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FLOOD DISASTERS AND HUMAN DISPLACEMENT IN NIGERIA, 1970–2023

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Abstract
Flood disasters have become one of the most enduring environmental challenges in Nigeria, with origins in both natural and anthropogenic forces. Since the 1970s, recurrent floods have displaced millions, reshaping livelihoods, settlement patterns, and cultural identities. Historical developments such as dam construction, unregulated urbanization, and weak environmental management have amplified the risks, while climate change and transboundary water politics, particularly the Lagdo Dam in Cameroon, continue to exacerbate the crisis. Flood-induced displacement has generated wide-ranging socio-economic consequences, including food insecurity, rural-urban migration, infrastructural losses, and widening inequality. Vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the elderly bear disproportionate burdens, while overlapping crises of conflict and communal clashes deepen humanitarian pressures. Despite its magnitude, flood displacement receives less policy attention compared to conflict-related crises, resulting in reactive rather than proactive governance. This study argues that flood disasters must be understood not merely as ecological disruptions but as human security challenges that threaten Nigeria's long-term development. It recommends resilience-centered planning that integrates early warning systems, climate-smart infrastructure, sustainable agriculture, and inclusive governance. Strengthening bilateral cooperation, especially in trans boundary water management, and prioritizing the welfare of displaced populations are also critical. By situating flood displacement within its historical and socio-political contexts, the study underscores the urgency of proactive, inclusive, and sustainable approaches to disaster management in Nigeria.

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Introduction

Flood disasters remain one of the most persistent environmental crises in Nigeria, shaped by both natural and anthropogenic factors. Since the 1970s, recurrent floods have displaced thousands of households annually, particularly in southern basins where rainfall intensity and poor drainage combine to produce large-scale inundations. From the Ogunpa flood of 1980 to the nationwide floods of 2012 and 2022, the country has experienced cyclical inundations that disrupt settlement patterns, food systems, and livelihoods. These events highlight the fragility of Nigeria's environmental management systems and expose the human cost of weak planning. Flooding has therefore become a central lens for examining Nigeria's developmental challenges, linking ecological hazards with displacement and human insecurity.

The roots of these crises can be traced to state-led development projects of the 1970s, particularly dam construction and unregulated urban expansion. The Bakolori and Jebba dams, while intended for irrigation and energy supply, generated downstream flooding that uprooted rural communities (Eyisi et al., 2025). Poorly coordinated mitigation strategies, combined with growing population densities, meant that heavy rainfall translated directly into disaster. Urban centers like Lagos, Ibadan, and Makurdi experienced repeated inundations that extended beyond temporary shelter loss to long-term migration. These disasters illustrate the entanglement of human activity and natural forces in shaping displacement. Historically, flooding in Nigeria has therefore been as much a product of governance failures as of climatic shocks.

The challenge has been compounded by climate change, which has intensified rainfall variability, river overflow, and sea-level rise. Low-lying areas of the Niger Delta, already weakened by oil exploration and deforestation, now experience tidal surges that displace thousands. Similarly, inland towns with weak drainage systems struggle under increasingly unpredictable rainfall (Aweda, 2025). As traditional coping mechanisms fail, populations are compelled to migrate seasonally or permanently, swelling the number of internally displaced persons. This climate-induced displacement underscores the inadequacy of Nigeria's adaptation measures. It also reveals how global climate shifts translate into localized humanitarian crises.

External factors further exacerbate Nigeria's flood vulnerability, particularly the management of Cameroon's Lagdo Dam. Built in the 1980s, the dam has repeatedly caused severe downstream flooding whenever excess water is released into the Benue River, devastating farmlands in Benue, Kogi, and Niger states (Abioro et al., 2025). Despite decades of warnings, Nigeria has failed to secure effective bilateral agreements with Cameroon to prevent these displacements. Each release generates

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massive humanitarian crises as families lose homes, livelihoods, and ancestral lands. This external dimension illustrates how flood disasters in Nigeria intersect with geopolitics and transboundary water governance. For displaced populations, these floods create cycles of dependency that extend far beyond immediate recovery.

The humanitarian cost of flooding has been staggering, with millions displaced over five decades. Flooding is second only to conflict as the primary driver of internal displacement, yet it receives far less policy attention (Oluwatosin et al., 2024). States from Bayelsa to Jigawa are repeatedly inundated, producing waves of internally displaced persons that stretch limited resources. Unlike conflict displacement, however, floods are often treated as temporary inconveniences rather than structural crises. This perception undermines investment in durable housing, urban planning, and early warning systems. Consequently, flood victims often cycle between temporary relief and renewed exposure to future disasters. Historically, this reactive approach has deepened the humanitarian burden of floods.

