Climate Mobility, Securitization, and the Politics of Protection in Bangladesh

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Executive Summary

Climate change in Bangladesh is increasingly a human security challenge because environmental pressures intersect with poverty, livelihood insecurity, unequal access to resources, social obligations, weak service provision, and institutional arrangements, thereby shaping whether people can remain safely, move with support, or recover after displacement. Climate-related mobility should therefore not be understood simply as movement away from floods, cyclones, erosion, salinity, heat, or waterlogging, but as an outcome of interacting environmental, economic, social, political, and institutional conditions (Black et al. 2011; IPCC 2022).

Drawing on an interpretive study of 42 purposively selected participants across *Satkhira, Khulna, Pirojpur, Barishal, Chandpur, Jamalpur*, and *Dhaka*, this research examines how climate mobility is constructed as a security issue and how such constructions shape recognition, responsibility, and protection. It argues that climate mobility is best understood as constrained choice, since environmental deterioration can simultaneously increase pressure to move and reduce the resources required to do so. Mobility, immobility, circulation, and return therefore reflect unequal capabilities shaped by income, assets, care responsibilities, social relations, place attachment, institutional recognition, and access to assistance.

Security is also constructed differently across actors: affected households emphasize livelihoods, housing, water, dignity, and belonging; government and development institutions focus on adaptation, infrastructure, eligibility, and urban capacity; while rights and climate justice actors foreground entitlement, accountability, and historical responsibility. These competing constructions influence whose losses become visible and what forms of intervention become possible.

The evidence does not demonstrate completed securitization in the classical sense; rather, climate mobility is more visibly governed through routine practices of classification, registration, eligibility, planning, funding, and service allocation. Desecuritization likewise does not automatically produce protection if adaptation and resilience discourses shift responsibility onto households. The report therefore recommends a human security approach that evaluates mobility by whether people retain meaningful, realistic, and continuous options to remain, move, recover, and rebuild secure lives.

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1. Climate Risk Is Becoming a Human Security Question

Bangladesh faces multiple climate-related pressures, including flooding, riverbank erosion, salinity intrusion, extreme heat, changing rainfall, cyclones, and waterlogging. Yet exposure to these hazards does not by itself determine who moves, who remains, or who becomes insecure. Climate-related environmental change interacts with economic opportunities, political institutions, demographic circumstances, family relations, land ownership, social networks, and access to resources, producing very different mobility outcomes among people facing similar forms of environmental stress (Black et al. 2011; IPCC 2022).

This distinction is vital for public policy because environmental exposure does not translate uniformly into migration. A household affected by river erosion may lose land and relocate, while another facing comparable conditions may remain because it lacks the resources needed to move. A third may choose to stay because of family responsibilities, social networks, attachment to land, or viable local livelihood opportunities. Movement and immobility, therefore, cannot be inferred directly from hazard exposure. They must be understood in light of the broader conditions that shape what people are able, willing, and permitted to do.

This is where a human security perspective becomes especially useful. Rather than defining security primarily in terms of territory or state protection, human security focuses on people's survival, dignity, livelihoods, social relationships, and capacity to make meaningful choices (Commission on Human Security 2003; UNDP 1994). Its different dimensions, including economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security, are closely interconnected. Insecurity in one area can therefore trigger or deepen insecurity in another.

Climate change makes these interconnections particularly visible. Declining agricultural productivity can reduce both household income and food security, while salinity intrusion or deteriorating water access can increase health risks and unpaid care burdens. Loss of land can undermine livelihoods while also weakening attachment, identity, and belonging. Mobility may reduce exposure to one environmental hazard, but it can simultaneously create new insecurities through irregular employment, unaffordable housing, weak access to public services, or family separation (Barnett and Adger 2007; O'Brien and Barnett 2013).

For this reason, mobility cannot be evaluated simply by asking whether people moved or whether household income increased after migration. A migrant may send remittances home while living in hazardous housing or insecure employment. A household may gain better access to food while also accumulating debt, losing social connections, or facing insecure tenancy. Similarly, the movement of one household member may strengthen consumption while increasing the care responsibilities and uncertainty experienced by those who remain behind.

