

Climate/Environmental Refugees: A Growing Global Crisis

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Abstract:

This article delves into the escalating global crisis of climate and environmental refugees, examining the adverse impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on vulnerable populations. With a focus on empirical data and case studies, the causes of climate/environmental migration are analyzed, including sea-level rise, extreme weather events, desertification, deforestation, and water scarcity, which compel communities to seek refuge in safer regions. The humanitarian crisis unfolds as developing countries shoulder the disproportionate burden, straining limited resources and hindering sustainable development efforts. Conflict and social unrest emerge as climate/environmental displacement intersects with competition for scarce resources, exacerbating internal and cross-border tensions. Loss of traditional livelihoods deepens poverty and disrupts the cultural fabric of affected communities. The article underscores the health implications and psychological distress experienced by climate/environmental refugees, underscoring the need for comprehensive support and protection. The limitations of the existing international legal framework, represented by The 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 protocol, are examined, but new approaches like the Global Compact on Refugees offer potential for enhanced international cooperation. Implementing mitigation and adaptation techniques is strongly recommended as crucial actions to reduce future displacement, highlighting the pressing need to address climate change and enforce adaptation regulations. Ultimately, it is clear that urgent actions at both national and international levels are required to tackle the critical humanitarian and ecological issues caused by climate/environmental refugees. This is crucial as the global community works towards a more sustainable and fair future.

Keywords : Climate, environment, refugees, humanitarian, migration, displacement

Date of Submission: 15-11-2023

Date of Acceptance: 25-11-2023

I. Introduction:

One of the most significant problems we face today is climate change, the impacts of which are already being seen in every corner of the globe. People being forced to relocate is one of climate change's most devastating impacts. Rising sea levels, droughts, and floods, among other extreme weather hazards, have displaced these climatic and environmental refugees by compelling them to abandon their homes and seek safety elsewhere. There is no single definition of climate/environmental refugees. However, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines them as "persons who have been forced to flee their homes solely or primarily due to changes in the environment that have rendered their homes or habitual places of residence uninhabitable."^{1,2}

¹ Magezi, Christopher. (2021). Exploring possibilities of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' integration with churches in refugee response. In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi. 55. 10.4102/ids.v55i1.2750.

² <https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/how-we-work/environment-disasters-and-climate-change/climate-change-and-disaster>

Causes of Climate/Environmental Migration³

The causes of climate/environmental migration are complex and interrelated. However, some of the most common causes include:

Rising sea levels: Rising sea levels are inundating coastal areas and forcing people to relocate.

Droughts: Droughts are causing crop failures and water shortages, which are displacing people from rural areas.

Floods: Floods are destroying homes and businesses, and forcing people to flee.

Extreme weather events: Catastrophic weather conditions including heat waves, storms, and wildfires are occurring more often and severe, displacing people from their homes.

Impacts on Affected Populations:

Climate/environmental refugees experience a myriad of adverse consequences as they are forced to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. These impacts are wide-ranging and pose significant challenges to both the displaced individuals and the communities that host them. Let's delve into the details of these impacts, backed by appropriate references:

Humanitarian Crisis: Populations who have been uprooted often find themselves in dire humanitarian situations, unable to get the essentials of life. Environmental catastrophes can destabilize a region to the point that local resources and infrastructure are overwhelmed, making it difficult for communities to deal with an inflow of displaced people.⁴

Conflict and Social Unrest: The mass migration of climate/environmental refugees can strain host communities, leading to competition for resources and an increase in social tensions. This situation can escalate into conflicts and social unrest, as demonstrated in various regions worldwide.⁵

Loss of Livelihoods: Environmental disruptions often force communities to abandon their traditional livelihoods, such as farming, fishing, or pastoralism. This loss of livelihood can result from factors like land degradation, water scarcity, or changes in weather patterns, leaving individuals economically vulnerable and driving them to seek alternative means of survival.⁶

