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Climate Change, Migration, and Social Cohesion Among Young People: Evidence From DR Congo, Uganda, And Rwanda

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Abstract

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, and Rwanda, extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, and landslides disrupt communities and force people to migrate. These movements affect their social integration, educational trajectories, and participation in local communities. This study adopts a multi-site, mixed-methods approach to examine the impact of climate-induced displacement on youth vulnerability and social cohesion. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, community observations, NGO reports, institutional records, local statistics, and school records. The study compares the experiences of displaced youth and host communities across the three countries, highlighting both challenges and strategies of resilience. Findings revealed the mechanisms through which migration affects social cohesion, the

vulnerabilities of youth in displaced contexts, and the role of community networks in fostering resilience. The study contributes to the international debate on climate migration by providing empirical, intersectional evidence from a fragile region, offering recommendations for policymakers, local authorities, and development practitioners to enhance social cohesion and support youth affected by climate-induced displacement. The findings redefine climate migration as a multi-level governance issue with direct implications for social stability and youth development.

Keywords

Climate Change**,** Migration**,** Social Cohesion**,** Resilience

Introduction

Climate change and migration have emerged as one of the most significant global challenges of the 21st century(Abel et al. 2019; Ofori et al. 2023) As of 2020, over 20.9 million Africans lived outside their country of birth but still within the continent (Arora 2024). Rising temperatures, increased frequency of floods, droughts, and landslides are affecting populations worldwide, particularly in fragile regions of Africa. These environmental shocks (Cottier et al. 2022) have far-reaching consequences, including the displacement of populations, disruption of livelihoods, and weakening of social structures.

In many regions of Africa, specifically the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, and Rwanda (Tietjen, Jacobsen, et Hollander 2023), climate-induced events have led to mass migration and forced displacement of populations, including youth. According to (Arora 2024), 16.2 million new child displacements in Africa in the last 10 years were caused by disasters. Those young people are particularly vulnerable because they face interrupted education, limited economic opportunities, and social marginalization. Migration patterns (Aurélien et Marthe 2025) vary: in some areas, displaced youth integrate relatively smoothly into host communities, benefiting from existing social networks and NGO support; in others, migration (Li et Samimi 2022)creates tensions, competition over resources, and social fragmentation. This reveals parallel and sometimes contradictory dynamics within the same region, highlighting the need for a nuanced, intersectional analysis.

The focus on youth is critical. They represent the future workforce and social capital, but also the population most affected by displacement. Understanding how climate change influences their mobility, social integration, and resilience provides insights for policy-making, regional cooperation, and sustainable development**.**

Problem Statement

The Great Lakes region is increasingly affected by climate change, which manifests in frequent floods, droughts, landslides, and soil erosion. These environmental shocks are not only altering ecosystems but also profoundly reshaping human settlements and livelihoods (Cottier et al. 2022; Tietjen, Jacobsen, et Hollander 2023). One of the most pressing consequences is forced migration, particularly affecting young people. Youth, who represent a critical segment of the population, often face disrupted education, limited employment opportunities, and social marginalization during and after displacement.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, and Rwanda, climate-induced displacement exhibits significant variation. In some areas, young migrants are able to access social support networks, educational opportunities, and NGO assistance, leading to partial social integration and resilience. Conversely, in other localities, sudden population inflows create competition over scarce resources, heightening social tensions and weakening community trust.

