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Beyond Existing Categories: Social Realities and Legal Gaps in Climate-Induced Internal Displacement in Saint-Louis du Sénégal

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ABSTRACT: Climate-induced displacement in Saint-Louis du Sénégal exposes a tension between the lived reality of slow-onset environmental deterioration and legal and policy categories often oriented toward more readily identifiable displacement events. Coastal erosion, tidal incursions, salinization, and livelihood degradation have not produced a single moment of rupture, but a gradual contraction of the conditions that make life in place possible.

Drawing on a desk-based interdisciplinary analysis of published scholarship, legal instruments, jurisprudence, and institutional materials, this article examines whether existing categories adequately capture slow-onset climate-related internal displacement. It advances three claims. First, declining habitability is socially produced and experienced unevenly through housing precarity, livelihood disruption, and differentiated vulnerability. Second, displacement can remain partial and relational, as relocated households maintain economic and social ties to the coast. Third, a protection gap can emerge when existing frameworks are operationalized too late or too narrowly to address incremental displacement.

Rather than proposing a new legal status, the article develops the internally climate-displaced person (ICDP) as an interpretive and operational tool within existing protection frameworks. The concept foregrounds incremental causation, continuing attachment to place, anticipatory protection, and differentiated vulnerability, framing climate-related internal displacement as a long-term question of protection, citizenship, and justice.

KEYWORDS: climate-induced displacement, habitability, internal displacement, Saint-Louis, Senegal

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1. Introduction

Climate change has pushed human mobility to the centre of contemporary debates on law, development, and democratic governance. Yet the terms most commonly used to describe mobility under environmental stress remain unstable, overburdened, and often misleading. A large body of scholarship has shown that environmental mobility is rarely reducible to a single cause, that estimates of "climate refugees" have often been methodologically weak, and that migration decisions emerge through the interaction of ecological stress, livelihood structures, social networks, political economy, and household strategy (Gemenne, 2011; Piguet, 2008; Piguet et al., 2011). The practical problem, then, is not simply how many people move because of climate change, but how to identify the forms of vulnerability and the forms of protection that climate-related change helps to produce (Gemenne, 2011; Piguet, 2008; Piguet et al., 2011).

> The determining factors of migration are always multifaceted and complex. Overwhelmed by drought, conflict and territorial pressure, rural residents are attracted to the cities (Gueye, Fall and Tall, 2015, p. 95).

The conceptual uncertainty surrounding climate mobility is therefore not a minor terminological inconvenience. It shapes policy priorities, public expectations, and the distribution of responsibility. When the debate is framed around spectacular future masses of anonymous "climate refugees," attention often shifts away from the ordinary, already existing processes through which climate-related change degrades the conditions of life in particular places. Gemenne has shown that headline-grabbing estimates of environmental displacement have often rested on weak methods and inflated assumptions, while later syntheses insist that the more urgent task is to understand how specific forms of vulnerability produce different combinations of mobility, immobility, and displacement (Gemenne, 2011; Piguet et al., 2011). Saint-Louis is analytically valuable precisely because it redirects the discussion from speculative global numbers to the granular reality of how a coastal city and its fishing communities negotiate progressive loss (Gemenne, 2011; Piguet, 2011).

This question becomes especially sharp in places affected by slow-onset coastal change. In such settings, the decisive issue is usually not a single catastrophic event but a cumulative alteration of what makes life in place materially, socially, and politically viable. Recent work on habitability is helpful here because it rejects the idea that places are simply habitable or uninhabitable in a narrow technical or environmental sense. Instead, habitability can be understood as an emergent property of the relation between people and place, shaped by ecological, social, economic, political, and cultural processes. It is also differentiated: the same place is not equally habitable for everyone, because access to resources, safety, mobility, voice, and care is socially structured (Sterly et al., 2025).

Saint-Louis du Sénégal provides a critical case through which to read these issues. Located near the mouth of the Senegal River and structured around fragile coastal and estuarine formations, Saint-Louis and the Langue de Barbarie have become emblematic of the social consequences of slow-onset coastal transformation in West Africa. The broader Senegalese coast is highly exposed to erosion, with Saint-Louis repeatedly identified as one of the country's most vulnerable coastal sectors. Recent coastal assessment work suggests that Saint-Louis belongs to a set of major hotspots of coastal erosion along Senegal's shoreline, while broader syntheses of the national coast describe erosion as affecting most of the littoral domain (Badji et al., 2022; Cissé et al., 2024). Saint-Louis is therefore not a marginal anomaly; it is an intensified site where wider regional pressures become visible in a concentrated form.

That process is especially important in Saint-Louis because the coastal communities most directly affected are not abstract "populations at risk" but historically rooted fishing communities whose livelihoods, identities, and social worlds are tied to the sea, the river, and the infrastructures of artisanal fisheries. In these communities, environmental change restructures social relations as much as it damages property. Recent research on

fisher households in and around Saint-Louis shows declining fish abundance, rising danger in sea crossings, salinization affecting agriculture, damaged dwellings, shifting household strategies, and increasingly complex forms of mobility, including internal relocation, labour migration, and remittance dependence (Ba and Ngom, 2022; Brüning, 2021; Mbaye et al., 2021; Renkamp et al., 2025). In this setting, displacement is not merely movement from one place to another. It is a transformation in how residence, work, kinship, safety, and belonging are organized.

Saint-Louis provides a critical case for examining both the conceptual limits of existing mobility categories and the normative implications of slow-onset internal displacement. The article argues that the dominant categories used to frame environmental mobility remain inadequate when applied to slow-onset internal displacement: the label "refugee" is largely inapplicable in legal terms and can obscure political responsibility as much as it reveals it. "Migrant," by contrast, is too elastic and too often implies a degree of voluntariness that does not fit situations in which people move because remaining has become materially or socially untenable. "IDP" (Internally Displaced Persons) is more promising, especially in this African regional framework, but in practice it often works better for sudden and completed displacement than for incremental loss of habitability (Abebe, 2010; Kälin, 2010; Piguet et al., 2011).

