

Forum: United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees
Issue: Creating a Framework for Climate Refugees
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Introduction

The 21st-century problem is climate change. It is an unparalleled danger to the environment, human health, food security, and peace and stability. Some of the worst impacted cases include the forced migrants who leave their homes and sources of living due to the effects caused by climate change. This category of individuals is sometimes referred to as climate refugees, even though the term does not have a legal or generally agreed-upon meaning. According to UNHCR, at least 21.5 million persons are made homeless annually owing to climatically induced short-notice disasters between 2008 and 2016 and this figure is expected to increase beyond 216 million by 2050. These numbers certainly will increase as we continue to feel more intensely the effects of climate change, such as rising seawater levels, extreme droughts, rainstorms, fires, deserts and shortage of water.

Displacement caused by climate change is a multi-dimensional phenomenon with different interrelated factors and drivers. Climate change, as one of the factors affecting immigration, is rarely seen in isolation. Also, climate change can worsen current conflict issues to generate a new cause of displacement. Hence, they suffer both losses in property and threats to human rights, equality, safety and security. Presently, international law does not pay attention to the particular situation of climatic immigrants. Those fleeing on account of the environment but not perished would not be protected by the 1951 Refugees Convention and its 1967 Protocol; they would only be covered if, in addition to environmental factors, they were also being subjected to persecution because of belonging. The 2018 global compact on refugees, which is a non-binding treaty that seeks to enhance the response to mass movements of refugees refers to climate change connection with displacement; however, it does not address clear definition and binding measures for climate refugees. It states that the Paris Agreement of 2015, which serves as the major global framework for tackling climate change, recognizes the fact that it's necessary to forestall, minimize, and cope with climatic-induced forced migrations, however, without specifying how these.

In conclusion, there is an urgency to create a comprehensive and coherent framework for climate refugees that respects dignity, rights and needs in order to ensure adequate protection and assistance. Therefore, such a framework should be grounded in the core values of human rights, solidarity, equitable responsibility sharing, and mutually beneficial global relations. This must also consider the different scenarios and diverse and complex nature of weather-induced migration as well as its possible solutions. It will also identify solutions for climate change and displacement and improve the ability of these vulnerable countries and communities to withstand and overcome the consequences.

This study aims to examine the challenges and potential for devising such guidelines. Additionally, it will provide some recommendations to UNHCR and the world at large.

Definition of Key Terms

Climate Refugees

These are people forced to migrate away from their homes through environmental alteration, mostly by climate change factors like rising seas, intense weather catastrophes, and long-term dehydration. However, it is not an official term under international law, and there is no clear understanding of persons classified as climate refugees.

Humanitarian consequences

Adverse impacts of situations like climate change or displacement that relate to human dignity, safety, health and life.

Forced migration

Internal displacement is defined as leaving one's home or usual place of abode because of causes one can not control, like natural calamities, conflicts, violence, human rights abuse, and environmental deterioration.

Temporary or permanent relocation

Relocation is a process of relocating people, either for a short or long-term duration, depending on the availability of durable solutions.

Movement across borders

People moving across national borders in a climate-change and disaster context driven by different motives like climate change and disasters.

Coping capacity

It refers to the capability of people, institutions, organizations, and systems to confront, manage and cope with adverse conditions through existing skills, values, beliefs, resources, and opportunities within the short-medium time limit.

Climate justice

Climate change and its solution must be based on the recognition and respect of the rights and interests of every person, particularly the people who are most vulnerable and the marginalized.

Climate vulnerability

Human vulnerability to the negative impacts resulting from weather fluctuations and climate change.

Climate risk

Threat to life, livelihoods, health, ecosystems and socio-economic systems arising from compounded climate hazard, exposure and vulnerability.

Climate hazard

These are physical occurrences associated with climate change, which can lead to death, injury, ill health, damaged properties as well as destroyed infrastructure, livelihood systems, services, ecosystems, and environmental resources.

Background

It is clear that climate change has severe consequences, the most obvious among them being elevated seas, more intense weather occurrences and increasing migration, whose echoes can be heard across many countries. Herein lies an investigation into the dynamics of displacement resulting from climate change as well as major humanitarian issues connected with it.