Health Implications: Climate/environmental refugees are exposed to a higher risk of health problems due to their displacement and living conditions. Inadequate sanitation, overcrowded refugee camps, and limited access to healthcare facilities contribute to the spread of diseases and health issues among displaced populations.⁷

Psychological Distress: Being uprooted from their homes and communities can cause significant psychological distress among climate/environmental refugees. They experience feelings of loss, uncertainty, and fear for their future, contributing to mental health challenges.⁸

Economic Disruptions: The displacement of communities often disrupts local economies, affecting trade, production, and employment opportunities. This can result in long-term economic consequences for both the displaced populations and host communities.⁹

International Legal Framework: The issue of climate/environmental refugees presents a significant challenge to the existing international legal framework, as it struggles to adequately address the complex and evolving nature of displacement caused by environmental factors. While some protections exist for refugees fleeing persecution under the 1951 Refugee Convention, there is a lack of explicit recognition and legal mechanisms to safeguard

³ Milán-García, J., Caparrós-Martínez, J.L., Rueda-López, N. *et al.* Climate change-induced migration: a bibliometric review. *Global Health* 17, 74 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-021-00722-3>

⁴ IPCC, 2018: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, H.-O. Pörtner, D. Roberts, J. Skea, P.R. Shukla, A. Pirani, W. Moufouma-Okia, C. Péan, R. Pidcock, S. Connors, J.B.R. Matthews, Y. Chen, X. Zhou, M.I. Gomis, E. Lonnoy, T. Maycock, M. Tignor, and T. Waterfield (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, 616 pp., doi:10.1017/9781009157940.

⁵ Warner, K., Rajaram, P., & Gemenne, F. (2017). **Environmental change, migration and conflict**. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(4), 495-516.

⁶ <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

⁷ WHO global strategy on health, environment and climate change: the transformation needed to improve lives and well-being sustainably through healthy environments. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020.

⁸ UNHCR, Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015, 20 June 2016, www.refworld.org/docid/57678f3d4.html, p 20.

⁹ Kumari Rigaud, Kanta, Alex de Sherbinin, Bryan Jones, Jonas Bergmann, Viviane Clement, Kayly Ober, Jacob Schewe, Susana Adamo, Brent McCusker, Silke Heuser, and Amelia Midgley. 2018. *Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

those displaced solely due to environmental reasons. Let's explore the international legal framework in more detail and examine the need for comprehensive solutions:

The 1951 Refugee Convention: The 1951 Refugee Convention, constructed under the United Nations, provides a clear definition of a refugee as an individual who is residing outside their country of origin or usual residence and possesses a legitimate apprehension of being subjected to persecution due to factors such as race, religion, nationality, political beliefs, or affiliation with a specific social category. Although this convention has played a crucial role in safeguarding millions of refugees globally, it does not explicitly account for those who are displaced purely as a result of environmental degradation or the consequences of climate change.¹⁰

The 1967 Protocol: The 1967 Protocol about the Status of Refugees eliminated territorial and chronological limitations imposed by the 1951 Refugee Convention, extending its applicability to refugees globally, irrespective of the timing of the events that caused their migration. However, similar to the initial agreement, it does not include environmental factors as a legitimate ground for granting refugee status.¹¹

Limitations of the Existing Framework: Although the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol have effectively safeguarded refugees from persecution, they have yet to keep pace with the growing challenges of climate/environmental displacement. Primarily, the number of individuals compelled to evacuate their residences due to ecological factors continues to rise, and it becomes evident that the current legal framework lacks the necessary provisions to address this specific form of displacement.