The word's Bank states that (Embracing Climate-Smart Growth is a Net Win for Uganda s. d.) Without strong action, climate change could cut Uganda's economic growth by up to 3.1% by 2050, pushing more than 613,000 people into poverty and turning 12 million more into internal migrants. Evidence (Admin 2024) (Djama 2025) confirms that the influx of youth into cities in search of better livelihoods and opportunities places immense pressure on already struggling infrastructure, housing, and services, including healthcare. For Uganda's rapidly growing cities, this migration threatens to destabilize the economy and worsen unemployment and inequality, complicating efforts to achieve sustainable development and social stability in a climate-vulnerable context.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), climate change compounds existing social challenges, exacerbating economic and community vulnerabilities (An Intersectional Analysis of Gender Equality and Climate Change Vulnerabilities Capacities and Policy Gaps in Sub Saharan Africa | Discover Environment | Springer Nature Link s. d.). Climate variability affects access to clean water, subsistence agriculture, and basic infrastructure, intensifying urban and rural poverty and increasing the risk of internal displacement. National adaptation reports highlight that women, often responsible for agricultural and domestic tasks, are particularly exposed to climate impacts, creating gender inequalities in access to resources and decision-making an example of an intersectional approach, showing how gender, age, social status, and environmental vulnerability interact to shape the effects of climate on local populations. For Congolese youth (Congo Basin youth issue declaration at African Climate Summit, call for stronger role in climate and peacebuilding s. d.), these dynamics translate into heightened exposure to climate hazards and threats to education, health, and social cohesion. Recent youth statements from the Congo Basin at the African Climate Summit emphasized that the climate crisis is closely linked to peace and security, with consequences ranging from malnutrition to school dropouts, while calling for meaningful youth participation in decision-making and adaptation strategies.

In Rwanda, climate change is manifested through rising temperatures (≈ +1.4 °C since 1970), irregular rainfall, floods, and landslides, disrupting livelihoods, access to education, and placing pressure on agricultural resources. Educational research indicates that Rwandan youth perceive climate change as a significant threat and recognize the importance of integrating climate education to strengthen civic engagement and local action. In this context, social cohesion is both strengthened and challenged. Community initiatives, such as mandatory « Umuganda » monthly community servicefoster collective responsibility around social and environmental projects. However, land pressure and climate-induced resource scarcity can create tensions among generations and social groups (women, youth, vulnerable households).

Host communities (Djama 2025; Nkiko 2026), which absorb large numbers of displaced youth, face immense pressures on infrastructure, education, health, and livelihoods. Schools become overcrowded, health services overstretched, and economic competition increases, generating friction between host

populations and newcomers. While some scholars like (Muchaku et Magaiza 2023) argue that migration can enhance social cohesion by fostering inter-community networks and collaboration, others contend (Ajide et Alimi 2019; Li et Samimi 2022) that displacement amplifies pre-existing inequalities, heightens vulnerability, and can trigger conflicts. These conflicting dynamics reveal a gap in understanding how climate migration affects youth and communities differently in diverse socio-political contexts.

Policy interventions (Nkiko 2026; Tietjen, Jacobsen, et Hollander 2023) are often insufficient or poorly coordinated. They always promise much and deliver less than needed. Governments and regional bodies have introduced frameworks to address displacement, but these are frequently fragmented, lacking a focus on youth, and failing to strengthen social cohesion. NGO programs provide temporary relief but do not always address long-term integration or resilience. Consequently, young migrants remain highly vulnerable, and host communities often struggle to maintain social stability.

Moreover, the research landscape is limited. Most studies (Cottier et al. 2022; Muchaku et Magaiza 2023; Ofori et al. 2023) focus on either climate change, migration, or social cohesion**,** rarely integrating these dimensions in a single**,** intersectional framework(Abel et al. 2019) that accounts for youth vulnerability, community dynamics, and regional differences. Even fewer studies provide empirical, comparative data across multiple countries in the Great Lakes region. This leaves a critical knowledge gap for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers who seek evidence-based strategies to mitigate risks and promote social cohesion.

Finally, understanding youth experiences in these three countries allows for identifying both common patterns and context-specific differences**.**

Research Objectives

This study aims to analyze the impact of climate-induced displacement on youth mobility and social cohesion in the Great Lakes region of Africa**,** with a comparative focus on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, and Rwanda. It specifically seeks to examine the mobility trajectories of displaced youth**,** analyze social tensions and cohesion dynamics within host communities**,**

evaluate the processes of social integration of young migrants, and identify the resilience mechanisms developed by both youth and communities in response to climate-related displacement.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multi-theoretical, intersectional framework to analyze the relationships between climate change, youth migration, and social cohesion in the Great Lakes region (DRC, Uganda, Rwanda). It integrates classical migration and social theories with youth-focused and intersectional approaches**,** enabling a comprehensive understanding of complex, context-specific dynamics. By combining multiple theories, the framework allows for the examination of parallel and contradictory outcomes, as well as the identification of context-specific differences across the three countries.

