



Policy Brief

**BUILDING CLIMATE RESILIENT URBAN
FUTURES IN THE HORN OF AFRICA**

January 2025

Policy Brief

BUILDING CLIMATE-RESILIENT URBAN FUTURES IN THE HORN OF AFRICA



January 2025

About Life & Peace Institute

We build peace one change at a time. For over 40 years, we have promoted nonviolent approaches to conflict in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region. Working across multiple key programmes in 6 countries and with more than 70 staff, we support the capacity of people living with violent conflict to transform their own communities and societies into inclusive, just, and peaceful ones. We also work to influence regional and global policy agendas, making sure local voices are heard around the world.

Summary

Cities across the Horn of Africa (HoA) are increasingly shaped by the convergence of climate change, displacement, and urban governance stress. Recurrent droughts and floods, interacting with conflict, weak land and environmental governance, and limited rural adaptation options, are driving sustained rural–urban and cross-border mobility toward secondary and regional cities. These cities have become de facto displacement hubs, absorbing populations displaced by livelihood collapse and environmental stress. Rapid, largely unplanned expansion is intensifying pressure on land, housing, and basic services, while deepening spatial and socio-economic inequalities as planning and infrastructure investment lag behind. At the same time, migrants and internally displaced people (IDPs) sustain urban economies through informal trade, labour, and services, highlighting mobility as both a source of resilience and stress. Drawing on research in Kisumu and Baidoa, this brief identifies priorities for integrated urban resilience.

Key Messages

- **Climate change is contributing to acceleration of urban growth in the HoA.** Droughts and floods are driving sustained rural-urban displacement, particularly into secondary cities.
- **Secondary cities are frontline displacement spaces.** Rapid population inflows are outpacing planning capacity, land regulation, and service delivery, increasing urban fragility.
- **Urban stress is largely governance driven.** Weak land tenure, fragmented institutions, and exclusionary planning exacerbate inequality and conflict risks.
- **Urban vulnerability is linked to wider ecological systems.** Upstream land degradation and poor environmental governance intensify flood and resource risks in cities.
- **Inclusive urban resilience can serve as preventive peacebuilding measure.** Investing in land governance, climate adaptation, and social integration can reduce aid dependency and urban insecurity.

Climate Change, Displacement, and Urban Transformation in the HoA

The relationship between climate change, peace, and security has gained growing policy attention¹. While climate change does not directly cause violent conflict, evidence shows that it acts as a threat multiplier, intensifying livelihood collapse, food and water insecurity, social inequalities, and displacement. In the HoA, recurrent droughts

and failed rainy seasons have severely undermined agricultural and livestock-based livelihoods, accelerating rural–urban mobility. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the region will experience rising temperatures and more frequent and intense droughts, generating complex and sustained displacement dynamics². Climate-related mobility is often circular, seasonal, and multi-locational, challenging policy frameworks that treat displacement as short-term. Secondary and regional cities have become key destinations for displaced populations, often without adequate planning, land governance, or institutional coordination. This raises a central question: How can secondary and regional cities in the Horn of Africa manage climate-driven displacement to strengthen urban resilience, harness migrant contributions, and reduce aid dependency and insecurity? Drawing on comparative, multi-method research in Kisumu, Kenya, and Baidoa, Somalia, including Focus Group Discussions (FGD), key informant and community key interviews, photo-voice recordings, and field observations, we identify gaps in inclusive urban planning, secure land tenure, and coordinated governance, and highlight policy options to strengthen urban resilience and reduce inequality, aid dependency, and insecurity. It argues that the trajectory of climate-driven urbanisation will depend largely on policy interventions that align adaptation, governance, and social integration.

1 C. E. Richards et al., "Re-Framing the Threat of Global Warming: An Empirical Causal Loop Diagram of Climate Change, Food Insecurity and Societal Collapse," *Climatic Change* 164, no. 3 (2021): 49.

2 Linda Márcia Mendes Delazeri et al., "Climate Change and Rural–Urban Migration in the Brazilian Northeast Region," *GeoJournal* 87, no. 3 (2022): 2159–79, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-020-10349-3>.

