



**Forum:** Economic and Social Council

**Issue:** The question of climate refugees

**Student Officers:** Jessica Bonnema and Stuart Verkerk

**Position:** President and Deputy President

## Introduction

If you were asked to name the consequences of climate change, what would you answer? Probably something like “temperature and sea level rise, extreme weather conditions and natural disasters like floods and droughts” Barely anyone would name “environmental refugees” in their answer, even though it is a great concern for the international community.

Displacement due to climate change and disasters has affected about 22.5 million people between 2008 and 2017. This happened during events like droughts in Somalia in 2011 and 2012, floods in Pakistan between 2010 and 2012 and the earthquake in Nepal in 2015. These refugees, however got a lot less attention in the world media than those who had to flee their homes because of, for example, the situation in the Middle East.

This research report will explain the question of environmental refugees as well as their status and what can be done to help them. Furthermore, it will include some history on environmental migration and the role of the United Nations.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Environmental refugee

Environmental refugees do not really fit into any of the legal definitions of a refugee. For example, not all environmental refugees migrate from their home country, on occasion they are just displaced within their country of origin. The term refugee is defined as “a person who flees their home country due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”. Thus, “environmental refugees” don’t exactly fit the definition of “refugee”.

The term **environmental migrant** is more suitable. This term is defined as "Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to have to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their territory or abroad." by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This working definition recognizes that:

1. Environmental migrants are not only those displaced by extreme environmental events but also those whose migration is triggered by deteriorating environmental conditions;
2. Environmentally-induced movement can take place within as well as across international borders;
3. It can be both short and long term;



4. Population movements triggered by environmental factors can be forced as well as a matter of choice.

### **Natural disaster**

The Wikipedia definition of a natural disaster is as follows: “A natural disaster is a major adverse event resulting from natural processes of the Earth; examples include floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other geologic processes. A natural disaster can cause loss of life or property damage, and typically leaves some economic damage in its wake, the severity of which depends on the affected population's resilience, or ability to recover and also on the infrastructure available.”

### **Climate change**

Climate change is the long-term shift in weather patterns mainly caused by human activities leading to an increased concentration of greenhouse gases in the planet's atmosphere. The term fundamentally covers precipitation, atmospheric conditions and temperature.

### **Internally Displaced Person (IDP)**

An IDP is someone who is forced to flee his or her home but who remains within his or her country's borders. They are often referred to as refugees, although they do not fall within the legal definitions of a refugee. There is no universal legal definition of IDP. However, a United Nations report, Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement uses the definition of: "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border." At the end of 2014, it was estimated there were 38.2 million IDPs worldwide.

## **General Overview**

Previously, the issue of environmental refugees was one that was not commonly discussed or given sufficient attention. However, the importance of the topic should not be misunderstood. The issue of environmental migrants is something that has been ongoing since the beginning of human race.

### **History**

After the second World War, lots of attention was drawn to the status of refugees; the most prominent example being The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on the 10th of December 1948.

In 1951, a specification for this declaration was created: the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. In this convention, the term “refugee” was defined as a person who flees their home country “due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”. Thus, the 1951 Convention established the definition of a refugee as well as the principle of non-



refoulement, which is the principle of international law which forbids a country receiving asylum seekers from returning them to a country in which they would be in likely danger of persecution, and the rights afforded to those granted refugee status.

Because of how this convention defined the term “refugee”, it did not protect Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), environmental migrants, stateless individuals not fearing persecution and individuals who have crossed an international border fleeing generalized violence. The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees served as an ‘update’ to the 1951 convention but still did not ensure that the right of the groups of people mentioned above would be protected.



Unlike the case of refugees, there is no international universal treaty which applies specifically to IDPs. Only a regional treaty for African countries has been established: the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa was held in October 2009. Article 5(4) of this convention specifically establishes state responsibilities for the protection and assistance of *internally displaced persons, whose displacement is the result of "natural or human made disasters, including climate change"*. This means that only in the African Union a special convention has been held on IDPs.

This was, however, not the first time environmental migrants were officially discussed. In August 2006, the government of the Maldives organized a meeting of representatives of governments, environmental and humanitarian organizations, and United Nations agencies on the issue of the protection and resettlement of “climate refugees.” For a small island nation like the Maldives, located only few meters above sea level, this question is surely at the heart of its national security, if not national survival. Such low-lying island nations are likely to be the first to suffer from global climate change and the rise of the sea level. Yet, at this meeting, no treaties have been written and no actions have been taken.

### The role of climate change

Nowadays, the main cause for the existence and growth of environmental migrants is climate change. Climate change related migration may escalate into a global crisis as many estimations, including the report that was published by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) in 2010, concluded that approximately up to 150 million people may be displaced by the year 2050 due to climate and environmental change under the current status quo. Such estimations may however be incorrect under certain terms as it makes assumptions and estimations on population growth, temperature increase, and economic development. Although such prediction may or may not be accurate, most scenarios agree



that in this century, the changes in the climate will forcefully displace millions of people especially in Africa and Asia.