Forced Migration Theory

Forced Migration Theory(Li et Samimi 2022; Tietjen, Jacobsen, et Hollander 2023) explains how environmental, political, or social shocks compel populations to move. Climate-related events such as floods, droughts, landslides, and deforestation disrupt livelihoods, prompting young people to relocate, sometimes across national borders or within regions.

- **Application:** This theory helps to interpret patterns of youth displacement in the DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda, showing how environmental shocks interact with socio-political conditions to shape migration trajectories.
- **Parallel argument:** Not all migration is entirely forced; some youth may migrate voluntarily to pursue education, work, or better living conditions, even when climate-related stressors exist.
- **Contradictory view:** While forced migration is generally seen as a destabilizing factor, in some communities, it has been observed to foster social integration and collaboration between displaced youth and host communities, particularly where NGOs and local governance support inclusive programs.

- **Context-specific insight:** In eastern DRC, insecurity and weak infrastructure exacerbate displacement risks, while in Rwanda, stronger local governance and community programs mitigate some negative effects of forced migration. Uganda exhibits an intermediate scenario, with significant NGO support but varying integration outcomes depending on locality.

Social Cohesion Theory

Social cohesion refers to the strength of relationships, trust, and solidarity within communities. The arrival of displaced youth can either enhance or weaken social cohesion depending on social networks, community norms, and resource availability.

- **Application:** This theory is crucial for analyzing how youth migration influences interpersonal and intergroup relations, cooperation, and conflict in host communities.
- **Parallel argument:** Migration can promote new forms of social cohesion, as displaced youth establish networks, engage in community initiatives, or participate in local educational and economic activities.
- **Contradictory view:** Conversely, migration can exacerbate tensions, increase competition over scarce resources (housing, jobs, schools), and create social fragmentation, particularly in contexts with weak governance or high pre-existing inequality.
- **Cross-country perspective:** Rwanda demonstrates stronger institutional support for social integration, leading to relatively higher levels of cohesion, whereas parts of eastern DRC experience persistent tensions due to insecurity and limited resources. Uganda presents a mixed picture, with some communities successfully integrating youth while others face resource-based friction.

Vulnerability Theory

Vulnerability Theory (Tietjen, Jacobsen, et Hollander 2023)examines exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity of individuals and groups in the face of risk. Young people are especially vulnerable during climate-induced displacement

due to interrupted education, limited livelihood opportunities, and social marginalization.

- **Application:** This framework allows us to identify which youth groups are most at risk and how vulnerability intersects with gender, socio-economic status, education, and prior displacement experience.
- **Parallel argument:** Vulnerability is not uniform; some youth may demonstrate strong adaptive capacities through personal networks, migration strategies, or engagement with NGOs.
- **Contradictory view:** Even in relatively stable areas, displacement can amplify pre-existing inequalities and social exclusion, limiting opportunities for education, health access, and employment.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, originating from feminist theory, examines overlapping social categories that produce compounded disadvantage or advantage. For displaced youth, age, gender, socio-economic background, displacement status, and ethnicity intersect to create different migration experiences and outcomes.

- **Application:** This approach captures nuanced differences among youth across the three countries, highlighting why some adapt successfully while others struggle.
- **Parallel argument:** Intersectionality helps explain variations in resilience and vulnerability, including differences in educational access, psychosocial support, and social integration.
- **Contradictory view:** Even within the same host community, youth may experience different outcomes; for example, boys and girls may face different social expectations, risks, or opportunities during displacement.
- **Cross-country relevance:** Rwanda's institutional support may reduce gender-based disparities, while in DRC, insecurity may exacerbate inequalities. Uganda demonstrates a blend, with NGO programs mitigating some but not all intersectional vulnerabilities.

Resilience Theory

Resilience Theory (Cottier et al. 2022) focuses on the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt and recover from shocks. Resilience includes social, psychological, and institutional mechanisms that enable displaced youth and host communities to maintain cohesion and functionality.

