UNEP - United Nations Environment Program

Climate-Induced Displacement

Overview

Climate change has undeniably augmented the frequency, intensity, and geographic reach of natural disasters in recent years (unep.org). Around the globe, communities are witnessing unprecedented extreme weather events that shatter lives and livelihoods. Populations affected by these disasters often watch their homes and communities literally disappear, leaving them without shelter or a means to live. The human toll is mounting: at the end of 2022, 108.4 million people were displaced worldwide (climate-refugees.org). While conflicts remain a major driver, climate-related shocks are an increasingly significant factor, with weather disasters triggering nearly 32 million new displacements in 2022 alone (climate-refugees.org). These mass relocations underscore an unfortunate reality: as climate impacts intensify, the number of people forced to migrate is rising sharply. Those spared from the necessity of moving may soon be the exception rather than the rule, as climate change reshapes global migration and displacement trends.

It is important to note that climate-induced displacement can be both internal and cross-border. Many people migrate within their own country—for example, farmers relocating from drought-stricken rural areas to cities in search of food and work. Others, however, are beginning to cross national borders in greater numbers as entire regions become uninhabitable. The World Bank's *Groundswell* report projects that up to 216 million people could be compelled to move within their own countries by 2050 in a worst-case scenario (weforum.org; unep.org), and this figure excludes potential cross-border "climate refugees." In 2025, the international

community faces a defining challenge in how to address this human exodus before it escalates further.

The UNEP

In June of 1972, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was created as a result of the Stockholm Conference.[1] The aim of this meeting—to provide guidelines to governments on how to address global environmental problems—resulted in the UNEP's creation with a mandate to assist nations in improving their quality of life by caring for their environment.[1] Furthermore, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) works with developing countries to assist in implementing environmentally sound practices and policies, and likewise coordinates the United Nations' environmental activities.[1]

It is crucial to note that the UNEP does not work in a vacuum, but rather pursues its mission in conjunction with several organizations and governing bodies, such as the Global Environment Facility and the Green Climate Fund, to provide innovative and effective solutions to environmental issues. With a particular focus on climate change, the UNEP aims to aid countries in disaster response planning by providing assistance in leadership, mitigation, technology, and finance. Similarly, in times of active natural disasters, the UNEP conducts environmental assessments in affected areas and provides legislative and institutional assistance as needed.[2] Recently, the UNEP has been particularly involved in assisting Afghanistan, Sudan, and Haiti by sending relief and supporting rebuilding efforts.

Defining Terms

"Climate refugees" is a popular but unofficial term lacking a universally accepted definition. The phrase intuitively suggests refugees created by climate change, yet both components—"climate" and "refugee"—carry distinct legal and political meanings. Under the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, a refugee has a very specific definition: someone who has crossed an international border due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. People displaced solely by environmental factors do not fit this definition.

Without established legal recognition for "climate refugees," those displaced by climate events fall into a protection gap. People fleeing floods, storms, or drought do not easily qualify as refugees under international law, nor are they protected as a class by any binding UN convention. Most climate-induced migration today occurs within countries (internal displacement), but when people do cross borders, they often find no clear asylum status awaiting them. The lack of a definition has real consequences: there is no agreed international responsibility for assisting climate-displaced people, and no guaranteed rights or visa status if they cross into a new country. In spite of the lack of formal recognition, the number of individuals self-identifying as climate refugees is on the rise.[4]

The Global Picture

A refugee, according to the definition established by the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention—a multilateral treaty with 151 signatory nations—is a person outside their country of nationality owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted due to race, religion, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion and who is unable to receive sufficient protection

within their home nation's borders.[5] Evidently, these seventy-year-old agreements are out of touch with current circumstances, since individuals forced to displace themselves due to climate change do not fall under the definition of those who qualify for refugee status.

Since the year 2000, the world has experienced 2,500 natural disasters, affecting more than 2 billion people worldwide.[2] Climate change will continue to alter the severity and duration of future natural disasters. Individuals forced to move as a result of these disasters are left in legal limbo, and many more people will remain in this state of uncertainty. At the time of the Geneva Refugee Conference, the international community could not predict the effects of climate change, and the legislation was passed within the context of the early to mid-20th century—conditions that differ greatly from the novel threats facing the modern world.

However, within the present context, given the rise in phenomena such as war, persecution, famine, and the resultant resurgence of xenophobia, there is a lack of willingness and fear among members of the international community to consider redefining the meaning of "refugee." These overlapping challenges make the task of defining climate refugees politically difficult, which helps explain the topic's continued avoidance.[6]

Recent international legal and policy developments have increased attention to climate harms. In July 2025, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion on states' obligations with respect to climate change, recognizing that climate impacts can implicate international obligations and affect human rights and state interests, including in relation to sea-level rise (ICJ Advisory Opinion, 23 July 2025).