A human security approach, therefore, shifts the evaluative question from whether mobility occurred to what mobility actually changed. The central policy question becomes: *does mobility expand people's capacity to live securely and pursue valued lives, or does it merely redistribute insecurity across places, people, and domains?*

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2. Climate Mobility as Constrained Choice

Public debate often places climate mobility along a continuum between voluntary migration and forced displacement, yet research increasingly shows that this binary obscures the unequal aspirations, capabilities, social obligations, and material constraints that shape mobility and immobility (Black et al. 2011; de Haas 2021; Schewel 2020). Evidence from Bangladesh reinforces this argument, showing that decisions to move or remain are shaped by livelihood insecurity, place attachment, social relations, and uneven capacities to act rather than by environmental exposure alone (Ayeb-Karlsson, Kniveton, and Cannon 2020; Wiegel, Boas, and Warner 2022). Environmental pressures may progressively narrow a household's available options without eliminating agency altogether: flooding can disrupt transport and day labour, salinity can undermine agricultural production, riverbank erosion can remove homes and productive land, and repeated losses can deepen indebtedness and livelihood insecurity. At the same time, migration itself requires resources, including money for transport and accommodation, access to employment and social networks, and the capacity to absorb uncertainty at the destination. Climate-related mobility is therefore shaped not only by pressure to leave, but also by the uneven ability to act on that pressure (Black et al. 2011; Foresight 2011).

This interaction creates a paradox. Environmental deterioration may make remaining increasingly difficult while simultaneously eroding the financial, social, and material resources required to migrate (Foresight 2011). The distinction between migration aspirations and migration capabilities is particularly useful for understanding this tension, as people may wish to move without the means to do so, just as others may prefer to remain but find that deteriorating livelihood conditions progressively undermine that possibility (de Haas 2021). Mobility and immobility should therefore be understood not as simple expressions of preference, but as outcomes produced through the interaction of aspirations, capabilities, and changing constraints.

The concept of constrained choice captures this relationship by recognizing that people continue to exercise agency, although the alternatives available to them are unequally structured. A household may remain because staying is socially and culturally meaningful, because migration is financially unattainable, or because both conditions operate simultaneously. Conversely, migration may occur not because departure is freely preferred, but because repeated livelihood losses make other options increasingly untenable. These distinctions are consistent with research showing that immobility can reflect both limited mobility capabilities and meaningful attachment to place, while migration decisions themselves are shaped by unequal access to material and social resources (Adams 2016; Carling 2002; Schewel 2020; Wiegel, Boas, and Warner 2022).

Constrained choice also exposes inequalities within households, where mobility decisions are shaped not only by resources but by unequal authority over money, timing, destination, employment, and care responsibilities. A household may send one member first because moving everyone is unaffordable, while gender, age, income, and family obligations influence who moves, who remains, and who bears the costs of either decision. Participants' accounts further show that these inequalities intersect with broader differences in household capacity: wealthier families were often better able to leave environmentally exposed areas, whereas poorer households sometimes remained because they lacked the means to move, even when environmental pressures intensified. At the same time, remaining could reflect attachment to

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land, responsibility for elderly relatives, established social relationships, or uncertainty about livelihood opportunities elsewhere. These experiences show that material constraint and meaningful attachment are not mutually exclusive, and that both mobility and immobility may represent agency exercised within restricted alternatives.

The policy implication is that neither movement nor staying should be treated as evidence of successful adaptation in itself. Assessment should instead examine the range and quality of alternatives available before, during, and after mobility, including whether people could remain without unacceptable risks to livelihoods, housing, health, dignity, and social relationships; whether they could move without incurring excessive debt or losing essential support; who exercised decision making authority within the household; and whether institutional assistance expanded or narrowed the possibilities to move, remain, return, or circulate.

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3. How Climate Mobility Becomes a Security Issue

Security is not a neutral label because defining an issue as a matter of security simultaneously identifies what must be protected, what constitutes a threat, who is responsible, and which forms of intervention become legitimate. Climate security can therefore be constructed in different ways depending on the object of protection and the institutional setting in which risk is interpreted (McDonald 2013, 2021).

This variation is evident in how different actors understand climate mobility. For climate affected households, security is often grounded in everyday concerns such as food, safe water, livelihoods, housing, healthcare, family wellbeing, and continued connection to place. Disaster management institutions may instead emphasize evacuation, shelters, infrastructure, and rapid recovery, while urban authorities may view climate related migration through pressures on housing, sanitation, employment, congestion, informal settlement, and service capacity. Development organizations often translate these concerns into vulnerability assessments, adaptation programmes, livelihood interventions, resilience projects, and beneficiary categories. Rights advocates, by contrast, are more likely to frame security through entitlement, recognition, compensation, housing rights, and access to social protection, while climate justice actors extend responsibility beyond households and national institutions toward historical responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions and international climate finance (Schlosberg and Collins 2014; Vanhala and Calliari 2022).