The socio-economic effects of flood displacement further highlight its structural dimensions. In rural communities, farmland destruction triggers migration to cities, while in urban areas, informal settlements along waterways face recurring evacuation. These dual pressures exacerbate inequality, as the poor remain trapped in vulnerable zones while wealthier households can rebuild or relocate (Emmanuel et al., 2025). Overcrowding in temporary shelters worsens sanitation and heightens disease risks, compounding humanitarian stress. Flooding thus exposes the intersection between environmental disaster and social justice. Vulnerable groups, especially women, children, and the elderly, bear disproportionate risks, with disrupted education, maternal health challenges, and the erosion of economic independence (Yahaya et al., 2025). This uneven burden highlights the need for inclusive disaster management.

Finally, the cumulative impact of floods must be understood within Nigeria's wider humanitarian and development crises. States like Benue face overlapping displacements from farmer-herder clashes and flooding, creating complex vulnerabilities (Okibe et al., 2025). At the same time, repeated disasters undermine progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those on hunger, poverty, and sustainable cities (Aweda, 2025). Flood-induced losses, such as the estimated ₦2.6 trillion destruction during the 2012 floods, demonstrate how disasters translate directly into economic instability (Eyisi et al., 2025). The persistence of these crises underscores the urgency of resilience-centered planning, incorporating early warning systems, climate-smart infrastructure, and inclusive governance. Ultimately, flood-induced displacement is not merely an environmental issue but a human

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security challenge demanding urgent academic and policy attention.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Political Ecology Theory, which examines how environmental challenges intersect with power relations, governance structures, and socio-economic inequalities. Flood disasters in Nigeria are not simply "natural" events but are mediated by political decisions such as dam construction, urban planning, and disaster response (Abioro et al., 2025). Political ecology helps explain why marginalized populations, such as farmers in Benue or slum dwellers in Lagos, bear the brunt of recurrent displacement. It highlights how weak environmental governance, corruption in relief management, and poor transboundary water agreements with Cameroon exacerbate vulnerability. The theory situates flood-induced displacement within broader struggles over land, resources, and state accountability. In this sense, displacement is not only an ecological consequence but also a political outcome of unequal power structures. Thus, Political Ecology provides a lens for understanding the interplay of human and environmental factors shaping Nigeria's flood crises.

Complementing this is the Climate Migration Theory, which explores how climate variability and extreme weather events drive human mobility. In Nigeria, recurrent flooding has produced cycles of forced migration, with displaced populations relocating temporarily or permanently to safer zones (Aweda, 2025). The theory emphasizes that migration is both an adaptive response to environmental shocks and a reflection of socio-economic constraints. For instance, wealthier households may relocate permanently, while poorer households are trapped in vulnerable floodplains, repeatedly displaced each rainy season (Erondu, 2025). Climate Migration Theory also clarifies the link between global climate change and local displacement patterns, underscoring the necessity of resilience-building policies. By combining this framework with Political Ecology, the study situates Nigeria's flood disasters within both structural power dynamics and broader climatic transformations. Together, they provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing displacement as a multidimensional phenomenon.

Historical Trajectories of Flood Disasters in Nigeria

The history of flooding in Nigeria reveals a long-standing environmental challenge that has shaped settlement patterns and population movements since the 1970s. Southern Nigeria, with its river basins and coastal plains, was among the earliest regions to experience large-scale flood-induced migration, as thousands were displaced annually due to poor drainage and heavy rainfall (Erondu, 2025). The problem intensified as urban centers expanded rapidly during the oil boom without adequate infrastructural planning. Informal housing in flood-prone areas exposed vulnerable

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populations to seasonal displacement. Historical records show that by the late 1970s, migration from inundated farmlands had already begun to redefine rural-urban dynamics in states like Anambra and Rivers. These early displacements demonstrate how environmental stress intersected with social and economic transformations. They also mark the beginning of climate-induced migration as a historical reality in Nigeria.

The 1980s further entrenched flooding as a recurring disaster with far-reaching displacement impacts. The Ogunpa flood of 1980 in Ibadan, which killed hundreds, is often cited as a turning point in Nigeria's urban flood history (Emmanuel et al., 2025). In parallel, state-led projects such as Bakolori and Jebba dams altered watercourses, causing massive downstream flooding and displacing entire farming communities (Eyisi et al., 2025). This period illustrates how infrastructural modernization, though intended for development, created new vulnerabilities. It also demonstrates how state policies shaped the geography of displacement by forcing communities into precarious settlements. The political ecology of the 1980s shows the consequences of ignoring ecological sustainability in development planning. As such, flood disasters became embedded not only in Nigeria's environment but also in its governance failures.

