or region, policy phase, and policy instrument. A deductive coding frame derived from the theoretical argument identified references to legal or administrative category, eligibility, portability, territorial capacity, bordering, expulsion, host-area pressure, and return or relocation. Second, inductive subthemes were added when they recurred across different source families, including shelter saturation, service interruption, registration problems, benefit timing, reconstruction, and real-estate pressure. Findings were retained as substantive claims only when supported by documentary evidence or when field observations converged with an independently verifiable source.

The 'constellation of truths' formulation adapted from De Geroni (2021) is used here as a sensitising interpretive protocol, not as a substitute for source criticism. Accounts produced during a traumatic and rapidly changing event can be incomplete, temporally inconsistent, or shaped by different institutional positions. Instead of forcing such accounts into a single harmonised narrative, discrepancies were retained, indexed by actor, place, and date, and compared with contemporaneous administrative records and media chronologies. Convergence strengthened an interpretation; divergence was analysed as evidence of unequal information, institutional position, or lived experience. This differs from simply choosing the majority account and is especially relevant where emergency figures changed daily.

**Table 1 - Evidence base and analytical use**

| Evidence family | Sources and scope | Analytical use |
|---|---|---|
| Legal and policy documents | Federal legislation; PNPDEC/SINPDEC instruments; Auxílio Reconstrução rules; state and municipal emergency measures; PL 1,594/2024. | Identify categories, eligibility, institutional responsibilities, and policy continuity. |
| Official communications | Rio Grande do Sul State news portal and Civil Defence updates; selected municipal communications; May 2024-February 2025. | Reconstruct chronology and code public framing of displacement, climate, services, and reconstruction. |
| Media and monitoring sources | Agência Brasil, BBC News Brasil, G1, Valor, Exame, Canal Rural, Metsul; UFRGS geospatial and reconstruction materials. | Triangulate chronology, host-area pressure, housing-market effects, infrastructure disruption, and lived impacts. |
| Secondary quantitative indicators | Water and electricity records; highway-traffic indicators; later IBGE PEERS used as retrospective validation. | Support spatial and temporal inference on disruption and movement; not used to identify individual displaced persons. |
| Exploratory field material | May-September 2024; affected residents, public responders/officials, civil-society actors, environmental specialists; Porto Alegre metropolitan area, Taquari and Sinos Valleys, northern coast, Santa Catarina, and selected border localities. | Contextual triangulation and mechanism identification; no closed interview roster or frequency inference. |
| Reflexive field notes | Author's 35-day displacement and contemporaneous notes on evacuation, utilities, routes, and return. | Participant-observer illustration of mechanisms also supported by independent documentary evidence. |

