

Environmental Commission (EVC)

Protecting climate refugees



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Introduction

The world as we know it is currently facing many different issues. As much as we do our best to find solutions and prevent further crises, it never quite seems to be enough. Nevertheless, we should always focus on what we can do, rather than what we are failing to. This Research Report will discuss the protection of climate refugees, to make it possible for delegates to do their best to solve the issue.

Both climate change and the incredible number of refugees/displaced individuals are serious problems, but the connection is too often overlooked. According to the International Displacement Monitoring Centre, over 376 million people have been forced out of their environment due to disasters like floods, earthquakes and drought since 2008. The increase compared to previous years is greatly concerning.

The biggest struggle these individuals face is protection upon arrival in a different region. The reason for this is that there is no universal definition of a 'climate refugee', and therefore no general guideline obligating nations to handle these people a certain way. This makes it hard for these people to find a legal basis and usually prevents them from building a new life after their home has been destroyed.

Ultimately, there are two main points to take into consideration when debating the issue. These are the prevention and the handling of the problem. After all, at some point there will simply



not be any room left. In the best-case scenario, everyone can continue to live in safety, without having to worry about any natural disasters. This is why it is so important to keep working to stop and reverse climate change. On the other hand, when this is not possible, it is important a consensus is reached between countries, so that victims of climate change do not have to live in uncertainty.

Both these issues and other nuances will be elaborated upon in this Research Report, hopefully simplifying the delegates' research process and assisting them during the conference.

Definition of Key Terms

Climate refugee/migrant

Someone who has been forced to move out of their home due to the consequences of climate change. These consequences can vary from floods to drought.

Legally, a climate refugee is not a refugee but a migrant. This will be explained further in this report.

International organizations prefer using the term climate migrant, therefore, this report will feature the same habit.



Climate change

A change in global or regional climate patterns, in particular a change apparent from the mid to late 20th century onwards and attributed largely to the increased levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide produced by the use of fossil fuels.

Human displacement

The forced relocation of (large groups of) people. This can be due to (violent) conflict, shortages of living supplies or natural disasters.

Refugee

Refugees are people who have fled their countries to escape conflict, violence, or persecution and have sought safety in another country.

Internally Displaced Person (IDP)

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are in most aspects similar to refugees. The largest difference between these two groups is the fact that IDPs do not cross an international border.

General Overview

In 2015, Ioane Teitiota requested refugee status in New Zealand on the basis of climate change, for both him and his family. He lived in Kiribati, an island threatened severely by rising sea levels. The case, however, was dismissed, and the man, with his family, was sent back to his home.

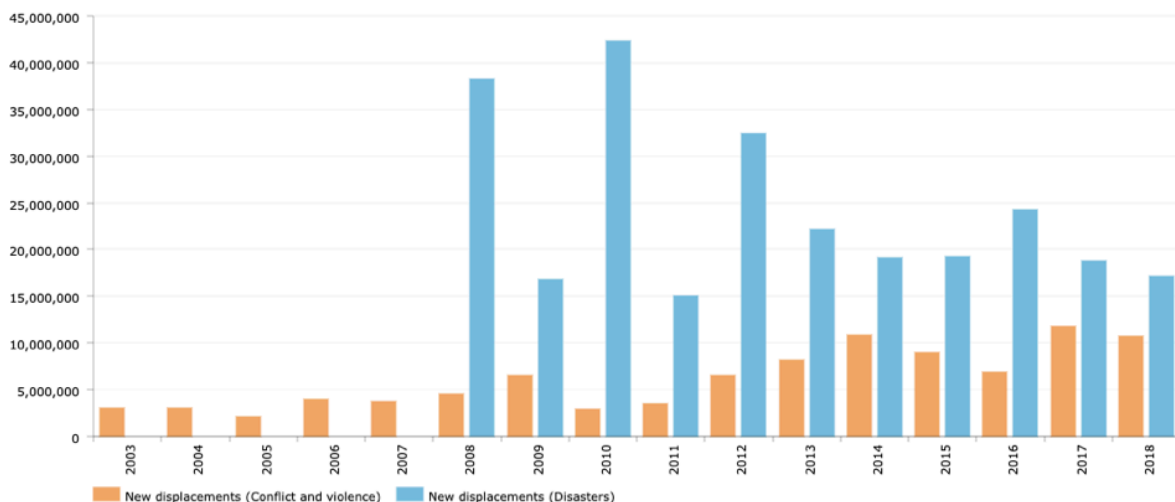


The government argued that Mr. Teitiota was not protected by the refugee convention, something that does appear to make sense. The danger faced by him and many others, on the other hand, should not be so easily dismissed. This general overview will attempt to explain the build-up to the status quo and how the situation will develop if nothing is done.

