



National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

Climate Change, Global Migration and Human Rights

We have long understood that environmental factors contribute to migration, locally and globally. But internationally, the issue of climate-induced displacement and migration has largely fallen into a “gap” between climate change and migration policies. Today, with more than 25 million people around the world displaced due to climate change – and the dangerous acceleration of climate change itself – this is an issue that demands urgent attention by governments, advocates, and affected communities. It is especially necessary when it comes to recognizing the human rights of those who must cross international borders for survival and safety – one of the most controversial issues of this time.

Much remains to be done to raise awareness and commit to internationally accepted policies that address the drivers of both climate change and migration – and their consequences. In 1992, the United Nations adopted the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and to date, 196 countries have ratified it. This convention provides a basic framework for addressing climate change. The COP (Conference of the Parties) – the decision-making body of the UNFCCC – meets every year on the implementation of the convention. However, only in more recent years has the issue of migration been addressed more squarely in the COP, as the issue of population displacement and forced migration has emerged as a glaring, unavoidable phenomenon.

There are some 260 million people in migration around the world today, and the figures of further human displacement due to climate factors – internally, within countries or in migration across international borders – are of no small concern.

A 2017 Greenpeace study concluded that approximately 25.4 million people are displaced **due to climate factors every year** – a rate that is 60% higher than the rate of climate displacement four decades ago. Experts predict that by 2030, some 325 million extremely poor people will be living in the 49 most climate risk-prone countries, mainly in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America – three “hot spots” that include over half of the world’s developing populations. While most will remain displaced within their home countries, many will be “forced” to migrate across borders. ***In this context, migration is an “adaptation” strategy for climate change, even as we work to reduce its disastrous effects and alter its longterm course.***

The Earth’s climate is changing at a rate that has exceeded most scientific forecasts; policy regarding its effect on forced migration needs to adapt along with it.

Addressing climate change must go hand-in-hand with addressing the challenges of population displacement and international migration. Whether people have been forced to leave their homes due to natural disasters, drought, food insecurity, or rising sea levels brought about by climate change – they are suffering from the environmental imbalances for which there must be global responsibility and accountability. Urgent efforts are needed to minimize the climate factors leading to displacement, just as climate change factors need to be considered in migration policies. ***Lack of attention to current and predicted climate-induced mobility patterns will leave millions without safe, dignified options when forced to make the difficult decision to leave their homes.***



photo from 350.org

The Effect of Climate Change on Population Displacement and Migration

There are two broad categories of causes for climate displacement and migration: *intensive* risk and *extensive* risk. Climate change is bringing about more intense, extreme natural disasters such as flooding, hurricanes, heat waves, tsunamis and earthquakes (intensive risk). In addition, it is bringing less visible gradual changes which make living conditions and socio-economic well-being difficult – such as flash-floods, droughts, rising sea levels and temperatures, and food insecurity (extensive risk). Intensive risk is a clearer driver of displacement, but the number of people moving in response to extensive risks is rising substantially, as hazard-prone areas continue to expand. Extensive risk, often due to “slow-onset” climate change, is contributing to large movements of “forced migrants” who must cross international borders in search of survival.

Why is this happening?

No country is immune to climate change, but the consequences fall most heavily on those already most vulnerable (and typically, least responsible). In a 2018 interview, Fenton Lutunatabua, Pacific regional coordinator for 350.org, noted that “in Fiji, we have no fossil fuel extraction, yet our communities and our lands bear the cost of this industry’s greed.” Lutunatabua touches on a key factor: there is an extreme imbalance in the way climate change manifests itself. The countries with the highest, most unsustainable levels of consumption per capita tend to be “developed” countries in the Global North, while the nations being hit hardest by climate disasters tend to be in the Global South.

While migration and climate change have a powerful and obvious relationship, it is difficult to quantify this type of migrant crisis due to the diverse set of causal factors that go along with it (e.g., political and economic conflicts over resources, health issues due to climate conditions). However, it is clear that the numbers of climate-induced migrants will increase along with the increase in carbon emissions, a major contributor to global warming.

According to a 2015 study from Oxfam, the poorest half of the world’s population accounts for just 10% of emissions; the wealthiest 10% of the global population are responsible for over half of the world’s emissions. The U.S. and other “developed” countries are responsible for 80% of the world’s carbon emissions.

Action plans promoted by the U.S. such as REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation & Forest Degradation) and “carbon-offset trading” also lead to forced displacement as vast communities are relocated due to land-grabs and large-scale development projects, including those for reforestation.

“Carbon emissions causing 4 degrees Celsius of warming (7.2 degrees Fahrenheit) – a business-as-usual scenario – could lock in enough eventual sea level rise to submerge land currently home to 470 to 760 million people globally.” *Mapping Choices: Carbon, Climate, and Rising Seas, Our Global Legacy*, Climate Central, 2015

By 2100, more than 20 countries are expected to experience 30-60% of agricultural and food production loss, and 2.3 billion people will be threatened by mega-droughts. In Ethiopia, people are being driven out of cropland areas due to increasingly unpredictable rainfall and drought.

At the current rate of carbon emissions, average global temperatures will rise between 3-5°C by 2050. A 3°C rise will increase sea levels as much as 1.3 meters (compared to just 21 cm in the last 100 years). A one meter rise in sea level would result in the flooding of 80% of the

25,000,000 people displaced by “natural” disasters every year.

3 times as many people are displaced due to climate change than by any political conflict.

photo from State of the Planet - Columbia University



Maldives and 20% of Bangladesh – which are already experiencing flood surges and rising sea levels that displace coastal residents.

What happens to people displaced by climate conditions?

