

Junior Committee: Climate Refugees

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I. Introduction

Researcher Essam El-Hinnawi first mentioned the term “**climate refugees**” in 1985 at the U.N. Environmental Program, defining it as “people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption, natural and/or triggered by people, that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life. By ‘environmental disruption’ in this definition is meant any physical, chemical, and/or biological changes in the ecosystem that render it, temporarily or permanently, unsuitable to support human life”.¹

According to the Norwegian Refugee Council’s Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, overall migration across national borders is at 214 million people worldwide and 20 million people were displaced by climate related disasters in 2008 alone.² With the current intensification of climate change, these disasters are likely to increase in the near future, leaving more and more communities vulnerable to the consequences. The nexus between **climate change**, disasters and other causes of **displacement** is now indisputable. However, as climate change threatens to enact the largest refugee crisis in history, current governments and organizations aren’t prepared to combat this emerging crisis and climate refugees still lack proper recognition and protection under international law.

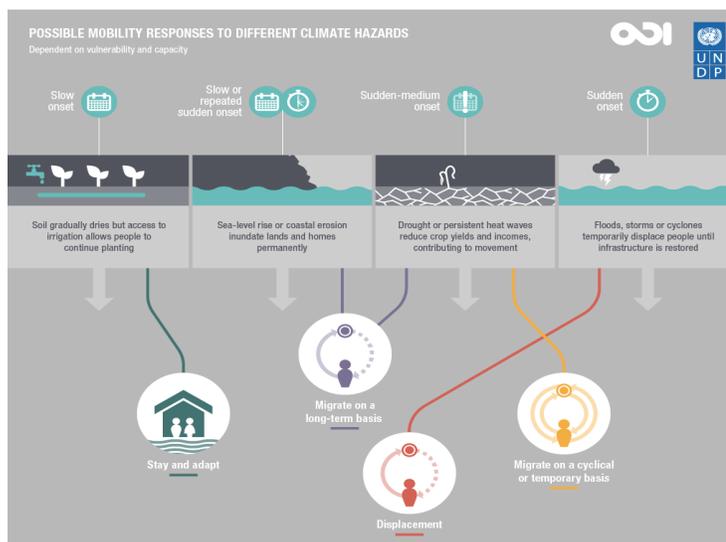
¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/596f25467.pdf>

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<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2012/01/03/10857/climate-change-migration-and-conflict/>

degradation, or socioeconomic conflict caused by natural disasters. Within this activity of mobility we can include three main groups: **internally displaced persons** otherwise known as **IDPs** who relocate within their own country and **cross border migrators** who relocate to an entirely different continent or country from their vernacular.⁴ Island states are a less common, but still important group affected by disasters. These so called “**stateless persons**” are forced to leave their homes and permanently resettle in another country or neighboring island state due to rising sea levels, desertification, coastal erosion, and salt-water contamination, which greatly threaten living standards. Within these three categories of mobility groups we find three more

categories that further describe and classify environmental migrants. The three groups are: **emergency migrants** who flee temporarily from their homes due to a sudden and catastrophic event, **forced migrants** who leave due to deteriorating environmental conditions and



motivated migrants who leave to avoid future environmental degradation and instability. However, there is still no **international agreement** on who exactly constitutes as an environmental refugee.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), 18.8 million new internal displacements associated with natural disasters were recorded in 2017 in 135 countries

⁴<http://www.legalanthology.ch/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Kalin-Conceptualising-Climate-Induced-Displacement1.pdf>

and territories. Weather and climate related hazards triggered the vast majority, with floods accounting for 8.6 million and storms 7.5 million. China, the Philippines, Cuba and the United States were the most affected by these.⁵ As climate change aggravates storms and droughts, climate scientists and migration experts predict the number of cross border and internal migrants to further increase. While sudden onset disasters could displace large quantities of people for short periods of time, slow-onset disasters are likely to permanently displace more people.

III. Political Landscape

In 2018, both the aforementioned IDMC and the Norwegian Refugee Council identified climate phenomenon as the number one cause of migration at a global level.⁶ As such, it has become necessary for nations to begin addressing the legal voids that currently limit climate refugees' **recognition** internationally, their **legal protections**, and reevaluate the populations they prioritize for assistance to adjust their immigration, refugee, and asylum policies accordingly. Firstly, the term "climate refugees" is one which lacks a proper legal definition and therefore fails to categorically assert which people may be considered within that designation.

