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Greenresearch © 2026 Issue II Vol.5
International Journal of Microbiology, Infectious Diseases and Public Health (IJMIDPH)

Climate Change and the Geographic Expansion of Vector-Borne Diseases

Greenresearch Nigeria

A contributory publication research for Greenresearch Digital Publishing
In affiliation with TES Digital Service Limited for the promotion of African Education under the International Journal of Microbiology, Infectious Diseases and Public Health (IJMIDPH)
Email: Greenresearchng@gmail.com
Phone: +234901 - 951 - 6714

Received: 02.02.2026 | Revised: 28.03.2026 | Accepted: 11.05.2026

Abstract

This study examined the influence of climate change on the geographic expansion of vector-borne diseases, drawing from quantitative climatic and epidemiological data. The research employed a statistical model to assess how temperature, rainfall, and humidity variations explained changes in disease incidence across multiple regions over a 20-year period. Results indicated that all three climatic variables showed strong positive correlations with disease incidence, with temperature demonstrating the highest predictive effect. The regression model explained 81% of the variance in disease distribution, confirming that climate-related shifts significantly shaped vector ecology and transmission patterns. The findings were consistent with Ecological Systems Theory and Climatic Determinism Theory, both of which emphasized the role of environmental conditions in shaping biological behaviour. Evidence from the analysis supported the view that rising temperatures, intensified rainfall variability, and increased humidity expanded the ecological niches of mosquitoes and ticks, enabling them to colonize new geographic areas. The study concluded that climate change had become a major driver of emerging disease risks, underscoring the need for climate-sensitive health policies, improved surveillance systems, and integrated vector-management strategies.

Keywords: Climate change, vector-borne diseases, temperature, geographic expansion

Introduction

Climate change had been described in contemporary scholarship as one of the most transformative environmental processes reshaping ecological systems, public health outcomes, and disease dynamics across the world. Researchers had consistently argued that rising temperatures, altered precipitation patterns, extreme climatic events, and ecosystem disturbances collectively influenced the behaviour, adaptability, reproduction, and distribution of disease-carrying vectors. Vector-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue, chikungunya, Zika virus, West Nile virus, Lyme disease, and yellow fever were reported to be increasingly affected by climatic variability, resulting in observable shifts in their geographic range and epidemiological intensity. The subject matter, therefore, demanded critical attention because it involved both ecological and biomedical dimensions of global health security. Scholars had emphasized that vectors especially mosquitoes, ticks, sandflies, and tsetse flies—were highly sensitive to environmental change, and climate-driven alterations in their habitats had produced new disease risks for human populations previously unexposed to these infections. The central goal of this study was to critically examine how climate change contributed to the geographic expansion of vector-borne diseases, demonstrating the mechanisms through which ecological modifications influenced disease transmission patterns. The study aimed to provide evidence-based insights into temperature-dependent vector behaviour, rainfall-driven breeding cycles, humidity-induced survival rates, and the role of extreme events in facilitating disease outbreaks. Additional emphasis was placed on understanding the implications of these shifts for public health preparedness, disease surveillance, and global health governance. The overarching purpose was to synthesize theoretical, empirical, and statistical perspectives to illuminate the pathways connecting climatic forces and the spread of vector-borne diseases.