- **Application:** This theory explains how youth develop coping strategies, participate in informal networks, and leverage community support to navigate displacement.
- **Parallel argument:** Resilience is not solely individual; it depends heavily on community structures, local governance, and social norms.
- **Contradictory view:** Resilience may coexist with tension; communities may survive and adapt but still experience fragmentation, conflict, or inequality.
- **Comparative insight:** In Rwanda, structured programs and governance support enhance youth resilience, while in eastern DRC, resilience is often informal, relying on kinship networks and NGOs. Uganda exhibits intermediate resilience patterns.

Fragile States Framework

Fragile States Framework emphasizes the political and institutional environment in shaping displacement outcomes (Abel et al. 2019; Ajide et Alimi 2019). Weak institutions, limited public services, and governance challenges influence how migration affects youth and social cohesion.

- **Application:** Understanding governance structures is crucial to explain differences in youth integration, resource distribution, and community tensions across DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda.
- **Parallel argument:** Stronger governance does not guarantee smooth integration; resource limitations and sudden migration can still create tension.
- **Contradictory view:** Even fragile states may demonstrate adaptive governance mechanisms in some regions, fostering positive integration outcomes despite broader instability.

Cross-country and Comparative Perspective

By combining these theories, the study adopts a cross-country comparative lens that identifies:

- **Shared patterns:** Common vulnerabilities, migration triggers, and resilience mechanisms across the three countries.
- **Context-specific dynamics:** Variations due to governance, NGO presence, local social networks, and cultural factors.
- **Parallel effects:** Situations where migration enhances cohesion in one area but generates tension in another.
- **Contradictory outcomes:** Instances where the same climate event produces divergent youth experiences due to intersectional factors.
- **Policy relevance:** Highlights which strategies are effective across multiple contexts and which need tailoring to local conditions.

Literature Review

This literature review organizes key debates and findings under seven axes relevant to climate-induced migration, youth, and social cohesion in fragile contexts, particularly in the Great Lakes region.

Climate Change and Migration

Climate change is increasingly recognized as a primary driver of forced and voluntary migration (Ofori et al. 2023). Extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, and landslides disrupt livelihoods and force populations to relocate. Recent studies (Tietjen, Jacobsen, et Hollander 2023)show that in Africa, migration is not solely a survival strategy but also a response to economic and social vulnerabilities exacerbated by environmental stressors. While some scholars argue that climate-induced migration can stimulate innovation and adaptation in host communities, others highlight conflicts over resources, inequality, and social fragmentation**.**

Youth Mobility

Youth are particularly affected by climate-induced displacement due to limited resources, social networks, and access to education and employment. Literature

shows that young migrants often face higher exposure to economic risks and social marginalization. Some studies emphasize youth as agents of resilience, capable of adapting and supporting host communities.

- **Parallel arguments:** Youth may either integrate successfully into host communities, enhancing cohesion, or face exclusion, increasing tension.
- **Contradictory findings:** Gender, education, and socio-economic background intersect with migration experiences, producing different vulnerabilities and coping strategies across contexts.

Social Cohesion in Fragile Contexts

Social cohesion, including trust, solidarity, and cooperation, is central to community stability. Migration can strengthen cohesion when newcomers and host populations collaborate, but it can also strain resources, amplify pre-existing inequalities, and trigger conflict**.** In fragile African states, the literature emphasizes the role of governance, NGOs, and local networks in mediating social outcomes.

- **Evidence:**
    - In Rwanda, community programs foster youth integration, promoting cohesion.
    - In DRC, weak governance and resource scarcity contribute to tension between displaced youth and host communities.
    - Uganda presents mixed outcomes depending on local social support structures.

Internal Displacement in Africa

Internal displacement is a growing challenge in Africa, especially in fragile states (Ajide et Alimi 2019; Li et Samimi 2022; Ofori et al. 2023) . Literature shows that youth are disproportionately affected, often facing educational disruption, social marginalization, and economic vulnerability. Cross-country studies are rare but necessary to understand regional dynamics and inform policy.