## Major Parties Involved

### **International Organisation of Migration (IOM)**

The IOM was initially founded in 1951 as the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM). It is the leading intergovernmental organization on the topic of migration. IOM's task is to promote safe and humane migration by providing help and advice to governments and migrants. Their three main objectives concerning environmental migration as stated by the IOM are to prevent forced migration as a result of environmental factors, to assist and protect affected populations and seek durable solutions, where forced migration occurs and to facilitate migration as a strategy to climate change.

As of 2005, in the UN-led Humanitarian Reform, IOM takes on the role of global cluster lead for Camp Coordination / Camp Management (CCCM) in natural disasters with a responsibility within the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to ensure the assistance is delivered. IOM also participates actively in other clusters like emergency shelter, logistics, health, protection or early recovery, and depending on the field presence at a given location, also engages with other clusters in order to provide assistance to displaced population and other vulnerable groups.

### **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**

The UNHCR, founded in 1950 by the General Assembly, has as goal to ensure that refugees, IDPs and returnees, can use the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another state, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country. UNHCR has played a major role in the cases of many natural disasters which lead to growth in environmental refugees, such as offering protection to the populations affected by droughts in Somalia in 2011 and 2012, floods in Pakistan between 2010 and 2012, storms and flooding in Myanmar in 2013, and typhoons in the Philippines in 2011 through 2013. Most recently, in 2015, UNHCR assisted cyclone and flood victims in Myanmar's Rakhine and Kachin states, assisted victims of the devastating earthquake in Nepal and relocated 50,000 flood-affected refugees in Ethiopia.

### **Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF)**

EJF is an NGO based in London and has been working internationally since it was founded in 2001 to protect the environment and human rights. The recently rapidly growing population of environmental refugees sits outside of international protection and is not supported by the Geneva Convention of 1951 by which those fleeing from war and persecution are supported.



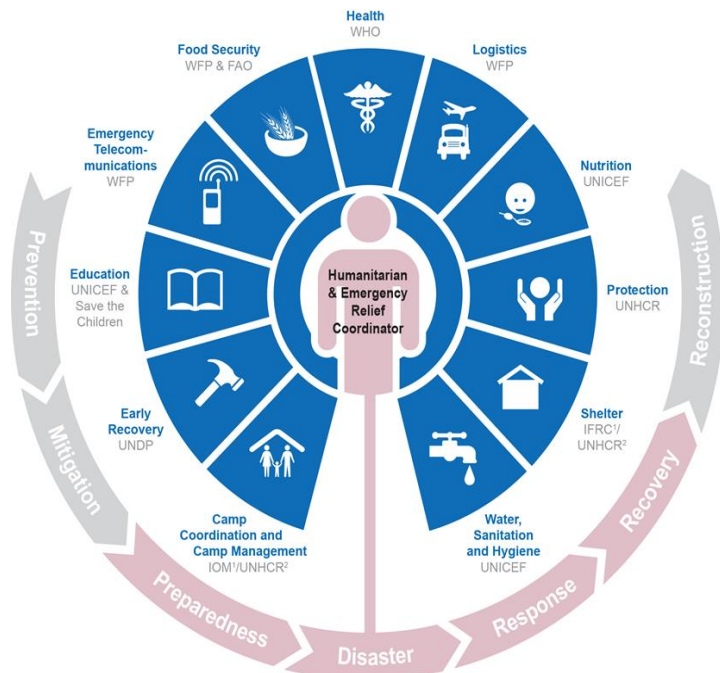
The EJF strives to improve the quality of living conditions and to have human rights be respected. It does this by campaigning and doing and publishing research. The organization calls on governments, the UN and all countries for three things:

- "EJF calls on governments to recognise climate refugees and support a new legal agreement to guarantee their rights."
- "EJF calls on all countries to rapidly and fully implement the global climate agreement agreed in Paris in 2015."
- "EJF calls for a UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Climate Change to examine the issues surrounding climate change and human mobility, help protect the most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations within and across countries, and guide international action on climate-induced displacement."

### Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)

IASC, founded in 1992, is an inter-agency forum of humanitarian partners, both UN and non-UN, to strengthen humanitarian assistance. The primary goal of the IASC is to improve the delivery of humanitarian assistance to affected populations.

Since an independent humanitarian response review, also known as the Humanitarian Reform Agenda, in 2005, the cluster approach has been in use, with the IASC at its head. This approach has first been used following the earthquakes in Pakistan in 2005. The cluster approach was created for a more focussed and more easily prioritized reaction to a natural disaster. Each organisation is responsible for their cluster and an efficient delivery of the needed resources at the time of a natural disaster.



### Affected countries

The environmental refugees flee from countries that have endured a natural disaster or even multiple natural disasters. These countries are ridden with chaos at that time, human rights are violated and the population is at danger. In the past decade, climate change has shown an unconventionally rapid growth in the amount of countries it severely affects and in intensity. Seen as the environmental refugees are not lawfully recognised as refugees they are treated different and do not receive the amount of help they need and deserve.



For instance, around 2,000 people move to the Bengali capital, Dhaka, every day. At least 400,000 people move to Dhaka every year, according to the World Bank, while the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that 70% of Dhaka's underprivileged moved there fleeing from some kind of environmental shock. This phenomenon is not only happening in Bangladesh, but also in other LEDCs. The countries who produce the smallest ecological footprint are hit the hardest with the consequences.

