

Environment Commission

Climate change and human displacement



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| Forum | Environment Commission |
| Issue: | Climate change and human displacement |
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Introduction

Human displacement is an issue known to many. Something happens in a home and the inhabitants are forced to leave. This phenomenon occurs all over the world, while reasons for it can vary greatly. There are two main types of displacement: human and naturally induced displacement. Human induced displacement usually comes from a violent conflict, like a civil war, or lack of proper wealth, while naturally induced displacement occurs when civilians are forced to flee their homes because of a natural disaster.

Naturally induced displacement also occurs very often, but is usually overlooked. The 'refugees' forced to leave their homes because of drought or extreme weather are a forgotten group, palling in comparison to war victims. However, despite the numbers already being shockingly high, the number of people having to relocate as a result of climate change is only expected to increase.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, there have been 265 million new displacements due to natural hazard. This is more than three times the number of displacements due to any other reason.

Human displacement is an almost direct consequence of climate change. The number of people forced to relocate due to climate-related disasters is much higher than armed conflict. This number could rise to an extreme high of 1.2 billion climate 'refugees' in 2050. It is important a solution is found as soon as possible, either to prevent the damage of disasters and/or to help the already existing victims.

This research report will attempt to summarize the issue and the key parts involved, in order to give delegates a good overview, hopefully with the result of a productive debate. Delegates should keep international cooperation in mind and attempt to limit environmental damage as much as possible, while keeping their country's best interests in mind.



Definition of Key Terms

Human Displacement

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

Climate Refugee/Climate Migrant

Someone who has been forced to leave their home and country due to the effects of climate change on their living circumstances, though legally a climate refugee is not a refugee but a migrant. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee their country because of violence or fear of prosecution. This means there is no strict definition of a climate refugee, as it doesn't exist. Nations can easily find loopholes where it benefits them. As there is no specific title, the people forced to flee due to climate change will be referred to as climate migrants for the rest of this research report, considering that many global agencies involved prefer to avoid the term climate refugee. More about this can be found in appendices I and IV.

Internally Displaced Person (IDP)

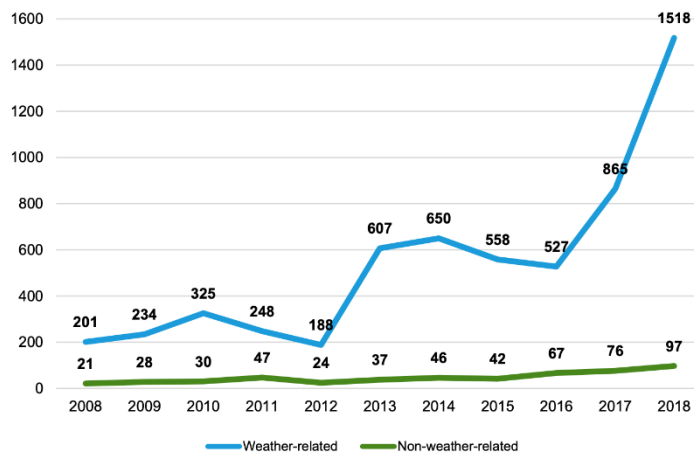
An IDP is, comparable to a refugee, someone who is forced to leave their home. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two, as an IDP does not cross a border, whereas a refugee does. The IDP is forced to stay in their country, for reasons such as lack of money or proper health to undertake such a trip.

General Overview

Human displacement due to climate change will only increase if nothing is done to prevent it. The numbers of victims are already disturbingly high, as the following graph shows. The number of internally displaced people due to climate change is much larger than other causes. This, amongst other reasons, is why the issue being overlooked so often is extremely problematic.



Figure 1: Number of climate-related disasters per year that have resulted in people being internally displaced



Source: Oxfam analysis of data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.⁶

<https://cleantechnica.com/2020/03/01/oxfam-every-2-seconds-climate-change-forces-a-person-from-their-home/>.

History

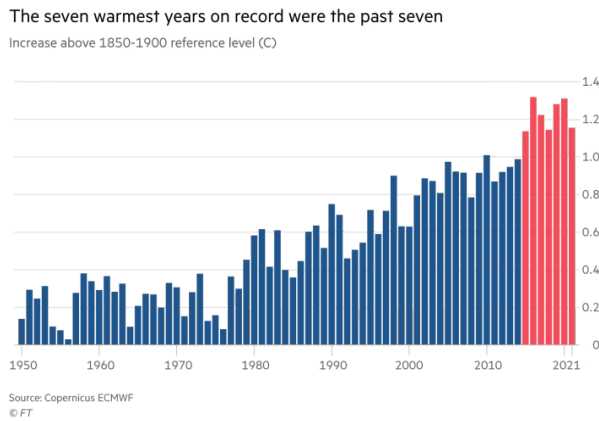
With the increase of natural disasters, victims of climate change have been increasing for decades. People are forced out of their homes because they have been flooded, people don't have enough food because of poor harvests.