Evidently, there is increasing global resolve to combat climate change. Most governments and the United Nations recognize a warming planet and its consequences as legitimate issues.

However, there remains a lack of political will to develop a comprehensive plan to protect refugees affected by such changes.[7] In a time when individuals are increasingly concerned about borders and national security, leaders seeking political survival often appeal to nationalist sentiments, making them reluctant to accept new populations.[7] Currently, as noted by the Nansen Initiative, the only governments that explicitly recognize forced displacement related to disasters as a reality are Switzerland and Norway.[5] It is telling that this initiative has received significant backlash from the international community, which remains largely avoidant of a multilaterally accepted status for climate-induced migrants.

Economic Perspective on the Issue

While the threats posed by climate change are largely universal, communities in economically precarious positions are significantly more likely to experience the full impact of natural disasters, both due to a reduced ability to mitigate disaster effects and to rebuild afterward. Indeed, the poorest countries are usually hit the hardest by disasters,[8] with South and East Asia among the most affected regions.[7] Wealthy countries, on the other hand, can invest in infrastructure and planning that provide security when disasters strike. Similarly, privileges often taken for granted—such as disaster insurance, travel freedom, and the option to live in less disaster-prone areas—are luxuries unavailable to many populations. While industrialized nations possess the financial and technical capacity to protect vulnerable countries, there remains a distinct lack of leadership from the Global North and an evident absence of sufficient monetary aid being offered to the periphery.[8]

Scientific Perspective on the Issue

Geographic location has a significant effect on climate disasters and, consequently, on the creation of potential climate refugees. Scientists predict that rising sea levels and increasingly dangerous environmental disasters will place small islands in the Pacific and Indian Oceans at a disproportionate risk of generating climate displacement.[7] It is anticipated that individuals will be displaced at a scale never before seen in modern history. For instance, islands such as Tuvalu and Kiribati in the Pacific Ocean are at risk of becoming completely submerged. The ICJ's 2025 advisory opinion acknowledged that sea-level rise threatens the territorial integrity of small island states, raising novel questions about statehood and the rights of displaced citizens (voelkerrechtsblog.org). However, science cannot yet predict exactly when a nation might become unviable, as outcomes depend heavily on emissions reductions and the effectiveness of adaptation measures such as coastal defenses. As explored above, disparities in governance, economics, and geography clearly result in disproportionate impacts of climate change on nations and their inhabitants.

Consequences

It is estimated that by the year 2050, there will be between 100 and 300 million climate refugees worldwide.[9] This alarming statistic raises critical questions: where will these millions of people go, and what will happen to the places they are forced to leave behind? These questions are no longer theoretical, but increasingly central to global stability and development planning.

One of the most immediate consequences of climate-induced migration is mass relocation toward urban centers.[10] Approximately one billion people—nearly one-third of the world's urban population—currently live in slums. Increasing uncertainty regarding access to food, water, and shelter will accelerate rural-to-urban migration in peripheral countries.[10] While urban centers

offer economic and social opportunities, rapid urbanization places significant strain on housing, sanitation, healthcare, and public services. Given the number of people already living in poor conditions, it is evident that cities are ill-equipped to manage the consequences of unplanned urban growth. Despite this, experts estimate that the number of people living in informal urban settlements will increase to 1.7 billion by 2030.[10]

Another consequence of climate displacement is the hollowing of economies.[10] Not only are climate refugees affected by economic instability, but economies themselves are weakened by displacement. Markets suffer from the loss of human capital, while declines in labor participation and disruptions to education undermine long-term economic prosperity.

Health and welfare are also gravely affected by displacement.[10] Population movements make disease control more difficult and increase mortality risks, as demonstrated by epidemics arising in displaced populations. Historical evidence consistently shows that refugees and displaced persons experience worse health outcomes than any other population.

Finally, climate-induced displacement can contribute to political instability and ethnic conflict.[10] Group migration alters demographic distributions, often placing previously separate groups in close proximity. This can intensify competition over resources, a dynamic already evident in parts of Africa. In Nigeria, for example, scholars argue that climate-driven migration from arid regions may exacerbate state fragility and increase pressure on neighboring regions. While large-scale population movements are acknowledged by the United Nations Security Council as a global concern, the absence of a clear definition and protection framework for climate refugees leaves responsibility for addressing their plight with the international community.[10]

Proposed Solutions

Climate change is contributing to both slow-onset and sudden-onset events, including shifting rainfall patterns, ocean acidification, rising sea levels, and increasingly extreme weather. Recent scientific consensus confirms that these processes are already reshaping human mobility patterns worldwide. While some experts argue that certain impacts of climate change may be irreversible, others maintain that meaningful mitigation and adaptation efforts can still reduce the scale and severity of displacement if implemented promptly.[12] As such, a coordinated response to climate-induced displacement is urgently required, yet a comprehensive and binding international framework remains absent.