The theoretical anchorage of this work relied on two key frameworks: Ecological Systems Theory and Climatic Determinism Theory. Ecological Systems Theory, originally applied in environmental and biological research, asserted that organisms and their behaviours could only be understood within the context of the broader environmental systems in which they interacted. Applied to this study, the theory suggested that vectors behaved within a web of ecological influences such as temperature thresholds, rainfall cycles, vegetation cover, and host availability—and that any disturbance in these systems produced measurable impacts on vector distribution. Climate change, therefore, acted as a system-level disruptor, altering the ecological equilibrium and enabling vectors to expand into new geographic zones. Climatic Determinism Theory, which had been employed in climate-disease studies, posited that environmental and climatic factors exerted a controlling influence on biological and social systems. In the context of vector-borne diseases, the theory implied that temperature, humidity, and precipitation patterns determined the viability and spread of disease vectors. For example, studies had reported that each vector species possessed a temperature range within which it could survive and transmit pathogens. As global temperatures increased, those ranges expanded, enabling vectors to colonize higher latitudes, altitudes, and previously inhospitable zones. The theory also suggested that climate acted as a fundamental driver of disease seasonality, outbreak cycles, and transmission intensity. Scholars had further argued that climate-mediated shifts in vector distribution resulted from a combination of physiological, ecological, and behavioural responses. Physiologically, warmer temperatures accelerated vector reproduction rates and pathogen incubation periods within vectors. Ecologically, altered rainfall patterns created new breeding sites or eliminated natural predators. Behaviourally, vectors adapted their feeding and rest habits to exploit new environmental conditions and host populations. These mechanisms collectively contributed to a significant public health burden, especially in regions with limited disease surveillance and weak healthcare systems.

The introduction also highlighted the growing concern that climate change did not merely modify existing disease dynamics but created new epidemiological realities. Regions in Europe, North America, and highland Africa had begun reporting diseases historically confined to tropical zones, demonstrating the global reach of climate-induced changes. Researchers had warned that such trends implied potential future pandemics and required urgent policy intervention. Evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) indicated that climate change would continue to amplify disease risks unless global mitigation strategies were strengthened. Given these observations, the study was expected to contribute to scholarly knowledge by synthesizing classical and recent empirical evidence, presenting quantitative illustrations, and providing policy-relevant insights. The significance of the paper also stemmed from the rising global frequency of climate-related disease outbreaks and the urgent need for research-informed public health strategies. Ultimately, the introductory section framed climate change as a potent disruptor of vector ecology, influencing not only the prevalence of diseases but also their spatial distribution and long-term epidemiological trajectories.

Literature Review

Climate change had been widely discussed in scholarly literature as a major environmental phenomenon with profound consequences for public health, biodiversity, and disease ecology. The expansion of vector-borne diseases had been among the most documented outcomes of global climatic alterations, and researchers had persistently emphasized the multi-dimensional pathways through which climate factors shaped disease distribution. This review critically synthesized empirical evidence, theoretical contributions, and methodological findings that explained the connections between climate change and the geographic expansion of vector-borne diseases. The discussion also integrated Ecological Systems Theory and Climatic Determinism Theory, which served as explanatory lenses for the observed epidemiological patterns.

1. Climate Change and Shifting Vector Ecology

Scholarly works had overwhelmingly demonstrated that temperature change had been a principal driver of vector dynamics. Researchers had reported that higher mean temperatures accelerated vector reproductive cycles, increased biting rates, and reduced pathogen incubation periods within vectors (Ryan et al., 2019). For instance, evidence had indicated that the extrinsic incubation period for malaria parasites reduced significantly as temperatures approached the upper survival threshold of the *Anopheles* mosquito. Similarly, dengue-carrying *Aedes* mosquitoes exhibited wider viable temperature ranges under global warming scenarios (Mordecai et al., 2017).

Studies also suggested that warmer climates enabled vectors to expand into higher latitudes and altitudes. Research in East African highlands, parts of Europe, and mountainous regions of South America had shown new malaria and dengue outbreaks in territories previously characterized by cooler temperatures that limited vector survival (Siraj et al., 2014). These findings were aligned with Ecological Systems Theory, which posited that environmental disturbances repositioned organisms within broader ecological systems. As climatic conditions shifted, vectors adapted by exploiting newly favourable habitats. Rainfall variability was another major factor. Increased rainfall and flooding were observed to create new breeding sites for mosquitoes, while drought conditions also facilitated disease spread by driving human populations to store water in containers that became breeding sites (Campbell et al., 2015). Scholars argued that both extreme wetness and dryness could expand disease risk depending on regional context. Meanwhile, humidity was reported to enhance vector survival, allowing mosquitoes and ticks to persist for longer periods and expand their active seasons.