Environmental Dynamics and Displacement:

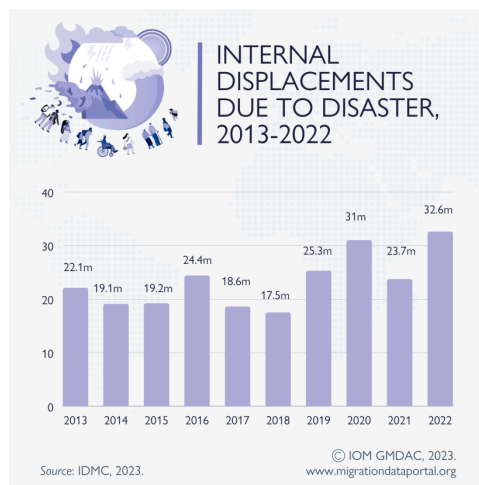


Figure 1: A graph depicting the rise in internal displacements due to climate disasters from 2013 to 2022 (GMDAC)

Figure 1 shows the increasing impact of climate change and represents the rise in the number of climate-related displacements during the last ten years. Put the figure at an average of 21.5 million persons leaving their homesteads annually as a result of climatic catastrophes. Some of these cataclysmic events include floods, storms, bushfires, and other extreme weather phenomena. Worryingly, IEP’s projection shows a much worse picture: over 1.2 billion of displacement could be projected globally by 2050.

Differential Impacts Across Regions:

The ramifications of climate change are not uniform, creating a mosaic of challenges that vary across regions and communities. Certain areas, such as low-lying islands, deltaic zones, deserts, and river catchments, stand as the epicentres of vulnerability. The most affected communities are often those already grappling with poverty, with

additional burdens borne by marginalized groups—women, children, indigenous people, and those displaced or persecuted due to civil strife.

These communities are highly vulnerable with respect to their being exposed to climate hazards coupled with low adaptive capacities and existing socio-economic challenges. It is worth noting that as climate change becomes more intense, these communities will be confronted with more complicated issues requiring specific actions that should cover not only ecological but also societal problems of displacement.

Multifaceted Drivers of Population Movements:

Climate-induced displacement is not a singular narrative but a tapestry woven with multiple threads of drivers. Beyond the direct impacts of climate change, other compounding factors contribute to the intricate circumstances surrounding population movements. Impoverishment, starvation, instability, violence, and poor governance collectively form a complex matrix, blurring the lines between traditional classifications of refugees and migrants.

Consider a scenario where individuals flee their homes not only because of drought and crop famine but also in response to the ominous shadow of armed conflict. However, the motivations are as diverse as the stories themselves. Some might choose preemptive displacement, seeking a haven before the full force of environmental or conflict-related adversities strike. Others may be propelled by a quest for better opportunities, an aspiration for an enhanced quality of life, or the pursuit of alternative lifestyles.

Navigating Uncharted Terrain:

The increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters are propelling communities into uncharted terrain, challenging conventional frameworks of response and support. Humanitarian efforts must adapt to the evolving nature of displacement, recognizing the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic factors. The surge in climate-induced displacement demands a comprehensive and nuanced approach. Efforts to address this complex challenge must integrate environmental sustainability, social justice, and resilience-building, recognizing that the impacts of climate change extend far beyond the physical boundaries of affected regions. As we stand at the crossroads of a rapidly changing climate and its far-reaching consequences, collective action and innovative solutions become imperative in our response to ensure the well-being of displaced persons and in our address of the wide array of community challenges.

Major Parties Involved

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC):

The UNFCCC, established in 1992, plays a pivotal role in addressing climate change on a global scale. Its primary objective is the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, recognizing the humanitarian consequences associated with displacement caused by climate change. The Paris Agreement, a landmark accord adopted in 2015 under the

UNFCCC, aims to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, with an aspirational target of 1.5 degrees Celsius. The UNFCCC oversees the implementation of this agreement, focusing on mitigating the impacts of climate change and fostering international cooperation. While its primary focus is on greenhouse gas reduction, the UNFCCC acknowledges the interconnected challenges related to displacement and actively considers the humanitarian dimensions of climate-induced migration.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR):

The UNHCR, established to protect and assist refugees and forcibly displaced individuals, assumes a central role in addressing climate-induced displacement. With a mandate covering a broad spectrum of displacement causes, including those related to climate change, the UNHCR provides humanitarian aid, legal protection, and durable solutions for those displaced by environmental disasters. This includes advocating for the rights of climate-induced displaced persons and promoting their inclusion in regional and international policies. The UNHCR's comprehensive approach reflects its commitment to addressing the complexities of displacement, recognizing the unique challenges posed by climate-related factors.

Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD):

Launched in 2016, the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) is a state-led initiative designed to implement the recommendations of the Nansen Initiative. The Nansen Initiative, a consultative process, developed a protection agenda for people displaced across borders by disasters and climate change. The PDD collaborates with governments, international organizations, civil society, and academia to enhance prevention, preparedness, and response to displacement resulting from disasters and climate change. By working closely with various stakeholders, the PDD seeks to address the challenges posed by cross-border displacement, emphasizing the importance of a coordinated and cooperative approach to managing the impacts of disasters and climate-induced migration.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
March 2010	UNFCCC acknowledges climate-induced displacement as a pressing issue.
June 2015	Adoption of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, recognizing the role of climate change in exacerbating displacement.
December 2015	Adoption of the Paris Agreement, which includes a task force on displacement under the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage.
September 2016	Launch of the Platform on Disaster Displacement.

December 2018	Adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, both of which address the impacts of climate change and disasters on displacement.
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Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Past international efforts, such as the Nansen Initiative and the Platform on Disaster Displacement, have addressed displacement concerns.

The Nansen Initiative was a state-led consultative process that discussed the displacement of persons in the context of disasters and climate change. This initiative aims to create a consensus among government and international organizations in coordinating a global response to addressing the displacement challenges worldwide. A key outcome of Nansen was the development of the “Protection Agenda” in 2015, which outlines a set of standards and recommendations for the protection of climate refugees across borders. This initiative provided an international platform for fostering cooperation and dialogue among different global stakeholders and stands as a policy development precedent in addressing the issue.

The Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) is a follow-up of the Nansen initiative. It served as a mechanism to carry out the recommendations and conclusions of the Protection Agenda and address the previously discussed problems. This platform allowed for sharing practices and conducting research on a global level to address the nuanced consequences of climate change worldwide adequately.

However, both attempts at multilateral collaboration were unable to address the problem of displaced persons and climate refugees adequately, the reason being fourfold:

1. There was a lack of clear and consistent definitions of climate refugees and their legal status, especially those who cross borders, limiting their ability to seek help and preventing them from receiving aid.
2. There remains limited data and evidence on the scale, patterns, and drivers of climate-induced displacement, as well as the needs and vulnerabilities of climate refugees, making a refined approach difficult for organizations and governments when addressing case-specific issues.
3. There was insufficient funding and resources for humanitarian and development assistance, as well as for climate adaptation and mitigation measures. Without proper funding, the recommended arrangements cannot be carried out, thus rendering the initial discussions fruitless.
4. Despite the international platform, there was inadequate coordination and cooperation among different actors and stakeholders, such as governments, international organizations, civil society, and affected communities. The lack of coordination and effective communication among these groups ultimately contributed to the inability of these previous attempts to be carried out at their full capacity.

Possible Solutions

The following are some solutions that have been proposed, and they include the establishment of an international law that will regulate this crisis and the formation of a fund meant for the victims of this disaster, amongst others. Some of the specific actions that could be taken are:

1. Formulating an additional new international regime or instrument on climate change-induced refugees or amending the existing refugee regime by including these categories within its scope, based on the principles of human rights and the concepts of solidarity and burden-sharing: For instance, establishing a green, refugee-like fund at the global level, similar to that of the green climate fund, can provide resources for preventing, protecting, mitigating against, and solving the problems associated with flight as well as eliminating the bases of the problem.
2. Improvements in collecting and analyzing climate change-induced displacement data and evidence via advanced methods such as remote sensing, big data and artificial intelligence: These new technologies will enable a more accurate and real-time assessment of the impact of climate change on vulnerable populations. By using these tools, international organizations and national governments can make informed decisions to develop targeted and effective solutions. Improve data collection can also facilitate better identification of displaced persons, ensuring that they receive the necessary legal protections and assistance.
3. Support for livelihoods, education, health, SCP, mitigation, adaptation, DRR, etc., among climate refugees and host communities to build their capacities and enhance their resilience to climate change-related disasters: Investing in education and skills development not only empowers individuals to rebuild their lives but also contributes to the overall well-being of the affected community. Health services will address the immediate and long-term health needs of the displaced populations while SCP and DDR will contribute to long-term sustainable living conditions, reducing vulnerability and creating long-term resilience in communities exposed to climate-induced displacement.
4. Ensuring that the voices, needs and preferences of the climate refugees and host communities are incorporated for the promotion of participatory practices within decision-making processes and development agenda: By promoting participatory practices within the decision-making processes that incorporate voices of those affected, solutions become more relevant and catered to the needs of those we need help. This approach also helps identify and subsequently tackle community-specific challenges, which allows for the aid process to be more targeted and focused on the needs of the population.

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