

Climate Change | Heat here – poverty there (Update 2026)

Speaking of climate change: even if we were to stop emitting a single greenhouse gas into the atmosphere today, at this very moment, it would take decades for the climate system to stabilise again. That was already the case in 2019, when this text first appeared. Except that the clock hasn't stood still since then. It has ticked faster than even the pessimists had expected.

On a hot July day in 1988, one man explained climate change to the world. Back then, people weren't yet talking about the causes of displacement, which climate change has long since become. James E. Hansen, Director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies and a professor at Columbia University, sat before the US Congress and essentially said everything there was to know. He became world-famous overnight and has remained influential to this day. That was almost forty years ago. The physics he described has not changed since then. Only the figures have materialised – and they are worse than the models suggested in 1988.

A decade too early

2026 can be summarised by a single data point published by the European climate service Copernicus in January: for the first time, the three-year period from 2023 to 2025 averaged more than 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. That was the Paris 'red line', agreed in 2015 as a long-term target, intended to provide a safety margin of decades. 2025 itself was 'only' the third-warmest year on record – after 2024 and 2023, and significantly warmer than anything that had come before. Copernicus Director Carlo Buontempo put it as soberly as it was depressingly: we are approaching the limit at breakneck speed, and we will "inevitably cross it". The European Commission now openly expects the 1.5-degree mark to be breached before the end of this decade – more than ten years earlier than was thought possible in Paris in 2015.

The pattern of Hansen's speech is repeating itself: scientists issue warnings, figures confirm those warnings, and yet a gap remains between awareness and action – a gap that is widening rather than closing.

Germany, sweating it out – again

Anyone who read this article in 2019 may recall the nearly forty degrees I was moaning about back then. The summer of 2026 has mercilessly surpassed that: In June, a new all-time heat record of 41.8 degrees was set in Germany. Bavaria reported between twelve and fifteen days of extreme heat for the month. At the same time, the rain stayed away – by early August, the summer had met only just under 45 per cent of its rainfall target, significantly less than even in the notoriously dry years of 1911 and 2018. The result: crop failures for wheat, barley and, above all, maize – whose pollination suffers in the heat – as well as a risk of forest fires and a drought monitor classifying large parts of southern and eastern Germany as 'exceptionally dry'.

What is interesting here is not the individual figure, but the pattern behind it: a heatwave, a brief cooling-off period, then the next heatwave – without the several days of rain that used to bring such weather conditions to an end almost automatically. What used to be an anomaly is becoming the norm.

And yet: anyone who finds 39 or 41 degrees in Frankfurt or Cologne unbearable still has air conditioning, a swimming pool within easy reach, or at least a cool shower at their disposal. This brings us to the part of this text that could barely be put into perspective in 2019, but will be impossible to do so by 2026.

Where heat turns to hunger

The World Meteorological Organisation recorded that, in Africa in 2025, at least 13 million people were affected by climate-related disasters, with more than 3,000 deaths. Floods – not droughts – were the most common cause: A flash flood in Nigeria in May claimed over 200 lives, whilst in the Congo more than 160 people died in similar events in April. At the same time, the ongoing drought in East Africa has affected more than 8.5 million people. The co-occurrence of floods and droughts is not a contradiction, but the new normality of a climate system that has gone out of sync.

A report by Oxfam from March 2025 is particularly grim: in eight East African and South African countries – including Kenya – the number of people suffering from extreme hunger has risen by 80 per cent within five years, from just under 31 million in 2019 to over 55 million in 2024. Two in ten people in these countries simply do not have enough to eat. 116 million people in the same region – 40 per cent of the population there – live without reliable access to drinking water. Nine out of ten smallholder farmers rely almost entirely on rain, both for themselves and for their fields. If the rain fails, everything fails.

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To put this into context – because figures are often easier to remember when compared: globally, the average duration of droughts has increased by 29 per cent since 2000. Flash floods have become twenty times more frequent between 2000 and 2022. Only around 40 per cent of African countries currently have early warning systems that could save lives.

The inequality remains the same

What has not changed since 2019 is the fundamental imbalance: the industrialised nations are largely responsible for causing climate change, whilst the countries that have contributed the least bear the greatest burden. Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe – in all these places, rainfall still determines harvests, drinking water and, ultimately, life and death, without the safety net that Europe or North America can afford.

And the consequence of that situation back then still holds true, only with greater urgency: people who are deprived of their livelihoods at home seek a new one elsewhere. The latest global report on internal displacement estimated that, by the end of 2025, around 13.6 million people had been displaced within their own countries due to weather and disasters – 37 per cent more than in the previous year. In its long-term scenarios, the World Bank estimates that there will be up to 216 million internal climate migrants by 2050, with up to 86 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa alone. Such long-term forecasts are, by their very nature, uncertain – as even the authors themselves acknowledge – but the direction they point to is not. Alongside this stands the separate, stark figure of 117.8 million people who, according to the UNHCR, were fleeing violence and conflict by the end of 2025. The two figures do not coincide, but they are increasingly converging: where water is scarce, conflicts over what remains are also on the rise – from Darfur to the conflicts between herders and farmers in the Sahel, which Amnesty International now explicitly attributes to the climate crisis.

What remains

Seven years on from the first article, little remains of the hope that the problem could still be resolved with a delicate touch. The 1.5-degree limit, once thought of as the absolute threshold, is set to be breached this decade – not in 2050, not ‘sometime’, but now. For us, this means more days of

extreme heat, drier summers and more expensive food. For millions of people in Kenya, Sudan, Ethiopia or Mozambique, it means something else: the difference between having a meal and going without, between staying and leaving.

The heat wasn't the real problem in 2019. It was the ignorance.

I wrote that in 2019. Backed up by more stark figures, it remains just as true today.

A brief note on the revision

I have retained the structure of the original 2019 text, but have replaced the key facts and quotations with up-to-date data (Copernicus/EU Climate Service, WMO Africa Report 2025, Oxfam Report March 2025, IDMC Global Report on Internal Displacement 2026, UNHCR Global Trends, World Bank Groundswell long-term scenarios).

I have removed the Baerbock quote from 2019 and the reference to the Bern study because they were time-specific or could be replaced by more recent, more reliable sources.

The World Bank's long-term forecast of 216 million, as indicated in the text, should be treated with caution; this is how it is classified within the research community itself.