Furthermore, all the protections afforded within the **1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees** do not apply because the document only extends to "people who have a well-founded fear of being persecuted on grounds related to race, religion, nationality or membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and are unable or unwilling, owing to fear of persecution, to seek protection from their home countries".⁷ Clearly, this definition omits people who might be construed solely as climate refugees and deprives them of all the rights afforded to traditional migrants. In many ways this distinction was established directly by

⁵ <http://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2018/>

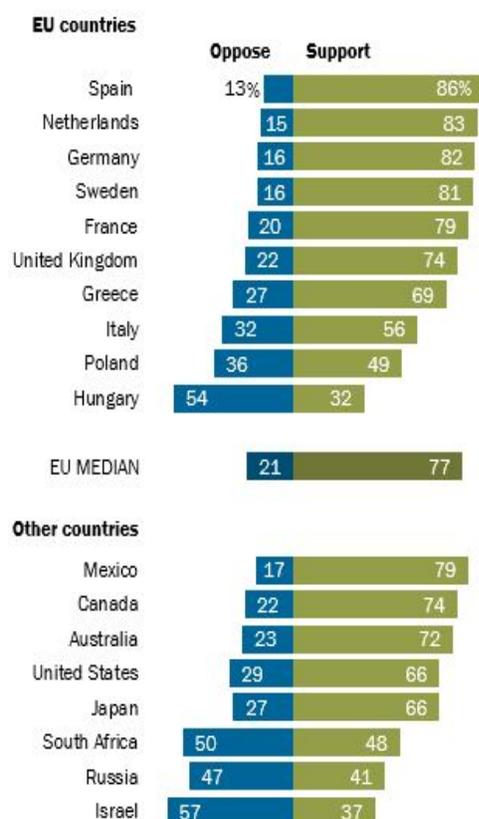
⁶ <http://www.internal-displacement.org/disasters-and-climate-change>

⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/11/climate-refugees-151125093146088.html>

the **UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)** who concluded that since the root of these people's displacement was environmental then they could seek protection from their governments unlike the refugees enumerated in the 1951 Convention.⁸ Additionally, debate exists over whether climate refugees should even be brought under UNHCR jurisdiction given that this agency already struggles to adequately handle the 22.5 million refugees resulting from war and

Majorities in several EU countries support taking in refugees

Thinking about immigration, would you _____ taking in refugees from countries where people are fleeing violence and war?



persecution.⁹ Proponents of moving away from the UNHCR in order to attend climate refugees often propose an international recognition of the problem with subsidiary regionalized systems across the globe.

The idea behind these being a more local agency would be able to more effectively gauge the needed form and degree of response to, in turn, offer a more pointed and thus, more beneficial response to any sudden-onset crises, while continually providing assistance to those suffering from more gradual, slow-onset crises.

Therefore, it is evident that the international community currently lacks a consensus with respect to what response this climate-induced migrant crisis merits.

Most non governmental organizations (NGOS) like the UNHCR also battle to give sufficient help to the

world's 22.5m refugees, further claiming the need for governmental aid and intervention. In the

⁸ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/621893/EPRS_BRI%282018%29621893_EN.pdf

⁹ <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/03/06/why-climate-migrants-do-not-have-refugee-status>

event that the UNHCR expands its meaning of "displaced person" to help an altogether new classification, it is still uncertain that a political craving exists to give the necessary funding. Nina Birkeland, senior adviser for disasters and climate change at the Norwegian Refugee Council, states that the process of renegotiating the existing refugee treaty or creating a new one could take decades.¹⁰ While countries like New Zealand are currently paving the way to recognise the impact of climate change as grounds for a claim of asylum, some countries have an anti-refugee infrastructure. Many countries spend billions of dollars a year just to prevent refugees from entering their countries or purposely limit their access to asylum. In most cases, millions of migrants fall into a **protection gap** with no access to any form of international protection. Another key issue is the fact that large-scale migration is not taken into account in national adaptation strategies, which tend to see migration as a "failure of adaptation". So far there is no "home" for climate migrants in the international community, both literally and figuratively. Numerous propositions have been created to address environmentally displaced people, albeit none of them extensively addresses the issue of cross border development of individuals related with environmental change. **The Nansen Initiative** recognized that forced relocation identified with catastrophes is a reality and among the greatest humanitarian issues affecting the global network.¹¹ The Nansen Initiative has gained considerable attention and is the only framework that seeks to govern cross border displacement. However, limiting the system to migration because of extreme climate occasions is somewhat restrictive as the individuals who are uprooted because of slow onset related environmental change won't fall inside this structure. Contrarily, the **Paris Agreement of 2015** established a task force to develop recommendations

