

Climate Refugees: The Growing Challenge of Displacement in International Politics

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Source: TBS²

Introduction

The phenomenon of the climate refugees represents one of the most pressing and complex challenges facing the international community in the 21st century. As global temperatures rise and extreme weather events become more frequent and severe, millions of people are being forced to abandon their homes and livelihoods, creating a novel category of displaced persons that defies traditional definitions and legal frameworks. This commentary examines the growing challenge of climate refugees, exploring the multifaceted nature of the problem. Its implications for international politics, and potential solutions to address this emerging crisis.

The Emergence and Scale of Climate Refugees

The concept of climate refugees, also referred to as environmental migrants or eco-refugees, has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years as the impacts of climate change become increasingly apparent. While there is no universally accepted definition, climate refugees are generally conceptualized as individuals or groups who are forced to leave their traditional habitats,

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² <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/developed-nations-should-accept-climate-refugees-experts-574022>

temporarily or permanently, due to marked environmental disruption that jeopardizes their existence and/or seriously affects their quality of life.³

The scale of the phenomenon is substantial. The World Bank projects that by 2050, up to 216 million people could be internally displaced within their own countries due to climate change impacts across six world regions.⁴ This figure excludes those who may be compelled to cross international borders, suggesting that the total number of climate refugees could be significantly higher.

Causes and Complexities of Climate-Induced Displacement

The causes of climate-induced displacement are diverse and often interconnected. Rising sea levels threaten to inundate low-laying coastal areas and small island nations, while desertification and drought render vast swaths of land uninhabitable. Extreme weather events such as hurricanes, floods, and wildfires can destroy infrastructure and dwellings, necessitating the relocation of entire communities. Moreover, climate change can exacerbate existing social, economic, and political tensions, potentially leading to conflicts that further drive displacement⁵.



Source: Concern USA⁶

Recent research has highlighted the significant impact of slow-onset events such as sea-level rise, desertification, and loss of biodiversity. These gradual changes can lead to what scholars term “trapped populations”- individuals or communities who lack the resources to migrate despite deteriorating environmental degradation, socioeconomic factors, and human mobility.

³ Essam El-Hinnawi, "Environmental Refugees" (Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme, 1985).

⁴ Kanta Kumari Rigaud et al., "Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration" (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018)

⁵ Jon Barnett and W. Neil Adger, "Climate Change, Human Security and Violent Conflict," *Political Geography* 26, no. 6 (2007): 639-655.

⁶ <https://concernusa.org/news/refugee-idp-migrant-difference/>

Moreover, climate change can exacerbate existing social, economic, and political tensions, potentially leading to conflicts that further drive displacement. A 2019 study by Abel et al. demonstrate how climate variability and extremes can increase the risk of armed conflict, particularly in regions with pre-existing vulnerabilities⁷.

Legal and Political Challenges

One of the most significant obstacles in addressing the climate refugee crisis is the absence of a clear legal framework for protecting and assisting those displaced by environmental factors. The 1951 Refugee Convention, which forms the cornerstone of international refugee law, does not recognize climate or environmental factors as grounds for refugee status⁸.

However, recent developments suggest a growing recognition of climate-induced displacement in international forums. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018, explicitly acknowledges climate change as a driver of migration⁹. While not legally binding, this recognition represents a significant step towards addressing climate-induced displacement at the global level.

Moreover, a landmark ruling by the UN Human Rights Committee in January 2020 established that countries cannot deport people who face climate change-induced conditions that violate the right to life¹⁰. This decision, while not creating a new legal status for climate refugees, does establish that climate change can be a valid basis for seeking asylum.

The political challenges extend beyond legal definitions. Climate-induced displacement raises complex questions about responsibility and burden-sharing. Developing countries, which have contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions, are often the most imbalance has led to calls for greater support from developed nations in addressing the crisis, both in terms of mitigation efforts to reduce emissions and adaptation measures to help vulnerable communities cope with climate impacts.