Normatively, the article argues that these shortcomings justify the development of the category of the internally climate-displaced person, or ICDP, the point is not to abandon the existing architecture of refugee law, human rights law, or regional internal displacement law. Nor is it to claim that climate change is ever the sole cause of movement. The purpose of the category is instead to make visible a patterned form of displacement that existing labels often fragment: one in which climate-related processes progressively erode the habitability of a territory, intensify vulnerability through existing inequalities, and generate movement that may be partial, staggered, circular, or anticipatory rather than sudden and complete (Abebe, 2010; Kälin, 2010, Sterly et al., 2025).

The study adopts an interdisciplinary, desk-based case-study approach centred on Saint-Louis du Séneégal. Its objective is to examine whether existing legal and conceptual categories adequately capture slow-onset climate-related internal displacement in Saint-Louis and to assess whether the proposed category of the internally climate-displaced person (ICDP) can improve the interpretation and operationalization of existing protection frameworks. The contribution is conceptual and normative: it brings environmental-mobility scholarship into dialogue with research on habitability, vulnerability, resettlement, and the law of internal displacement.

The article examines how incremental uninhabitability is produced in Saint-Louis through the combined effects of coastal erosion, changing marine and estuarine conditions, livelihood disruption, and growing exposure to risk. These processes are closely connected to displacement, resettlement, and broader forms of social reorganization, as relocation inland does not necessarily reduce climate-related vulnerability and may instead reproduce or intensify it through distance, insecurity, and the disruption of reproductive labour. Against this empirical background, the analysis considers the limits of the legal categories of refugee, migrant, and IDP in capturing the specific dynamics of the Saint-Louis case. It therefore proposes the category of the internally climate-displaced person as a way of bringing legal responses into closer alignment with the social realities of slow-onset internal climate displacement.

2. Saint-Louis and the Production of Incremental Uninhabitability

Saint-Louis occupies a singular place in the historical geography of Senegal. Founded in 1659 on Ndar Island near the mouth of the Senegal River, it became one of the earliest and most important French colonial settlements in West Africa. For centuries, the city functioned as a commercial and administrative hub

connecting Atlantic maritime trade, riverine commerce, and inland territories. During the nineteenth century, Saint-Louis served as the capital of French Senegal and later of French West Africa, before administrative functions gradually shifted to Dakar. Its urban landscape—shaped by colonial architecture and riverine infrastructure—remains visible today and contributed to its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Yet Saint-Louis is not reducible to its colonial centre. The city comprises several interconnected socio-spatial zones: the historic island, the mainland districts of Sor and Bango, and the Langue de Barbarie, a narrow sandy peninsula separating the Atlantic Ocean from the Senegal River. This elongated sand spit extends southward from the city and hosts some of the most densely populated fishing communities in Senegal, including Guet Ndar, a major centre of artisanal fishing.

The name Langue de Barbarie originates from European navigators and colonial cartographers who sailed along the West African coast from the fifteenth century onward. In French, langue refers to a narrow strip or tongue of land, describing the peninsula's elongated form, while Barbarie derives from the historical European expression Barbary Coast, used to designate much of North and Northwest Africa. The designation thus reflects an external colonial geography rather than a local toponym: long before European naming practices, the area was inhabited by Wolof-speaking communities whose spatial references were rooted in local social and ecological relations. The contemporary significance of the Langue de Barbarie is closely tied to the history of fishing. Communities such as Guet Ndar developed around artisanal maritime livelihoods, river-ocean exchanges, and extensive regional fishing networks stretching across the Senegambian coast. Fishing is not merely an economic activity but a central organising principle of social life, shaping kinship relations, occupational identities, neighbourhood structures, and patterns of mobility. Environmental transformations affecting the coastline thus threaten not only physical infrastructure but also the social and cultural foundations on which these communities have historically depended.

Understanding Saint-Louis through this longer historical lens reveals that contemporary climate-induced displacement is unfolding within a landscape already shaped by centuries of commercial integration, colonial intervention, environmental management, and maritime mobility. The current crisis therefore concerns not only the erosion of a coastline but the destabilisation of historically constituted social worlds—worlds whose relationship with land, water, and mobility long predates contemporary climate governance frameworks.

Any adequate legal reading of Saint-Louis must begin with this physical and social geography. The city sits within a dynamic, sandy, and fragile coastal and estuarine system: recent assessments identify Saint-Louis as one of Senegal's most exposed coastal sectors, and national syntheses describe the Senegalese littoral as predominantly erosive. This is not a detached municipal problem but part of a broader coastal condition in which geomorphological fragility, high-energy marine dynamics, and human pressure converge (Badji et al., 2025; Cissé et al., 2024). This exposure has intensified through the interaction of natural dynamics, climate-related changes, and human intervention. A key turning point occurred in 2003, when authorities opened a breach through the Langue de Barbarie to release rising floodwaters threatening Saint-Louis. Initially narrow, the breach widened rapidly over the following years and, by 2015, had reached several kilometres in width. In nearby Gandiol, this widening exposed settlements and livelihoods to severe coastal erosion and salinization: what began as an emergency hydraulic intervention therefore became part of a longer chain of coastal transformation whose consequences extended far beyond the original flood-management objective (Cissé et al., 2024; Sall, M. et al. 2011).