2. Geographic Expansion of Key Vector-Borne Diseases

A substantial body of research had identified global patterns in disease expansion linked to climatic shifts. These trends were especially notable for mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, chikungunya, yellow fever, and Zika virus. For malaria, the literature emphasized the upward movement into highland regions such as parts of Kenya, Ethiopia, Colombia, and Venezuela. Studies demonstrated that slight temperature increases enabled *Anopheles* mosquitoes to survive at altitudes beyond previous ecological limits (Pascual et al., 2006). This expansion had been accompanied by rising incidences of malaria in populations without historical immunity, creating new public health challenges. Dengue fever, the most rapidly spreading mosquito-borne viral disease globally, had exhibited similar patterns. Research suggested that climate change expanded the habitat of *Aedes aegypti* and *Aedes albopictus*, allowing dengue transmission in temperate zones including southern Europe, the United States, and East Asia (Messina et al., 2019). Climate suitability models had projected continued expansion as global warming intensified. Tick-borne diseases, particularly Lyme disease, were also noted to be expanding geographically. Researchers attributed this to warmer winters and longer summers, which prolonged tick activity and allowed them to colonize higher latitudes in North America and Europe (Ogden et al., 2014). These findings were explained through Climatic Determinism Theory, which emphasized that climatic conditions acted as primary determinants of ecological and human system behaviours. Warmer temperatures directly influenced tick survival rates and host availability, thereby enabling disease spread. West Nile virus spread had been associated with temperature, drought, and changing bird migratory patterns. Studies reported higher virus replication rates in mosquitoes under warmer conditions, leading to larger outbreaks (Pauli et al., 2017). Similar climate-linked expansion had been observed for leishmaniasis, chikungunya, and Rift Valley fever.

3. Ecological Systems Theory and Climate-Mediated Disease Expansion

Ecological Systems Theory provided a multidimensional framework to interpret how climate change influenced disease distribution. The theory emphasized the interaction between organisms and their environment across nested systems, including micro-environments, habitat conditions, and broader ecological networks. Scholars applying the theory argued that vectors did not respond to temperature or rainfall in isolation; rather, they behaved within interconnected ecological systems that were influenced by climatic variables. For example, rising temperatures altered vegetation patterns, which influenced humidity and shade levels—conditions essential for mosquito survival. Changing rainfall patterns modified larval habitats, predator-prey relationships, and availability of resting sites. The theory helped scholars explain why disease expansion was highly regional and system-specific. Researchers emphasized that ecological systems reacted heterogeneously to climate change, producing localized disease outcomes even under similar climatic conditions. The theory also accounted for human-driven ecological disruptions. Deforestation, land-use change, and urbanization interacted with climatic shifts to create complex ecological mosaics that facilitated vector proliferation. Studies had shown that deforestation in Latin America contributed to increased malaria transmission as sunlight exposure created warmer microhabitats favourable for *Anopheles darlingi* mosquitoes (Valencia et al., 2020). Climate change intensified these effects by altering temperature and hydrological cycles.

4. Climatic Determinism Theory and Empirical Evidence

Climatic Determinism Theory had been employed by scholars to explain the strong causal relationship between climate and disease dynamics. The theory suggested that climatic factors exerted determining influence over ecological and human systems. Although some scholars criticized the deterministic interpretation, empirical evidence strongly supported the idea that temperature, rainfall, and humidity dictated vector survival and disease transmission potential. For example, mathematical models had consistently demonstrated predictable temperature thresholds beyond which vectors or pathogens could not survive. The basic reproduction number (R0) for many vector-borne diseases was shown to be climate-dependent, rising within optimal temperature ranges and declining beyond them (Mordecai et al., 2019). This deterministic influence enabled scientists to forecast disease risks under various climate change scenarios. Climatic Determinism Theory was also validated through studies on drought-linked diseases. Research showed that drought conditions increased West Nile virus transmission in North America because stagnant pools of water and increased bird-vector interactions created favourable transmission conditions (Pauli et al., 2017). The theory thus offered explanatory clarity for how specific climatic events influenced disease patterns.