By the 1990s, the pattern of flooding had expanded to include both northern and central regions, with river overflows displacing thousands in states like Benue and Kano. Archival evidence indicates that these floods were often overshadowed by conflict-related crises, leaving flood victims marginalized within humanitarian responses (Okibe et al., 2025). Yet, internally displaced populations were already being created annually by recurring inundations during the rainy season (Oluwatosin et al., 2024). Coastal erosion and tidal surges in the Niger Delta also displaced fishing and farming communities, accelerating migration to urban areas. The invisibility of flood displacement in policy and academic discourse during the 1990s points to the selective recognition of humanitarian crises in Nigeria. Flood victims were often forced into self-reliance, rebuilding homes in the same vulnerable areas year after year. This neglect contributed to the emergence of chronic cycles of displacement that persist to the present.

The 2000s marked a significant shift, as climate change emerged as a major explanatory framework for Nigeria's flooding crises. Irregular rainfall patterns, intensified by rising global temperatures, produced widespread flooding across multiple states (Aweda, 2025). At the same time, the release of excess water from Cameroon's Lagdo Dam repeatedly triggered devastating floods along the Benue River, displacing tens of thousands annually (Abioro et al., 2025). These events highlighted the transboundary dimension of Nigeria's flood problem, linking domestic displacement to regional resource management. The decade also

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witnessed an increase in urban flooding, as poorly maintained drainage systems in cities like Lagos and Port Harcourt failed to cope with rising rainfall. Flood displacement was increasingly framed within international climate discourse, connecting local realities to global debates. Historically, this decade represents Nigeria's entry into a climate-governance crisis with direct humanitarian consequences.

The 2012 nationwide floods stand as a watershed moment in Nigeria's flood history. Affecting 30 of the 36 states, displacing over 2.1 million people, and destroying billions in property, this disaster forced the Nigerian state to confront the scale of its vulnerability (Eyisi et al., 2025). It exposed the weaknesses of national disaster preparedness and drew global attention to flood-induced internal displacement. Camps established for victims were quickly overwhelmed, revealing the absence of long-term resettlement strategies. This disaster also redefined the humanitarian landscape in Nigeria by positioning flood displacement alongside conflict-related displacement as a central crisis. The 2012 floods remain a historical benchmark in policy and academic debates on Nigeria's disaster management. They underscore the cumulative effects of decades of neglect in urban planning, climate adaptation, and transboundary water governance.

The years after 2012 continued the historical trajectory of recurrent floods, culminating in the catastrophic floods of 2018 and 2022. In 2018, the federal government declared a national disaster after Niger and Benue rivers overflowed, once again displacing hundreds of thousands. The 2022 floods, among the worst in Nigeria's history, displaced more than 1.4 million people and destroyed over 300,000 homes (Yahaya et al., 2025). These floods compounded food insecurity as farmlands were submerged, worsening Nigeria's dependence on food imports. They also demonstrated the persistence of historical patterns, as government responses remained reactive and inadequate. By 2023, displacement from flooding had become a cyclical reality, producing a population of "permanently displaced" citizens. This continuity highlights the historical depth of Nigeria's flood crisis, situating it within both national development failures and global climate pressures.

Flood Displacement and Humanitarian Responses in Nigeria

Flood displacement in Nigeria has consistently strained humanitarian responses, revealing systemic weaknesses in the country's disaster management framework. Historical records show that while floods in the 1970s and 1980s displaced thousands annually, the government response was largely ad hoc, relying on temporary shelters and relief materials (Erondu, 2025). Non-governmental organizations had limited reach at this time, leaving most victims dependent on self-reconstruction and community solidarity. In rural areas, families rebuilt in the same vulnerable floodplains, perpetuating a cycle of displacement. These early

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humanitarian failures highlight the absence of long-term policies for relocation or resettlement. As a result, displacement during this period was not only physical but also psychological, producing a sense of abandonment among flood victims. The pattern of minimal state intervention became a defining feature of Nigeria's humanitarian landscape.

The 1990s saw displacement intensify but remain underreported, as conflict and communal violence captured national and international attention. Flood-induced internally displaced persons (IDPs) were overshadowed by victims of herder-farmer clashes and political unrest (Okibe et al., 2025). Relief interventions by the government and aid agencies prioritized conflict zones, leaving flood victims in rural Benue, Niger, and Delta states without significant support. Seasonal displacement was treated as a "normal" event rather than a humanitarian emergency. Many victims resorted to seasonal migration, abandoning farmlands during floods and returning afterward, only to face the same disaster the following year. This normalization of displacement reveals the historical marginalization of flood victims within Nigeria's humanitarian frameworks. The invisibility of these populations shaped their vulnerability, making them recurrent casualties of environmental neglect.