First of all, a brief history on climate change must be provided. The UN scientific conference was the first UN-body to address the issue of exhaustion of resources in 1949, though it was not until 1968 that it received serious attention from a conservation perspective. Over the next few years, environmental-centered UN-bodies were created, and several conventions were adopted. International attention rose, and climate change became a subject discussed by many ordinary civilians. However, despite the creation of many new organizations, including ones within the UN, their main purpose was not to combat climate change, but mainly discuss development and environment. They were more occupied with renewable energy sources and water resources. After 1988 proceeded to go down in history books as the hottest year until then—keeping that title for a decade, until 1998 took over—this heat proved many scientists right and made it abundantly clear that climate change was happening.

An analysis on the amount of IDPs from 2008 to 2018

Crider, Johnna. "Number of climate-related disasters per year that have resulted in people being internally displaced." CleanTechnica, 2 March 2020,





An overview of the increase in temperature over the last 70 years compared to a 100 years ago

Hook, Leslie. "2021 among Seven Hottest Years on Record as Greenhouse Gas Emissions Surge." Financial Times, January 10, 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/28cf2f30-8a8d-494d-9599-0ea723db519e>.

Currently, it is hard to ignore climate change, as everyone has an opinion on it. Some people think drastic measures must be taken; some don't even believe it to be real. Regardless of that, it cannot be denied that there are countless of victims of natural disasters, as there have been for quite some time. It is important to recognize the different parts being played in the issue: from the scarcity of food to the floodings of entire cities. The reasons people are forced to flee are numerous.

Causes

Climate change is a natural phenomenon. The heat of the sun is absorbed by the earth and reflected back into the atmosphere, where a part of it goes back into space and part of it is absorbed by greenhouse gases. These greenhouse gases are responsible for the habitable conditions on Earth. Were it not for them, the average temperature on Earth would be $-18\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$, rather than the $15\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ it is currently. The problem, however, is that humans have also been releasing a greater amount of greenhouse gases, causing an increase in heat retention. This artificial warming has led to an unnatural increase in climate change.

With the rise of climate change has come a rise in problems all over the world. Extreme weather and food shortages have increased everywhere, causing many problems, and though the problems have increased, a rise in proper global cooperation is still missing. An example of this is the Pacific Islands. By 2100, it is expected that 48 islands will be completely underwater, leaving all the inhabitants without a place to stay. In 2015, a family illegally staying in New Zealand attempted to be



recognized as refugees based on the changed environment of their original home in Kiribati. This was eventually dismissed by New Zealand's high court, but gained a lot of attention in the media. For more information on the case, please see appendix II.

The Pacific Islands are one of the few examples where climate change is the direct and only cause of migration, and despite the attention gathered by its population, there has been little international action. In many other situations, climate change is a contributing factor, to internal and international conflict (e.g. food and clean water shortages), and with an ever-increasing energy demand, the impact on climate change continues to grow.

Another often-cited example where climate change is a contributing factor is the Syrian civil war. Extreme drought and failed crops led to population displacement and friction between the military and civilians, which played a part in the build-up to the still ongoing civil war.

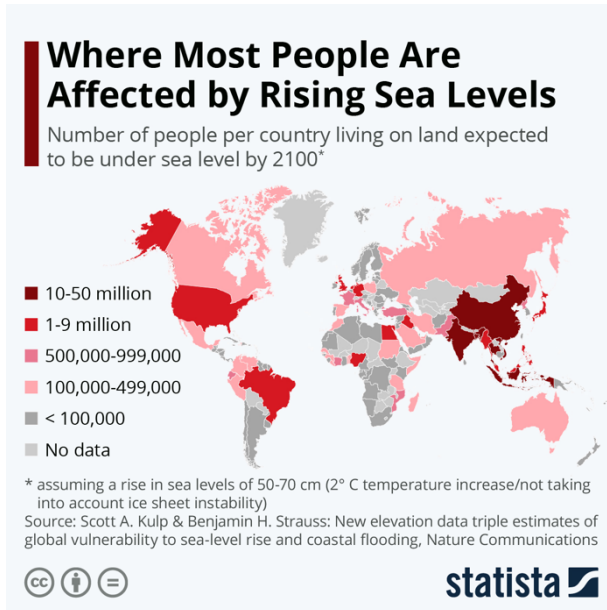
Status Quo

Right now, even in the US the number of climate victims is threatening to rise with the case of Isle de Jean Charles. Since the 1930s, the island has lost more and more of its land, leaving more and more people with no place to live. This example proves that more economically developed countries (MEDC's) will also start to suffer from climate change, if no clear arrangements are made. In the African continent, rising sea levels and desertification will only contribute to the seasonal migrants and the troubles countries already face. In Asia, the extreme weather change is influencing migration patterns greatly, creating large problems. Many of Asia's inhabitants live in areas located under sea level.

Over 90% of the excess heat caused by humans has been absorbed by the oceans. This is fantastic for us humans, as earth's temperature is still endurable, but there are many downsides to it. For example, coral reefs and sea animals are dying because of this increase in temperature, and more specifically, the ice caps are melting. This melting will lead to a rise in sea levels, which can cause floods, resulting in more victims of climate change.