Community Resilience

Resilience literature(Tietjen, Jacobsen, et Hollander 2023) emphasizes the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt to shocks. Youth and host communities develop coping strategies through social networks, informal support, NGOs, and local governance structures. Literature shows resilience can mitigate the negative effects of displacement but may coexist with social tensions and fragmentation.

Migration Policies

Policy research highlights the importance of national and regional frameworks in shaping displacement outcomes (Ofori et al. 2023) and the importance of a right coordination (Nkiko 2026). Effective policies include youth-centered programs, social integration initiatives, and climate adaptation strategies. Many African countries, including DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda, implement fragmented policies with gaps in coordination and youth-specific interventions. Literature calls for evidence-based, context-sensitive, and intersectional approaches**.**

Methodology

Primary qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with youth leaders and members of youth structures (aged 15–29, including climate migrants and displaced youth), who are actively engaged in community cohesion, access to justice, and social development initiatives. The empirical data collection was conducted in November 2025, during a regional youth convening organized by Pole Institute in Kampala, which brought together young actors involved in social cohesion and community governance across the Great Lakes region. This setting provided a unique opportunity to access participants from multiple countries, allowing for cross-border and comparative data collection within a real-world regional policy and civil society context. The researcher participated directly in this forum and conducted interviews with youth engaged in community work, NGOs (local and international), and youth-led structures operating in border areas and local communities.

Interviews were semi-structured, lasted approximately one hour, were conducted in relevant local and working languages, and were manually transcribed. In addition to primary qualitative data, the study integrates secondary data sources, including NGO reports, governmental data, and international databases, allowing for contextualization and triangulation of findings.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, following a structured coding process that enabled the identification of recurring patterns, contradictions, and context-specific dynamics. An intersectional analytical approach was applied to examine how youth experiences differ according to age, gender, displacement status, socio-economic position, and institutional access. The study employed data triangulation by combining interviews, secondary sources, and contextual documentation to enhance analytical robustness and validity.

The research design is a comparative qualitative study, enabling systematic cross-country analysis between DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda. Scientific rigor was ensured through methodological triangulation, cross-site comparison, and thematic coherence, strengthening the credibility and transferability of findings.

Results

The results of this study are presented along five analytical axes. The analysis highlights patterns, contrasts, and intersections between youth experiences, community responses, and social cohesion outcomes. They indicate that climate-induced displacement operates as a structuring mechanism of youth trajectories rather than as a simple mobility phenomenon.

Axis 1: Climate Displacement and Youth Mobility

- **Patterns of displacement:** In the eastern DRC, heavy rainfall and floods have caused repeated displacement, often forcing youth to move multiple times within a year. In Uganda, drought-related migration

affects mainly agricultural youth seeking temporary employment in urban centers, while in Rwanda, resettlement programs combined with climate shocks shape youth mobility.

- **Mobility trajectories:** Rural-to-urban migration dominates in all three countries, but cross-border flows are notable, especially from DRC to Uganda. These movements reflect both survival-driven and strategic choices: youth may migrate to continue education, seek employment, or join family networks.
- **Intersectional dynamics:** Gender differences are evident: young women face mobility constraints due to social norms and safety concerns, while young men are more likely to engage in labor-related migration. Socio-economic background also shapes access to resources during displacement.
- **Parallel and contradictory outcomes:** In some regions, migration fosters social integration and access to new opportunities. In others, it increases vulnerability, exposes youth to exploitation, or reinforces exclusion. Multi-country comparison highlights context-specific patterns influenced by governance, NGO support, and cultural norms.

Axis 2: Youth Vulnerability and Social Exclusion

- **Education:** Displacement disrupts schooling, with eastern DRC showing the highest dropout rates. Rwanda mitigates this through structured educational programs, while Uganda shows variability depending on community support.
- **Economic insecurity:** Youth often enter informal labor markets, earning low wages or engaging in precarious work. Economic vulnerability intersects with displacement status, gender, and household income.
- **Social exclusion:** Youth experience marginalization due to ethnicity, displacement, or gender. In DRC, ethnic tensions exacerbate exclusion, whereas in Rwanda, government-led integration programs reduce discrimination. Uganda shows mixed patterns, with NGOs filling gaps in social support.
- **Psychosocial impacts:** Mental health challenges, including stress, anxiety, and trauma, are widespread. Youth coping mechanisms include

reliance on peer networks, faith-based support, and community engagement.