Key Trends in Climate and Conflict-Driven Urban Migration

The findings show that Kisumu and Baidoa have experienced repeated waves of migration over the past five decades, driven by an interplay of factors ranging from droughts and flooding to conflict, economic disruptions, and urban investment opportunities. Historical timelines were drawn by the communities and migration pathways mapped, which provided evidence of communities' deep understanding and insight of key drivers of migration and important timelines observed. In Kisumu specifically, respondents described how migration patterns have varied over time. Migrants from within Kisumu County, neighbouring counties, and even other countries were correlated with the years. Following the city's designation in 2001, there was an influx of people attracted by the optimism of new employment and business opportunities. During periods of political tension, (2007–2008), the city experienced both immigration and emigration. From 2018 onwards, migrants have been drawn into Kisumu during relatively peaceful periods, motivated by investment and business prospects.

Communities have special attachments to cities which explains migration trends as expressed by some Kisumu residents:

"Kisumu is our city, we call it Dala (which means home), when life is hard at home (referring to the villages/rural areas where they come from), we come here to find another life. We also come here to build this city so that it can grow"

Climate-induced migrations were also clearly identified in Baidoa with years that recorded extreme episodes such as droughts that displaced people from rural areas into the city, a clear indication of environmental factors acting as key drivers of urban migration. An account from a community member summarised the situation on the urban migration-climate-security nexus in Baidoa:

"Our city has become a safe home - likened to a safe haven" for many communities from around us where those who have been displaced in their regions come here hoping to find better lives, but they end up being disappointed as life in the city is neither easy".

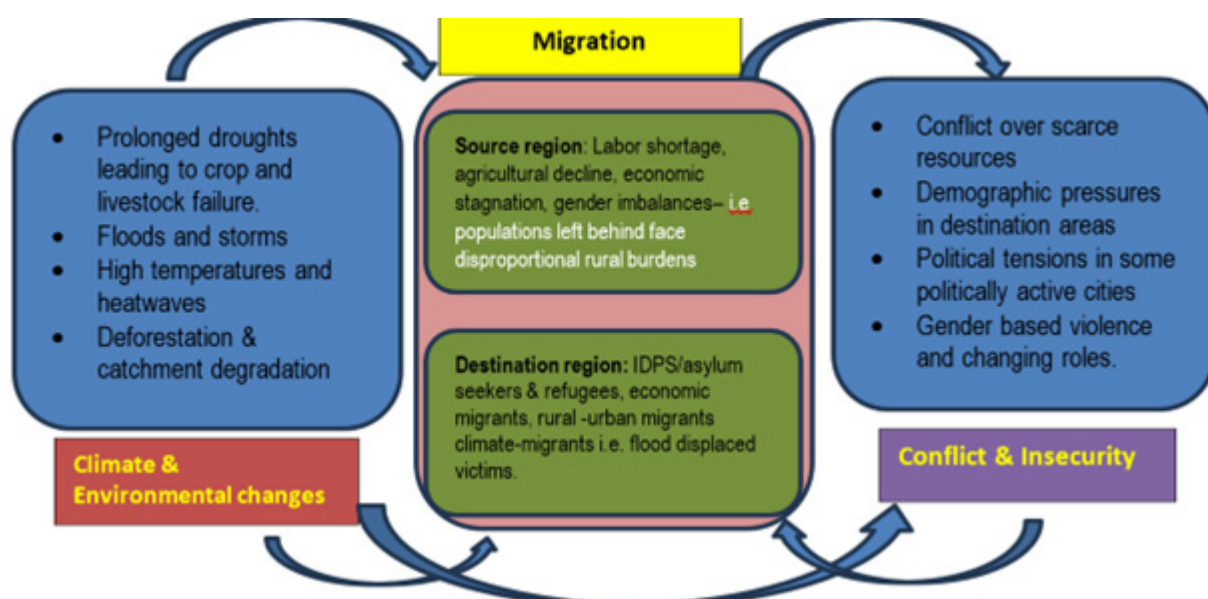


Figure 1: The interrelationship between climate, security and migration phenomena in the HoA

Theme	Kisumu (Kenya)	Baidoa (Somalia)
Key drivers	Climate shocks, declining rural livelihoods, urban opportunities, political factors i.e. post-election migration factors	Drought, livelihood loss, humanitarian dependence
Migration trends	Rural–urban & cross-border; informal settlement growth. Significant arrivals through the lake and beaches	Seasonal and long-term displacement; multi-sited mobility; camp-based social norms
Economic role	Small and medium enterprises, informal trade, housing & services investments	Informal <u>labor</u> , petty trade, humanitarian cash circulation; IDPs as economic actors
Urban impacts	Strains on water, sanitation, housing; social tension & cultural shifts	Fragmented growth, pressure on services, clan-based territorialisation
Governance & policy	Limited city-level regulation; need for integrated land-use planning	Humanitarian urbanism dominates; weak urban policy; siloed governance
Gender Dynamics	Male-dominated rural-urban migration; female led households in source regions, youth transitions tied to education/jobs. Sexual violence against women	Majority IDPs are women/children, high gender-based violence (rape/exploitation); female-headed households vulnerable without networks.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Urban Migration Trends