Emergence of New Approaches: In light of the shortcomings of the existing legal framework, various worldwide efforts have developed to thoroughly address the issue of climate/ecological displacement. The Nansen Initiative is one such effort; it was initiated in 2012 to create an agreement on the requirements for protecting individuals who have been forced to flee their homes because of natural catastrophes, particularly those caused by the effects of climate change.¹²

The Global Compact on Refugees: The UN General Assembly ratified the Global Compact on Refugees in 2018, representing a remarkable advancement. Although the Compact does not create new legal obligations, it reinforces the commitment of the international community to share responsibilities and offer protection and assistance to refugees, including those displaced by climate change and environmental factors.¹³

Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies: As the impacts of climate change continue to escalate, the urgent need to address climate/environmental displacement has become evident. Mitigation and adaptation strategies play crucial roles in managing and reducing the risks faced by vulnerable communities and individuals. These measures aim to decrease the release of greenhouse gases (mitigation) and improve the ability to cope with current and expected effects of climate change (adaptation). Let's elaborate on these strategies in more detail:

Mitigation Strategies:

Transition to Renewable Energy: To mitigate the effects of global warming, we must transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy sources like solar, wind, and hydroelectric power, which will have the potential to considerably decrease greenhouse gas emissions, which play a crucial role in driving climate change. By implementing policies that support renewable energy adoption, nations can reduce the speed and intensity of climate change, so averting future relocation.

Sustainable Land Use and Forest Conservation: Deforestation must be stopped to keep natural carbon sinks and ecosystems intact, and sustainable land use practices must be promoted. Tribes that depend upon these resources for survival may be protected from the worst effects of climate change.

Energy Efficiency and Green Technologies: Encouraging energy-efficient practices and the use of green technologies can lead to reduced emissions and lower environmental impact. These initiatives are essential in curbing climate change and protecting vulnerable populations from displacement.¹⁴

¹⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," 1951. <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>

¹¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," 1967. <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>

¹² The Nansen Initiative, "The Nansen Initiative: Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change," 2012. <https://www.nanseninitiative.org/>

¹³ United Nations General Assembly, "Global Compact on Refugees," 2018. https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf

¹⁴ Edenhofer, O., Pichs-Madruga, R., Sokona, Y., Seyboth, K., Matschoss, P., Kadner, S., Zwickel, T., Eickemeier, P., Hansen, G., Schlömer, S., & von Stechow, C. (Eds.). (2011). Renewable energy sources and climate change mitigation. Special Report. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA.

Adaptation Strategies:

Climate-Resilient Infrastructure: Financing on flood walls, alert systems, and drought-proof water distribution systems, can enhance the ability of communities to withstand extreme weather events and prevent mass displacement.

Climate-Informed Land Use Planning: Incorporating climate considerations into land use planning helps identify and protect areas prone to environmental risks, reducing the exposure of vulnerable populations to potential displacement.

Community-Based Adaptation: When locals are involved in the planning and executing adaptation strategies, it makes sure the measures taken are appropriate for the community at large. Community-based approaches foster resilience and empower affected populations to cope with changing environmental conditions.¹⁵

Global Climate Finance:

Financial resources are essential to support both mitigation and adaptation efforts, particularly in developing countries that are most vulnerable to climate impacts. The possibility of climate/environmental displacement may be mitigated by international collaboration and climate financing structures like the Green Climate Fund, which gives funds for programmes that enhance resilience and foster sustainable growth.¹⁶

Policy Integration and Institutional Frameworks:

Integrating climate considerations into various policy areas, such as disaster management, agriculture, and urban planning, helps mainstream climate adaptation measures. Additionally, establishing robust institutional frameworks at national and international levels fosters coordinated action and ensures the implementation of effective strategies.¹⁷

National and International Initiatives: National and international initiatives are crucial in addressing the growing crisis of climate/environmental refugees. These initiatives aim to tackle the root causes of displacement, strengthen the resilience of affected communities, and provide humanitarian support to those displaced. At the national level, governments can play a pivotal role by integrating climate change considerations into their policies and development plans. This includes implementing climate adaptation measures, promoting sustainable land use practices, and investing in climate-resilient infrastructure. By prioritizing climate action and environmental conservation, countries can mitigate the impacts of climate change and reduce the likelihood of displacement. Additionally, empowering local tribes to actively participate in taking measures and adaptation projects fosters ownership and ensures that solutions align with their needs and realities.