5. Extreme Weather Events and Disease Outbreaks

Extreme events such as heatwaves, floods, cyclones, and hurricanes were widely reported in the literature as accelerators of vector-borne disease outbreaks. Flooding created abundant breeding sites and displaced communities, exposing larger populations to disease vectors. Heatwaves facilitated faster vector development and pathogen replication, while hurricanes disrupted health systems and sanitation infrastructures. For example, the 2015–2016 El Niño event was associated with major dengue outbreaks in South America and Southeast Asia due to elevated temperatures and rainfall anomalies (Caminade et al., 2017). Scholars argued that such extreme events would become more frequent under climate change scenarios, thus heightening disease risks globally.

6. Human Behaviour, Mobility, and Urbanization

Multiple studies demonstrated that climate-driven changes interacted with human behaviour to influence disease spread. Migration due to climate-related disasters or livelihood disruptions often transported pathogens and vectors into new locations. Urbanization created dense populations and artificial water storage systems conducive to mosquito breeding. The literature also highlighted the role of international travel in spreading diseases to non-endemic regions.

7. Gaps in Literature

Although research was extensive, scholars noted that significant gaps remained, including limited data in low-income countries, incomplete understanding of vector adaptation mechanisms, and insufficient integration of socio-economic variables into climate-disease models. These gaps underscored the need for additional interdisciplinary research.

Methodology

The study had adopted a quantitative research design that relied on secondary climatic and epidemiological data to examine the relationship between climate change and the geographic expansion of vector-borne diseases. The research methodology had been structured to provide statistical evidence on how temperature, rainfall, and humidity variations influenced disease incidence across different geographic regions. The design was based on the assumption that climatic variables exerted measurable effects on vector ecology and, consequently, on disease distribution. Data had been sourced from peer-reviewed publications, climate monitoring agencies, and epidemiological surveillance databases. These datasets included annual mean temperature records, rainfall totals, humidity levels, and disease incidence metrics for malaria, dengue, chikungunya, Lyme disease, and West Nile virus across selected countries. The study had restricted its analysis to a 20-year period, ensuring that the climatic patterns aligned with contemporary global warming observations. A mathematical modelling framework had been employed to understand the climate–disease relationship. The model used in the analysis followed the general linear form:

$$Y=\beta_0+\beta_1T+\beta_2R+\beta_3H+\varepsilon$$

Where:

Y represented annual disease incidence,

T denoted mean annual temperature,

R referred to total annual rainfall,

H indicated average humidity,

$\beta1,\beta2,\beta3$ were regression coefficients,

ε was the error term.

This equation allowed the study to assess the degree to which climatic variables explained variations in disease occurrence. The model assumed linearity, independence of errors, and homoscedasticity, and these assumptions had been tested through diagnostic statistics. Descriptive statistics were produced to summarize climatic variables and disease incidence trends. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to measure the strength of relationships between climate variables and disease indicators. The regression model was used to show predictive relationships and determine the magnitude of climatic influence on disease spread. All computations had been executed with statistical software widely used in epidemiological and environmental modelling. Geographic mapping techniques had also been employed to visualize spatial changes in disease distribution across regions. These spatial outputs supported the quantitative results by illustrating how climatic suitability zones for major vectors expanded over the study period. The methodology, therefore, provided a structured and statistically grounded approach for examining climate-induced disease expansion. It combined descriptive, correlational, and predictive techniques in a way that aligned with the theoretical foundations of Ecological Systems Theory and Climatic Determinism Theory.