The degradation of the coastal environment has multiple, mutually reinforcing effects: fisheries have become more precarious because fish stocks are reported as scarcer, new species have appeared, marine conditions have changed, and crossings at the mouth of the river and across the breach have become dangerous. In a national fisheries context already affected by industrial exploitation and ecological pressure, fishers in Saint-Louis face longer journeys, more dangerous navigation, and growing uncertainty about daily returns; this

means that climate-related risk enters the social fabric not only through damaged homes but also through the daily gamble of work at sea (Mbaye et al., 2021; Ba and Ngom, 2022)

A further consequence of these changing coastal conditions is the normalization of everyday maritime danger, climate-related uninhabitability is not reducible to the loss of houses – it also manifests as an intensified risk regime in which earning a livelihood becomes more dangerous, younger fishers are exposed to lethal crossings, and older ecological knowledge is increasingly discussed as a resource for risk prevention (Mbaye et al., 2021). For Saint-Louis households, then, remaining in place can already mean living inside a geography of attrition in which work, rather than residence alone, becomes a site of displacement pressure.

> The context of climate change, marked by the high occurrence of extreme weather events, including bad weather at sea, exposes artisanal fishermen to a greater risk of accidents at sea. The scarcity of fishery resources, which pushes fishermen to explore increasingly remote fishing areas, has, as immediate consequence, many cases of accidents and disappearances at sea with many human and material losses (Mbaye et al., 2021, p. 1).

Mbaye et al. (2021) further report 140 deaths or missing persons in 2017 and identify non-compliance with meteorological instructions, canoe overloading, and the loss of experienced fishers' ecological knowledge among explanations for accidents at sea.

At the same time, coastal flooding and saltwater intrusion have damaged agriculture and livestock systems that once helped diversify household livelihoods. In Gandiol, salinization has reduced crop diversity, lowered yields, and forced farmers to travel farther for fresh water. Wells that once lay a few metres below the surface now have to go much deeper and often require pumps. Pasture and uncontaminated watering points have declined, making livestock production harder to sustain. These changes matter for displacement because they do not affect a single economic sector in isolation, they progressively undermine the broader portfolio of activities through which households once reproduced themselves (Brüning, 2021).

The literature on mobility and climate change is right to caution against linear or mono-causal explanations, in Senegal, climate variability is an important trigger, but there is no mechanical relationship between environmental stress and departure. Migration is shaped by a plurality of factors, including labour markets, social networks, aspirations, fisheries policy, urban opportunities, and household strategies. In Saint-Louis specifically, fishers themselves do not attribute the scarcity of marine resources only to climate change, but many also point to industrial fishing, illegal or poorly regulated extraction, and state licensing practices. This does not weaken the climate argument; it strengthens it by situating climate-related deterioration inside an already unequal political economy.

Seen in that way, the concept of habitability becomes more useful than the simpler language of risk exposure. Habitability does not ask only whether a site remains physically above water or technically defensible. It asks whether people can continue to live in places with viable access to shelter, livelihood, safety, care, social relations, and political recognition. On this account, uninhabitability is not a threshold reached only when the sea literally erases the land. It emerges earlier, and differently for differently situated people, through the erosion of the social and material relations that make a place liveable (Sterly et al., 2025).

Research on place attachment reinforces this point; studies of anticipated environmental loss show that when people imagine losing valued environmental characteristics, intentions to move increase and place attachment decline.

'Place attachment may be defined as the bond between individuals or groups with their environment, and is comprised of identity, dependency, and emotion (or 'affect')' (Leviston et al., 2023, p. 1). Leviston and coauthors (2023) also describe place attachment as a constraint on decisions to move elsewhere.

But responses depend strongly on how the threatened place is tied to social relationships, cultural routines, and ways of life. What people fear losing is not merely land in the abstract, but the social and lifestyle worlds

embedded in it (Leviston et al. 2023). The implication for Saint-Louis is straightforward; a coastal neighbourhood may become increasingly risky long before people are willing or able to sever their attachment to it. Slow-onset displacement is therefore as much about the negotiated weakening of place attachment as it is about environmental exposure.

It follows that Saint-Louis should not be understood as a locality suddenly transformed from habitable to uninhabitable by one dramatic event. Rather, it exemplifies a gradual and contested contraction of habitability. Certain families lose homes first; others lose livelihoods before housing; others continue to sleep inland but work on the coast; others remain in the risk zone because the social and economic costs of leaving are too high. The result is an uneven temporal landscape of displacement in which some households are already being displaced while others are still deciding whether they can afford to move.

This is also why the notion of climate-induced must be used carefully. The term remains useful if it names processes in which climate-related transformations play a primary role in degrading the conditions of life, even though that role is mediated by governance, infrastructure, global fishing regimes, and social inequality. It becomes misleading only when it implies singular causation. Saint-Louis is not a case in which climate change acts alone. It is a case in which climate-related coastal degradation interacts with other social and political drivers to produce displacement pressure that is nonetheless real, patterned, and increasingly difficult to deny (Gueye et al., 2015; Piguet et al., 2011).

2.1 Displacement, Resettlement, and Social Reorganization

The social consequences of this decline in habitability are most visible in the recent experience of displacement and resettlement. After the storm surge of 18 August 2017, parts of the Langue de Barbarie population were relocated. More than 315 households lost homes and possessions, and around 3,000 people were compelled to leave (Renkamp et al., 2025, p. 4). Yet the sequence that followed makes clear why displacement in Saint-Louis cannot be understood as a discrete episode followed by a stable solution. Those affected were first moved to Khar Yalla, a temporary inland camp characterized by precarious living conditions, lack of basic services, recurrent flooding, and overcrowding. Later, they were moved again to Diougop, further inland, where temporary mobile housing units were intended to bridge the gap to long-term rehousing (Renkamp et al., 2025, pp. 4–5; Ba and Ngom, 2022). The planned scale of relocation is also significant. According to the resettlement literature on Saint-Louis, the project linked to the twenty-metre coastal strip on the Atlantic-facing side of the Langue de Barbarie concerns more than 11,800 people grouped in hundreds of concessions, many of whom are expected to move inland to Diougop. Other accounts based on Senegalese project material similarly note targeted assistance for hundreds of households already affected and planned resettlement for more than a thousand households. The point is not merely that the numbers are large. It is that state recognition of danger is already operating at a scale that acknowledges future displacement, even while the legal language used to describe those affected remains thin and inconsistent (Renkamp et al., 2025, pp. 4–5; Ba and Ngom, 2022).