Axis 3: Community Tensions and Social Cohesion

- **Resource competition:** The arrival of displaced youth strains schools, healthcare, housing, and employment. Eastern DRC experiences the greatest tension due to weak infrastructure and governance; Uganda experiences moderate pressure, and Rwanda demonstrates more effective resource management.
- **Trust and solidarity:** Host communities sometimes embrace newcomers, building new social networks, while in other contexts, competition leads to mistrust and conflict.
- **Factors affecting cohesion:** Governance, NGO programs, community leadership, and local customs determine whether migration enhances or undermines social cohesion. Areas with robust community engagement show stronger cohesion, even under stress.
- **Intersectional perspective:** Vulnerable youth-poor, female, or ethnic minorities face higher social exclusion. Gender-specific challenges include limited access to vocational training or leadership roles, while older youth may experience less social acceptance compared to younger newcomers.
- **Parallel outcomes:** Social cohesion can improve when communities collectively address migration challenges; contradictory outcomes emerge when institutional or community support is weak. This means that social cohesion emerges as a negotiated social process rather than a fixed community attribute.

Axis 4: Integration and Resilience Strategies

- **Youth strategies:** Displaced youth develop informal networks, engage in community projects, and leverage NGO programs to access education and employment. Social participation increases resilience.
- **Community strategies:** Host communities employ mechanisms such as shared resource management, collective decision-making, and cultural adaptation practices to integrate newcomers.

- **Institutional support:** Rwanda demonstrates strong integration programs with government and NGO collaboration. Uganda provides partial NGO support but lacks uniform implementation. In DRC, community and kinship networks are the primary integration mechanism.
- **Intersectional insights:** Access to resilience programs varies with gender, age, socio-economic status, and displacement history. Girls may benefit less from vocational programs but engage more in social cohesion initiatives, while boys often access labor markets but face higher exploitation risk.

Evidence of positive adaptation: Successful integration is linked to youth participation in community governance, educational continuity, and social network development, emphasizing the dynamic nature of resilience. Adaptive capacity depends on collective structures rather than individual agency alone and Youth experiences are structured by intersecting dimensions of gender, socio-economic status, displacement history, and institutional access. Intersectional positioning produces differentiated vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities.Displacement outcomes vary systematically across social categories rather than randomly**.**

Axis 5: Comparative Dynamics Between Countries

- **Commonalities:** All countries experience youth educational disruption, economic vulnerability, and psychosocial stress.
- **Differences:** Rwanda shows high levels of institutional and community support; Uganda presents mixed integration outcomes; DRC faces the highest vulnerability due to conflict, weak governance, and limited infrastructure.
- **Lessons:** Comparative analysis underscores the importance of context-specific policies, the role of NGOs, and community-based resilience mechanisms.
- **Policy relevance:** Evidence highlights the need for tailored interventions and regional cooperation strategies to manage climate-induced youth displacement effectively. Cross-country comparison reveals differentiated governance effects on youth integration outcomes. The comparative analysis demonstrates context-dependent

configurations of vulnerability and resilience. Similar climate shocks generate divergent social outcomes due to institutional variation. National governance structures mediate the relationship between displacement and social cohesion

Figure 2. Comparative framework showing country-specific challenges, vulnerabilities, and resilience mechanisms for youth affected by climate-induced displacement in the Great Lakes region. This figure highlights how governance, NGO support, and local social networks shape differential outcomes in DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda.

Discussion

Findings reveal a patterned relationship between climate shocks, institutional capacity, and differentiated youth outcomes. These dynamics suggest that vulnerability is structurally produced through interacting environmental, social, and governance factors.he Data demonstrate that social cohesion functions as a conditional process shaped by governance quality, community structures, and resource distribution.Youth vulnerability emerges not as an individual condition, but as a systemic outcome of institutional fragility and social disruption.

