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The EU-MERCOSUR Agreement And Its Effects On Environmental Migration Flows

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Summary:
The increasing frequency of droughts, severe weather events, and wildfires, which are linked to global warming, is already evident and is driving climate migration. In this sense, incorporating climate policies into trade agreements aims to address the environmental impacts of trade and promote sustainable practices, reflecting the growing global concern for the environment and the recognition that trade can have both positive and negative environmental effects. Therefore, it is urgent to establish criteria that identify not only this situation but also the measures taken within the European Union (EU) and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), both individually and through the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement. The success of implementing and enforcing sustainability, cooperation, and monitoring mechanisms will determine whether the Agreement helps reduce or worsen environmental migration in the future.

Keywords: *environmental – migration - international agreements – European Union – Mercosur*

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I. Introduction

Cottier, citing Jenkins and Zimmermann, explains that the well-known push-pull model of international migration suggests that factors in the host country, such as economic opportunities, political freedom, and family ties, "pull" people seeking a better life, while economic hardship and violence can "push" people out of their home countries. Therefore, with the increasing rate of climate change, it is plausible that disruptions to normal weather patterns could act as an additional push factor, as they interfere with economic activities, especially in agriculture, leading to climate shocks associated with food insecurity and large-scale migration (Cottier, Salehyan, 2021).

The trend of increasing droughts, severe weather events, and wildfires, which are linked to global warming, is already clear. Although studies suggest that sudden climate events like heavy rainfall may be more directly connected to migration than gradual changes such as rising temperatures and droughts (Cottier, Salehyan, 2021), experts emphasize the risk of tipping points—such as a rapid change in Atlantic circulation, the die-off of tropical forests, or the thawing of permafrost—a thick underground layer of soil that remains frozen year-round, mainly in polar regions—that can trigger climate migration. In such cases, more environmentally displaced individuals are likely to attempt to cross international borders. Therefore, the views and discussions of key stakeholders may dominate this issue, overestimating Western knowledge systems compared to local ones, providing unfounded justifications for development actions, or reinforcing negative stereotypes of the "other," often based on the expectation that the "Global South" will migrate en masse to the "Global North" (Wirthová, 2024).

Therefore, it is urgent to develop criteria that identify not only this situation but also, more importantly, the measures taken within the European Union (EU) and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), both individually and multilaterally through the EU-MERCOSUR Association Agreement. The potential influx of large numbers of migrants crossing their borders will undoubtedly increase pressure on services and infrastructure in host countries, which could, in turn, lead to conflicts over limited resources. This highlights environmental migration as a significant geopolitical risk, especially for regional integration.

II. Environmental Migration Flow

An environmental migration flow, also known as climate migration, refers to the movement of people forced to leave their homes due to environmental changes caused or worsened by climate change, such as droughts, floods, sea level rise, and desertification. These movements can be temporary or permanent and may occur within a country (internal migration)[1] or across international borders, with migrants often referred to as "environmental refugees."

[1] In Brazil, a prominent case of environmental migration involves people leaving rural regions of the Northeast for wealthier areas of the Southeast, driven by adverse climatic conditions that disrupt traditional ways of life.

This term gained popularity through Essam El-Hinnawi's studies. He initially stated that, broadly speaking, all displaced people could be considered environmental refugees, but he later defined them as those forced to leave their traditional habitats, temporarily or permanently, due to severe environmental disturbances[2] (natural and/or human-made) that threaten their survival or significantly impact their quality of life. He categorized them into three groups: a. those temporarily displaced by environmental stress, such as populations affected by natural disasters like earthquakes or cyclones, or by environmental accidents like industrial incidents causing temporary disturbances; b. those permanently displaced and resettled due to lasting changes—often man-made—in their original habitats, such as the construction of large dams and artificial lakes; and c. those migrating from their original habitat, either temporarily or permanently, to a different location within their own country or abroad, usually seeking a better quality of life. They often move because the resources in their environment have become unsustainable. Migration mainly depends on refugees' perceptions and their ability to adapt to these changes. For example, sharecroppers and smallholders whose lands are flooded or salinized and who cannot afford the costs to restore them often leave to go to nearby cities in search of employment. On the other hand, migrants from drought-affected areas may initially rely on urban resources during emergencies, planning to return once conditions improve. Only when droughts last for several years, making future productivity uncertain, do migrants decide whether to stay or seek alternative means of livelihood.