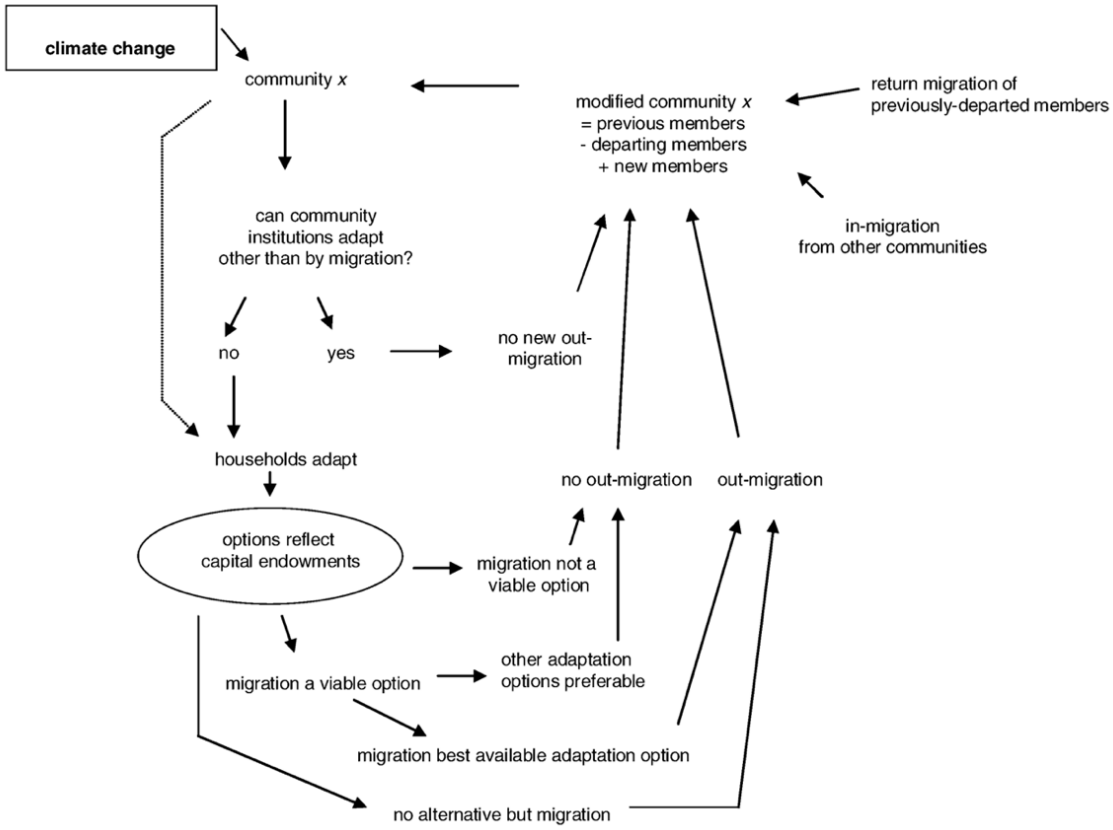
A concrete example is the treatment of emergency displacement figures. During May 2024, state updates and media reports alternated between counts of people in public shelters, pessoas desalojadas staying in private arrangements, and broader totals of residents 'affected' by the floods; those categories changed at different moments and were not numerically interchangeable. The protocol therefore did not collapse them into a single series. Each figure was retained with its date, institutional source, territorial scope, and population definition, and it was used only for the claim that matched that definition. Thus, the approximately 5,000 displaced residents reported by Imbé was treated as evidence of pressure on a receiving municipality, not added to statewide displacement totals, because destination reports could not be uniquely reconciled with origin-based registers (Araújo 2024). Likewise, the article uses the later consolidated state assessment for stable aggregate statements while preserving higher contemporaneous estimates as evidence of how the scale of the emergency was understood in real time (Rio Grande do Sul 2025; Lopes, Malinoski, and Gonzatto 2024). In this sense, divergence was not 'resolved' by selecting one truth, but by delimiting what each source could validly support.

Secondary quantitative indicators - notably water and electricity records and highway-traffic data used to infer displacement patterns - required technical standardisation because source tables used non-identical municipality names, dates, units, and structures. ChatGPT (GPT-4) and DeepSeek were used only as ancillary preprocessing interfaces to standardise those labels and table structures and to flag mismatches. No missing observation was generated, no unobserved value was estimated, and no generative output was treated as evidence. Each transformation was checked against the raw tables, while inferred trends were compared with contemporaneous press reports and municipal or state estimates. Qualitative coding and interpretation were conducted by the author.

McLeman and Smit's (2006) climate-migration model was used as a heuristic rather than a predictive model. The adaptation preserved the original logic linking climatic stimuli, vulnerability, decision constraints, and mobility outcomes, but translated it to the short time-scale of an acute flood emergency. For the case analysis, the model was operationalised through three event phases - evacuation, provisional displacement, and return or relocation - and through observed route constraints and destination conditions. The adaptation was necessary because the article examines rapid internal displacement and receiving-territory capacity rather than long-run

original model, while the text explains the event-specific analytical use.

**Figure 2 - McLeman and Smit's (2006) Climate Change-Induced Migration Model (original model; event-specific analytical adaptation described in Section 4)**




Source: McLeman and Smit (2006, 47).