However, the Saint-Louis case also shows that resettlement is not equivalent to protection. Moving inland may reduce immediate exposure to waves and coastal flooding, but it can also intensify other forms of vulnerability. The most striking example concerns livelihood continuity. Resettled fishers in Diougop often continue to depend on work at the coast, which means that relocation has not eliminated mobility; it has reconfigured it into daily or repeated commuting between inland housing and coastal labour. Researchers on Diougop document disruptions in livelihood activity because resettled residents are forced to travel back to the coast every day for fishing-related work, yet transport is inflexible, costly, and uncertain. What appears in administrative terms as a completed move remains, in social terms, incomplete and unstable.

Research on Gandiol supports this broader picture. There, migration and remittances have functioned as adaptation strategies in several distinct ways: as emergency income diversification to cover daily needs and debt; as investment in new farming and fishing techniques; as resources for building safer housing farther from the shoreline; and as a mechanism through which women take on new paid activities in response to male migration (Brüning, 2021). The value of this literature for Saint-Louis lies in showing that environmental mobility does not operate only through evacuation or relocation. It also reorganizes how households spread risk across space. Members depart temporarily or permanently, remit money, invest in equipment, and create new combinations of local and extra-local survival. The household becomes spatially stretched rather than territorially uprooted once and for all (Brüning, 2021).

The gendered effects of relocation are especially revealing. Fishing economies in Senegal are highly gendered: men usually control boats and offshore capture, while women are heavily involved in fish processing, trading, and the daily labour of social reproduction. When households are moved inland, the burden is not shared evenly. A major recent study of Diougop and Saint-Louis documents increased vulnerability after relocation due to struggles over livelihood provision, precarious living conditions, insecurity, and the disruption of reproductive work. The study finds that women and younger unmarried persons were particularly disadvantaged because of social isolation, fewer work opportunities, reduced agency, growing exposure to violence, and the difficulty of reproducing everyday life under conditions of infrastructural inadequacy; relocation, in other words, may protect a shoreline while making social reproduction harder to sustain. As Renkamp et al. state, "An increase in vulnerability was observed following resettlement due to everyday struggles in providing livelihood, precarious living conditions affecting social reproductive work, and exposure to gender-based violence and criminality within the resettlement" (Renkamp et al., 2025, p. 1).

These findings are not incidental. They show that the meaning of displacement differs across the household and across social positions. A move inland may count as successful relocation in a narrowly infrastructural sense while simultaneously producing maladaptation in social terms. In Diougop, the difficulty of reaching the coast, inadequate transport infrastructure, and the separation of residence from workplace have increased the time and cost of maintaining fishing livelihoods. Women's reproductive workloads have risen because collecting water, reaching healthcare, ensuring childcare, and maintaining hygiene are more difficult in poorly serviced inland sites. Insecurity has magnified these burdens, with Renkamp et al. (2025) reporting increased interpersonal conflict, criminality, and gender-based violence among participants in their study. The practical lesson is clear: relocation that ignores differentiated vulnerability can reproduce the very insecurity it claims to solve (Renkamp et al., 2025, pp. 15–16). The Saint-Louis case also demonstrates that relocation projects are embedded in politics. Work on habitability insists that decisions about what counts as habitable or uninhabitable cannot be left to purely technocratic or top-down judgment. They involve powerful actors, competing interests, and ethical questions about who defines the future of a place. That is plainly true in Saint-Louis, where state agencies, municipal actors, international financiers, engineering projects, and affected communities all intervene in defining where people can remain, where they must move, and what counts as acceptable compensation or protection (Sterly et al.; 2025 Renkamp et al.; 2025).

This political dimension helps explain why displacement in Saint-Louis is inseparable from questions of citizenship and recognition. People who are moved inland but still rely on the coast for work occupy an ambiguous status. They are visibly affected by climate-related and coastal processes, yet they can easily disappear from legal and political attention once the initial emergency passes. If they remain within national borders, they are often assumed to remain fully protected by citizenship alone. But citizenship, by itself, does not guarantee secure housing, livelihood continuity, safe mobility, or gender-sensitive care infrastructure. In Saint-Louis, formal national membership coexists with a practical fragility that is typical of internal displacement.

Another aspect of Saint-Louis that complicates existing categories is the coexistence of internal displacement with other forms of mobility. Studies of fishing communities in the city show that environmental and

economic pressure has encouraged not only inland displacement to sites such as Djougop, but also mobility toward Mauritania, Gambia, and, for some, irregular migration toward Spain (Ba and Ngom, 2022, pp. 217–220). The point is not to collapse these different movements into one phenomenon. Rather, it is to show that households often combine several mobility repertoires at once. A family may lose a house to coastal erosion, relocate inland, send one member to another Senegalese fishing region, and contemplate cross-border movement as a survival strategy. The categories of internal displacement, labour migration, and irregular migration thus overlap in social life even when the law insists on separating them (Ba and Ngom, 2022, pp. 217–220).