In this context, the term "environmental refugee" has been used in position papers from various non-governmental organizations, media outlets, and academic writings. It is particularly associated with the early stages of exploring the issue, before distinctions were made between different types of environmental change and mobility. It has been utilized to raise awareness and highlight the forced nature of displacement. However, the use of the term and the status "refugee" to describe both internally and externally displaced people has faced criticism. Initially, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) considered the term inaccurate because it blurred the lines between the refugee definition under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and popular ideas of refugees. In June 2019, Dina Ionesco, head of the Migration, Environment, and Climate Change Division at the International Organization for Migration (IOM), expressed concerns about granting refugee status to climate migrants, arguing that it could weaken the Convention[3] and exclude climate-displaced individuals who cannot provide sufficient evidence that their forced displacement was climate-related from receiving aid and support.

Thus, relevant United Nations (UN) agencies and the IOM have started referring to the term "environmental migrant" for anyone who has experienced a major environmental or climate change during their lifetime and has chosen to leave voluntarily or forcibly in search of better living conditions and stability, whether short-term or long-term, domestically or internationally (IOM, 2019).

A term that has become popular is "environmentally/climatically displaced person." In this context, Walter Kälin and Nina Schrepfer identify four key indicators of forced environmental displacement: reduced water availability, decreased agricultural productivity, the risk of floods, storms, and coastal flooding, and overall negative health effects (especially for the poor, elderly, young, and marginalized). They also outline three types of barriers to the return of people in such situations: legal barriers to return after an environmental crisis, where forcing the return would put the individual at substantial risk of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, or punishment; factual barriers, because there are no means for people to return, such as lacking airports, roads, or other essential infrastructure; and humanitarian barriers, because even if return is possible and there are no human rights concerns, compassionate and humanitarian reasons may prevent them from being sent back. They conclude that as long as any of these three situations persist, the affected people should be classified as forcibly displaced environmentally, in need of protection and assistance from another state (European Parliament, 2021).

Recently, the term "environmental shock migration" has gained popularity, referring to the rapid movement of people caused by large-scale environmental changes. It is primarily an urgent type of migration that differs from planned migration; it is dynamic, constantly changing, and can span multiple countries as their economies decline (Moawad, 2024).

[2] In this definition, "environmental disturbance" refers to any physical, chemical, and/or biological changes in the ecosystem (or resource base) that make it, either temporarily or permanently, unsuitable for sustaining human life. For example, rising temperatures, increased droughts, and variable rainfall impact water supplies, agriculture, and quality of life.

[3] According to UNHCR, individuals displaced due to environmental changes could, in theory, rely on the protection offered by their home countries. In contrast, traditional refugees often cannot do so because their countries may be the source of persecution. This situation makes them "reluctant to avail themselves of the protection of that country," as stipulated in Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

While some view this mostly as an academic discussion, with many emphasizing that recognizing its existence is more important than debating terminology, Isabel Borges notes that the lack of a clear definition of who qualifies as an environmental displaced person causes difficulties in accurately tracking current and potential displacement flows. Nonetheless, studies show that climate-related external migration will likely increase in the coming years, possibly leading to conflicts with existing residents over resources like food, water, jobs, or because of pre-existing ethnic tensions or gender-based violence, which often escalate in conflict zones. She stresses that "environmental displacement must be seen as a human rights issue, and there must be a rights-based approach" (European Parliament, 2021). Additionally, confusion between economic[4] and environmental migrants has been used as an argument against creating a separate category for "environmental refugees," mainly because of the significant financial and administrative burden it could place on international organizations and countries.

Given these justifications, we have chosen the term "environmental migrant" in this work, aligning with the terminology adopted by the main international organization involved in this issue, the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Since the adoption of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change in 2015, COPs have started focusing on climate displacement to create a framework designed to prevent migration within the scope described below.