The author's own 35-day displacement is methodologically framed as reflexive positionality and participant-observer material, not as a separate autoethnographic dataset. First-person vignettes are retained only where they illuminate mechanisms already visible in the wider evidence - utility interruption, evacuation routes, uncertainty over return, and the timing or accessibility of emergency support. Personal experience is not used to infer prevalence and does not substitute for documentary verification. This distinction is important because proximity to the event provides observational access but can also create interpretive bias.

The study has four limitations. First, the absence of a unified displacement registry prevents a precise count of unique displacement trajectories and complicates distinctions between evacuation, shelter use, temporary stays with relatives, and permanent relocation. Second, the exploratory field material is not a statistically or theoretically saturated interview sample. Third, proxy indicators such as utility consumption and traffic flows

can suggest population movement but cannot uniquely identify displaced persons. Fourth, some retrospective evidence, particularly PEERS, was collected well after the event. These limitations reinforce rather than weaken the core administrative argument: the difficulty of reconstructing who moved, where, for how long, and with what access to rights is itself evidence of fragmented legibility.

This limitation was encountered directly in reconstructing the displacement process. There was no single identifier or longitudinal record linking a household's municipality of origin, shelter or private accommodation, temporary destination, benefit status, and eventual return or relocation. As a result, the analysis could reconstruct patterns only by triangulating partial traces - civil-defence and shelter categories, benefit records, municipal destination reports, utility interruptions, traffic indicators, media chronologies, and field observations - rather than by following a closed cohort of displaced people. This creates an asymmetry in the evidence: the emergency phase is comparatively visible because shelter occupancy and civil-defence categories generated frequent counts, whereas onward movement, stays with relatives, intermunicipal relocation, and delayed return are less legible. Methodologically, proxy movements are therefore not converted into person-level counts; substantively, the same constraint illustrates the article's core claim that fragmented data architecture makes displacement trajectories difficult for both researchers and public authorities to follow across institutional boundaries.

## 5. The Case of the Floods in Rio Grande do Sul (2024)

The floods that struck Rio Grande do Sul from late April and through May 2024 constitute the most severe natural disaster recorded in the state and one of the largest in Brazil. They resulted from a convergence of extreme precipitation, basin geography, land use, infrastructure exposure, and broader climatic change (Oliveira, Camardelo, and Stedile 2025). Rivers such as the Taquari, Sinos, Caí, and Jacuí overflowed, while Lake Guaíba inundated extensive areas of Porto Alegre and its metropolitan region. Subsequent state technical assessment recorded 478 of 497 municipalities affected and 182 deaths, while nearly one million people were directly affected according to consolidated official data (Rio Grande do Sul 2025). These figures are used in preference to the higher provisional estimates circulating during the emergency.

Environmental and infrastructural impacts were long-lasting. Riverine ecosystems and permanent preservation areas were degraded, water was contaminated by sewage and other waste, road and bridge networks failed, and electricity and communications were repeatedly interrupted. Ecological and infrastructure recovery was expected to take years (Maliszewski and Faverin 2024; Hirata 2024). The closure of Porto Alegre International Airport for months was an extreme example of territorial disconnection, affecting passenger mobility, freight, tourism, and the state's connection to national and international networks (Neves 2024; Gallisa, Quadros, and Paz 2024).

The disaster's social geography was equally uneven. Low-income urban residents, peripheral neighbourhoods, family farmers, and communities in floodplains often had fewer private resources for evacuation and recovery. The later PEERS evidence provides a useful retrospective check on this pattern: structural housing damage was disproportionately concentrated among lower-income households (IBGE 2026). In Santosian terms, the flood did not strike an abstract homogeneous territory; it interacted with an already unequal distribution of infrastructure, income, mobility, administrative capacity, and access to safer land.

The response involved substantial mobilisation by all levels of government as well as civil society. Federal authorities recognised public calamity, released extraordinary resources, deployed security and logistical support, and created specific benefit and credit instruments. State and municipal governments operated evacuation, shelter, health, civil-defence, and reconstruction measures. Civil-society organisations and informal solidarity networks provided food, transport, medical, psychological, veterinary, and logistical assistance. This

mobilisation is important because the argument of this article is not one of state absence. The problem was coordination under extreme scale and the continuity of protection across institutions and territories.

