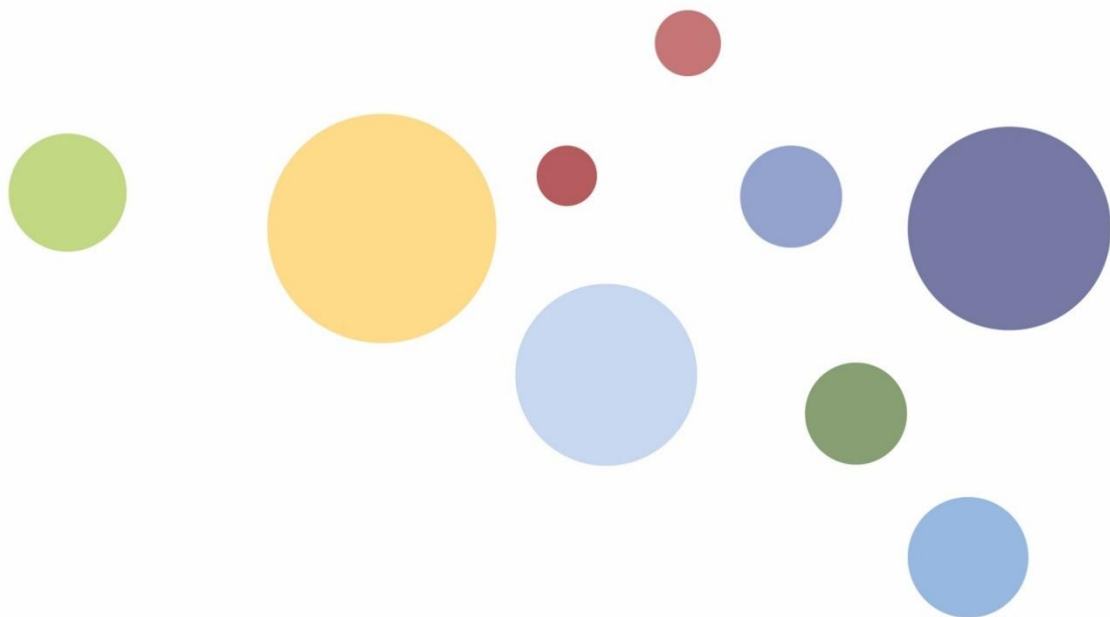


Polycrisis Governance in Southern Africa

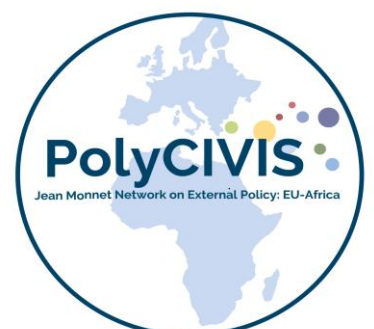
Climate Stress, Mobility, and the Limits of Fragmented Policy Responses

Policy brief no.17
September 2026

By Margaret Monyani



The Polycrisis & Policy Brief Series is coordinated by the *Policy Work Package* which is part of [the PolyCIVIS Network](#). The PolyCIVIS Policy brief series aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations for policymakers, at various levels and to foster dialogue among stakeholders on effective policy responses.



Executive Summary

Southern Africa is increasingly shaped by a polycrisis in which climate stress, economic insecurity, food-system fragility, urban pressure, and cross-border mobility interact rather than unfold in isolation. Recent evidence shows worsening drought and food insecurity, rising disaster displacement, and mounting pressure on human settlements and public services. The 2023/24 El Niño shock pushed multiple countries into national emergencies and contributed to a major regional food-security crisis, while longer-term warming, rainfall variability, and compound extremes continue to erode livelihoods across rural and urban areas alike. In this context, migration and displacement should not be treated as residual humanitarian outcomes; they are central indicators of whether governance systems can anticipate risk, protect people, and maintain legitimacy.

This brief advances three arguments. First, mobility is still too often approached as a downstream consequence of drought, flooding, conflict, or economic decline, despite evidence that it is deeply embedded in regional adaptation, labour markets, and urban change. Second, fragmented mandates across climate policy, disaster risk management, migration governance, and municipal planning generate reactive and short-term interventions. SADC's own strategies recognise systemic and transnational risk, yet climate, disaster, and migration instruments remain only loosely connected, while key free-movement architecture is still incomplete. Third, regional governance tools remain underused despite the cross-border nature of climate and mobility pressures. The brief therefore recommends integrating mobility indicators into national and regional adaptation frameworks, establishing a SADC climate-mobility coordination mechanism, embedding urban planning and social protection into climate responses, and building trust through evidence-based communication, anti-xenophobia measures, and predictable cross-border procedures. These are practical steps towards more anticipatory, inclusive, and system-aware governance.