Because these perspectives define insecurity differently, the same mobile person can appear in institutional discourse as a climate vulnerable household, displaced person, adaptation beneficiary, migrant worker, urban poor resident, informal settler, or pressure on urban infrastructure. These labels are not simply descriptive. They shape how problems are interpreted and, in turn, which institutions are expected to respond. Classification therefore becomes a mechanism through which evidence requirements, eligibility criteria, administrative responsibility, funding streams, and permissible forms of assistance are organized. Different causal and institutional frames of climate mobility can consequently produce different distributions of responsibility and protection (Dewan 2023; Vanhala and Calliari 2022).

The politics of classification is particularly evident in the debate over the term "climate refugee". Some participants regarded the term as useful because it conveys compulsion, highlights loss, and opens questions of international responsibility. Others, particularly actors working within migration and humanitarian institutions, resisted the label because “climate refugee” does not constitute an independent legal status under the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR 2020). The disagreement, therefore, reflects more than terminology. It reveals competing views on whether climate mobility should be framed primarily by urgency and responsibility or by legal precision and established institutional mandates.

Both positions carry consequences. Refugee language can heighten political attention and strengthen claims of responsibility, yet rhetorical recognition does not automatically generate enforceable rights to housing, income, services, or compensation. Conversely, more legally precise categories may reduce conceptual ambiguity while leaving unresolved who should respond to the material consequences of displacement and mobility. The central policy challenge is therefore not to identify a single ideal label, but to ensure that changes in classification do not interrupt recognition, responsibility, or continuity of protection.

4. Securitization, Desecuritization, and the Limits of Security Framing

Securitization theory distinguishes ordinary policy concern from the transformation of an issue into an exceptional security threat. In the Copenhagen School formulation, securitization occurs when an issue is presented as existentially threatening, accepted by a relevant audience, and used to justify extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures, while later work emphasizes that this process also depends on political context, audience reception, and the authority of the securitizing actor (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998; Balzacq 2005).

Applied to climate mobility, securitization draws attention to the point at which environmentally affected populations are represented less as people requiring protection and more as potential threats to borders, public services, political order, or urban stability (Bettini 2013; Baldwin 2013; Bigo 2002). In Bangladesh, such language appears in accounts that link rapid migration to pressures on housing, employment, sanitation, infrastructure, and municipal services, thereby shifting migrants discursively from populations experiencing insecurity to populations perceived as generating it (McDonald 2013; Vanhala and Calliari 2022). Yet the evidence does not support completed securitization: participants who expressed concern about urban capacity also advocated housing, planned settlement, employment, sanitation, and social protection, showing that regulatory concern and protection can coexist. The study therefore distinguishes security framing from completed securitization, since threat language alone does not establish audience acceptance or the authorization of exceptional measures (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998; Balzacq 2005).

This distinction also sharpens the analysis of administrative exclusion. Households may be denied assistance because of territorial eligibility, closed beneficiary lists, limited budgets, or fragmented mandates, none of which should automatically be read as securitization. At the same time, security rationalities can operate through routine professional practices and administrative classifications, making decisions about registration, eligibility, funding, institutional

responsibility, and service access central to how insecurity becomes actionable or remains marginal (Bigo 2002; Balzacq 2005).

Moving away from threat-based framing does not, however, guarantee human security. Desecuritization shifts an issue from exceptional security politics toward ordinary governance (Hansen 2012), but adaptation, welfare, or resilience frames can still leave material insecurity intact. Indeed, adaptation discourse may recognize household agency while simultaneously shifting responsibility for managing climate risk onto populations already facing deteriorating livelihoods and limited institutional support (Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin 2015; Fassin 2012).

This tension is especially visible when households respond through borrowing, temporary migration, insecure employment, self-financed protection, or repeated livelihood adjustment. Such practices demonstrate agency, yet their capacity to endure should not be mistaken for expanded freedom. Following Sen (1999), adaptation becomes substantively protective only when it enlarges meaningful alternatives rather than requiring households to absorb increasing social and economic costs. Likewise, replacing the label "climate refugee" with "adaptation beneficiary" or "urban poor resident" may alter institutional language without securing housing, employment, services, or continuity of entitlements.

Human security, therefore, provides the broader standard against which both securitization and desecuritization should be assessed. The central question is not simply whether climate mobility is framed in threatening or non-threatening terms, but whether the resulting institutional arrangements reduce vulnerability, preserve dignity, expand substantive choice, and provide adequate and continuous protection across different stages of mobility (UNDP 1994; Commission on Human Security 2003; O'Brien and Barnett 2013).

