Climate Displacement and Human Rights in Southern Kyrgyzstan

A Field-Based Analysis of the 2024 Floods in Osh Oblast

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Abstract

This study presents a **rights-based assessment** of the 2024 floods in Kyrgyzstan's Osh oblast, with field research conducted in Nookat and Kara‑Suu districts, covering five rural villages. Relying on interviews, observational data, and official statistics from the Ministry of Emergency Situations, we document severe violations of the rights to housing, water, health, mental well-being, and participation. Our findings reveal that government compensation was inadequate, potable water access was disrupted, psychosocial trauma was widespread, debris-blocked infrastructure hindered mobility, and marginalized communities were excluded from decision-making processes.

Kyrgyzstan is among Central Asia's most climate-vulnerable countries, facing increasing extreme precipitation, glacier melts, and floods driven by global warming. Natural hazard-related damages, including floods and mudflows, claimed lives—predominantly children—and disrupted rural livelihoods and agriculture (CDKN; World Bank). The study integrates legal frameworks such as the ICESCR, ICCPR, CRC to assess state obligations and rights violations. It concludes with policy recommendations to strengthen climate resilience through participatory, child-sensitive, and rights-based disaster planning.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background & Relevance

The year 2024 marked a dramatic escalation in hydrometeorological disasters across Kyrgyzstan: the Ministry of Emergency Situations recorded **339 flood and mudflow events**, with **over 240 of them registered between April and July alone** (a seven‑fold increase from the previous year) (UNDRR, 2024). **Osh oblast**, particularly Nookat and Kara‑Suu districts, accounts for **91 flood events**, making it one of the most severely impacted regions nationally.

This escalation occurs amid increasing climate variability: Kyrgyzstan experienced a **rise in average temperature from 4.8 °C to 6 °C over two decades**, intensified glacier melt, and a higher frequency of extreme precipitation—all contextualized within projections of wetter winters and more intense summer storms. As the third most climate-vulnerable country in Central Asia, terrain characteristics including steep topography and glacier-fed river networks increase exposure to floods, landslides, glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), and mudflows.

The economic and social consequences of these hazards are substantial: past assessments suggest such disasters cost between **0.5–1.3 % of Kyrgyzstan's annual GDP** and significantly impact infrastructure, agriculture, health systems, and displacement patterns (World Bank, 2023)

1.2 Rationale & Research Focus

Our research interrogates how devastating floods in **Kok Zhar, Gulistan, Mady Kyrgyz-Chek, Datka, and Bash Bulak** interacted with structural vulnerabilities, governance gaps, and climate drivers to produce distinct human rights impacts. While national and international agencies have recognized and responded to these disasters, ground-level experiences suggest systemic inadequacies particularly in housing support, water access, mental health, and community inclusion. Given that **children, elderly individuals, and subsistence farmers** represent major vulnerable groups in these regions dependent on agriculture, water-based livelihoods, and minimal social protection the research explores how their rights were affected by, and responded to, climate-linked disaster events.

1.3 Objectives & Structure

This report aims to:

- **Document lived experiences** of flood-affected households in Nookat and Kara-Suu districts.
- **Situate field observations** within broader environmental, institutional, and climate risk trends.
- **Analyze rights-based violations** across housing, health, water, safety, and participatory domains.
- **Propose actionable policy and practice recommendations** for community-centered resilience.

Structure of the Report:

1. **Abstract & Introduction** - situates context and rationale
2. **Methodology** - outlines field methods, data sources, and ethical approaches
3. **Contextual Climate Risk Overview** - presents macro-level climate trends in Kyrgyzstan
4. **Field Findings** - provides detailed account of housing, health, agriculture, displacement, and planning failures

5. **Human Rights Analysis** - uses ICESCR, CRC, ICCPR to interpret rights violations
6. **Recommendations** - proposes reforms for disaster preparedness, response, and governance
7. **Conclusion** - summarizes implications and future directions

2. Methodology

2.1 Field Research Sites

This study is based on field research conducted in **two flood-prone districts of Osh oblast**: **Nookat** and **Kara-Suu**. Within these districts, the following five rural villages were selected due to their severe flood exposure and vulnerability:

- **Nookat District**: Kok Zhar, Gulistan
- **Kara-Suu District**: Mady Kyrgyz-Chek, Datka, Bash Bulak

These villages were selected based on reported infrastructure damage, community vulnerability, and agricultural reliance. According to the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the majority of southern Kyrgyzstan's 2024 flood and mudflow events were concentrated in these areas.