¹⁰ <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/03/06/why-...>

¹¹ https://disasterdisplacement.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/EN_Protection_Agenda_Volume_I_-low_res.pdf

for integrated approaches to avert, minimize and address displacement related to the adverse impacts of climate change. The inclusion of a provision on human rights and climate justice is a significant step on the path to environmental migrant rights and protection.

IV. Effects

Catastrophic natural disasters and the looming consequences of climate change have forced many to flee their countries and homes, but not without several, often life threatening complications. This immediate need for relocation can put people and families at risk, since migration often increases vulnerability, and easy **resettlement** is never guaranteed. In most journeys, migrants have to travel painstakingly long distances. During these journeys, migrants can suffer robberies, kidnapping by criminal gangs, assaults, even death from starvation, dehydration or murder. As many as 20,000 migrants are abducted each year for criminal gangs or guerillas (some are even held for ransom) and women and girls are often raped during the journey. Taking these possible scenarios into account, A World Bank report projects that within three of the most vulnerable regions (sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America) 143 million people could be displaced by environmental impacts by 2050.¹² This means 143 million people would be put at risk if proper legislation isn't created and **implementation gaps** aren't filled to manage this crisis and protect those affected. For example, after Puerto Rico was hit by Hurricane Maria in 2017, thousands migrated to the United States and many of those are still struggling to find permanent housing and employment. In Bangladesh, hundreds of thousands of people are losing their houses to coastal flooding, forcing many to make a treacherous journey to the capital. In West Africa, the near disappearance of Lake Chad due to desertification has

¹² <https://www.kqed.org/science/1926237/climate-refugees-lack-media-attention-and-legal-protections>

empowered local terrorists and forced more than four million people into camps. Through these examples we can not only infer a humanitarian crisis, but the **economic and social consequences** and the increased violence that feeds off this issue. Other effects of climate change and forced migration include food and water scarcity, rapid and unplanned urbanization, increased poverty in displaced families, threatened children's education, and the spread of diseases or epidemics within refugee populations, such as tuberculosis and malaria. Forced migrants, especially those forced to flee quickly from climate catastrophes, are also at greater risk of sexual exploitation, financial instability, xenophobic attacks, human trafficking and sexual and gender-based violence.¹³

V. Social and Economic Implications

The main and indispensable socio-economic challenge posed by the climate crisis is without a doubt the development of a coherent and effective **resettlement** policy. Initially, the consideration of the root of the migration problem becomes critical because the distinction between slow onset effects and immediate disasters determines in large part the future of the migrants themselves. This is because victims of the former largely lack the option to return to their place of origin while those of the latter can eventually be obliged to return once the temporal danger from a natural disaster subsides. However, UN researchers Walter Kälin and Nina Schrepfer identified three particular impediments to the forced return of people displaced as a result of sudden onset circumstances. The first are **legal impediments** under human rights law where the return of migrants would render them vulnerable to a substantial risk of human rights violations through torture or degrading treatment or punishment. **Factual impediments** follow,

¹³ <https://publications.iom.int/books/mrs-ndeg31-migration-and-climate-change>

and these comprise the possibility that the means of return to the country no longer exist, such as a case where essential transportation infrastructure like roads and airports no longer exists. Finally, there are **humanitarian impediments** where a return, while possible on the previous two points, is made impossible by considerations regarding humanitarian grounds. With respect to these impediments, Kälin and Schrepfer maintain that should any of the three exist in a given situation then the migrants should be considered **forcibly displaced** and therefore, in need of protection from another state. The fact that developing countries are more vulnerable than developed countries is also important to consider. Further evidence that national wealth determines vulnerability is demonstrated by the fact that, between 1994 and 2003, natural disasters in countries of high human development killed an average of 44 people per event, while disasters in countries of low human development killed an average of 300 people each. In another statistic, between 1991 and 2005, developing and least developed countries suffered 884,845 deaths, compared to OECD countries, which suffered 61,918 deaths due to natural disasters.¹⁴ Indirect consequences such as population changes, brain drain, political instability, health impacts and gender impacts can serve to further undermine national development. In terms of health care, population displacement undercuts the provision of medical care and vaccination programmes; making infectious diseases harder to deal with and more deadly.