By the 2000s, humanitarian responses began to expand, but they remained reactive and inconsistent. The release of water from Cameroon's Lagdo Dam frequently displaced communities along the Benue River, yet little was done to develop preemptive resettlement plans (Abioro et al., 2025). International organizations such as the Red Cross and the UNHCR began documenting flood displacement, but their interventions were constrained by funding shortages and poor coordination with Nigerian authorities (Oluwatosin et al., 2024). Government responses typically involved short-term distribution of food and mattresses, rather than durable solutions. The lack of collaboration between federal, state, and local agencies further weakened the effectiveness of aid. These failures underscore the historical continuity of reactive humanitarianism in Nigeria. Flood displacement during this decade reinforced the dependence of victims on inadequate relief efforts.

The 2012 floods marked a critical moment in humanitarian response history, as the sheer scale of displacement overwhelmed existing structures. Over 2.1 million people were displaced, and emergency camps were set up in schools, stadiums, and abandoned buildings (Eyisi et al., 2025). However, these facilities were ill-equipped, lacking adequate sanitation, medical care, and security. Reports of overcrowding and disease outbreaks highlighted the fragility of Nigeria's humanitarian preparedness. International attention led to short-term inflows of aid, but sustainable resettlement strategies remained absent. The 2012 floods revealed the structural gap between humanitarian rhetoric and practice, as displaced populations were left to return to vulnerable

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zones after the waters receded. This disaster demonstrated the systemic inability of Nigeria's humanitarian apparatus to deal with natural disaster displacement. It remains a reference point in discussions of institutional reform.

Subsequent floods between 2013 and 2018 continued to test Nigeria's humanitarian frameworks, with recurring evidence of inadequate coordination and resource shortages. The 2018 floods, declared a national disaster, displaced hundreds of thousands, but emergency shelters were once again overcrowded and poorly managed (Yahaya et al., 2025). International humanitarian actors emphasized the need for multi-sectoral approaches linking relief, rehabilitation, and development (Yahaya et al., 2025). Yet, Nigerian institutions remained reactive, offering relief materials without addressing the structural drivers of displacement. Victims often faced double jeopardy, losing homes and livelihoods without receiving adequate support for rebuilding. This cycle highlights how displacement perpetuates poverty and dependence in flood-affected communities. The humanitarian shortcomings of this era point to the necessity of integrating long-term adaptation strategies into national policies.

The 2022 floods further demonstrated the historical persistence of weak humanitarian systems. Displacing more than 1.4 million people and destroying over 300,000 homes, the disaster revealed the cumulative failure of decades of inadequate responses (Yahaya et al., 2025). Camps were quickly overwhelmed, and displaced families resorted to makeshift shelters on highways and public spaces. Despite repeated disasters, no significant national relocation program was implemented, and resettlement plans remained fragmented. International reports emphasized the growing humanitarian cost of environmental displacement in Nigeria, urging a comprehensive multi-sectoral approach (Yahaya et al., 2025). The historical continuity of reactive relief rather than proactive planning underscores the structural weakness of Nigeria's humanitarian frameworks. As displacement becomes cyclical, Nigeria faces the challenge of transforming short-term aid into durable solutions for vulnerable populations.

Flood Disasters, Climate Change, and Migration Dynamics

Flood disasters in Nigeria are deeply intertwined with broader climate change dynamics that have shaped human mobility since the late 20th century. Historical studies show that irregular rainfall patterns, intensified storms, and rising river levels have altered traditional settlement systems since the 1970s (Aweda, 2025). As climate conditions worsened, populations in flood-prone areas increasingly faced cycles of forced displacement. In states like Anambra, Niger, and Benue, thousands were compelled to leave ancestral farmlands each rainy season, creating a pattern of seasonal migration. Migration in this context was both a survival strategy and an indicator of environmental vulnerability. By the 1990s, the connection

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between flooding and migration had become a recurring feature of Nigeria's rural landscape. These patterns situate flood-induced displacement within the broader framework of climate-driven mobility.

The role of climate change in intensifying flood disasters became more pronounced in the 2000s. Extreme weather events, linked to global warming, produced widespread flooding across river basins and coastal plains. The release of water from Cameroon's Lagdo Dam often coincided with heavy rainfall, creating compounded disasters along the Benue and Niger rivers (Abioro et al., 2025). Displaced populations migrated temporarily to upland areas, only to return once waters receded, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability. In some cases, entire villages relocated permanently, abandoning farmlands that had sustained them for generations. This period also witnessed increased migration into cities, where displaced rural dwellers often ended up in informal settlements vulnerable to urban flooding. Such dynamics highlight the double displacement effect, where victims are uprooted by both rural floods and urban vulnerabilities. The migration dimension of climate change thus deepened humanitarian challenges.