2.2 Data Collection

The data collection process included:

- **Semi-structured interviews** with residents from all five villages
- **Focus group-style conversations** with elders and family clusters
- **Narrative testimonies** focused on displacement, health, water access, and rebuilding
- **Official documentation**, including flood statistics and damage reports obtained from the Ministry of Emergency Situations
- **Photographic and observational notes** on living conditions, housing structures, and terrain

Respondents were selected via purposive sampling, with attention to representing diverse perspectives - especially those of low-income households, elderly persons, women-headed families, and subsistence farmers.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the study's purpose and gave verbal consent to share their stories anonymously. No identifiable information is shared in this report. Interviews with minors were conducted in the presence of parents or guardians.

2.4 Analytical Framework

The data was analyzed using a **rights-based analytical framework** grounded in the following international standards:

- **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**
- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**
- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**
- **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030**

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns across testimonies related to housing, water, food, participation, and psychosocial effects. These were then assessed against State obligations under the above frameworks.

3. Contextual Climate Risk Overview: Kyrgyzstan and Osh Oblast

3.1 National Climate Vulnerability

Kyrgyzstan is one of the most climate-sensitive countries in Central Asia due to its mountainous geography, glacier dependency, and reliance on climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture and livestock.

According to the **World Bank's Climate Risk Profile**, Kyrgyzstan is experiencing:

- Increased **mean annual temperatures** (rise of ~1.6 °C since 1950)
- More **frequent and severe precipitation events**
- Greater **glacial melt** from over 8,000 glaciers, threatening water security downstream
- High exposure to **floods, landslides, mudflows**, and **glacier lake outburst floods (GLOFs)**

3.2 Regional Exposure: Osh Oblast

Osh oblast lies in the **Fergana Valley**, a densely populated agricultural region prone to flash floods and landslides due to steep gradients and high seasonal rainfall.

In 2024, government and IFRC reporting highlighted:

- **91 flood incidents in Osh** (the highest regional count in the country)
- Damage to **homes (2,093), bridges (16), irrigation canals (17 km), and farmlands (108.4 ha)**
- Emergency sheltering of **dozens of families in tents or relatives' homes**
- Widespread complaints about **delayed or insufficient government response**

Notably, urban expansion, **deforestation**, and **chaotic construction** near waterways (such as around the **Abshyr-Ata River**) have exacerbated runoff and reduced floodwater absorption capacity.

3.3 Institutional Risk and Adaptive Capacity

The **Ministry of Emergency Situations** coordinates national disaster response but faces challenges:

- **Inadequate early warning systems** in rural areas
- **Limited psychosocial support** and healthcare access
- **Low institutional capacity** at municipal levels to implement zoning regulations or climate adaptation policies

Despite international support such as early warning station upgrades by **UNDP** and the **EU** local governance remains under-resourced. Structural drivers like unregulated construction, poverty, and weak enforcement contribute to cyclical disaster impacts.

4. Field Findings

This section presents primary data collected from five rural villages across Nookat and Kara-Suu districts in Osh oblast. Thematic findings are organized into six core areas: housing, water and sanitation, health and mental well-being, agriculture and livelihood, participation and preparedness, and environmental mismanagement. Direct quotations from affected residents are included to ground the analysis in lived experience.

4.1 Housing and Displacement

Floodwaters in July 2024 caused widespread destruction of homes, displacing families and forcing many into temporary or informal shelters. According to the Ministry of Emergency Situations, **2,093 homes were affected**, with **50 completely destroyed**. The government's compensation policy provided **1 million KGS (approx. 11,454 USD)** per destroyed house.

However, residents consistently reported that this amount was inadequate for full reconstruction:
"They gave us 1 million soms, but we couldn't rebuild. Materials alone cost more. We had to move into my brother's house with 11 people."
— Resident, Bash Bulak

In Kara-Suu, respondents described **living in tents during winter**, exposing children and elders to freezing temperatures:
"My grandchildren got bronchitis. We stayed in a tent for weeks in –15°C while rebuilding. There was no other help."
— Grandmother, Kara-Suu District

The absence of proper emergency shelter options, coupled with the lack of follow-up support, contributed to prolonged displacement and human insecurity.