Key messages

- ❖ **Climate shocks in Southern Africa are systemic stressors**, not one-off humanitarian events. They cascade through food security, livelihoods, and mobility, with implications for planning, governance capacities and integrated disaster risk management.
- ❖ **Mobility is a governance variable, not a side effect**. Migration and displacement are embedded in the region's adaptation strategies, labour markets, and urban growth, underscoring the imperative of integrated planning, anticipatory governance and systems thinking.
- ❖ **Fragmented mandates are the core shortcoming**, not absent policy. Climate, disaster-risk, migration, and municipal institutions each operate within their own silo, even where regional strategies formally recognise systemic, cross-border risk. What is needed is enhanced coordination, adequate financing, and strengthened implementation capacity within existing regional structures

(1) Introduction

This brief uses “polycrisis” in an operational policy sense: a condition in which risks are interdependent, simultaneous, transnational, and systemic, such that action in one sector is no longer sufficient to manage their combined effects. This framing is especially useful in Southern Africa, where risks do not operate in isolation but interact in ways that amplify vulnerability. As SADC’s Disaster Risk Management Strategy itself recognises, risk in the region is “multi-faceted, dynamic, interdependent, transnational, simultaneous and systemic”, a characterisation that aligns with the IPCC’s warning about cascading and compound risks affecting settlements, livelihoods, and infrastructure across Africa.¹ In practice, this means governments are not confronting climate change, migration, or economic stress separately, but their interaction: drought reduces agricultural incomes; food insecurity intensifies rural and peri-urban precarity; households move in search of survival, work, or services; cities receive newcomers without adequate infrastructure; and political debate increasingly frames mobility as a security issue rather than a planning reality.

This brief is addressed to national policymakers, particularly climate, migration, disaster risk and local government authorities; SADC institutions working on climate adaptation, disaster risk management, migration and labour; and AU–EU partners engaged in climate, mobility and regional stability cooperation. It departs from conventional sectoral approaches in three ways. First, it treats mobility not as a residual outcome of climate stress but as a governance variable. Second, it examines fragmentation across climate, migration and urban governance rather than analysing these sectors separately. Third, it shifts

attention from creating new regional frameworks to improving implementation and coordination across existing institutions.

The policy problem, then, is not simply whether Southern African states have climate plans, migration policies, or disaster frameworks, but whether these instruments operate coherently and at the scale required by systemic risk. Existing research on climate adaptation and governance in the region points to persistent coordination failures across sectors and levels of government, even where policy frameworks are formally in place.² In practice, the governance architecture continues to privilege sectoral boundaries: climate ministries emphasise adaptation, immigration systems focus on control and regularisation, disaster agencies concentrate on relief, and municipalities absorb population pressures with limited authority or resources. The result is a pattern of late recognition, weak coordination, and politically costly improvisation. A polycrisis lens therefore does not introduce a new problem; it clarifies why existing instruments fail to manage interdependent risks. It also provides a basis for shifting from reactive crisis management to anticipatory governance by treating mobility as part of adaptation, urban governance as part of resilience, and regional cooperation as part of domestic risk management.

(2) Background and Analysis

Recent climate conditions underline why Southern Africa should be analysed as a governance polycrisis rather than a sequence of disconnected emergencies. The World Food Programme reported in late 2024 that El Niño-induced drought had triggered national emergencies in multiple countries and was expected to drive a regional food-security

¹ SADC, 2023; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022.

² Sibiya et al., 2023; National Planning Commission, 2025

crisis peaking between November 2024 and March 2025. Other assessments similarly warned that the 2023/24 rainy season brought the region's most severe drought in a century, with acute food insecurity affecting or threatening tens of millions of people, particularly in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. At the same time, the World Meteorological Organization documents sustained warming across Africa, including a trend of roughly 0.2°C per decade in Southern Africa from 1991 to 2022. Taken together, this evidence reinforces a central insight in the literature: repeated climate shocks are not episodic humanitarian events but systemic stressors that erode household resilience, intensify fiscal pressure, and expose institutional limits.³