Administrative capacity itself was damaged. Municipal buildings and databases became inaccessible; roads isolated communities; utility networks failed; and some municipalities simultaneously lost service capacity and faced the need to register large affected populations. The state news archive documents repeated updates on infrastructure services, civil-defence statistics, temporary systems, and meetings with affected municipalities throughout May 2024 (Rio Grande do Sul Government 2024-2025). These conditions help specify 'unequal territorial capacity': response depended not simply on formal competences but on whether local institutions, staff, connectivity, registries, shelters, and transport remained operational.

The floods triggered mass evacuation and internal displacement within Rio Grande do Sul and to neighbouring Brazilian states, especially Santa Catarina. Hundreds of thousands of people temporarily left homes that were inundated, contaminated, inaccessible, or without electricity and drinking water. At the height of the emergency, official categories distinguished those in public shelters from those classified as desalojados, many of whom stayed with relatives, friends, or in privately arranged accommodation. This distinction was operationally necessary, but it also fragmented the administrative picture because neither group was synonymous with the full population experiencing a displacement trajectory.

**Figure 3 – Downtown Porto Alegre flooded in the second week of the flood.**



Source: Agência Brasil (2024).

**Figure 4 – Porto Alegre International Airport flooded in May 2024.**



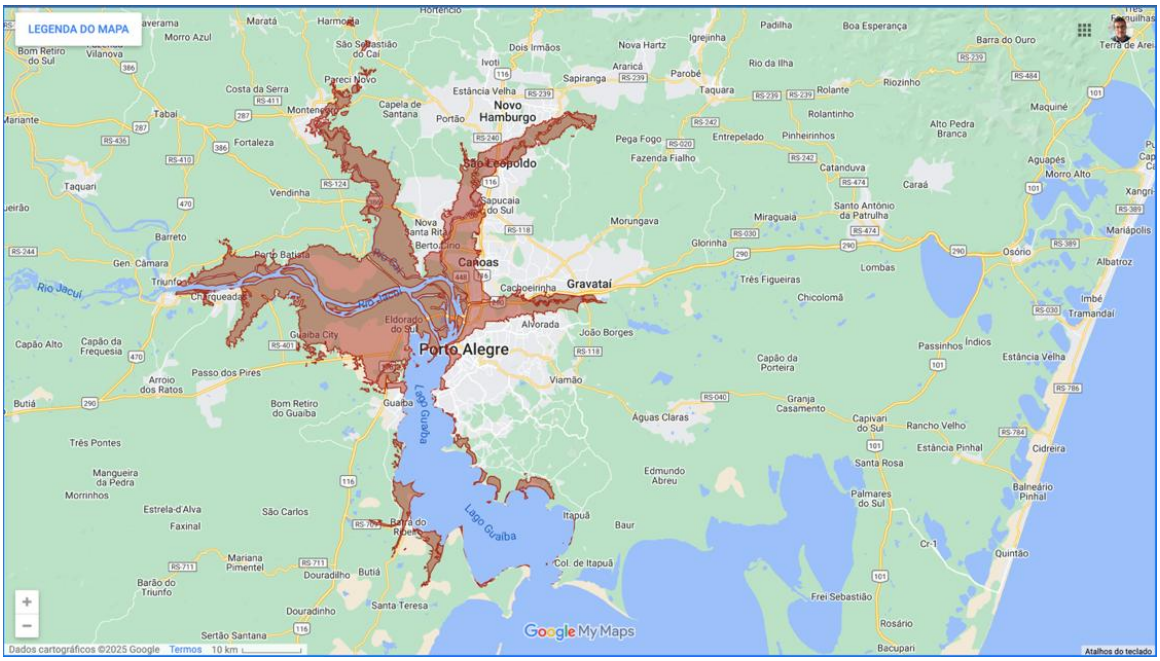

*Source: Metsul Meteorologia (2024).*

The spatial pattern of damage translated into different displacement constraints. Rural families and small farmers frequently faced the loss not only of a dwelling but also of productive land, animals, equipment, and transport access. Low-income urban households faced rent pressure and limited access to safer neighbourhoods. The absence of an integrated registry made it difficult to connect the municipality of origin, temporary destination, housing condition, benefit status, and later return or relocation. Psychological trauma compounded these material constraints and made the temporal boundary between emergency and recovery particularly uncertain (Silva, Silva, and Molin 2024).