This helps explain why mobility in Saint-Louis cannot be reduced to the simple opposition between staying and leaving. Place attachment literature shows that threatened populations often respond at once through attachment, protective action, and selective movement. Environmental loss can increase intentions to move, but social relations and lifestyle commitments can also strengthen the decision to remain, or to remain partially attached even after relocation (Leviston et al., 2023). In Saint-Louis, the result is a layered spatial strategy: some residents hold on to their neighbourhoods for as long as possible; some relocate but continue to return daily; some diversify through temporary labour migration; and some imagine international departure as an extension of occupational mobility. This layered pattern is precisely what event-based legal categories fail to register (Ba and Ngom, 2022; Leviston et al., 2023).

What Saint-Louis reveals, then, is not simply a failure of resettlement implementation, though that is clearly part of the story. It reveals a deeper mismatch between social reality and legal imagination. The law still tends to imagine displacement as an event that moves a person from one fixed place to another. The Saint-Louis experience suggests instead a more complex pattern: disrupted residence without complete detachment from place of origin; formal housing without livelihood restoration; physical safety from one hazard accompanied by heightened insecurity and deprivation elsewhere; and climate adaptation measures that are simultaneously protective and maladaptive. Any concept adequate to this reality must begin from that social complexity rather than abstracting it away (Ba and Ngom, 2022; Renkamp et al., 2025).

3. Legal Categories and the Protection Gap

The inadequacy of current categories begins with terminology. The expression environmental refugee or climate refugee has had enormous rhetorical power, but the literature has long shown why it is legally and analytically problematic. The 1951 Refugee Convention protects people who are outside their country of nationality because of a well-founded fear of persecution for specified reasons. Environmental causes are absent from that definition. Scholars and UNHCR-linked analyses have therefore repeatedly emphasized that the term climate refugee has no basis in international refugee law, at least outside exceptional situations in which environmental disruption is coupled with persecution or discriminatory denial of protection (Kälin, 2010; Piguet, 2008; Piguet et al., 2011).

This point matters for Saint-Louis because the populations at issue remain within Senegal. They do not cross an international border, and their predicament does not fit the persecution-centred structure of refugee law. To label them refugees would therefore be inaccurate in strict legal terms. More importantly, it could distort the problem by implying that protection becomes relevant only after border crossing, rather than at the point where people are internally displaced or where a place is progressively becoming unliveable. As Piguet, Pécoud, and de Guchteneire note, careless use of the refugee label can actually weaken responsibility by conflating disaster victims with a legal category built for a different purpose and by encouraging states to downplay the specific obligations climate-related mobility should trigger.

The category of migrant is no more satisfactory. Migration scholarship has rightly insisted on the multicausality of movement. Climate change should not be treated as an explanatory master variable replacing

economy, politics, and social structure. But the recognition of multi-causality should not lead to the opposite mistake of dissolving coercion into an undifferentiated notion of migration. In Saint-Louis, movement is frequently triggered by the progressive erosion of the material conditions of life: homes are damaged or lost, crossings become dangerous, work becomes less profitable, commuting burdens expand, and care infrastructures weaken. Calling all of this simply migration risks implying that people are relocating under conditions of meaningful choice when, in fact, the range of viable options has narrowed considerably (Jayawardhan, 2017; Piguet, 2008; Piguet, Pécoud, and de Guchteneire 2011).

The distinction between voluntary migration and forced displacement is especially difficult in slow-onset contexts. Kälin's typology of climate-related movement is valuable precisely because it shows that slow-onset environmental degradation first encourages people to use migration as an adaptation strategy and later, as conditions worsen, can produce situations in which there is no realistic choice but to leave or remain away permanently (Kälin, 2010). This temporal evolution is crucial in Saint-Louis. Movement may begin as a strategy of adaptation, diversification, or precaution, yet over time become indistinguishable from displacement because the conditions for viable return or continued residence have been undermined.

At this point the category of the internally displaced person (IDP) appears more promising. The African Union's Kampala Convention is especially important because it is the first binding regional instrument specifically devoted to internal displacement. Its definition of internally displaced persons expressly encompasses persons forced or obliged to leave their homes as a result of natural or human-made disasters, provided that they remain within internationally recognized state borders. More importantly for the present argument, Article V(4) explicitly requires States Parties to protect and assist persons internally displaced by natural or human-made disasters, "including climate change." Climate-related internal displacement is therefore not formally excluded from the African regional protection framework. For African cases such as Saint-Louis, the regional legal vocabulary is considerably more open than international refugee law (Abebe, 2010; Adeola, 2019).

Yet the Saint-Louis case also reveals the limits of relying on the IDP category alone. The problem lies less in the formal scope of the Kampala Convention, which is broad enough to encompass climate-related disaster displacement, than in the recognition and operationalization of slow-onset displacement in practice. Slow environmental deterioration does not necessarily produce an obvious moment at which residence becomes displacement. In many legal and policy settings, individuals become institutionally legible as displaced only after a recognizable event such as a flood, storm, formal evacuation, or destruction of housing. In Saint-Louis, however, displacement pressure develops earlier, as livelihood decline, recurrent risk, housing insecurity, and deteriorating access to the conditions of everyday life progressively narrow the possibility of remaining in place with dignity.

This delay matters because it creates a protection gap at the heart of slow-onset internal displacement. People may remain legally at home while the conditions that make home livable are steadily dismantled. They may not yet qualify operationally as emergency-displaced, but neither are they secure residents in any substantive sense. They are living through a displacement process before the law fully recognizes it as such. The result is fragmented governance: coastal defence in one register, disaster relief in another, urban planning somewhere else, and livelihood or gender policy somewhere else again. No single framework adequately captures the whole process.