Despite differing governance, security, and socio-economic contexts, Kisumu and Baidoa reveal similar patterns of climate-driven displacement, informal settlement growth, and institutional gaps, and opportunities for developing common urban resilience strategies and harnessing the economic contributions of migrants while reducing cycles of aid dependency and insecurity. The table below provides a summary of key findings from the two cities.

The comparative data from Kisumu and Baidoa highlight both convergences and differences in how climate-driven mobility shapes urban dynamics. While both cities face pressure on housing, services, and social cohesion, Kisumu shows more informal

settlement growth and small business-driven economic activity, whereas Baidoa is characterised by seasonal displacement, camp-based social norms, and humanitarian cash circulation. Governance gaps also differ: Kisumu requires integrated city-level planning, while Baidoa operates largely under humanitarian urbanism. These contrasts underscore context-specific challenges and potential lessons for transferable urban resilience strategies. Figure 3 illustrates one such shared challenge: congested informal settlements serving as entry points for urban migrants.

Policy Insights

The migration patterns in Kisumu and Baidoa highlight how climate shocks, conflict, and economic opportunities are reshaping urbanisation across the Horn of Africa. These findings point to critical regional policy entry points that support both migrants and host communities while promoting sustainable urban development.

- **Source Interventions:** Support climate resilience programmes in rural areas to reduce migration pressures, address food insecurity, and ease demographic burdens on populations left behind, such as women and the elderly.
- **Sustainable Aid Programmes:** Design humanitarian interventions carefully to avoid unintended migration pull effects, which in Baidoa have drawn women and children to cities, leaving men and the elderly in vulnerable rural areas.
- **Anticipatory Urban Planning:** Align land administration and urban planning with projected population growth to prevent informal settlements, encroachment into biodiversity hotspots, and increased climate-related risks.
- **Participatory Policy Approaches:** Engage migrants, IDPs, and host communities in decision-making to strengthen social cohesion and shared economic opportunities.
- **Catchment-Based Environmental Management:** Implement policies that consider upstream and downstream impacts across regions and administrative boundaries, as in Kisumu, to manage environmental risks effectively.
- **Gender Perspectives:** Address emerging gender roles and vulnerabilities caused by migration, such as women becoming primary breadwinners when men migrate, or families left behind in harsh climatic conditions.

Regional Implications of the Findings

Baidoa and Kisumu illustrate how secondary cities in the HoA experience urban migration under distinct but comparable conditions. In Baidoa, prolonged drought and insecurity have transformed a former agricultural and trading centre into one of Somalia's largest displacement hubs, with hundreds of thousands of IDPs living mostly in informal settlements on the urban periphery. In Kisumu, climate variability, flooding, and economic pressures have driven both internal and cross-border migration, contributing to rapid urban expansion and encroachment into environmental hotspots such as wetlands and drainage zones, further amplifying climate-related risks. Like Kisumu and Baidoa, other secondary and major cities across the HoA including Nairobi, Mogadishu, and Addis Ababa are increasingly viewed as centres of opportunity, attracting migrants in search of income and services often absent in rural areas.

Migration Dynamics: Future projections indicate that climate stressors will continue to accelerate rural-urban flows, transforming secondary cities into displacement hubs. While cities provide economic opportunities, unregulated migration can strain housing, services, and infrastructure. Policies must anticipate population surges, integrate migrants into local economies, and manage undocumented flows to prevent urban sprawl while maximising the contributions of migrants. Regional initiatives, including the African Union's Migration Policy Framework³, the IGAD Regional Migration Policy⁴, and the IOM Regional Migrant Response Plan⁵, provide important foundations but require

3 *Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018 - 2030). Executive Summary, 2018.*

4 "IGAD Migration Policy Framework," n.d., accessed January 13, 2026, <https://igad.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IGAD-Migration-Policy-Framework.pdf>.

5 *Regional Migrant Response Plan (MRP) 2025, n.d.*

enhanced implementation to address porous borders, rural-urban migration, and city-specific challenges.