The amount of land below sea level across the world is, additionally, very large. If sea levels continue to rise, it will leave many people without a home, as can be seen in the image below. This will naturally lead to the displacement of large populations.





An image portraying the amount of people living under sea level: the dark areas include the most victims

Buchholz, Katharina. "Rising Sea Levels Will Threaten 200 Million People by 2100." *Statista Daily Data*, 11 Feb.

2020, www.statista.com/chart/19884/number-of-people-affected-by-rising-sea-levels-per-country.

In summary, climate change has influenced migration patterns all over the world, directly affecting people's living circumstances and indirectly leading to (violent) conflict. There is no legal or binding agreement on these environmental migrants, and the problem is that the issue is so multidimensional that there is not one solution.

Major Parties Involved

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)

Though the UNHCR does not necessarily protect displaced people because of climate change, it is one of the most important organizations in the world when it comes to refugees and aiding them. The organization is committed to making the SDGs succeed and creating a refugee-free world

South-Eastern Asian Nations (Pakistan, the Philippines and Bangladesh)

When looking at the numbers, many countries in the south and east of Asia have seen a rise in the number of human displacement due to disasters over the past few years. These countries are



obviously looking for a solution in order to protect their population. Therefore, they are already engaging in many projects already. The Philippines have had the most displaced people for many years, followed by countries as Pakistan, China and India. Some other countries outside of Asia, like Nigeria, Haiti, Senegal and Afghanistan, have also suffered greatly.

Argentina

In May 2022, Argentina created a humanitarian visa, specifically designed for victims of climate change. It allowed migrants from Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean Islands to stay in the country for three years without paying additional migratory fees. This was one of the first visas of its kind and helped many displaced people. Argentina has been very welcoming to migrants and therefore plays an important part.

Timeline of Key Events

Relevant dates are mentioned below.

| Date | Description of event |
|---|--|
| August 17 th to September 6 th 1949 | UN Scientific Conference on the conservation and utilization of resources in New York, first official address of depletion of resources, though it was more from an economic point of view |
| December 14 th 1950 | The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is established |
| May 29 th 1968 | Economic and Social Council includes environmental issues as an agenda item |
| June 5 th to 16 th 1972 | First Earth Summit, in Stockholm, where a declaration was accepted pointing out the issue of climate change and warning governments to be mindful |
| June 5 th 1972 | United Nations Environment Program established |
| 1988 | Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change established |
| 2015 | Teitota family is the first to request a refugee status on the base of climate change solely |

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events



There is actually no official agreement on climate migration. There are a lot of treaties, agreements and resolutions on climate change itself, and a lot on refugees or migrants themselves, but an agreement specifically pointing out migration due to climate change and a solution for it is still missing.

However, in 2020 the UNHCR released legal guidance which allowed countries to take climate change more into consideration with refugees, but as it didn't change the Refugee Convention, there is still not much legal groundwork.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

As stated before, there have not been many attempts to solve this issue specifically. There are, however, a lot of agreements either on climate change or refugees. These can be found on several official websites (e.g. your delegation's official site or <https://www.un.org/>).

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The 2030 SDGs, adopted by 193 countries, do address climate change and refugees, but don't link the two. The Goals call for organized migration and political planning, but is not legally binding. Moreover, the progress necessary has been slowing, though mostly due to unforeseen events such as COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war. This explanation has usually been ignored by critics.

Possible Solutions

When looking for solutions, it is important delegates keep a few things in mind. Human displacement is not just one issue, with one solution, rather it is a plethora of complications needing to be solved.

To begin, it is necessary to come up with a clear and globally accepted procedure for when a climate disaster occurs. It is important to have a precise plan that can be used immediately, in order to help as many people as possible, especially if they choose to leave their country. An international disaster risk management protocol should be created.



Additionally, a topic that should be discussed is that of what a climate migrant (or refugee) is, and what rights they have. One of the biggest struggles related to human displacement due to climate change is that there is no definition. There is no global treaty, no multilateral agreement, nothing which creates a safety net or environment for people forced to leave their homes because of the environment.

Finally, it should also be considered how the UN can help IDPs without the means to find a better living situation. There are many people without the means to leave their country, while there is no place for them to stay.

To conclude, it remains important to stop climate change. Environmental damage can be limited by using more clean energy and minimizing the use of fossil fuels, in combination with finding replacements for certain resources that produce a lot of greenhouse gases. Cooperation, transparency and accessibility for all countries is crucial, as some countries simply do not have the means necessary to combat environmental damage. An increase in climate change will only come with an increase in the number of human displacements and must be prevented.

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Appendices

Both Appendices I and II have been mentioned in the document already. Appendix I elaborates a bit more on the term climate refugee and why it is actually incorrect, and appendix II is a summary of the case of the Teitiota family. Appendix III has not been mentioned, but is a concise and useful article about the consequences of climate change on the issue of human displacement, which could be of help to the delegates during their research. Appendix IV and V are both a continuation of Appendix I, and going into a bit more depth for curious delegates. While appendix IV is more about facts and figures, appendix V is an official European Parliament briefing.

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- IV. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698753/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)698753_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698753/EPRS_BRI(2021)698753_EN.pdf)
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