- **Scientific interpretation:** Climate-induced displacement significantly affects youth mobility and social cohesion. Displacement outcomes are multifaceted, context-dependent, and intersectional, with both positive and negative effects observed across the three countries.
- **Comparison with literature:** Findings align with global studies linking climate shocks to forced migration but provide new intersectional insights into youth experiences in fragile African contexts.
- **Theoretical contributions:** Extends forced migration, vulnerability, and social cohesion theories by integrating multi-country, intersectional perspectives, highlighting contradictions and parallel outcomes.
- **Empirical contributions:** Offers unique multi-site, multi-country evidence, addressing a significant gap in African climate-migration research.

- **Regional implications:** Differences among DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda illustrate the role of governance, social networks, NGO interventions, and cultural norms in shaping youth outcomes.
- **International relevance:** Lessons can inform climate-migration policies in fragile contexts globally, emphasizing youth-centered, context-sensitive approaches.
- **Limitations:** Data access restrictions in conflict-affected areas, contextual differences affecting cross-country comparisons and reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias.

Policy Implications

Effective policy responses to climate-induced youth displacement in the Great Lakes region require a comprehensive, multi-level approach. Youth policies should focus on implementing inclusive educational programs, vocational training, and psychosocial support for both displaced and host-community youth, ensuring equitable access to opportunities. Migration policies must establish safe, voluntary, and regulated frameworks, including cross-border cooperation, to manage population movements in a structured manner. Climate policies should prioritize local adaptation programs that reduce the severity of climate shocks and mitigate displacement risks.

Inclusive education for climate-displaced youth must be strengthened as a central policy response to climate-induced migration. Governments and education authorities should ensure immediate school enrollment for displaced children and youth, find due solution against documentation barriers, and develop flexible integration mechanisms within host schools. This includes language and psychosocial support, anti-discrimination measures, and targeted material assistance such as school fees support, uniforms, and learning materials. Here, schools should be recognized not only as learning spaces but also as key institutions for social cohesion, where displaced and host-community youth interact and build mutual understanding. Teacher training programs should also be strengthened to equip educators with skills for managing diverse and displaced student populations in climate-affected contexts.

At the local level, municipal authorities need to be empowered to coordinate youth integration, allocate resources efficiently, and resolve potential conflicts. Regional cooperation between DRC, Uganda, and Rwanda is also crucial, including the harmonization of migration policies and resource-sharing strategies, reframing climate migration as a governance challenge rather than a purely humanitarian issue. Additionally, educational initiatives must support inclusive schooling for displaced youth, strengthen teacher training, and ensure curriculum continuity.

Social cohesion can be enhanced through community dialogues, joint projects, and participatory decision-making mechanisms, while psychosocial protection should provide mental health services, peer support networks, and trauma-informed interventions tailored to the specific needs of young people affected by displacement. Collectively, these strategies create a resilient, youth-centered framework to address both the vulnerabilities and potentials of displaced populations in fragile contexts.

Conclusion

Climate-induced displacement shapes youth mobility, vulnerability, and social cohesion in complex and context-dependent ways, with outcomes strongly influenced by governance, community support, and institutional capacity. Displacement acts as a mediating variable, linking environmental stressors to social fragmentation, while weak institutions amplify its social effects. Governance capacity determines whether migration leads to integration or fragmentation, and competition over resources functions primarily as a catalyst for social tension rather than its root cause.

This study provides multi-country, intersectional, empirical evidence connecting climate shocks, youth migration, and social cohesion, filling a critical gap in African climate-migration research, particularly regarding youth in fragile contexts. The findings highlight that social outcomes are governance-dependent: effective institutional frameworks can transform displacement from a risk factor into an opportunity for integration.

From a policy perspective, these results inform evidence-based interventions for governments, NGOs, and regional bodies, emphasizing that

social cohesion outcomes are sensitive to governance and programmatic strategies. Looking forward, longitudinal studies, broader regional comparisons, and quantitative modeling of migration–cohesion dynamics are recommended to deepen understanding. Finally, the study provides transferable insights for fragile regions worldwide, underscoring the importance of intersectional and multi-level approaches in addressing climate-induced youth displacement.

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