Security Dynamics: Urban migration can exacerbate competition over resources, increasing the risk of social tension and insecurity in already volatile HoA cities. These pressures are compounded by governance gaps in source regions, including gender-based inequalities. Social protection policies such as youth employment programmes and migration-linked peacebuilding interventions can mitigate these risks by fostering cohesion and addressing vulnerabilities. Existing regional security frameworks, such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)⁶, address security indirectly; however, there is a lack of dedicated, city-level frameworks to manage urban migration-related tensions.

Climate Change and Environmental Resilience: Climate-driven displacement highlights the need for integrated rural-urban resilience strategies. Upstream investments in rural livelihoods, such as climate-smart agriculture, must complement downstream urban planning measures that protect environmental hotspots. This calls for sustainable and flexible climate financing. Multi-state coordination on shared resources such as Lake Victoria, the Nile River, and pastoral lands is essential to manage transboundary risks. IGAD climate strategies, national adaptation plans, and initiatives like the Lake Victoria Basin Commission⁷ provide a foundation but often lack clarity on city-level responsibilities, enforcement mechanisms, and financing.

Policy and Governance Gaps: Despite existing regional policies, gaps persist in cross-city learning, coordination, and operational capacity. Cities require stronger institutional frameworks, data-sharing mechanisms, and gender-sensitive approaches aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Regional cooperation platforms like IGAD should be strengthened to facilitate the implementation of climate- and migration-sensitive policies that promote sustainable urban growth, social cohesion, and the economic integration of migrants.

Secondary cities in the HoA must prioritise sustainable, resilient urban growth that accounts for migration dynamics, housing demand, environmental risks, and the economic contributions of migrants. Evidence from Kisumu and Baidoa highlights the urgent need for a more integrated, multi-level, and gender-responsive policy interventions that ensure urban expansion is inclusive, safe, and sustainable.

⁶ Sophie Desmidt and Volker Hauck, "Conflict Management under the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)," *European Centre for Development Policy Management* 63, no. 211 (2017): 979–979.

⁷ Kenya marine, *lake victoria basin commission*, 2010, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/john-gichuki/publication/301649648_strengthening_of_community_based_natural_resources_management_in_the_masai_mara_and_serengeti_ecosystem/links/571faf8908aefa64889a8145/strengthening-of-community-based-natural-resources-management-in-the-masai-mara-and-serengeti-ecosystem.pdf.

Policy Recommendations

Building on the comparative findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed for secondary and regional cities experiencing climate-induced migration across the Horn of Africa.

- 1. Invest in rural livelihoods** to reduce climate-driven migration by strengthening climate-resilient agriculture and livestock value chains and addressing cross-border socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Key actors include national and county/state governments, river basin authorities, regional bodies such as IGAD, and environmental agencies. Expected outcomes include reduced rural–urban migration, strengthened rural livelihoods, improved urban resilience, and enhanced regional stability.
- 2. Implement catchment-based climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction measures** through upstream land management interventions such as reforestation, terracing, and soil conservation, linked to downstream urban risk reduction. Integrate early warning systems and cross-border data sharing. Lead actors include governments, river basin authorities, IGAD, and regional early warning platforms. Anticipated results include enhanced ecosystem resilience, reduced disaster exposure in cities such as Kisumu and Baidoa, and coordinated regional responses to climate push factors.
- 3. Strengthen environmentally sustainable urban land-use planning** by enforcing buffer zones, applying climate-risk screening for settlements, and relocating households from high-risk flood areas. Integrate community consultation and compensation mechanisms to minimise relocation-related hardships. Expected benefits include safer urban expansion, reduced flood risk, and biodiversity protection.
- 4. Facilitate managed and regularised urban migration** by streamlining migration policies and supporting safe settlement in destination cities. Promote host–migrant integration through civic education, dialogue platforms, and community-led initiatives. Key actors

include interior ministries, municipal authorities, migration agencies, civil society, and traditional and religious leaders. Expected outcomes include enhanced social cohesion, trust, and sustainable integration.