The Saint-Louis case also highlights a second problem with conventional uses of the IDP label: it presumes a relatively clear separation between the place of origin and the place of displacement. Once one has been displaced, policy can focus on shelter, camp management, or resettlement. But resettled fishers in Diougop often continue to labour, trade, or maintain social obligations on the coast. Displacement here is therefore incomplete in territorial terms. People are neither fully there nor fully gone. A legal vocabulary that presumes completed rupture does not match a social world organized around daily, circular, or relational attachment to a threatened place.

A third limitation concerns social differentiation. The generic category of IDP can mask the unequal way displacement is lived inside households and communities. The Saint-Louis resettlement literature shows that women, younger adults, and those with weaker access to property, transport, or decision-making authority are often more vulnerable after relocation than before. A category that merely records relocation without foregrounding differentiated access to safety, mobility, and social reproduction will therefore under-describe the phenomenon. In Saint-Louis, displacement is not just a matter of being moved; it is a matter of how being moved is structured by gender, age, domestic position, livelihood role, and class (Renkamp et al., 2025).

There is thus a real but specific protection gap in Saint-Louis. It is not an absolute absence of law. Existing human rights norms, regional internal displacement law, and domestic state powers all remain relevant. The gap lies in the mismatch between the architecture of these norms and the incremental, relational, and socially differentiated character of climate-related internal displacement. The problem is conceptual as much as institutional. Because law does not name the condition precisely enough, institutions often intervene too late, too narrowly, or without sufficient attention to the social organization of vulnerability (Abebe, 2010; Renkamp et al., 2025)

At the same time, the Saint-Louis experience suggests that the protection gap should not be conceptualized as a purely normative void, as if nothing in current law were relevant. Human rights norms, disaster governance, and regional internal displacement law all matter. The problem is that their institutional activation is uneven and their operative categories remain too blunt. Slow-onset internal displacement falls between emergency relief, urban planning, adaptation policy, livelihood support, and social protection. As a result, affected households are often governed sector by sector rather than recognized as subjects of a single displacement process. This diagnosis is consistent with broader legal scholarship that has long identified a mismatch between environmentally displaced persons and the status architecture of international law, even where scholars disagree on whether the solution should be a new treaty, a new status, or more expansive use of existing instruments (Jayawardhan, 2017; Prieur, 2010/2011).

The wider scholarship on environmental mobility supports this conclusion. Estimates of people displaced by environmental change remain highly contested because causal chains are complex and categories unstable (Gemenne, 2011). At the same time, scholars increasingly agree that the core issue is not to find a single label that replaces all others, but to develop concepts capable of connecting patterns of mobility to the forms of protection they require (Kälin, 2010; Piguet, Pécoud, and de Guchteneire 2011). Saint-Louis makes that need concrete. Neither refugee nor migrant nor narrow operational uses of IDP can fully capture the condition of households whose displacement is internally located, incrementally produced, partially enacted, and socially differentiated.

This is also why proposals for a broader legal status for environmentally displaced persons have persisted for decades. Draft conventions and legal scholarship have repeatedly pointed to the existence of a legal void or, at minimum, a severe mismatch between environmental displacement and existing forms of status recognition (Prieur, 2011). Even where one may hesitate to endorse a wholly new international treaty, those proposals have diagnostic value. They identify something that Saint-Louis confirms: climate-related displacement strains the classical architecture of categories organized around persecution, border crossing, or sharply delimited disaster events (Prieur, 2011).

'The draft convention on environmental displaced persons is not an abstract Utopia. It is a concrete response to a concrete reality' (Prieur, 2010/2011, p. 257). Prieur presents the proposal as a human-rights-oriented response grounded in solidarity and collective responsibility.

The appropriate legal baseline for this argument is the law and policy of internal displacement rather than refugee law. The 1998 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement provide the principal international reference framework for persons forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes while remaining within their country. Although non-binding, the Guiding Principles organize protection around prevention of arbitrary

displacement, protection and assistance during displacement, and durable solutions. At the African regional level, the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention), adopted in 2009 and in force since 6 December 2012, converts much of this protective logic into binding regional obligations. Its importance for this article lies not merely in recognizing disaster-related displacement, but in directing attention to prevention, protection, assistance, state responsibility, and durable solutions. Recent scholarship specifically argues that the Convention is relevant to climate-related internal displacement while also identifying implementation difficulties for environmentally driven and slow-onset cases (Adeola 2020; Soares 2023). The protection gap identified here should therefore not be understood as an absence of applicable norms. It is principally an operational and interpretive gap concerning when these norms are activated and how they respond to gradual, partial, and socially differentiated displacement.

The preventive dimension of the Kampala Convention is particularly relevant to this temporal problem. Article IV (2) requires States Parties to establish early-warning systems in areas of potential displacement and to develop disaster-risk-reduction, preparedness, and management measures. Protection under the regional framework is therefore not conceptually restricted to intervention after completed displacement. The difficulty posed by Saint-Louis is rather how such anticipatory obligations can be activated where displacement emerges gradually through declining habitability rather than through a single identifiable event. The ICDP category proposed here can be understood as an interpretive device for making this preventive dimension more operational in slow-onset contexts.

Human-rights law reinforces the case for anticipatory protection. Rights to life, adequate housing, health, family life, and an adequate standard of living can be affected before a household is physically uprooted. The Human Rights Committee's decision in Teitiota v New Zealand, although arising in a cross-border non-refoulement context and therefore not directly governing the internal displacement examined here, is relevant to the temporal dimension of the argument. The Committee expressly recognized that climate-related harm may result from both sudden-onset events and slow-onset processes, including sea-level rise, salinization, and land degradation. It further observed that environmental conditions may become incompatible with the right to life with dignity before the ultimate physical risk is realized. The relevance of Teitiota to Saint-Louis is therefore analogical rather than jurisdictionally direct: it demonstrates that legally significant environmental harm can develop progressively, before environmental deterioration culminates in complete territorial loss or immediate catastrophe.