Security Implications

The climate refugee crisis also has significant implications for global security. Large-scale populations movements can strain resources, exacerbate existing tensions, and potentially lead to conflicts in both sending and receiving areas. Climate-related displacement can interact with other drivers of insecurity, potentially exacerbating fragility in already vulnerable regions.

⁷ Guy J. Abel et al., "Climate, Conflict and Forced Migration," *Global Environmental Change* 54 (2019): 239-249.

⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees" (Geneva: UNHCR, 2010).

⁹ United Nations General Assembly, "Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration," A/RES/73/195 (2018).

¹⁰ UN Human Rights Committee, "Views Adopted by the Committee under Article 5 (4) of the Optional Protocol, Concerning Communication No. 2728/2016," CCPR/C/127/D/2728/2016 (2020)

Moreover, the securitization of climate migration – framing it primarily as a security threat rather than a humanitarian or development issue – risks further marginalizing vulnerable populations and potentially justifying more restrictive migration policies. This approach could undermine efforts to address the root cause of climate-induced displacement and provide adequate protection to those affected.¹¹

Economic and Social Impacts

The economic and social consequences of climate-induced displacement are profound and far-reaching. For individuals and communities forced to relocate, the loss of homes, livelihoods, and cultural heritage can be devastating. The process of resettlement often involves significant challenges, including finding new source of income, adapting to unfamiliar environments, rebuilding social networks¹².

For receiving areas, the influx of climate refugees can place considerable strain on infrastructure, public services, and local economies. While migration can bring benefits in terms of labor and skills, it can also lead to social tensions and competition for resources, particularly in areas already facing economic or environmental challenges¹³.

At a broader level, climate-induced displacement represents a significant impediment to economic development and poverty reduction efforts. Recent estimates suggest that climate change could push more than 130 million people into poverty by 2030¹⁴. This setback to global development goals underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address both the causes and consequences of climate-induced displacement.



¹¹ Giovanni Bettini, "Where Next? Climate Change, Migration, and the (Bio)politics of Adaptation," *Global Policy* 13, no. 1 (2022): 122-133.

¹² Koko Warner et al., "Integrating Human Mobility Issues Within National Adaptation Plans," Policy Brief, United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (2014).

¹³ Cristina Cattaneo et al., "Human Migration in the Era of Climate Change," *Review of Environmental Economics and Policy* 16, no. 2 (2019): 289-308

¹⁴ Stephane Hallegatte et al., "Shock Waves: Managing the Impacts of Climate Change on Poverty" (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2016).

Source: South Asian Voices¹⁵

Intersectionality and Climate Displacement

Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding and addressing climate-induced displacement. Factors such as gender, age, disability, and socioeconomic status significantly influence individuals' vulnerability to climate impacts and their capacity to adapt or migrate¹⁶. A 2022 report by CARE International highlights how women and girls are disproportionately affected by climate-induced displacement, facing increased risks of gender-based violence, early marriage, and disrupted education¹⁷. This underscores the need for gender-responsive policies and programs in addressing climate migration.

Technological Innovations in Addressing Climate Migration

Advancements in technology are offering new tools for predicting, monitoring, and responding to climate-induced displacement. Satellite imaging, big data analytics, and artificial intelligence are increasingly being employed to forecast population movements and inform policy responses.

For example, a 2022 study by Šedová et al. demonstrates the potential of machine learning techniques to predict climate-induced migration patterns with greater accuracy¹⁸. Such innovations could significantly enhance the capacity of governments and international organizations to prepare for and manage climate-induced displacement.

Climate Finance and Migration

Recent years have seen increased attention to the role of climate finance in addressing climate-induced migration. The Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage, established under the UNFCCC, has begun to explore financial instruments to support communities affected by climate change, including those facing displacement¹⁹.

However, a 2023 report by Oxfam International highlights that current climate finance flows remain insufficient to meet the adaptation needs of developing countries, let alone address the

¹⁵ <https://southasianvoices.org/geo-f-oth-n-climate-migration-03-28-2024/>

¹⁶ Christiane Fröhlich and Silja Klepp, "Effects of Climate Change on Migration Crises in Oceania," in *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises*, ed. Cecilia Menjivar, Marie Ruiz, and Immanuel Ness (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 330-342.