4.2 Water Insecurity and Sanitation Breakdown

In **Kok Zhar** village, floodwaters destroyed both the water system and the upper layer of the earth that supplied groundwater. As a result, the village's estimated **35,000 residents** were left with **no clean water source**.
"We've been drinking dirty, brown water for almost a year now. My children drink it too. We have no choice."
— Mother of three, Kok Zhar

Access to clean water was stratified by income. Wealthier households could transport water from a clean waterfall 25 km away or purchase deliveries. Most could not:
"Some people bring clean water and sell it, but we cannot afford that daily. We live off a pension."
— Elderly woman, Gulistan

This situation violates the right to safe drinking water and created downstream health impacts, including **suspected outbreaks of hepatitis A** among children, though official statistics were not available at the village level.

4.3 Health and Mental Well-being

Physical illness particularly among children was widely reported. In addition to waterborne illnesses, respondents recounted increased cases of bronchitis, diarrhea, and skin infections.

But more pervasive was the **mental toll** of the floods, particularly on children and the elderly. Repeated exposure to trauma, combined with lack of psychosocial support, created chronic anxiety:

"Whenever it rains now, my children panic. They cry and ask if the flood is coming again."

— Parent, Datka

"I'm 65 years old. We've had floods before, but never like this. I've never been this afraid."

— Resident, Mady Kyrgyz-Chek

No trained mental health professionals visited the villages. No counseling services were offered in the aftermath of displacement. As such, communities were left to process collective trauma alone.

4.4 Livelihoods and Agricultural Devastation

Flooding significantly impacted agriculture the primary livelihood source in the region. The Ministry reported **108.4 hectares** of farmland affected in Osh; of this, **31.11 ha** belonged to smallholder farmers in Nookat and Kara-Suu.

"I lost all three hectares of my crops. No autumn harvest, no income. We depend on that land."

— Farmer, Kara-Suu District

In addition to income loss, the floods damaged irrigation channels ("aryks"), reducing planting capacity for the following season. The lack of crop insurance, access to micro-loans, or emergency support further entrenched rural poverty.

4.5 Participation, Preparedness, and Government Accountability

Respondents across all villages emphasized a **lack of inclusion** in disaster planning and post-crisis recovery.

"There were many people during the flood. Journalists, officials. But after that? No one came. No social workers, no instructions, no follow-up."

— Resident, Gulistan

When asked whether they knew how to act in case of another flood, most said:

"No. We just run. No one trained us. No one explained anything."

This lack of training, combined with the absence of early warning systems or village-level drills, placed already traumatized residents at heightened risk.

4.6 Environmental Degradation and Planning Failures

Community members cited environmental mismanagement as a contributor to the intensity of the floods. Specific concerns included:

- **Chaotic tree planting**
- **Construction of recreation areas and businesses near rivers**
- **Poor permeability under bridges near coal quarries**

"There was no flood here for many years, so they built all over the riverbanks. Now the river came back. And took everything."
— Elder, Nookat

These observations reflect poor enforcement of land-use regulations and weak zoning mechanisms, especially in rural settings.

5. Human Rights Analysis

This section applies a human rights framework to assess the impact of the 2024 floods in southern Kyrgyzstan. Each major area of harm housing, health, water, life, mental well-being, participation, and livelihood is analyzed in light of **Kyrgyzstan's international legal obligations**, including the:

- **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**
- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**
- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**
- **UN General Assembly Resolution 64/292 (Right to Water and Sanitation)**
- **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030**

5.1 Right to Adequate Housing (ICESCR, Article 11)

The right to housing includes the right to live in **security, peace, and dignity**. Temporary tents, shared spaces with relatives, and insufficient state compensation (1 million KGS) failed to meet this threshold. Many families reported being unable to rebuild, especially in winter conditions.

The **Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)** in General Comment No. 4 clarifies that states must ensure housing that is habitable and provides protection from cold, damp, and rain. This obligation was not met.