Physical changes also produced new borderscapes. Rivers and inundated road corridors became barriers, isolating communities and disrupting ordinary municipal connections. Figure 5 maps the flood extent in the Metropolitan Region of Porto Alegre and helps show why formal administrative boundaries could not capture the geography of access: residents' practical territory was reorganised around open bridges, passable roads, functioning utilities, and available shelter rather than municipal lines alone.

Host areas reveal the relational nature of territorial capacity. Municipalities on the northern coast that were initially outside the principal flood zone received displaced residents from the metropolitan region and then faced pressure on housing, water, energy, transport, and local services. Imbé, for example, reported the arrival of approximately 5,000 displaced persons and sought emergency recognition to cope with the indirect impact of the disaster (Araújo 2024). In analytical terms, the territory of reception became part of the disaster even without being the site of the initial inundation. Capacity was transferred, stretched, and in some cases reduced by the arrival of people whose rights and service records were anchored elsewhere.

**Figure 5 – Map of the flood extent in the Porto Alegre Metropolitan Area.**




Source: Possantti, Müller, and Ruhoff (2024).

The post-disaster housing market added a second mechanism of expulsion. Areas perceived as safer, particularly higher parts of Porto Alegre, experienced sharp increases in property values (Quesada 2024). The same risk information that is necessary for adaptation can therefore have distributive effects: if safer land appreciates faster than household resources recover, lower-income displaced residents may be priced out of the very areas to which risk reduction directs them. Sassen's framework clarifies why return and relocation cannot be analysed only as voluntary preferences. Market dynamics, insurance, reconstruction costs, and new risk classifications can convert temporary displacement into durable exclusion.

These empirical patterns also tighten the connection between borderscapes and legal invisibility. A blocked road is a material border; a municipal registration requirement is an administrative border; an unaffordable safe neighbourhood is an economic border; and the absence of a portable displacement record forces households to cross these borders repeatedly without a single institutional identity that accompanies them. The borderscape produced by the flood was therefore simultaneously physical, bureaucratic, social, and economic.

## 6. Narratives, Administrative Bordering, and Lived Displacement

This section examines how public narratives transformed forced mobility into an object of governance and, in doing so, helped produce administrative and social borders. The argument is not that discourse caused the material crisis. Rather, the categories and stories used by authorities and media affected which aspects of displacement became salient: rescue and shelter, pressure on receiving municipalities, emergency income, reconstruction, or climate adaptation. These narrative frames interacted with the legal categories analysed above and influenced whether displaced residents appeared primarily as rights-holders, beneficiaries, victims, or additional demand on local capacity.

Rio Grande do Sul has a long environmental history associated with figures such as José Lutzenberger and organised ecological movements. During the 2024 emergency, however, public communication was

necessarily dominated by immediate operational information: river levels, road closures, shelter locations, rescue, donations, and service restoration. Local and national media initially performed an essential public-service role. As the emergency continued, coverage expanded towards questions of preparedness, infrastructure failure, reconstruction cost, political responsibility, and the dramatic symbolic narratives that often accompany disasters.

A first political-media narrative concerned receiving municipalities. Mayors in severely affected areas urged evacuation while municipalities outside the main inundation zone confronted rapid population arrival. Imbé illustrates this shift. Local authorities described the arrival of roughly 5,000 displaced residents from the Porto Alegre metropolitan region as an indirect disaster impact requiring additional public resources (Araújo 2024). The statement was administratively understandable, but it also shows a bordering mechanism: people who had crossed an internal municipal boundary were recoded from residents in need of protection into an external demand placed upon the destination's service capacity.