Often, “climate migrants” are internally displaced peoples, or “IDPs”, who must relocate within their home country. Typically, rural or coastal residents will migrate to safer urban areas, where they must also seek a livelihood. Rural occupational skills such as fishing and farming are not necessarily useful in urban areas – leaving many IDPs jobless and facing furthermore adversities. The sudden assimilation into a different lifestyle – living without a home, having left behind personal belongings, no prospects for employment – can be an insurmountable challenge and trauma for families without any relief or support.

Moreover, if climate migrants flee to cities and increase the urban sprawl into land once used to farm food, those centers could lose the ability to adequately sustain its population, further aggravating the existing food insecurity crises in many of these developing areas.

photo from Oxfam



Natural Disasters Timeline

Snapshots of some of the most impactful natural disasters and displacements in recent history (these numbers don't even include those forced to migrate due to gradual-onset climate change)!

Oct-Nov 1998 Hurricane Mitch kills 11,000 and leaves 2.5 million homeless in Honduras and Nicaragua.

December 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, one of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history, kills 250,000 and displaces nearly 2 million.

August 2005 Hurricane Katrina displaces up to 600,000.

January 2010 Haitian earthquake leaves 1.6 million internally displaced.

June 2017 Landslides in Bangladesh displace nearly 1 million. Over 1,000 were killed in South Asian floods over the summer of 2017.

August-Sept 2017 Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria leave approx. 500,000 homeless.

2018 Natural disasters around the world are occurring at an alarming rate. Every few weeks, we're witnessing earthquakes, wildfires, cyclones, volcanic eruptions, and dust storms. The scope of these events inevitably causes political, social, and economic turmoil, amplifying the tragedy and creating a vulnerable climate.

By 2050, the number of climate migrants is expected to rise up to 250 million.

The Case for Temporary Protected Status in the United States

Temporary Protected Status (TPS) has been a limited means for relief from deportation for migrants in the U.S. from countries seriously affected by natural disasters or other chaos. However, the Trump Administration is systematically **denying renewal** of TPS for many countries – even when that country is still in recovery and documentably unstable, such as Haiti. Since TPS was only designed to provide temporary humanitarian relief, status holders are not provided with a green card, or permanent residency. In fact, there is no direct pathway for them to become permanent residents or U.S. citizens, even for those who have lived here for 20 years or more. Some 400,000 or more TPS holders are at risk of deportation in the next year or so.



photo from brooking.edu

A Role for Global Migration Policy

At the global level, some recent progress has been made in recognizing the connection of climate change to forced migration. The final draft of the UN's new **Global Compact for Migration** (to be formally approved in Marrakech in December 2018) includes a specific section that begins to acknowledge the crucial link between the impact of climate change on the frequency and intensity of extreme climate disasters, environmental degradation, and human migration. It is a concession to several countries, as well as civil society advocates, that had strongly urged for a distinct "objective" addressing climate change, and introduces the need to incorporate the consequences of climate change displacement within an overall migration framework.

The UN Global Compact for Migration could begin to fill in the policy gaps on climate-induced migration and displacement in its implementation, even as a "non-binding" UN document. Civil Society groups across the globe can work together to use the Global Compact as leverage to pressure local governments, regions and the UN to develop a comprehensive approach to address the need for assistance, protection and durable solutions for those displaced by climate change, to manage climate risks for those remaining, and to support opportunities for voluntary migrants adapting to climate change.

Unfortunately, a parallel process to develop a Global Compact on Refugees produced a much more guarded approach, noting that climate may be a factor that interacts with the drivers of refugee movements. However, the process rejected any new refugee category or expansion of the definition of a "refugee" to include those displaced due to climate change.

In this evolving global environment, much work remains to ensure the human rights and protections of those who must move across borders due to climate change factors – regardless of today's limited "definitions".

The Global Compact for Migration

Excerpts from section on "Natural Disasters, the adverse effects of climate change, and environmental degradation"

- Strengthen joint analysis and sharing of information to better map, understand, predict and address migration movements, such as those that may result from sudden-onset and slow-onset natural disasters, the adverse effects of climate change, environmental degradation, as well as other precarious situations, while ensuring the effective respect, protection and fulfilment of the human rights of all migrants.
- Develop adaptation and resilience strategies to sudden-onset and slow-onset natural disasters, the adverse effects of climate change, and environmental degradation... taking into account the potential implications on migration, while recognizing that adaptation in the country of origin is a priority.
- Integrate displacement considerations into disaster preparedness strategies and promote cooperation with neighbouring and other relevant countries...
- Harmonize and develop approaches and mechanisms at subregional and regional levels to address the vulnerabilities of persons...ensuring they have access to humanitarian assistance that meets their essential needs with full respect for their rights wherever they are, and by promoting sustainable outcomes that increase resilience and self-reliance...
- Develop coherent approaches to address the challenges of migration movements in the context of sudden-onset and slow-onset natural disasters, including by taking into consideration relevant recommendations from State-led consultative processes...

RESOURCES

- Uprooted by Climate Change: Responding to the growing risk of displacement, Oxfam, www.oxfam.org
 - Beyond Borders: Our changing climate – its role in conflict and displacement, Environmental Justice Foundation, <https://ejfoundation.org/>
 - Climate Change, Migration and Displacement: The Underestimated Disaster, Greenpeace (2017), <https://www.greenpeace.de/>
 - Platform on Disaster Displacement, <https://disasterdisplacement.org/>
 - United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change <https://unfccc.int/>
 - United Nations Global Compact for Migration, <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/migration-compact>
 - International Organization for Migration, Migration and Climate Change, <https://www.iom.int/migration-and-climate-change>
 - Climate Justice Alliance, <https://climatejusticealliance.org/resources/>
 - NNIRR, Climate Justice and Migrant Rights: <https://www.nnirr.org/~nnirrorg/drupal/climate-justice-and-migrant-rights>
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