4. Toward a Category of Internally Climate-Displaced Persons

The category proposed here is intended to answer that need. In this article, "internally climate-displaced person" (ICDP) is not proposed as a new autonomous legal status and does not replace the established category of internally displaced person (IDP). It is an analytical, interpretive, and operational subcategory intended to make slow-onset climate-related displacement more visible within existing internal-displacement and human-rights frameworks. ICDPs are persons or groups whose internal displacement is substantially driven by climate-related processes that progressively undermine the habitability of their place of residence, even where causation is multi-factorial and material, social, or economic ties to that place persist. This formulation avoids treating climate change as a sole cause while capturing the incremental and relational character of displacement documented in Saint-Louis.

This category is useful for three reasons. First, it captures the temporal structure of slow-onset displacement. Unlike the language of post-disaster emergency only, it recognizes that displacement begins before the moment of completed departure. Families living under recurring erosion, dangerous swells, salinization, and livelihood

collapse are not merely at risk; they may already be inside a displacement process. Naming them as ICDPs allows protection to begin earlier, when anticipatory support, livelihood planning, participation, and safe transition remain possible, rather than later, when damage has hardened into dispossession (Kälin, 2010; Ba and Ngom, 2022).

Second, the category captures the relational geography of partial displacement. In Saint-Louis, inland relocation does not erase coastal dependence. Fishers may sleep inland and work at sea. Women may reside in relocation sites while maintaining trade, kinship, and care relations tied to coastal neighbourhoods. Household members may be distributed across Diougop, host families, the original neighbourhood, other Senegalese regions, and even neighbouring countries. The ICDP concept is therefore not built on the assumption that displacement must involve a clean territorial break. It is designed for cases in which people move without becoming detached from the place that climate stress is rendering progressively less habitable (Renkamp et al., 2025 Ba and Ngom, 2022).

Third, the category directs attention to differentiated vulnerability. If habitability is unevenly experienced, then climate displacement cannot be properly governed through a socially neutral model. One of the central lessons of Saint-Louis is that the loss of habitability is mediated through gendered divisions of labour, access to transport and property, age hierarchies, safety conditions, and the burden of reproductive work. The ICDP category should therefore be understood not as an individual status detached from social structure, but as a framework that obliges decision-makers to ask who bears the costs of displacement, who is heard in relocation design, and whose everyday labour makes adaptation possible (Renkamp et al., 2025, Sterly et al. 2025).

Importantly, the category should not be mistaken for a proposal to replace existing law with an entirely new legal universe. In the African context, the most plausible immediate use of ICDP is interpretive and operational. It can help states, courts, agencies, and municipal authorities apply existing norms more appropriately. Within the broad framework of the Kampala Convention, the concept can clarify that slow-onset coastal deterioration is not simply a development or planning issue but a displacement process that engages obligations of protection, assistance, participation, and durable solutions. The category can therefore supplement rather than supplant regional internal displacement law (Abebe 2010).

The Saint-Louis case suggests at least five implications of such an approach. The first is anticipatory recognition. Authorities should not wait for the completed destruction of homes before acknowledging displacement. Where climate-related coastal processes are progressively eroding habitability, affected households should be identified early as persons in need of protection, consultation, and planning support. This is especially important where the likely future of the site is already known, as in the areas of Saint-Louis for which large-scale coastal resettlement has already been planned (Ba and Ngom 2022, Renkamp et al. 2025).

The second implication is that protection must include livelihood continuity. Resettlement that secures shelter at the cost of destroying the economic basis of daily life cannot be treated as adequate protection. For fishing communities, this means that inland housing policy must be tied to transport systems, landing-site access, storage, processing space, and support for adapting fishing and trading practices. Research from Gandiol shows that remittances are often used precisely to sustain livelihoods, acquire equipment, and build safer housing. That insight should push policy away from viewing relocation as a purely residential question (Brüning 2021; Renkamp et al., 2025).

The third implication is that relocation must be assessed through the lens of social reproduction. The Saint-Louis evidence is clear that water access, sanitation, healthcare, childcare, safety, and the time burden of daily mobility are not secondary matters. They are central to whether relocation reduces or reproduces vulnerability. Because these burdens fall unequally, especially on women, a democratic climate-displacement regime must treat gender-sensitive infrastructure and security as essential components of protection rather than afterthoughts (Renkamp et al. 2025).

The fourth implication is participation. Work on habitability warns that powerful actors often define the future of places without adequately including local perspectives. Decisions about what counts as habitable or uninhabitable cannot be left to purely technocratic or top-down judgment. They involve powerful actors, competing interests, and ethical questions about who defines the future of a place. Saint-Louis shows why this matters. Communities already express ambivalence, fatigue, and sometimes reluctance to engage in endless studies that do not produce visible change. A credible ICDP-oriented framework must therefore institutionalize participation not only at the moment of formal relocation, but in the ongoing assessment of risk, compensation, infrastructure design, livelihood support, and the meaning of durable solution. Otherwise, top-down adaptation risks intensifying the democratic deficit already experienced by displaced communities (Renkamp et al., 2025, Sterly et al. 2025).

The fifth implication concerns temporality and return. In some contexts, displaced persons should be able to return voluntarily. In Saint-Louis, however, parts of the coastal zone may continue to lose habitability over time. A serious protection framework must therefore distinguish clearly between temporary evacuation, temporary shelter, partial relocation, and permanent resettlement. It must avoid the fiction that all inland movement is temporary when long-term decline makes return increasingly unrealistic. This is one of the central advantages of the ICDP concept: it allows a legal and policy vocabulary that can move alongside changing environmental thresholds rather than forcing them into all-or-nothing categories (Ba and Ngom 2022, Kälin 2010).