Despite the persistence of nationalist and protectionist ideologies in many states, it is vital to recognize the moral and ethical responsibilities that wealthy nations have toward both the planet and humanity. Given that these nations are disproportionately responsible for greenhouse gas emissions driving climate change, they bear a greater obligation to support countries most affected by climate-induced displacement.[12]

Many scholars and policymakers argue that a key step toward addressing this crisis is the formal recognition of climate-displaced persons as a distinct group in need of international protection.[12] However, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has expressed concern that granting climate refugees the same legal status as traditional refugees could undermine existing protections.[11] Conversely, a growing number of scholars and UN officials argue that this presents a false dilemma and that climate-displaced persons can be protected through complementary legal frameworks. To these leaders and scholars, the term

"refugee" carries a moral connotation and conveys societal responsibility, thereby granting legitimacy and protection.[7]

Following recognition and legitimization, this committee encourages the development of effective migration schemes for disappearing nations and vulnerable populations, alongside consideration of resettlement funding mechanisms. While countries still have time to implement assistance strategies due to the slow but continuous progression of climate impacts, the issue demands urgent attention. Individuals from high-risk regions, particularly low-lying island states, have expressed a desire to relocate with dignity.[7] It is therefore incumbent upon governments and the international community to design pathways that ensure safe passage and protection when relocation becomes unavoidable.[7] In weighing investments in adaptation infrastructure against relocation efforts, delegates are encouraged to consider the long-term economic and practical benefits of funding relocation in regions unlikely to remain habitable. Ultimately, solutions must balance ethical, legal, political, financial, and ideological considerations.

Questions to Consider

1. What is your country's definition of climate change, and does it acknowledge human influence? How might this influence your country's stance on climate-induced displacement?
2. What are your country's laws or policies regarding climate-displaced persons or "climate refugees"? For instance, would your country admit someone fleeing a climate disaster, and under what status?

3. How do your country's asylum and immigration laws for displaced people compare to those of other countries in your region? Are there regional frameworks addressing disaster displacement that your country is part of?
4. What realistic **preventative** measures can your country implement to reduce climate-related displacement (e.g. investing in adaptation, early warning systems, resilient infrastructure in vulnerable areas)?
5. What realistic **reactive** measures can your country and the international community take to deal with climate migrants when displacement does occur (e.g. humanitarian aid, temporary protection visas, resettlement programs)?
6. In addressing climate-induced displacement, should the focus be on **preventative** approaches (mitigation and adaptation to avoid displacement) or **reactionary** approaches (managing migration and relocation after displacement)? How can a balance be struck between the two?
7. What are the main factors or groups in your country that influence its policy on recognizing and protecting climate refugees? (Think of political, economic, or public opinion factors that might support or oppose offering protection to displaced foreigners.)
8. What is the extent of **climate risk** your country itself faces? Is your nation more likely to **produce** climate-displaced people (e.g. highly vulnerable to disasters) or to **receive** climate-displaced people (e.g. a nearby safe destination) – or both? How does this inform your perspective on international cooperation for this issue?
9. How can the international community, perhaps through UNEP or other UN bodies, better coordinate efforts on this issue? Would your country support new international legal

instruments or funding mechanisms to assist climate-induced migrants, and under what conditions?

Useful Delegate Resources

1. https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html
2. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/06/lets-talk-about-climate-migrants-not-climate-refugees/
3. http://climatemigration.org.uk
4. https://www.iom.int

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[2] "Disasters and Conflicts." Environment Programme – United Nations https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/disasters-conflicts

[3] "What is Climate Change?" David Suzuki Foundation https://davidsuzuki.org/what-you-can-do/what-is-climate-change/

[4] "Climate and Conflict." Climate and Migration Coalition. http://climatemigration.org.uk

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[9] "Protecting Refugees." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees - The UN Refugee Agency. http://www.unhcr.org/protect.html

[10] "Migration and Climate Change." International Organization for Migration. IOM Migration Research Series. 2008. Vol 31, p. 32-34

[11] "Climate Change and Disaster Displacement." The United Nations Refugee Agency – UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html

[12] "Migration and Climate Change." International Organization for Migration. IOM Migration Research Series. 2008. Vol 31, p. 36-40