A second narrative concerned income and reconstruction. As shelters expanded, displacement increasingly meant interruption of work, loss of household goods, housing uncertainty, and the cost of return. The federal Auxílio Reconstrução was created in mid-May as a single R$5,100 payment for eligible families registered as desabrigadas or desalojadas. The first payments began on 30 May and subsequent batches depended on municipal registration, citizen confirmation, and federal processing (Caixa Econômica Federal 2024; MIDR 2024). This sequence is more precise than the earlier manuscript's characterisation of a generic R$5,000 payment 'only' in June. The revised evidence shows both rapid policy innovation and a portability problem: the benefit required several administrative systems to recognise the same displaced family.

Other instruments followed different logics. The FGTS calamity withdrawal allowed eligible workers to access compulsory savings after official disaster recognition, while state income-transfer and reconstruction programmes applied their own eligibility criteria. Such measures were valuable but non-equivalent: one depended on labour-linked savings, another on household registration, another on income or local programme rules. The displaced person therefore moved through a policy mosaic rather than a unified protection pathway. This is precisely the type of administrative bordering that the 'non-category' framework seeks to capture.

The author's own displacement provides a reflexive illustration of this mechanism, not a separate evidentiary base. On 4 May 2024, the author's building was within the flooded area; the ground floor remained submerged for approximately three weeks, electricity was unavailable for the same period, and potable water was absent for roughly two weeks. The household stayed away from home for 35 days. This vignette is retained because the sequence - loss of utilities, evacuation, prolonged uncertainty over return, and navigation of emergency measures - is consistent with the broader documentary evidence. It is not used to infer how frequently other households experienced the same sequence.

The public-communication analysis also clarifies the climate framing. The author compiled 827 items attributed to or issued with Governor Eduardo Leite in the official Rio Grande do Sul State news portal between May 2024 and February 2025 and coded explicit references to *mudança climática* or *mudanças climáticas*, with manual verification of the items returned. Approximately 11.36 per cent contained an explicit climate-change reference. This figure is therefore a property of the defined author-compiled corpus, not a claim about every speech or communication by the governor. The source archive is identified in the methodology and references (Rio Grande do Sul Government 2024-2025). The municipal communications reviewed were likewise dominated by emergency and reconstruction frames, but the revised article does not retain the earlier unsupported categorical claim that the mayor of Porto Alegre made 'no references' to climate change.

**Figure 6 - Entrance to the Author's Building on the Second Day of the Flood, When the Household Left Home. May 4, 2024.**



Source: Author's Collection.

The relatively limited explicit climate framing matters because narratives shape temporal horizons. Emergency language directs attention to immediate rescue and restoration; resilience and adaptation language directs attention to future risk, land-use planning, and the possibility that return to previous locations may be unsafe or unaffordable. The two are not mutually exclusive, but the empirical imbalance helps explain why reconstruction could be narrated as restoring normality even where the territorial conditions of 'normal' had changed.

Borderscapes were also experienced along evacuation routes. The author's reflexive field notes identify the Porto Alegre-Viamão boundary as a perceived threshold of safety on 4 May, when available exits from the city were severely constrained. The route continued through Capivari do Sul and Osório to Torres, near the boundary with Santa Catarina, where the household stayed for 35 days. The analytical value of this observation lies in the reorganisation of practical territory: ordinary distances and municipal boundaries were subordinated to passable roads, fuel availability, congestion, suspended tolls, policing, and access to functioning services.

Comparable themes recurred in exploratory conversations with displaced residents and local actors in the northern coast, Santa Catarina, and selected border localities: uncertainty about reconstruction, the possibility of temporary or permanent relocation, housing cost, and fear of recurring extreme events. Because these conversations were not a closed interview sample, the article does not present them as frequency evidence. Their role is to illuminate how the same physical landscape acquired new social meanings that were then checked against documentary evidence on housing, services, mobility, and reconstruction.

**Figure 7 - Entrance to the City of Torres, near the Border with Santa Catarina, Refuge during the Author's 35-Day Displacement. Photograph Taken on May 4, 2024.**




Source: Author's Collection.