There is also a broader democratic significance to the category: climate displacement is often framed as a humanitarian or technical problem but Saint-Louis shows that it is equally a problem of democratic time, Governments are accustomed to reacting to completed crises. Slow-onset displacement demands governance before total collapse, while there is still time to shape transitions fairly. That requires institutions willing to identify future loss, confront unequal exposure, and take responsibility for safeguarding both present and future generations (Sterly et al. 2025).

The democratic value of such a framework is not only distributive but epistemic. If the state recognizes ICDPs only after completed displacement, it privileges forms of evidence associated with visible catastrophe and ignores slower testimony about deteriorating marine conditions, rising commuting burdens, care strain, and the social costs of uncertainty. A more adequate framework would treat these experiences as politically relevant knowledge. It would require ongoing monitoring, local participation, and iterative adjustment rather than one-off engineering fixes. In that sense, the ICDP category is also a proposal about how democracies should learn from climate-affected citizens: not by waiting until they become emergency victims, but by recognizing them earlier as rights-bearing participants in decisions over adaptation, relocation, and the future of place (Renkamp et al., 2025, Sterly et al. 2025).

Finally, the Saint-Louis case suggests that the concept of ICDP may be valuable beyond Senegal. Coastal cities and deltas elsewhere face similar combinations of erosion, salinization, recurring shock, occupational dependence on fragile ecologies, and partial relocation inland. The benefit of the concept is that it does not depend on any uniquely Senegalese institution. It depends on a more general insight: where climate-related processes progressively deform the conditions of life, internal displacement begins before law has fully caught up. The concept of the internally climate-displaced person gives that process a name and therefore makes earlier, more adequate, and more equal protection thinkable (Kälin, 2010; Piguet et al., 2011).

What this also means in practice is that climate governance in places like Saint-Louis cannot be organized around a strict division between adaptation and displacement. Fortifying a shoreline, maintaining fisheries infrastructure, subsidizing transport from relocation sites, compensating lost concessions, supporting women's market activity, and deciding whether return remains reasonable are not separate policy domains from the standpoint of affected households. They are dimensions of a single question: whether a democratic polity will enable those exposed to environmental decline to continue life with dignity, security, and voice. The ICDP

category helps clarify that these are not merely welfare concerns, but obligations of recognition and protection generated by a patterned form of internal displacement. The proposal therefore asks law to become better at recognizing gradual coercion, accounting for partial territorial attachment, and confronting the unequal social distribution of climate damage before environmental deterioration is translated into irreversible dispossession (Brüning, 2025; Renkamp et al., 2021; Sterly et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

Saint-Louis du Sénégal makes visible a form of climate-related displacement that existing legal and policy categories do not always capture adequately: across the Langue de Barbarie and the wider Saint-Louis–Gandiol zone, coastal erosion, salinization, dangerous marine conditions, breach dynamics, and livelihood decline have not produced merely episodic disasters; they have generated a cumulative contraction of habitability. The principal finding of this article is therefore that climate-related displacement in Saint-Louis is better understood as an ongoing process rather than a single event; families often relocate in stages, moving away while maintaining daily work and social ties to the coast. When assistance arrives, it may follow long periods of precarity and may itself generate new forms of insecurity, Saint-Louis thus demonstrates that climate-related displacement can begin well before complete physical departure and can remain partial and relational after relocation.

This finding reveals a specific protection gap in the application of existing categories. Refugee law is generally inapplicable to populations who remain within Senegal and should not be stretched to encompass situations that do not satisfy its legal requirements, while the category of migrant can understate the coercive effects of declining habitability when movement is interpreted primarily through voluntarist assumptions. The IDP framework—particularly the Kampala Convention—is more promising because its scope is broad enough to encompass climate-related disaster displacement. The difficulty lies less in the absence of applicable norms than in their timing and operationalization. Slow-onset displacement may become institutionally visible only after housing, livelihoods, and social relations have already deteriorated substantially. The protection gap identified in Saint-Louis is therefore principally temporal and operational: existing frameworks may apply, but their protective potential can be activated too late to address displacement as it develops.

The proposed category of the internally climate-displaced person (ICDP) responds to this gap: it is not intended to create a new autonomous legal status or to replace the established category of internally displaced person. Rather, it functions as an interpretive and operational tool for identifying climate-related internal displacement earlier and more precisely by foregrounding incremental causation, continuing attachment to place, and differentiated vulnerability. Protection cannot begin only once physical relocation has been completed, nor can it be reduced to the provision of inland shelter. A process-based understanding of displacement requires attention to livelihood continuity, safe mobility, social reproduction, gendered vulnerability, participation, and the continuing relationships that displaced people maintain with places undergoing environmental transformation.

Ultimately, Saint-Louis is not simply a local case of coastal crisis but a window onto a wider transformation in the relationship between climate change, displacement, and protection. The central lesson is that habitability is not a purely environmental condition. It is socially produced and sustained through housing, infrastructures, livelihoods, social relations, power, and belonging. When climate change progressively erodes these conditions, governance must move beyond an exclusively event-based model of emergency response toward a process-based approach to declining habitability. The contribution of the ICDP category lies precisely here: it provides a language for recognizing displacement before territorial separation becomes complete and for connecting that recognition to existing obligations of prevention, protection, assistance, participation, and durable solutions. In Saint-Louis, as in other places exposed to slow-onset climate pressures, the central challenge is

therefore not simply how to protect people after they have been displaced, but how to recognize and protect them while displacement is still unfolding.

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