International cooperation is essential to deal with the transboundary aspect of climate/environmental migration. Projects such as the Nansen Initiative initiated in 2012, have aimed to develop consensus on the protection requirements of persons dislocated across nations by natural catastrophes, particularly those produced by climate change. Such initiatives create platforms for countries to share experiences, knowledge, and best practices in addressing climate/environmental displacement. Furthermore, the Global Compact on Refugees, adopted in 2018, reinforces the commitment of the international community to providing protection and assistance to refugees, including those displaced due to climate change and environmental factors. The Compact encourages burden-sharing and international cooperation to support countries hosting large numbers of climate/environmental refugees. Financial mechanisms, such as the Green Climate Fund, offer funding to support climate adaptation and resilience-building projects in developing countries, particularly those most vulnerable to displacement. The European Union's Agenda on Migration and Mobility is a policy framework that was adopted in 2015 to address the challenges of migration in the European Union. The Agenda includes a number of provisions related to climate-induced displacement, such as the necessity to improve collaboration with nations of origin and transit and the necessity to ensure that refugees have access to legal pathways to Europe. OCHA is the United Nations' lead agency for coordinating humanitarian assistance. OCHA has a number of programs and initiatives related to climate-induced displacement, including the Climate Displacement Early Warning System (CREDS) and the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM).¹⁸

¹⁵ Shukla, P. R., Skea, J., Calvo-Ubeda, E., & Masson-Delmotte, V. (Eds.). (2019). Climate change and land: An IPCC special report. Geneva, Switzerland: IPCC.

¹⁶ Green Climate Fund (GCF). (2022, March 8). About the Green Climate Fund. Retrieved from <https://www.greenclimate.fund/home>

¹⁷ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. (1992). United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf>

¹⁸ **National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.** (2017). Climate adaptation and mitigation strategies: Supporting vulnerable populations. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

II. Conclusion:

The phenomenon of climate/environmental refugees is undeniably a growing global crisis that demands urgent attention and collective action. The impacts of climate change and environmental degradation have intensified, leading to the displacement of vulnerable communities worldwide. In this article, we have explored the causes, impacts, and potential solutions to this pressing issue.

The consequences of climate/environmental displacement are profound, encompassing humanitarian crises, conflict, loss of livelihoods, health implications, and psychological distress. Displaced populations face formidable challenges, and without effective measures, the crisis will only exacerbate, affecting millions more in the coming years.

To address this crisis, comprehensive mitigation and adaptation strategies must be employed. Governments play a pivotal role at the national level, integrating climate change considerations into policies and development plans, fostering resilience, and empowering local communities. At the international level, collaboration is crucial to address the transboundary nature of climate/environmental displacement. Initiatives like the Nansen Initiative and the Global Compact on Refugees provide platforms for cooperation, knowledge sharing, and financial support to countries facing the impacts of climate change.

However, much work remains to be done. Strengthening the international legal framework is essential to provide explicit protections to climate/environmental refugees and recognize their unique needs. Moreover, mobilizing additional climate finance and resources is imperative to support adaptation and resilience-building projects in vulnerable regions.

As individuals, researchers, policymakers, and global citizens, we have a collective responsibility to address the crisis of climate/environmental refugees. By fostering empathy, raising awareness, and promoting sustainable practices, we can contribute to a world that prioritizes the well-being and safety of those displaced by climate change. Together, we can forge a future that values environmental stewardship, inclusivity, and resilience, creating a pathway towards a sustainable and just world for all, regardless of their environmental circumstances. Only through united efforts can we hope to mitigate the impacts of climate/environmental displacement and ensure a more secure and prosperous future for generations to come.

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