Violation: Right to housing was systematically undermined due to inadequate post-disaster support, unsafe emergency shelters, and uninhabitable living conditions during winter.

5.2 Right to Health and Mental Well-being (ICESCR, Article 12)

Health impacts included outbreaks of suspected **hepatitis A**, **bronchitis**, and **diarrhea** due to unsafe water, lack of sanitation, and exposure to freezing conditions. The government provided no structured **mental health or psychosocial support (MHPSS)**, despite high levels of child trauma.

Violation: The right to health includes both physical and mental well-being. The state failed to protect flood survivors—especially children—from avoidable illness and psychological distress.

5.3 Right to Water (UN GA Res. 64/292; CESCR Gen. Comment No. 15)

Water is a **core, justiciable right**. In Kok Zhar, more than 35,000 people were left without access to clean, drinkable water for months. Market-based distribution of water created **economic barriers**, denying access to those without daily income.

General Comment No. 15 states that "water must be sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable." Failure to provide interim solutions or subsidized access violated this right.

Violation: The prolonged absence of access to clean water in Kok Zhar violates the right to safe and affordable water for all.

5.4 Right to Life and Physical Integrity (ICCPR, Article 6)

The **loss of 10 lives**, including **eight teenagers**, points to a failure to ensure basic protection in disaster-prone areas. States have a **positive obligation** to prevent foreseeable threats to life, including from environmental hazards.

Violation: Deaths caused by predictable and intensifying climate events constitute a breach of the right to life due to inadequate preventive measures.

5.5 Rights of the Child (CRC, Articles 6, 24, 27, 28)

Children are entitled to:

- **Survival and development** (Art. 6)
- **Highest attainable standard of health** (Art. 24)
- **Adequate standard of living** (Art. 27)
- **Access to education** (Art. 28)

Children in affected villages suffered from unsafe housing, mental distress, and illness. Many experienced educational disruption, trauma, and displacement. No targeted state outreach programs for children were reported.

Violation: Kyrgyzstan failed to meet its obligations under the CRC to safeguard children's basic rights during and after the flooding.

5.6 Right to Participation (ICCPR, Article 25; Sendai Framework Priority 4)

Villagers were **excluded from planning, risk assessment, and recovery efforts**. No disaster drills were conducted. Residents reported no involvement in housing decisions, infrastructure reconstruction, or preparedness training.

The Sendai Framework emphasizes "people-centered, all-of-society approaches" as key to reducing risk.

Violation: The right to participation in public affairs was violated by the exclusion of affected populations from disaster preparedness and response processes.

5.7 Right to Livelihood and Protection from Economic Displacement (ICESCR, Article 6)

The destruction of agricultural land (31.11 ha in total) directly impacted the economic survival of rural households. Many lost seasonal crops, lacked financial safety nets, and faced severe food insecurity.

Violation: The right to work and to gain a living through freely chosen activities was compromised due to unmitigated flood damage, absent crop insurance, and insufficient state recovery measures.

6. Policy Recommendations

The 2024 floods in southern Kyrgyzstan exposed systemic vulnerabilities in disaster response, infrastructure planning, and human rights protection. To strengthen resilience and uphold international obligations, the following recommendations are proposed:

A. Housing and Shelter

1. **Reform Compensation Frameworks**
    - Recalculate housing compensation to reflect real reconstruction costs, based on regional building material prices and inflation.
    - Offer in-kind reconstruction support (e.g., subsidized labor, materials) to low-income families, especially those with children or elderly members.

2. **Develop Temporary Housing Standards**
    - Adopt interim shelter guidelines aligned with **Sphere Standards**, ensuring tents or mobile shelters are equipped for winter.
    - Designate safe evacuation shelters in each village with sanitation and heating.

B. Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)

1. **Ensure Equitable Access to Clean Water**
    - Restore and climate-proof destroyed village water systems (especially Kok Zhar).
    - Provide **emergency water deliveries at no cost** for vulnerable households during infrastructure outages.
2. **Subsidize Water Tank Storage**
    - Support community-level installation of affordable water tanks and safe storage containers to enhance short-term water security.