Definition

The refugee convention as we know it now is in most senses the same as it was when it was first established in 1951. In it is stated which people can 'earn' the refugee status, and agreements on guidelines have been established. Individuals "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country", are protected by the UN. Note how persons fleeing their uninhabitable-turned homes are not included in this list.

In former years, this was definitely not as big of a problem as it has become today. As the consequences of climate change have become more tangible, the effects on our surroundings have grown graver. In the graph underneath it is portrayed how many individuals are displaced on a yearly basis due to climate, compared to those displaced due to conflict.



There is currently no universal definition for the term 'climate refugee', which creates a lot of legal gray area for nations to follow through with their own guidelines, considering the lack of enforced consequences by intergovernmental organizations.

Climate Migration

Climate migration can be found in many forms, but is usually one of these two: sudden, after a grave disaster, or gradually over time, with the increase of the effects of climate change. A recent example is the drought in Somalia in 2022, which is estimated to have displaced over a million individuals, and killed approximately 43000 people, half of which were children under the age of five. These victims were mostly due to famine, a problem still very present in the region. It is noteworthy that the people seeking refuge from this region are not necessarily fleeing the drought, but rather the consequences caused by it. A different example of gradual migration can be seen in Guatemala and Honduras, where people have been attempting to move to the USA due to climate change in their habitual areas.

This is also seen in the Philippine islands, a region very vulnerable to climate change. In the past fifteen years, it was struck by two of the most dangerous typhoons so far; these disasters have worsened societal situations in the region. Additionally, having around 60% of the cities at the coast, rising sea-levels form a great threat.

In other words, when discussing climate migration, it is important to not only look at the individuals moving to different countries, but also those who remain stuck in theirs, unable to travel elsewhere. The country does not always have the means to take care of their inhabitants, which is something international cooperation can help with.



Climate Change and its consequences

As of now, climate change is one of the most discussed topics all around the world. Very briefly summarized, the phenomenon is caused by greenhouse gas emissions, which prevent heat from leaving the earth's atmosphere. This causes changes in temperature, of which the results can be seen in many different aspects.

One of the most concerning consequences, are the rising sea levels. Most of the residue heat is absorbed by the ocean, which does benefit us humans, as it keeps earth's average temperature lower. However, though our temperature does not change as drastically, the sea's does. This influences all forms of life in there, and causes ice to melt, leading to an increase in sea levels.

Globally, there is quite a bit of habituated land that is under sea level. This means that, when the sea levels rise, land will get flooded and become uninhabitable. Food will become scarcer and transport more difficult, as the roads might get worse. Naturally, nations have preparations set in place to minimize this damage, but the costs are high.

Additionally, the increase of carbon dioxide in sea waters influences the pH value, causing damage to several ocean species. Several populations rely on these species for food and income, and ocean acidification might influence them badly.

Food and its availability will also be influenced in other ways, the primary one being droughts. This may cause famine but can also lead to (violent) conflict, with all the consequences that come with that.

Currently, the international community is far from being as involved with this issue as it should be. More and more countries are facing the consequences, either of climate change directly, or via a large stream of migrants looking to seek protection. Many organizations are calling upon international groups to create agreements on the grave topic. The status quo will only worsen over the next years if no action is taken.



To conclude the general overview, it is important for delegates to take several factors into consideration, for this is not a one-sided issue. Climate migration is very present and will only increase the upcoming years, and the fact that there are close to zero official guidelines is quite troubling.