5. Administrative Vulnerability: When Recognition Does Not Become Protection

One of the study's central findings is the gap between institutional visibility and effective protection. Climate-affected people may possess documents, submit applications, and repeatedly seek assistance, yet still fail to enter an actionable category through which support can be delivered. In Satkhira, for example, one participant described the absence of an effective record of household loss despite repeated attempts to obtain assistance, while a local government participant referred to locally anchored eligibility linked to voter registration. Although these accounts should not be generalized as a national rule, they illustrate how recognition can remain partial when assistance depends on place-based documentation and institution-specific criteria.

These experiences underpin the study's concept of administrative vulnerability, understood as insecurity that is produced or intensified when registration requirements, territorial jurisdictions, beneficiary lists, fragmented mandates, program boundaries, or limited budgets obstruct access to protection. Vulnerability, therefore, arises not only from environmental exposure or livelihood loss but also from the institutional procedures through which needs are classified, claims become actionable, and responsibility is allocated.

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Climate mobility makes this problem particularly visible because movement across administrative boundaries can disrupt continuity of recognition. At origin, authority may record cyclone damage, erosion, or livelihood loss, yet after relocation, the same household may appear to destination institutions primarily as urban poor, informal tenants, or low-income workers, severing the administrative link between earlier environmental loss and present insecurity. Formal citizenship, in this sense, does not automatically guarantee practical eligibility for support.

At the same time, such exclusion should not be reduced to deliberate neglect. Participants also pointed to limited resources, restricted mandates, and institutional fragmentation, suggesting that similar protection failures can arise through different mechanisms. Identifying those mechanisms is crucial because exclusion produced by eligibility rules, exhausted budgets, jurisdictional gaps, or program design requires different policy responses.

The study also shows that assistance and protection are not equivalent. A household may receive dry food, clothing, or short-term relief while continuing to face disability related care needs, livelihood insecurity, debt, unsafe housing, or repeated environmental exposure. Recognition, receipt of assistance, adequacy of support, and continuity of protection should therefore be treated as distinct policy outcomes. A household may be counted as a beneficiary while remaining insecure in ways that the intervention does not address.

For this reason, beneficiary numbers provide only a partial measure of policy effectiveness. A more meaningful assessment should ask whether assistance is adequate to the household's needs, whether it continues beyond the immediate crisis, whether it remains accessible after mobility, and whether it expands people's substantive capacity to recover, remain safely, or move under acceptable conditions. In this sense, the central governance challenge is not simply to make climate-affected populations visible, but to ensure that recognition is connected to continuous, portable, and adequate protection.

6. Urban Mobility, Funding, and the Redistribution of Insecurity

Migration to cities is often treated in climate policy as a route away from environmental risk, yet the interviews reveal a more complex process in which mobility can reduce some forms of insecurity while reproducing or intensifying others. Some households experience tangible gains after migration, including improved access to food, greater income opportunities, or reduced exposure to particular coastal hazards. These gains, however, may coexist with debt, high rents, irregular employment, inadequate schooling, waterlogging, poor sanitation, insecure tenure, and the loss of valued social and cultural relationships. One migrant from Satkhira described improved food access for children alongside debt-related humiliation and the loss of ancestral graves, memories, and valued relationships, while another household from Khulna reported that both spouses were employed after relocation, even as rent, food, schooling costs, and monsoon waterlogging continued to generate insecurity. These accounts are analytically significant because they show that mobility can produce gains and losses simultaneously across different dimensions of human security: income may improve while housing becomes precarious, environmental exposure may decline while new urban risks emerge, and household consumption may increase even as social relations and care burdens become more strained. This

multidimensionality is consistent with a human security perspective, which treats livelihood, housing, health, dignity, social relationships, and access to services as interdependent rather than reducible to a single measure of wellbeing (UNDP 1994; O'Brien and Barnett 2013).

Care relations further complicate these outcomes because migration can sustain households through remittances while also redistributing unpaid labor, emotional responsibility, and economic risk among family members. Household income may therefore conceal internal inequalities, particularly when one person's mobility depends on another remaining behind and assuming greater care responsibilities. At the same time, mobility can trigger institutional reclassification: people previously recognized through environmental loss may arrive in cities and become administratively visible primarily as urban poor residents, informal settlers, low-income workers, or occupants of public land. Although such categories may accurately describe present circumstances, they can disconnect current insecurity from the environmental losses and livelihood disruptions that shaped mobility. The policy challenge is therefore not to preserve a permanent "climate migrant" identity, but to ensure continuity of recognition and protection without permanent labeling.