Catastrophes within refugee populations and climate affected regions also spur conflict. Scarcity of water, lack of productive land for livelihoods, food security, habitability of areas, increased exposure to disease, worsening poverty and potential for conflicts linked to competition over scarce resources cause violence within affected populations or refugee

¹⁴ <http://www.internal-displacement.org/disasters-and-climate-change>

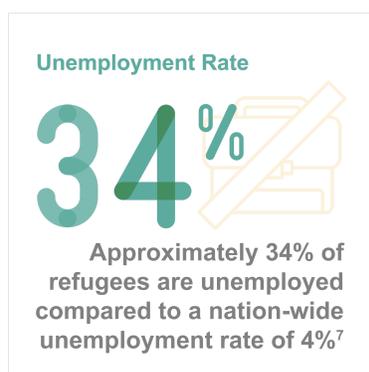
populations. Economies are greatly affected as well. Less developed countries, which experience 99% of climate disaster related deaths yet account for 1% of carbon emissions, are especially vulnerable since their economies mainly depend on climate-sensitive sectors and their adaptive capacity is low due to low levels of financial, technological, institutional and natural resources. Displacement in urban settings, a result of the rapid migration to urban settings from rural settings, particularly in Iraq and Syria, brought specific challenges in terms of humanitarian access, the delivery of basic services and heightened vulnerabilities for displaced people. Disaster displacement was also prevalent in East Asia and the Pacific, South Asia and the Americas, regions with high disaster risk because of high levels of exposure and vulnerability.¹⁵ Nonetheless, a few people distinguish as “**trapped populations**”, or populations who claim that they would have relocated eventually over the last 10 years if they had the means to do it. Many referred to the absence of monetary assets, visas or contacts outside of their territory as reasons for their inability to migrate. These are some of the most defenseless groups, and their circumstances have helped the United Nations build up a vulnerability index made out of six components: economic, education, health and nutrition, housing and environment, social capital, and social inclusion.¹⁶ According to the UNHCR, 24 percent of refugee adolescents, and 9 percent of refugee adolescents in low-income countries, attend secondary school. Only 3 percent of refugees enroll in a college or university. Across the world, enrollment in college or university stands at 37 percent.

Employment and self-sufficiency have been called the ‘greatest challenges’ for resettled refugees in other countries, including the solidarity resettlement countries in Latin America.

¹⁵ <http://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2018/downloads/report/2018-GRID-key-findings.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://unfccc.int/news/human-mobility-and-the-paris-agreement>

According to studies in the UK and Denmark, refugees frequently define economic outcomes such as employment as important to their own lives. The data for resettled refugees in Australia, Canada, Norway, and Sweden shows a clear **refugee gap** compared to other immigrants, especially in the short-term.¹⁷ in Australia shows clearly that after refugee or humanitarian entrants have lower labour market participation rates than other migrant and non-migrant groups



in the early years of resettlement. Data from Statistics Norway shows that resettled refugees in Norway also have lower employment rates than other immigrants and native-born individuals.¹⁸ Many experts hypothesize that **discrimination against immigrant groups**, including visible religious and racial

minorities, may explain part of the gap, both between refugee populations and native-born individuals and between refugees and other immigrant categories. It is also imperative to acknowledge that refugee women are less likely to be engaged in paid work than



women and men of the host country.¹⁹ The vulnerability impoverished regions face when subject to climate related disasters greatly affects migration, since strengthening internal infrastructures can help recover affected regions/nations and thus help prevent forced or voluntary migration. However, it is also important to protect refugee populations and refugees in their resettled regions, since these also suffer greatly to the disaster and social induced factors stated earlier. To make progress at the national, regional and international levels, there needs to be open dialogue