- 5. Integrate climate-induced displacement into urban planning and governance** Governments should embed mobility considerations into land-use, housing, and infrastructure planning, aligned with disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation frameworks. Strengthen land-tenure security and accessible dispute-resolution mechanisms for migrants and host communities. Expected benefits include inclusive urban development, equitable access for vulnerable groups, and improved institutional capacity.
- 6. Align humanitarian action with long-term urban development and climate goals** by coordinating humanitarian interventions with peacebuilding, climate adaptation, and urban governance frameworks. Establish integrated coordination mechanisms involving city authorities, humanitarian agencies, and development partners. Expected outcomes include greater policy coherence, reduced aid dependency, and minimised unintended community-level impacts.
- 7. Mobilise and coordinate climate financing** to support climate resilience, sustainable agriculture, water infrastructure, early warning systems, and livelihood diversification, particularly in source regions. IGAD and other regional bodies should develop and adopt a regional strategy to leverage global and regional climate finance while promoting climate-responsive public spending by governments. Key financing institutions include the Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund, African Development Bank, World Bank Climate Investment Funds, and bilateral donors such as the EU.

Conclusion

This policy brief demonstrates that climate change is fundamentally reshaping mobility and urbanisation across the HoA with cities simultaneously becoming sites of vulnerability and resilience. Consequentially, displacement strains already overstretched services, intensifies competition over land and livelihoods, and exposes governance gaps particularly around land tenure, planning, and institutional coordination. Whether climate-driven urbanisation becomes a source of instability or a pathway to resilience depends largely on policy choices made today. Investing, therefore in inclusive urban planning, secure land governance, climate-resilient infrastructure, and coordinated sectoral approaches (including humanitarian) can transform cities into stabilising hubs that absorb mobility while supporting economic growth and social cohesion.

Bibliography

1. Delazeri, Linda Márcia Mendes, Dênis Antônio Da Cunha, and Lais Rosa Oliveira. "Climate Change and Rural–Urban Migration in the Brazilian Northeast Region." *GeoJournal* 87, no. 3 (2022): 2159–79. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-020-10349-3>.
2. Desmidt, Sophie, and Volker Hauck. "Conflict Management under the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)." *European Centre for Development Policy Management* 63, no. 211 (2017): 979–979.
3. "IGAD Migration Policy Framework." n.d. Accessed January 13, 2026. <https://igad.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IGAD-Migration-Policy-Framework.pdf>.
4. Marine, Kenya. *Lake Victoria Basin Commission*. 2010. <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/John-Gichuki/publication/301649648-Strengthening-Of-Community-Based-Natural-Resources-Management-In-The-Masai-Mara-And-Serengeti-Ecosystem/links/571fa68908ae64889a8145/Strengthening-Of-Community-Based-Natural-Resources-Management-In-The-Masai-Mara-And-Serengeti-Ecosystem.Pdf>.
5. *Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018 - 2030). Executive Summary*. 2018.
6. *Regional Migrant Response Plan (MRP) 2025*. n.d.
7. Richards, C. E., R. C. Lupton, and Julian M. Allwood. "Re-Framing the Threat of Global Warming: An Empirical Causal Loop Diagram of Climate Change, Food Insecurity and Societal Collapse." *Climatic Change* 164, no. 3 (2021): 49.
8. Linda Márcia Mendes Delazeri et al., "Climate Change and Rural–Urban Migration in the Brazilian Northeast Region," *GeoJournal* 87, no. 3 (2022): 2159–79, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-020-10349-3>.

Authors

Dr. Calvince Othoo is an environment and climate change scientist with research interest in the intersection between climate resilience and urban infrastructure development. He holds a PhD in climate change and adaptation (2021) and a master's in environmental monitoring and analysis (2014). His multidisciplinary PhD investigation on the nexus between climate extremes and urban water and sanitation drew significant interest from policy actors. He is a lecturer at the Co-operative University of Kenya (Since 2015), and an immediate postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Earth and Climate Sciences, University of Nairobi where he engaged in the Global Centre on Adaptation (GCA) project on enhancing climate resilience for critical infrastructure in Africa. Dr. Calvince is a Commonwealth Scholar and a One-Planet Climate Fellow 2021-2024.

Abdirahman Edle Ali is a researcher on humanitarianism in the HoA, focusing on the drivers of humanitarian crises, particularly the intersections of climate change, famine, and conflict, and the actors shaping the humanitarian sector. His work examines the political economy of aid, public goods, and trade routes, based on extensive fieldwork in Somalia and Kenya. He has published with leading policy institutes, including the Rift Valley Institute and the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), and in academic journals such as *Security Dialogue* (2022) and *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2023). Abdirahman has collaborated with Durham University, Clingendael, Swisspeace, the Life & Peace Institute, and PRIO. He is a PhD candidate (awaiting graduation) at the University of Nairobi, where his thesis explores Somali diaspora humanitarianism.

*Life &
Peace*
INSTITUTE