Flood-induced migration has also carried significant socio-economic consequences, reshaping Nigeria's demographic and labor structures. Farmers displaced from fertile floodplains often migrated to urban centers, contributing to urban overcrowding and informal labor markets (Erondu, 2025). This rural-urban migration disrupted agricultural productivity, exacerbating food insecurity and dependence on imports. Women, who form a majority of smallholder farmers, were disproportionately affected, losing livelihoods and being forced into precarious urban work. Migration under these conditions reflects the unequal burden of climate change across socio-economic groups. Wealthier households often had resources to resettle permanently, while poorer families were trapped in repeated cycles of displacement (Aweda, 2025). This inequality illustrates how climate change not only drives migration but also reproduces social hierarchies. Historically, these patterns have cemented displacement as both an ecological and an economic crisis.

By the 2010s, international frameworks began explicitly linking climate change to forced migration in Nigeria. Reports by humanitarian organizations documented the growing number of internally displaced persons whose movements were triggered not by conflict but by flooding (Oluwatosin et al., 2024). The 2012 floods, in particular, highlighted the scale of climate-induced displacement, with over 2.1 million people uprooted in a single season (Eyisi et al., 2025). Yet, despite international recognition, Nigeria lacked a formal migration policy that incorporated environmental displacement. Victims were often categorized within general IDP populations, blurring the specific role of climate in shaping their mobility.

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This gap in policy demonstrates the historical lag between environmental realities and institutional responses. It also reveals how flood displacement has remained a neglected aspect of migration governance. Without targeted frameworks, displaced populations continued to navigate migration without adequate state protection.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that flood disasters are not only migration triggers but also determinants of long-term settlement restructuring. The 2018 and 2022 floods displaced over a million people each, forcing some communities to permanently relocate to safer uplands (Yahaya et al., 2025). Migration under these conditions is no longer temporary but transformative, reshaping regional population distribution. However, resettlement often occurs without government support, leaving migrants to establish new communities without infrastructure. This has created zones of informal settlement in both rural and peri-urban areas, vulnerable to future environmental shocks. International research highlights that such migration mirrors global patterns in Bangladesh, India, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, where flooding has permanently redefined human geography (Aweda, 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Historically, Nigeria's migration landscape demonstrates the cumulative and transformative impact of recurrent flooding. It underscores the urgency of integrating climate resilience into migration planning.

Flood displacement in Nigeria today represents a convergence of historical neglect, climate variability, and human mobility. Migration is no longer an accidental consequence of flooding but an embedded strategy of survival among vulnerable populations. Yet, without state intervention, such migration risks reproducing cycles of poverty, marginalization, and vulnerability. The historical trajectory from seasonal rural displacement in the 1970s to permanent resettlement in the 2020s illustrates the long-term transformation of Nigerian society under environmental stress. Scholars argue that migration can be adaptive if supported by policies that provide housing, livelihoods, and infrastructure (Erondu, 2025). However, Nigeria's failure to institutionalize climate migration frameworks continues to leave displaced populations in precarious conditions. Historically and contemporarily, this reflects the intersection of environmental crises with weak governance and socio-economic inequality. Flood disasters thus remain a defining force in Nigeria's migration dynamics.

Conclusion

Flood disasters in Nigeria have evolved from isolated natural hazards into deeply entrenched humanitarian and developmental crises, displacing millions and reshaping social, economic, and cultural landscapes. The historical roots in poor planning, dam mismanagement, and weak governance, combined with the contemporary forces of climate change and trans boundary water

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politics, reveal that displacement is neither accidental nor temporary but a structural outcome of Nigeria's vulnerabilities. To end this cycle, a shift from reactive to proactive strategies is imperative. Nigeria must invest in resilient infrastructure, early warning systems, and climate-smart urban planning while also strengthening bilateral cooperation with neighboring states on dam management. Rural livelihoods need protection through sustainable agricultural practices, while urban slums must be upgraded to withstand extreme weather. Disaster management should prioritize inclusivity by addressing the specific vulnerabilities of women, children, and the elderly, ensuring displaced persons are integrated into long-term development planning. Most importantly, governance must move beyond short-term relief toward anticipatory action, transparency, and community-driven adaptation. Only through such comprehensive, resilience-centered approaches can Nigeria begin to break the recurring cycle of flood-induced displacement and safeguard both its people and its developmental future.

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