Table I – Conferences of the Parties after the Paris Agreement

2015 – COP21: The preamble of the Paris Agreement acknowledges that climate change is a shared concern for humanity. It references migrants, urging parties to respect, promote, and consider their respective obligations towards migrants when taking measures to address climate change. It also requests that the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) establish a task force on displacement. In its decisions, the Conference of the Parties recognizes the risks of displacement and acknowledges that climate change is a key driver of displacement (paragraph 50).
2017 – COP23: held in Bonn, Germany, it created a platform—the InsuResilience Global Partnership for Climate and Disaster Risk Financing and Insurance Solutions—focused on reducing the humanitarian impact of climate disasters and helping vulnerable populations recover.
2018 – COP24: held in Katowice, Poland, it encouraged parties, in its decision text, paragraph 5(b), to "continue working on human mobility from a strategic perspective, through enhanced cooperation and facilitation on human mobility, including migration, displacement, and planned relocation." It also recommended, in its Annex 1(c), strengthening "coordination, coherence, and collaboration among relevant bodies under the Convention and the Paris Agreement, as well as institutional arrangements, programs, and platforms, with a view to enhancing understanding of human mobility (including migration, displacement, and planned relocation), both internal and cross-border, in the context of climate change, as they carry out their work and in collaboration with the Executive Committee."
2021 – COP26: held in Glasgow, Scotland, it aimed to establish a preventive framework with defenses, early warning systems, and resilient infrastructure and agriculture to respond to the loss of homes, livelihoods, and lives caused by climate disasters, thereby preventing climate-induced migration.
2022 – COP27: held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, a groundbreaking agreement was made to establish a new loss and damage fund for countries most vulnerable to climate change-related disasters, recognizing forced displacement as a form of "loss." The event also featured the launch of the Climate Mobility Pavilion—a forum established by the Global Center for Climate Mobility as a dedicated space for discussing policy solutions related to climate mobility and displacement.
2023 – COP28: held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, it recognized the strong link between the climate crisis and migration, emphasizing the challenges faced by vulnerable communities and reaffirming commitments to climate justice and support for developing countries during the hottest year on record and amid increasing frequency of extreme weather events. Their historic agreement included shifting to clean energy sources, pursuing more accessible climate finance, and increasing the inclusion of diverse voices in climate discussions.
2024 – COP29: held in Baku, Azerbaijan, the summit resulted in an agreement to triple support for developing countries, reaching US$300 billion annually by 2035. Although the main focus was on the financial target, climate migration was also discussed, with the release of a report on displacement and the launch of initiatives such as the UNHCR's "Refugees for Climate Action" network, formed by refugees and displaced people to serve as an advisory body on climate events, thereby aiming to include the voices of climate-displaced individuals in discussions and actions.

III. European Union, Mercosur, And Environmental Migrants

Indicators of environmental change in Europe include rising temperatures, variable rainfall patterns, shifts in ecosystems, and an increase in forest fires that affect the continent. The Southern and Mediterranean regions experience decreased water supplies and persistent forest fires, which harm agricultural productivity. The Northern region is more susceptible to ecosystem changes and flooding resulting from global warming. Eastern and Central Europe are likely to see an increase in fire incidents and a decrease in rainfall, which will impact water resources (Moawad, 2024).

Thus, the European Union has been securitizing climate change as a "threat multiplier" since 2008, taking an active role in addressing it (Wirthová, 2024). The growing attention to this issue in European political discussions, along with the resources allocated by the European Union, reflects this trend (Blocher, 2015).

[4] For example, Bolivian, Peruvian, and Venezuelan nationals are migrating to Argentina, Chile, and Brazil in search of better job opportunities and living conditions, driven by economic disparities, crises, and recent political instability.

The European Environment Agency estimates that extreme weather events have claimed 142,000 lives and cost €510 billion in Europe over the past forty years. Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and severity of these events, leading to greater damage, especially in vulnerable areas that are highly dependent on agriculture and fishing, and have limited capacity to adapt (European Parliament, 2022). Additionally, from 2008 to 2023, nearly 413,000 people were internally displaced by wildfires, over 317,000 by floods, and more than 106,000 by storms. Greece was the most affected, with 213,000 displacements, followed by France (119,000) and Spain (153,000), according to data released by the European Climate and Health Observatory in June 2025. However, the European Union does not have a dedicated strategy for environmental refugees. Instead, environmental migration is recognized as a driver of migration under the Pact on Migration and Asylum (2020)[5], alongside various climate-related policies, including the European Green Deal and the Adaptation Strategy.

The European Commission acknowledged through the European Green Deal (2019) that climate change can trigger migration and other forms of instability, such as conflict, food insecurity, and population displacement. The European Parliament also recognizes climate change as a catalyst for migration[6]. Nonetheless, despite many developing countries urging the EU to grant climate migrants refugee status, individual EU Member States have not supported this idea. It remains unclear whether the recent emphasis on migration's role in development as a strategy for adapting to climate and environmental changes indicates a genuine shift in institutional cooperation on migration or if it is merely a voluntary, non-binding declaration of cooperation between priority countries and EU Member States aimed at mutual benefits in labor migration and development.

Although less studied than socioeconomic migration, environmental migration flows within Mercosur are closely linked to environmental degradation, the pursuit of better living conditions in less affected areas, and responses to natural disasters that drive migration both within and outside the bloc—particularly from countries like Brazil and Argentina. However, the lack of specific data on environmental migration makes it difficult to accurately measure and analyze these flows. Furthermore, despite the Environmental Information System (SIAM), which centralizes environmental data to increase transparency and facilitate access for member countries and society at large, environmental factors often interact with socioeconomic conditions, complicating the identification of pure environmental causes of displacement.