## Timeline of Events

10th of December, 1948	Proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
28th of July, 1951	The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was held, definition of 'refugee' was given
December, 2005	Humanitarian Reform and Cluster Approach
23rd of October, 2009	The African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa was held, IDPs are from then on supported and protected by international law in Africa
12th of December, 2015	Signing of the Paris Agreement
31st of October, 2017	New Zealand considers creating a policy so Environmental Refugees can get a visa

## Previous attempts to solve the issue

### Humanitarian Reform

In 2005, the Emergency Relief Coordinator and the IASC started the process of the Humanitarian Reform to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian response through greater predictability, accountability, responsibility and partnership. This short-term solution was set in place to counter immediate chaos and aid the refugees created by a natural disaster immediately.

### The African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa

This convention was the first to address IDPs and end with giving them nearly the same aid and support as 'real' refugees. This is a more long-term solution, seeing as IDPs can be helped preventable and not just aided in response to a disaster. The convention has proven to be a viable aspect in mending the humanitarian crisis of environmental refugees.



## Possible solutions

A possible solution to the issue of environmental refugees could be to ensure they are recognised in international law. Since a large quantity is being overlooked by governments, the refugees are not receiving any support and their human rights are being violated. By writing legislation concerning the environmental refugees, the humanitarian crisis that we are facing can be solved.

Furthermore, a solution could be to encourage countries to provide aid and condemn those that do not provide help to those in need. It is a simple yet effective solution that has worked before in many different crises.

As climate change is one of the main causes for the existence and growth of environmental migrants, more actions should be taken in order to diminish human influence in climate change. This can be done through taking measures such as reducing CO2 emissions and possibly enforcing the Paris Agreement signed in 2015 more strictly.

Lastly, the UN could try to restore and rebuild the area affected as quickly as possible to enable a safe and efficient return for the refugees to their land of origin. In effectively dealing with the origin of the issue, we eliminate possible consequences from an early stage.

## Useful documents

This is a link to further explanation of the cluster approach, specifically of the role of the IOM in the cluster approach.

[https://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/activities/mepmm/op\\_support/epc\\_clusters\\_070808.pdf](https://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/activities/mepmm/op_support/epc_clusters_070808.pdf)

This is the link to the document with the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, published by the United Nations office for coordination of humanitarian affairs:

<http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/idrl/I266EN.pdf>

“How New Zealand can make world-leading climate refugee visas work” - an interesting climatechangenews.com article about climate refugee visas in New Zealand

<http://www.climatechangenews.com/2017/11/30/new-zealand-can-make-world-leading-climate-refugee-visas-work/>

## Bibliography

- “Climate Change”. Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, November 23rd 2017. December 24th. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate\\_change](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate_change)



- “Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees”. Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, January 15th, 2018. December 18th 2017.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention\\_Relating\\_to\\_the\\_Status\\_of\\_Refugees](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convention_Relating_to_the_Status_of_Refugees)
- “Definitional Issues”. The International Organization for Migration. IOM, April 08, 2015. December 20th 2017. <https://www.iom.int/definitional-issues>
- “Environmental migrant”. Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, January 20th 2017. December 18th 2017.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental\\_migrant#Global\\_statistics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_migrant#Global_statistics)
- “Guiding principles on internal displacement”. United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. UNOCHA, January 29th 2003. December 14th 2017.  
<http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/idrl/I266EN.pdf>
- “Migration and Climate Change”. The International organization for migration. IOM, June 5th 2017. December 20th 2017. <https://www.iom.int/migration-and-climate-change>
- “Natural disaster”. Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, December 12th 2017. December 20th 2017.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural\\_disaster#Protection\\_by\\_international\\_law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_disaster#Protection_by_international_law)
- Olivia Dun and François Gemenne. “Defining ‘environmental migration’”. Forced Migration Review. FMR, date of publication unknown. December 18th 2017.  
<http://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/FMRpdfs/FMR31/10-11.pdf>
- “Operational Activities”. The International organization for migration, December 3rd 2015. December 20th 2017 <https://www.iom.int/operational-activities>
- Poppy McPherson. “Dhaka: the city where climate refugees are already a reality”. The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, December 1st 2015. January 4th 2018.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/dec/01/dhaka-city-climate-refugees-reality>
- Susana B. Adamo. “Migration, Displacement and Climate Change”. United Nations. UN, April 25th 2016. December 28th 2017.  
[http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/events/other/other/documents/250416\\_COLUMBIA\\_UNI\\_Susana\\_Adamo.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/events/other/other/documents/250416_COLUMBIA_UNI_Susana_Adamo.pdf)
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. “UNHCR and Climate Change: An Overview”. UNHCR, October 2015. December 20th 2017.  
<http://www.unhcr.org/540854f49>
- “What is the Cluster Approach?”. HumanitarianResponse. HumanitarianResponse, March 12th 2017. January 4th 2018.





<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/about-clusters/what-is-the-cluster-approach>