Whether such continuity is possible also depends on institutional resources. Funding structures shape which recognized needs can be converted into programs, because compensation, durable housing, land acquisition, or long-term settlement may be harder to finance than training, livelihood support, water interventions, or short-term adaptation projects. The problem is also temporal: project cycles may end while landlessness, debt, insecure housing, care burdens, or unstable employment persist. Institutional completion should therefore not be equated with social protection. This mismatch also complicates resilience discourse, since households may continue to cope through borrowing, unpaid labor, self-financed adaptation, or insecure employment without experiencing any real expansion of substantive freedom. In such cases, apparent resilience may signal the transfer of responsibility from institutions to already vulnerable households rather than an improvement in security (Sen 1999; Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin 2015).

7. Policy Directions: From Mobility Management to Human Security

The evidence suggests that Bangladesh does not primarily need a separate and rigid policy architecture built around a fixed category of "climate migrant," because such a category risks oversimplifying diverse mobility trajectories and reproducing the very classificatory problems identified in this report. A more effective approach would be to strengthen coordination across existing climate, disaster management, social protection, urban development, local government, housing, labor, and migration systems so that protection follows people across places, institutions, and different stages of mobility. In practical terms, this means shifting policy attention away from the narrow question of how to manage movement and toward the broader question of how to protect people whose security is transformed before, during, and after mobility.

A human security approach would therefore begin by making protection portable across administrative jurisdictions. Current forms of assistance are often tied to locality, program eligibility, or institution-specific documentation, yet climate mobility frequently takes people

beyond the geographical areas in which their losses were first recognized. Registration systems should therefore retain relevant histories of environmental loss, displacement, assistance, and vulnerability when people change residence, so that movement from districts such as Satkhira, Khulna, or Chandpur to Dhaka does not automatically sever access to appropriate support. Such portability would not require preserving a permanent climate identity; rather, it would enable institutions to recognize how earlier environmental losses continue to shape present needs.

Closely related to this is the need to reduce the dependence of protection on overly narrow forms of local eligibility. When assistance is tightly tied to local voter registration, place-based beneficiary lists, or residence documentation, mobile households may remain formal citizens yet become practically invisible to the institutions responsible for assistance. National and local systems should therefore develop interoperable procedures through which need can be verified across administrative boundaries, allowing people to access relevant services without being institutionally anchored to places they have already left. This would help reduce the gap between citizenship as a legal status and eligibility as an administrative practice.

Policy assessment should move beyond treating migration as either success or failure and instead evaluate whether mobility expands substantive capabilities. The central question is whether people had meaningful alternatives and whether movement improved access to secure livelihoods, housing, services, dignity, and decision-making authority without imposing unsustainable debt or loss of essential support (Sen 1999; de Haas 2021). This allows policy to distinguish mobility that expands choice from movement undertaken because other options have become untenable.

Disaster response should likewise be connected to longer-term social protection. Emergency relief remains essential, but short-term assistance cannot address persistent landlessness, debt, disability, livelihood loss, insecure housing, disrupted education, or deteriorating health. Linking disaster response to sustained support in housing, livelihoods, health, education, and income security would reduce repeated dependence on crisis interventions.

Urban policy should also shift from viewing climate-related migration primarily as pressure on cities toward planning for inclusive incorporation. Housing, sanitation, transport, employment, education, healthcare, and social protection should be integrated into receiving-area planning, while concerns about congestion or infrastructure demand should be addressed through investment and coordination rather than by portraying migrants as sources of insecurity. In this respect, many climate mobility challenges are better understood as problems of everyday governance than as exceptional security threats (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998; Balzacq 2005).

Policy should also avoid equating resilience with successful protection. Household coping through borrowing, livelihood adjustment, informal networks, or self-financed adaptation may indicate institutional gaps rather than expanded freedom. Evaluation should therefore distinguish resilience grounded in greater capabilities from resilience sustained through intensified household burdens (Sen 1999; Eriksen, Nightingale, and Eakin 2015).

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Meaningful participation and climate finance are equally important. Affected people should have influence over program priorities, eligibility, resource allocation, and evaluation rather than merely provide data, while funding mechanisms should support longer-term needs that extend beyond short project cycles, including durable housing, livelihood recovery, safe water, urban services, relocation where appropriate, and continued assistance across places of origin and destination. Project success should therefore be judged not only by outputs or beneficiary counts, but by whether interventions reduce long-term insecurity and expand practical choices.

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