C. Health and Psychosocial Support

1. **Integrate Mental Health into Disaster Response**
    - Train rural health workers and teachers in **Psychological First Aid (PFA)** and trauma-informed care.
    - Establish mobile counseling units with psychosocial professionals for flood-affected areas.
2. **Improve Rural Public Health Services**
    - Increase funding for rural health clinics and mobile health teams to monitor outbreaks (e.g., hepatitis A).
    - Coordinate vaccination drives and safe hygiene messaging after flood events.

D. Agriculture and Livelihood Recovery

1. **Launch a Rural Livelihoods Recovery Fund**
    - Create emergency grants or micro-loans for farmers who lost crops or arable land.
    - Subsidize seeds and agricultural tools to restore local food production.
2. **Rehabilitate Irrigation Infrastructure**

- Repair 17+ km of damaged 'aryk' irrigation canals and introduce eco-engineering solutions for flood resilience.

E. Disaster Risk Reduction and Community Preparedness

1. **Institutionalize Village-Level Risk Committees**
    - Establish Disaster Risk Management Committees (DRMCs) in each village under local government supervision.
    - Ensure women, youth, and elders are represented and trained in basic DRR (Disaster Risk Reduction) strategies.
2. **Develop Local Preparedness Plans**

- Provide community-based flood drills, visual guidance materials, and SMS-based early warning systems tailored to each district.

1. **Ban Construction in High-Risk Zones**

- Enforce zoning regulations to prevent future development near floodplains and restore flood-buffer zones using native vegetation.

F. Children and Vulnerable Groups

1. **Design Child-Centered Resilience Programs**

- Partner with UNICEF and schools to teach disaster safety, climate adaptation, and resilience in classrooms.
- Ensure shelters have **child-safe spaces** with access to food, warmth, and hygiene.

1. **Create a Social Protection Shock Response Registry**

- Maintain a database of at-risk households (e.g., single-parent, elderly-led, disabled children) to enable automatic inclusion in future emergency support.

G. Governance and Accountability

1. **Adopt a Rights-Based DRR Framework**

- Align national emergency laws with the **Sendai Framework**, **ICESCR**, and **CRC** to ensure that disaster planning protects human rights.
- Mandate regular monitoring and public reporting on post-disaster recovery progress.

1. **Foster Donor and Civil Society Collaboration**

- Partner with IFRC, UNDP, and local NGOs to coordinate interventions, avoid duplication, and scale good practices (e.g., Red Crescent's voucher assistance).

7. Conclusion

The 2024 floods in Osh oblast particularly in Nookat and Kara-Suu districts serve as a stark reminder that climate-induced disasters are not only environmental crises but also **deep human rights challenges**. This study, grounded in firsthand testimonies from five vulnerable villages, documents how systemic gaps in governance, infrastructure, and social protection led to violations of the rights to housing, water, health, mental well-being, life, and participation.
While the government's initial disaster response included financial compensation and emergency coordination, these actions fell short of addressing the scale of harm experienced by residents. Families were left in tents through sub-zero temperatures, children drank unsafe water for months, and no mental health support was offered in the aftermath of trauma. Furthermore, affected populations were not included in decision-making about recovery or future preparedness deepening a sense of abandonment and helplessness.
These failures are not isolated; they reflect broader structural issues:

- **Urban planning that ignores ecological risks**
- **Emergency laws that overlook psychosocial needs**
- **Water governance that privileges market solutions over equity**
- **Institutional habits that sideline local voices and women's leadership**

Kyrgyzstan's commitment to international treaties including the ICESCR, CRC, and the Sendai Framework places **clear obligations on the state** to build systems that protect its people from foreseeable harm. In this context, floods are not merely acts of nature; they are **tests of political will**, **infrastructure planning**, and **human rights protection**.
Yet there is also opportunity. The insights and resilience of affected communities offer a **blueprint for reform**. From farmers who called for better irrigation planning to parents demanding clean water and youth asking for training on what to do when floods return, the solutions exist; they just need to be institutionalized.
A truly resilient Kyrgyzstan will be one where: A child doesn't fear the rain. A family doesn't sleep in a tent for months without support. A farmer doesn't lose their only harvest without

recourse. And no one feels forgotten after the storm has passed. Building that future requires investment, inclusion, and a firm belief that **climate justice is inseparable from human rights**.

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