¹⁷ CARE International, "Evicted by Climate Change: Confronting the Gendered Impacts of Climate-Induced Displacement" (2022).

¹⁸ Barbora Šedová et al., "A Meta-Analysis of Climate Migration Literature," *Nature Climate Change* 12 (2021): 897-904.

¹⁹ UNFCCC, "Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage Associated with Climate Change Impacts," <https://unfccc.int/topics/adaptation-and-resilience/workstreams/loss-and-damage-ld/warsaw-international-mechanism-for-loss-and-damage-associated-with-climate-change-impacts-wim> (accessed October 15, 2024).

growing challenge of climate-induced displacement²⁰. This underscores the urgent need for increased and more effectively targeted climate finance to support vulnerable communities.

Potential Solutions and Policy Responses

Addressing the challenge of climate refugees necessitates a multifaceted approach that combines mitigation, adaptation, and protection measures. Key areas for action include:

1. **Legal and Policy Frameworks:** There is an imperative need to develop new legal instruments or expand existing ones to provide adequate protection for climate refugees. This could involve creating a new international convention specifically addressing climate-induced displacement or expanding the mandate of existing bodies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)²¹.
2. **Planned Relocation:** For communities facing inevitable displacement due to sea-level rise or other irreversible climate impacts, planned relocation programs can help minimize disruption and ensure more positive outcomes. Such programs should be developed with the full participation of affected communities and prioritize the preservation of cultural heritage and livelihoods.
3. **Adaptation and Resilience:** Investing in adaptation measures can enhance the capacity of vulnerable communities to withstand climate impacts and potentially reduce the need for displacement. This includes infrastructure improvements, diversification of livelihoods, and capacity building for disaster risk reduction.
4. **Climate Finance:** Increased funding for climate adaptation and mitigation in developing countries is crucial. This includes fulfilling existing commitments, such as the pledge by developed countries to mobilize \$100 billion per year in climate finance, and exploring innovative financing mechanisms agreed in the COP15²².
5. **Regional Cooperation:** Given the transboundary nature of climate-induced displacement, regional cooperation frameworks can play a crucial role in coordinating responses and sharing responsibilities. Examples include the Nansen Initiative and the Platform on Disaster Displacement, which aim to build consensus among states on how to address cross-border displacement in the context of disasters and climate change²³

Conclusion

²⁰ Oxfam International, "Climate Finance Shadow Report 2023: Assessing Progress Towards the \$100 Billion Commitment" (2023).

²¹ Jane McAdam et al., "International Law and Sea-Level Rise: Forced Migration and Human Rights," FNI Report 1/2016, Fridtjof Nansen Institute (2016)

²² <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/climate-finance-and-the-usd-100-billion-goal.html#:~:text=At%20the%2015th%20Conference%20of,actions%20and%20transparency%20on%20implementation.>

²³ Walter Kälin, "The Global Compact on Migration: A Ray of Hope for Disaster-Displaced Persons," International Journal of Refugee Law 30, no. 4 (2018): 664-667.

The challenge of climate refugees represents a critical test for the international community's ability to respond to complex, interconnected global issues. As climate change continues to reshape our world, the number of people forced to flee their homes due to environmental factors is likely to increase dramatically. Addressing this crisis will require unprecedented levels of cooperation, innovation, and commitment from governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector.

The solutions proposed in this commentary offer a starting point for action, but their implementation will require overcoming significant political, economic, and practical obstacles. Moreover, any effective response must be grounded in a recognition of the fundamental human rights of climate refugees and a commitment to addressing the root causes of displacement through ambitious climate mitigation efforts.

As we confront this growing challenge, it is crucial to recognize that climate-induced displacement is not merely a future scenario but a present reality for millions of people around the world. The decisions made today in addressing this crisis will have profound implications for global stability, human security, and the achievement of sustainable development goals in the decades to come. By taking bold and coordinated action now, we can work towards a more just and resilient future for all, including those most vulnerable to the impacts of our changing climate.