The case therefore demonstrates a feedback loop. Material disruption created new routes and thresholds; administrative categories determined access to benefits and services; destination municipalities reframed displaced people as new service demand; and housing-market and risk dynamics affected the feasibility of return. These processes are the experiential face of legal invisibility. Borderscapes and the 'non-category' problem are not two parallel arguments: they describe, respectively, how fragmented governance is lived in space and how it is produced institutionally.

## 7. Conclusion

The 2024 floods in Rio Grande do Sul were not simply an episode of physical destruction. They reorganised mobility, access to public services, housing markets, perceptions of safety, and the territorial reach of governance. The case shows that climate displacement is produced at the intersection of environmental hazard and pre-existing social and territorial inequalities. It also demonstrates that public policy categories matter because they determine how people become legible to institutions during a period in which residence, municipality, employment, documents, and access to services may all be unstable.

The revised 'non-category' argument is deliberately precise. Brazil had a disaster-management framework, relevant legal categories, and extensive emergency action. Law 14,750/2023 already defined *desabrigado* and *desalojado*, and those categories were used in major programmes such as the Auxílio Reconstrução. The gap

was the absence of an integrated climate-displacement category or equivalent data architecture capable of linking emergency classification to a continuing set of rights across municipalities and policy sectors. Legal invisibility therefore arose through fragmentation: a household could be visible to civil defence, invisible to a housing programme, newly registered in a destination municipality, and later reclassified again during reconstruction.

The theoretical framework helps explain why that fragmentation has spatial consequences. Borderscapes describe the thresholds through which displacement was lived: blocked roads, functioning and non-functioning service areas, municipalities of origin and refuge, shelter and non-shelter accommodation, and changing zones of safe return. Santos explains why those thresholds were unequal, since technical networks, administrative capacity, income, and access to safer land were distributed unevenly. Sassen's concept of expulsion captures the risk that temporary evacuation becomes durable exclusion when reconstruction costs, livelihood loss, risk-zone reclassification, or real-estate appreciation prevent return.

The evidence supports seven policy directions, each tied to a problem documented in the article. First, because existing labels are sector-specific, Brazil should establish an integrated climate-displacement category or interoperable status that complements - rather than replaces - *desabrigado* and *desalojado* and does not conflate internal displacement with refugee status. Second, because the case lacked a unified record of movement, disaster registries should follow displacement trajectories from origin through temporary destinations, return, or relocation. Third, because access to emergency support depended on multiple territorial and digital registrations, benefits and essential records should be portable across municipalities and systems once disaster eligibility is established.

Fourth, because risk, housing cost, and livelihood loss can transform evacuation into expulsion, relocation and reconstruction policy should be linked to municipal land-use planning, social housing, livelihood recovery, and safeguards against reproducing pre-disaster vulnerability. Fifth, because local response capacity was itself damaged and receiving municipalities faced sudden service pressure, intergovernmental information systems should allow municipalities of origin and destination to share verified displacement and service-demand data. The post-2025 National Plan's emphasis on integrated information and monitoring provides an institutional opening for this approach (Brasil 2025).

Sixth, because evacuation routes and access to functioning shelters emerged under rapidly changing conditions, contingency planning should pre-identify safe corridors, accessible shelters, communication protocols, and alternative service nodes and update them as climate risk changes. Seventh, because risk-zone redefinition, housing reconstruction, and permanent relocation alter belonging and property relations, affected populations should participate in reconstruction decisions. Participation is not an abstract add-on: it is a safeguard against converting necessary adaptation into a new mechanism of expulsion.

These recommendations follow from the same analytical mechanism. The article does not argue that a new label will solve climate displacement. A category is useful only if it reorganises institutional practice: it must connect databases, jurisdictions, benefits, housing, social protection, and territorial planning. The Rio Grande do Sul floods thus show that climate governance is also a politics of categorisation. When displacement is recorded only in fragments, rights become less portable and territorial inequalities carry more weight. Making the trajectory legible is a minimum condition for protecting people forced to move by increasingly recurrent extreme events.

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