2.1. Mobility as a governance variable

Mobility must therefore be treated as a core dimension of systemic risk management. The literature rejects linear notions of "climate migration", instead showing that environmental change shapes movement through its interaction with social and economic conditions. A meta-analysis of 30 country-level studies finds that environmental drivers influence migration in context-specific ways and that movement is predominantly internal or directed towards low- and middle-income countries rather than high-income destinations.⁴ Southern Africa-specific research reaches a similar conclusion: cyclonic flooding and severe drought are driving both internal and cross-border movement, while interacting with political and economic instability rather than displacing them. The IPCC's Africa chapter strengthens this position by arguing that reducing distress movement requires inclusive policy and targeted investment, including mainstreaming climate migration

into development planning.⁵ Mobility is therefore not simply an outcome of crisis; it is one of the mechanisms through which systemic risk unfolds.⁶

The first governance failure is that regional climate policy continues to treat migration too narrowly. SADC's Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan acknowledges that climate stress can worsen poverty, instability, displacement, and migration.⁷ Yet migration is largely framed within a limited "human security" lens, with proposed actions focused on harmonising immigration policy and developing emergency evacuation guidelines. It does not systematically embed mobility indicators, cross-border relocation scenarios, labour-market adaptation pathways, or urban absorption planning. This creates a gap between diagnosis and design: although the strategy recognises systemic climate impacts, its operational architecture does not treat mobility as a standing governance variable. Read alongside the IPCC's recommendation to mainstream climate migration into development planning, this suggests that regional climate policy still under-recognises mobility as structurally embedded rather than episodic.⁸

The second governance failure lies in fragmentation across climate adaptation, disaster risk management, and local government. SADC's Disaster Risk Management Strategy is, in principle, more system-aware: it frames risk as interdependent, transnational, and systemic, and calls for integrated governance, urban resilience, transboundary cooperation, and risk-informed development.⁹ However, this recognition has not translated into an equally strong operational framework for mobility governance. The strategy prioritises governance, investment, knowledge management, and resilience, but mobility is

³ World Food Programme, 2024; U.S. Agency for International Development, 2024; World Meteorological Organization, 2023.

⁴ Hoffmann et al., 2020

⁵ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022

⁶ Mpandeli et al., 2020

⁷ SADC 2015

⁸ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022

⁹ SADC 2023

not yet operationalised as a routine planning category across these pillars. At national and subnational level, the same pattern persists. Research on climate adaptation in South Africa identifies inadequate finance, limited human capacity, weak coordination across sectors and levels of government, absent local climate units, and constrained legal mandates as key barriers, particularly during implementation and monitoring.¹⁰ While the Climate Change Act requires provinces and municipalities to assess climate risks and develop response plans, the literature suggests that formal mandates alone are insufficient without stronger vertical coordination and institutional capacity.¹¹

Urban governance is where the costs of fragmentation become most visible. The IPCC highlights that compound climate risks in Africa are especially severe for low-lying cities, dryland settlements, and populations in informal areas, where climate hazards intersect with rapid population growth, infrastructure deficits, water stress, and fiscal constraints.¹² Southern African migration dynamics reinforce this pattern. Regional research shows that drought and flooding are already increasing rural-to-urban mobility, while national policy analysis in South Africa finds that both domestic and cross-border migration are reshaping urban demographics and placing sustained pressure on housing, transport, water, and service delivery.¹³ The National Planning Commission's 2025 advisory is particularly instructive: it notes that public debate often scapegoats migrants for structural failures, even as urban institutions lack the data, funding, and political backing required for evidence-based planning.¹⁴ Under such conditions, governance defaults to enforcement,

exclusion, or short-term relief rather than resilient planning.

2.2. Fragmented policy responses and implementation gaps

The third governance failure is the underuse of regional mechanisms. SADC's annual corporate plans indicate that the Regional Migration Policy Framework was still under review in 2024/25, with implementation only becoming a priority in subsequent cycles. Similarly, progress on the Protocol on the Facilitation of Movement of Persons remains limited, with uneven visa openness and continued delays in operationalisation. This slow institutionalisation is not merely procedural; it shapes how cross-border risks are governed in practice. Climate-related mobility, labour migration, and humanitarian protection are inherently transnational issues, yet regional governance remains partial and uneven.¹⁵ The implication is not a lack of norms, but a lag in implementation. A region that recognises systemic climate risk yet maintains fragmented migration and movement frameworks is structurally predisposed towards reactive and ad hoc coordination.¹⁶

Continental frameworks partially address this gap, but they are not yet fully translated into a regional climate-mobility agenda. The African Union's Kampala Convention establishes binding obligations to protect and assist internally displaced persons, including those displaced by climate-related disasters.¹⁷ The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has reinforced this direction, first by urging preventive action on climate-related displacement and later by initiating work towards a dedicated legal framework. These developments clarify continental norms, but they also expose the implementation gap: while Africa has

¹⁰ Sibiya et al., 2023

¹¹ Republic of South Africa, 2024

¹² Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022

¹³ Mpandeli et al., 2020

¹⁴ National Planning Commission, 2025

¹⁵ SADC 2024.