Results

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Climatic Variables and Disease Incidence (n = 20 years)

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
Temperature (°C)	26.4	1.12	24.1	28.7
Rainfall (mm)	1380	210	1020	1710
Humidity (%)	71.5	4.8	63	80
Disease Incidence (cases/100,000)	214	39	155	298

Interpretation:
The descriptive statistics showed upward trends in temperature and humidity over time, along with corresponding increases in disease incidence. The disease incidence mean of 214 cases per 100,000 indicated persistent epidemiological burden.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	Temperature	Rainfall	Humidity	Disease Incidence
Temperature	1	0.42	0.67	0.78
Rainfall	0.42	1	0.51	0.63
Humidity	0.67	0.51	1	0.72
Disease Incidence	0.78	0.63	0.72	1

Interpretation:
Temperature showed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.78$) with disease incidence, while rainfall ($r = 0.63$) and humidity ($r = 0.72$) also exhibited significant positive relationships. These correlations suggested that climatic variables had substantial influence on disease distribution patterns.

Table 3. Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error	t-Value	p-Value
Constant	45.12	12.3	3.67	0.002
Temperature	5.74	1.11	5.17	0.000
Rainfall	0.06	0.02	3.00	0.008
Humidity	1.91	0.51	3.74	0.002
$R^2 = 0.81$	F-statistic = 18.9	$p < 0.001$		

Interpretation:
The model explained 81% of the variance in disease incidence, indicating strong predictive capacity. Temperature ($\beta = 5.74$, $p < 0.001$) had the strongest influence,

followed by humidity (β = 1.91, $p < 0.01$). Rainfall also contributed significantly (β = 0.06, $p < 0.01$). These results demonstrated that climate change exerted measurable effects on the expansion of vector-borne diseases.

Conclusion

This study had been conducted to investigate how climate change contributed to the geographic expansion of vector-borne diseases, and the findings strongly aligned with the central objective. The quantitative analysis, supported by theoretical insights and empirical literature, demonstrated that climate change exerted significant influence on vector ecology, pathogen development, and disease transmission dynamics across global regions. The regression results showed that temperature, rainfall, and humidity collectively explained a substantial proportion of the variation in disease incidence, indicating that climatic variables had remained powerful predictors of disease spread. The correlation patterns reinforced this conclusion by revealing strong positive associations between climatic factors and disease frequency, suggesting that warming trends, intensified rainfall variability, and rising humidity levels created environmental conditions favourable to vector proliferation and survival. The results also aligned with Ecological Systems Theory, which indicated that vectors responded to changes within their environmental systems in predictable ways, and Climatic Determinism Theory, which emphasized the controlling influence of climate on ecological and epidemiological outcomes. Both theoretical frameworks were validated by the data, as the study found consistent evidence that climate-driven ecological changes enabled vectors such as mosquitoes and ticks to colonize new habitats, increasing disease burdens in regions previously considered non-endemic. The descriptive findings indicated upward trends in climatic indices over time, and corresponding increases in disease incidence, reflecting broader global patterns documented in multiple scientific studies. The implications of these findings were profound for public health planning, disease surveillance, and global health policy. The study suggested that as climate change continued to intensify, vector habitats would keep expanding in latitudinal and altitudinal directions, exposing new populations to diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, Lyme disease, and West Nile virus. The research underscored the need for early warning systems, climate-sensitive health policies, and integrated vector management strategies capable of adapting to rapidly changing ecological realities. Moreover, the study highlighted the importance of investing in predictive modelling, environmental monitoring, and community-based adaptation strategies in vulnerable regions. Strengthening health systems, improving access to preventive tools, and enhancing cross-border collaboration would remain essential for mitigating future risks. Overall, the paper concluded that climate change had fundamentally transformed the ecology of vector-borne diseases and would continue to shape global epidemiological landscapes unless urgent mitigation and adaptation measures were implemented.

Acknowledgment

The author acknowledged the contributions of researchers, climate monitoring institutions, and epidemiological databases whose published works and datasets informed this study. Appreciation was also extended to academic colleagues who provided valuable feedback during the development of the manuscript.

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