Despite existing environmental protection laws, the lack of effective oversight and preventive policies hampers efforts to manage environmental impacts that can lead to migration. In 2020, IOM formulated regional strategies to address migration related to climate and environmental shifts, notably the IOM Regional Strategy 2020–2024 for South America (see: https://publications.iom.int/books/south-america-regional-strategy-2020-2024). This strategy emphasizes the importance of social integration for migrants and the reinforcement of multisectoral policies, as shown in Brazil and Peru. To support migrants properly, implementing a robust monitoring system is crucial for accountability, relying on timely and accurate data collection. A comprehensive approach should factor in gender, age, disability, ethnicity, and race. Key tools include IOM's Migration Data and Information Analysis System (MIDAS) and the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), used across several South American countries. These initiatives will significantly enhance support for migrant communities affected by environmental threats, including floods, droughts, forest fires, and debris from melting ice and snow, as well as sudden disasters and gradual environmental degradation, which have led to displacement and serve as key drivers of migration within the Mercosur region[7].

In the Southern Cone, access to residence rights, formal employment, recognition of educational credentials, portability of social security, and access to healthcare and education have improved migrant governance. The Mercosur Residence Agreement, signed in 2002 and effective from 2009, initially included Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay, later joined by Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, simplifies obtaining residence permits, granting holders the right to enter, exit, move, and reside freely, with access to healthcare, education, family reunification, and work, ensuring civil rights comparable to nationals. Countries like Brazil and Bolivia have laws in place to support migrants affected by disasters and climate

[5] The Pact does not acknowledge climate change as a valid reason for migration, nor does it consider it a legitimate basis for seeking asylum. As a result, it is challenging to determine the legal status of "climate refugees" under the main migration frameworks of the EU.

[6] In its Resolution of 15 June 2023, Parliament called for 15 July to be designated as the EU Day for Victims of the Global Climate Crisis to raise awareness of the human lives lost and the humanitarian crisis caused by climate change.

[7] IOM, Migraciones, ambiente y cambio climático, Cuaderno Migratorios No 8 [“Migration, environment and climate change”, Migration Notes, No. 8] (Geneva, 2017). Available at:: https://robuenosaires.iom.int /sites/default/files/publicaciones/Migraciones%2C%20ambiente%20y%20cambio%20clim%C3%A1tico.PDF. Accessed on: 22 Aug. 2025.

change. However, large-scale migration into unprepared countries creates crises, especially along the Venezuela-Brazil-Colombia and Peru-Ecuador borders.

IV. The Eu-Mercosur Agreement And Environmental Challenges

The inclusion of climate policies in trade agreements aims to address the environmental impacts of trade and promote sustainable practices, reflecting the growing global concern for the environment and the understanding that trade can produce both positive and negative environmental effects.

In December 2024, the EU and Mercosur—now comprising Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay—ended negotiations on an EU-MERCOSUR Agreement, which included provisions aligned with Europe's policy of integrating sustainability clauses into its international deals.

Therefore, the Agreement features a chapter on Trade and Sustainable Development, added in 2019, that contains key provisions, such as the requirement that the parties not weaken, derogate, fail to effectively enforce, or improperly implement environmental or labor protections to promote trade or investment. It also includes specific dispute resolution provisions, although unlike the general dispute resolution mechanism, it does not permit the suspension of concessions in case of a violation.

The Agreement also introduces a new Annex that provides timely clarifications on the issue and specifically assigns a Subcommittee on Trade and Sustainable Development to oversee its effective implementation, as well as that of other multilateral agreements. It also emphasizes that remaining a party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Paris Agreement is crucial for its effectiveness.

Additionally, the European Union and Mercosur agree not to weaken existing environmental protections and to implement measures to prevent deforestation, as well as to maintain or increase forest cover, starting in 2030. They work together to develop initiatives supporting sustainable interregional value chains, establishing, one year after it takes effect, a list of products from Mercosur countries that are considered to help preserve forests and vulnerable ecosystems, which will qualify for European trade incentives.

Another essential aspect is recognizing that actions taken to comply with the Agreement will be viewed favorably in the countries' risk classification. Therefore, Mercosur members may receive preferential treatment over non-Mercosur countries as part of implementing the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR).

Finally, it states that documentation, licenses, information, and data from certification schemes and traceability and monitoring systems recognized, registered, or identified by Mercosur countries will be used by EU authorities as a source to verify product compliance with their traceability requirements.