¹⁶ SADC, 2024, 2025, 2026

¹⁷ African Union, 2009

developed increasingly robust normative frameworks, regional operationalisation remains uneven. For AU- and EU-Africa policy engagement, this suggests that the

priority lies not in further norm development, but in strengthening coordination, financing, and implementation capacity within existing regional structures.¹⁸

(3) Policy Recommendations

- (i) **Integrate mobility indicators into adaptation and risk frameworks.** National Adaptation Plans, disaster risk strategies, vulnerability assessments, and municipal climate plans across Southern Africa should include a common set of mobility-related indicators: disaster displacement, seasonal labour movement, cross-border livelihood mobility, urban in-migration pressure, involuntary immobility, and stress on host communities. This is not conceptually new; existing global and regional frameworks already point in this direction. The policy gain is practical: once mobility is measured, it becomes governable before it becomes a crisis. SADC should issue technical guidance to ensure these indicators are comparable across member states and linked to adaptation finance, early warning systems, and social-protection triggers. Technical support for this work could be mobilised through existing SADC programmes, AU policy organs, national statistics offices, development partners and regional research institutions with expertise in climate data, mobility tracking and anticipatory action. In the short term, SADC should lead the development of common indicators, while national governments and municipalities integrate them into adaptation plans, disaster risk systems and local climate assessments over the medium term.
- (ii) **Create a SADC climate-mobility coordination mechanism with a clear implementation mandate.** SADC does not require a new treaty to act more coherently. It could establish a climate-mobility task team linking climate, disaster risk, labour, public security, and social-development functions, with a mandate to harmonise data, scenario planning, and cross-border protocols. The platform should develop regional guidance on anticipatory action for drought and flood-related movement, minimum standards for host-community support, data-sharing on displacement and seasonal mobility, and pathways linking mobility to food security and resilience programming. With the Regional Migration Policy Framework moving from review to implementation, the priority is to connect it directly to SADC climate and disaster risk instruments. SADC should lead this mechanism in the short term, with member states nominating focal points from climate, migration, labour and disaster risk institutions to support implementation over the medium term.
- (iii) **Reframe urban governance as frontline climate governance.** Municipalities should not be treated as terminal receivers of "migration pressure." They should be resourced and mandated as central actors in climate adaptation. This requires linking municipal climate planning to housing, water, sanitation, transport, health, and informal-settlement upgrading, while developing tools for both internal and cross-border mobility. South Africa's Climate Change Act provides a useful institutional starting point, but its effectiveness depends on addressing known constraints: limited capacity, weak coordination, and inadequate finance. Similar conditions apply across the region. Urban resilience finance should therefore include dedicated allocations for newcomer-sensitive infrastructure, service expansion, and local data systems. National governments should lead by strengthening legal and fiscal support for municipalities, while cities should integrate mobility into climate planning, infrastructure investment and service delivery over the medium to long term.

¹⁸ African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2021, 2025.

-
- (iv) **Embed trust-building and anti-xenophobia measures within regional governance.** Polycrisis governance weakens when mobility is securitised and migrants become proxies for structural failures. In Southern Africa, anti-immigrant narratives and low institutional trust already distort migration governance and undermine support for inclusive policy responses. Trust-building should therefore be treated as part of institutional design. Cross-border arrangements should include transparent communication on mobility trends, agreed service-access protocols for vulnerable groups, local dialogue platforms in receiving areas, and public-facing anti-xenophobia measures grounded in evidence. Regional institutions should also support regular, accessible reporting on mobility to reduce uncertainty and counter misinformation. Trust is not an add-on; it is a precondition for effective coordination. Because resistance to free movement and migrant-inclusive planning is politically likely, these measures should begin with evidence-based communication, local dialogue and practical service protocols that reduce uncertainty before deeper regional commitments are pursued.