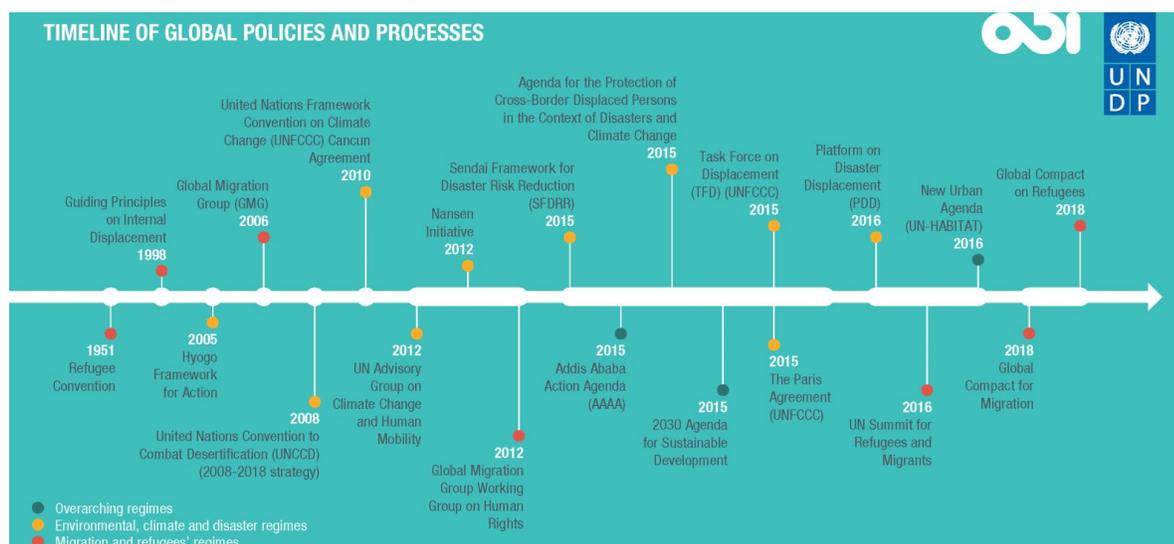
¹⁷ <https://www.unhcr.org/5273a9e89.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/19/canada-now-leads-the-world-in-refugee-resettlement-surpassing-the-u-s/>

¹⁹ <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/3987/reportrescueworksunlockingrefugeewomenspotential.pdf>

on environmental displacement and its effects on people. This must be led by countries impacted by the issue, with the support of international partners, and according to their national priorities and realities. By understanding the connection among powerlessness and movement with regards to environmental change, the worldwide network can set up strategies that decrease weakness and increment the versatile limit of potential vagrant populations.

VI. Timeline of Global Policies and Processes



VII. Guide Questions

- 1) What is your delegation's current immigration policy or infrastructure?
- 2) How would your delegation be affected by climate change and/or climate related disasters? Consider the social, economic or political aspects.
- 3) Is your delegation making any concerted efforts to create a climate migrant policy or protect climate migrants?
- 4) What policies can your delegation implement to protect climate refugees in your country and/or internationally?

- 5) What specific aspects or issues does your delegation see as a priority to attend to in this crisis?
- 6) How does your delegation plan to prevent implementation gaps in refugee policies?
- 7) If applicable, how does your delegation plan to help successfully integrate or protect refugees into their resettled countries or regions?

VIII. Message from the Dais

Hi delegates! We hope this briefing gave you a better understanding of the topic at hand and are truly excited to see what ideas you bring forth to the committee. It is important to keep in mind that this committee's purpose is not presenting solutions to solve climate change, it is to protect climate refugees. While climate change related plans can be made in the committee, they must have the greater intent for refugee protection. Take note that any terms in **bold** are concepts we think will be important to the committee; you can use them to help guide your research. When drafting plans, remember to be creative while still staying within your delegation's policy and the realm of possibility. **Position papers are due Tuesday, October 22** and must be sent to the members of the dais' emails before or by 11:59 PM. **The format will be font Times New Roman size 12, double space with a minimum of 2 pages and a maximum of 3 pages.** We strongly encourage you to email us if you have any questions regarding the committee and to research outside this briefing. We look forward to seeing you!

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