However, it is clear that the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement will have a complex impact on environmental migration flows, with the potential to either boost or reduce migration, depending on how sustainability commitments are implemented.

On one hand, the expansion of agribusiness driven by the Agreement could lead to deforestation and environmental damage, forcing populations to migrate from affected areas. Additionally, by enabling the export of agricultural commodities often linked to deforested regions, such as beef, it could increase pressure on areas like the Amazon, resulting in the displacement of local and Indigenous communities and escalating conflicts over land and resources. Moreover, organizations like Greenpeace emphasize that the push to export commodities from deforested zones may threaten the Agreement, especially regarding the import of pesticides, automobiles, and plastics from Europe.

Furthermore, the Agreement is still being negotiated with leaders of countries like Argentina and Paraguay, whose governments have shown little concern for climate issues and have even threatened to leave the Paris Agreement. In the end, the people of the Amazon and the Chaco are already feeling the severe effects of unchecked expansion of monocultures, mainly soybeans and corn, as well as livestock farming focused on exports. Along with increased deforestation, biodiversity decline, river pollution, and daily exposure to harmful pesticides, entire communities are also impacted by the large facilities needed for export production.

On the other hand, cooperation and financing mechanisms for implementing low-carbon agricultural practices and decarbonizing the economy can promote sustainable agriculture and reduce emissions, easing environmental pressure and the migration it causes. This helps create conditions for people to stay in their communities. Additionally, mechanisms are included to involve civil society in the Agreement's reviews, allowing for monitoring its impacts and making adjustments to protect the environment and the rights of traditional communities.

In this context, the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement, as customary, included clauses linking its compliance to the participation and objectives of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, with the EU promising to grant preferential access to Mercosur's sustainable products and to ensure that family farmers and local communities can effectively benefit. Even so, one of the most criticized issues has been the lack of transparency, social participation, and consultation with affected populations, as the entire process has been

carried out by the European Commission behind closed doors, without the necessary democratic oversight. This has led to harsh criticism, including from EU institutions such as the European Ombudsman.

Thus, the implementation of the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement could create tension between the economic incentives to expand production and the need to adopt sustainable practices. The effectiveness of implementing and enforcing sustainability, cooperation, and monitoring mechanisms will determine whether the Agreement will mitigate or exacerbate environmental migration in the future.

V. Conclusion

Discussions on migration go beyond merely describing it; they also frame it as a phenomenon. Depending on how the issue is defined—who is the focus and what the perceived threat is—such discussions can adopt a strongly anti-migrant stance, emphasizing anti-democratic or anti-humanitarian justifications and policies. Often, the "problems of the South" attract attention by being portrayed as "threatening the security/interests of the North" (Wirthová, 2024).

Climate-related disasters are already a leading cause of new displacements, sometimes exceeding migration caused by conflicts. Today, more people displaced by climate factors are crossing borders in search of better living conditions, often called environmental migrants, who are sometimes regarded as refugees. The issue is that the 1951 Refugee Convention was established before the world recognized the dangers of climate change, and it does not classify climate stress as a reason for refugee status. Currently, these migrants are protected by international human rights laws and humanitarian aid practices; however, this protection is incomplete and does not guarantee all their rights. The main challenge remains the lack of an international treaty specifically designed to define and protect these populations.

Until such an agreement is in place, the European Union, despite its leadership in combating climate change and adopting a human rights-based approach to international affairs, has become the primary actor defending the interests of those displaced by natural disasters.

In this context, European discourse has shifted from trying to securitize the issue with an alarmist international narrative to a more pragmatic approach, using a more argumentative tone and making its actions more normative. Julia Blocher argues that "the institutional place of environmental migration has shifted from its former basis in issues of asylum and 'climate security' to one of inclusion in technical and financial support for climate change adaptation and development cooperation" (Blocher, 2015). Within this framework, the EU-MERCOSUR Agreement includes environmental commitments, linking their implementation to compliance with the provisions established by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement, thereby encouraging decarbonization, cooperation for sustainable products, and the responsible use of natural resources.

Even when adopting this discourse, what we actually observe is that economic interests tied to an exploitative trade model lead to agro-industrial practices harmful to the environment. This occurs not only on the Mercosur side—such as the expansion of pasture lands into the Amazon and Chaco regions—but also on the European side, including the export of pesticides banned within the EU to Mercosur countries. These practices directly threaten biodiversity and rural communities, becoming a key factor in environmental migration.

In summary, there is still considerable progress needed in international relations regarding the analysis of migration and the environmental factors that influence it.

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