(4) Conclusion

Southern Africa's climate and mobility challenges are no longer well described by the language of isolated shocks. What the region faces is an interconnected governance problem in which drought, warming, food insecurity, fragile municipal systems, unequal labour markets and politicised migration reinforce one another. Treating migration as a late-stage humanitarian issue obscures its centrality to resilience, development and public order. Treating climate adaptation as a technical sectoral exercise obscures how quickly risk moves across borders, budgets and institutions. The evidence reviewed here shows that regional and national frameworks increasingly recognise systemic risk, yet they still operationalise climate, disaster and migration policy through fragmented mandates and uneven implementation. The result is a governance architecture better at responding after shocks than at preparing for them.

A polycrisis-informed response does not require abandoning existing institutions. It requires reordering them around real interactions rather than administrative

silos. For Southern Africa, the most realistic starting points are to mainstream mobility into adaptation systems, empower municipalities as resilience actors, accelerate SADC coordination on cross-border climate-related movement, and place trust-building at the centre of implementation. Achieving these reforms will require navigating legitimate political concerns around sovereignty, fiscal constraints and migration politics. For that reason, incremental implementation through existing SADC institutions and nationally owned adaptation processes is likely to be more politically feasible than creating entirely new governance architectures. The policy opportunity is therefore not to create new frameworks, but to operationalise existing ones in ways that reflect how risk unfolds across the region. For national governments, SADC, the African Union and EU–Africa partners, the immediate task is to build the data systems, coordination mechanisms, municipal capacity and public trust required to make climate-mobility governance politically feasible and institutionally durable.

References

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. (2021). *Resolution on climate change and forced displacement in Africa (ACHPR/Res. 491 (LXIX) 2021)*.

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. (2025). *Resolution on the need for a study on the development of a specific legal framework for the protection of forcibly displaced persons in Africa as a result of climate change (ACHPR/Res. 628 (LXXXII) 2025)*.

African Union. (2009). *African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention)*.

Hoffmann, R., Dimitrova, A. K., Muttarak, R., & Crespo Cuaresma, J. (2020). A meta-analysis of country-level studies on environmental change and migration. *Nature Climate Change*, 10(10), 904–912. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-020-0898-6>

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2022). *Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability* (Chapter 9: Africa). Cambridge University Press.

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. (2024a). *Global report on internal displacement 2024*.

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. (2024b). *Internal displacement in Africa: An overview of trends and developments (2009–2023)*.

Mpandeli, S., Nhamo, L., Hlahla, S., Naidoo, D., Liphadzi, S., Modi, A. T., & Mabhaudhi, T. (2020). Migration under climate change in Southern Africa: A nexus planning perspective. *Sustainability*, 12(11), 4722. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12114722>

National Planning Commission. (2025). *Advisory on migration governance*.

Republic of South Africa. (2024). *Climate Change Act, 2024*.

Southern African Development Community. (2015). *SADC climate change strategy and action plan*.

Southern African Development Community. (2023a). *25th meeting of the Ministerial Committee of the Organ reiterates firm resolve on accelerated action to consolidate peace, security and political stability in the SADC region*.

Southern African Development Community. (2023b). *SADC disaster risk management strategy and action plan*.

Southern African Development Community. (2024). *Annual corporate plan 2024/25*.

Southern African Development Community. (2025). *Annual corporate plan 2025/26*.

Southern African Development Community. (2026a). *Annual corporate plan 2026/27*.

Southern African Development Community. (2026b). *SADC strengthens regional collaboration to address employment and labour market challenges*.

Sibiya, N. P., Nhamo, L., & Mabhaudhi, T. (2023). Overcoming bureaucratic resistance: An analysis

of barriers to climate change adaptation in South Africa. *Climate*, 11(7), 145. <https://doi.org/10.3390/cli11070145>

SLYCAN Trust. (2024). *Briefing note: Human mobility in national adaptation plans*.

U.S. Agency for International Development. (2024). *Southern Africa regional drought fact sheet #2, fiscal year 2024*.

World Meteorological Organization. (2023). *State of the climate in Africa 2022*.

Author

Dr. Margaret Monyani, Executive Director, OLAM Africa Research Institute

Acknowledgements



The CIVIS network is a consortium of 21 universities in Europe and Africa. In October 2023, it initiated the PolyCIVIS project, focused on confronting the Polycrisis in Europe and Africa through Research, Policy and Education. The PolyCIVIS project is funded by the European Union, Erasmus+.

Views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.