Major Parties Involved

Somalia

As mentioned before, Somalia is currently facing severe consequences of climate change. Great droughts have led to extreme famine, creating an incredibly high number of displaced and deceased individuals in the region. The government has not been capable of protecting all people, yet the international community has failed at providing the care needed. Somalia is a wonderful example of what more places will start to look like as time goes by and nothing is done to change our direction.

The Philippines

The Philippines is one of the most vulnerable nations to climate change in the world. Not only do most of its residents reside in coastal areas, but many livelihoods are also supported through natural resources dependent on the ecosystem. The region is also targeted often by natural hazards, varying from heavy storms, floods and droughts. In this region, too, climate change will cause havoc if no action is taken sometime soon.



African, Caribbean, Pacifician and South-East Asian nations at risk

Nations in African, Caribbean and Pacifician regions are most at risk due to both their geographical position and legislative situation. They have less accessibility to technology which can predict climate-related disasters, making it harder to prepare themselves, but countries with largely populated areas near coastal regions are also more susceptible to consequences. This can be due to both flood and droughts, as most communities will have grown accustomed to marine resources. Examples of extremely vulnerable countries in these regions are Chad and Syria.

Argentina

In 2022, Argentina created a temporary visa for individuals from Mexico, the Caribbean and Central-America who were displaced due to disasters. Though there are many visas available, this is the first one specifically created for these types of situations. New Zealand had attempted to make a similar one, but this plan did not go through.

Timeline of Key Events

A few relevant dates are included below; most events are explained in a more detailed way elsewhere in the report.

Date	Description of event
Dec 14th 1950	The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is established, following the end of World War II. Its initial purpose was to help



displaced Europeans, and the organization was meant to be demobilized, but it is still working hard.

1951

The UNHCR Refugee Convention is accepted.
Read more in the following section.

1967

The convention is adapted to be available to more people (read more in the next section as well).

2015

The case of the Teitiota family takes place, drawing more attention from the international community to the issue through journalism.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

There are, interestingly, no official agreements on the topic of climate migration. It is one severely underrepresented and overlooked by governments at important summits. Several unilateral decisions have been reached on both climate change and migration itself, but the connection is hardly ever addressed.

The UNHCR has requested nations to take climate change into consideration when working with refugees, but this advice is not binding—therefore, effects are not highly notable. On the other hand, the 1951 Refugee Convention has made a significant impact, and is very relevant. Nations may decline climate migrants, arguing that they are not mentioned in this Convention, and therefore are



not protected. The 1967 Protocol expands this Convention, making it applicable all over the world without time-based limitations.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

As mentioned before, there have not been any specific attempts aiming to solve the issue of climate migration. Instead, there are many attempts at working against climate change and its consequences, as well as regulating migration and refugees separately from each other. An attempt that, however, is interesting to look at is Argentina's temporary visa. A similar one was meant to be created in New Zealand, where a plan to create 100 of these visas on a yearly basis never came off the ground.

Possible Solutions

The protection of climate refugees is a serious issue, one hopefully made clear in this report. The solution to it is not one set in stone, but one consisting of several aspects, which will be described in this section.

First of all, it is of great importance to define climate refugees. Only after an intergovernmental definition is decided upon, will it become possible for guidelines to be imposed. Without this definition, any agreements made will lead only into vague legal ideas. These individuals have no safety net as of now, and it is the responsibility of this organization to ensure one is created.

Additionally, a protocol for natural disasters should be created, in order to not waste any time when a disaster does occur. Many climate migrants find themselves in chaotic circumstances due to



inefficient and insufficient individual operations, that take time to get started and do not have the means they could have if they were all working together.

Furthermore, it should be discussed how Internally Displaced People are helped in countries without the possibilities to do this on their own. Many of these have no place in their current country, but do not have any means available to travel elsewhere, leaving them stuck.

Finally, delegates may consider working against climate change. After all, that is what is really at the root of this problem.

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Appendix or Appendices

I. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729334/EPRS_ATA\(2022\)729334_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729334/EPRS_ATA(2022)729334_EN.pdf)

This document provides a brief and thorough overview of the future of climate change. It is great for delegates trying to expand their knowledge of the topic and can be quite helpful when thinking of solutions.

