

Committee: United Nations Human Rights Council

Issue: Discussing the Rights of "Climate Migrants" and the Legal Definition of Refugees

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, the global community has experienced unprecedented shifts in environmental conditions, driven by accelerating human-induced climate change. As global temperatures continue to rise, severe weather events, sea-level rise, prolonged droughts, and environmental degradation are transforming human mobility patterns worldwide. Millions of individuals are increasingly forced to abandon their homes due to the loss of agricultural viability, coastal erosion, and freshwater scarcity. What was once considered a localized or temporary phenomenon has evolved into a global crisis of human displacement, significantly impacting human rights, socio-economic stability, and regional security.

Despite the growing scale and urgency of this issue, the current international legal architecture remains inadequately equipped to protect individuals displaced by environmental factors. Under existing international law, specifically the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, individuals fleeing environmental disasters do not qualify for formal "refugee" status, which strictly applies to those escaping persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, or political affiliation. This leaves "climate migrants" in a legal vacuum—facing profound economic, political, and social vulnerabilities without standardized legal protections, guaranteed asylum rights, or access to essential humanitarian services across international borders.

Consequently, the issue of climate migrants raises critical questions in the international community. First, who holds the historical and financial liability for the displacement? Second, what is the responsibility of those who hold the sovereign and humanitarian obligation to protect climate migrants? These questions address the human rights implications of climate-induced displacement and visualize the main purpose of this gathering; bridging the gap between existing refugee frameworks and the evolving realities of environmental migration. Resolving this issue requires member states to clarify legal

definitions, establish multilateral mechanisms for human rights protections, and integrate climate adaptation strategies into international migration governance to protect vulnerable populations while respecting state sovereignty.

Definition of Key Terms

Climate Migrant

A person or group of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are compelled to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad. However, the term holds no formal status or legal protection under international law.

Environmental Refugee

A non-legal, colloquial term often used to describe individuals displaced by environmental disasters or climate change; however, it holds no formal status or legal protection under international refugee law.

Non-Refoulement

A fundamental principle of international law that forbids a state from returning or deporting asylum seekers to a country where they would face torture, cruel treatment, or irreparable harm to their fundamental human rights (including life-threatening environmental conditions).

Internal Displacement / Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

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 to avoid the effects of natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border. It differs from climate migrants and environmental refugees because its definition strictly requires internal movement without crossing international borders, whereas the latter two focus primarily on the environmental drivers of displacement regardless of whether the movement is internal or cross-border.

Climate Adaptation

Adjustments in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects or impacts, aimed at mitigating potential damage or capitalizing on opportunities, including planned relocation and migration management.

De Facto Statelessness

A condition where individuals legally possess a nationality, but the state of that nationality is unable or unwilling to extend protection, or where the physical territory of the state ceases to exist or sustain human life due to extreme environmental events (such as low-lying island inundation).

History

The start and definition of global warming and its effects

Since the Industrial Revolution, the global annual temperature has increased by more than 1 degree Celsius. Between 1850 and 1980, it rose on average by 0.07 degrees Celsius every 10 years. Since 1981, however, the rate of increase has more than doubled. For the last 40 years, the global annual temperature has risen by 0.2 degrees Celsius per decade.

Global warming results from the increasing concentration of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that trap heat in the Earth's atmosphere. Although natural cycles and fluctuations have caused the planet's climate to change continually over the last 800,000 years, human activity such as electricity production and the burning of fossil fuels has driven our current era of global warming.

The surge of climate-driven environmental changes has profoundly transformed the dynamics of human displacement. The impact of global warming has now extended, including but not limited to the loss of agricultural viability and coastal territory. The world is witnessing various environmental crises, such as prolonged droughts and severe coastal intrusion, that continually diversify and expand the scale of global migration. Nonetheless, the rapid proliferation of these climate factors has created greater complexity in managing humanitarian responses, making it difficult to create more opportunities to aid border conflicts, urban overpopulation, and resource scarcity.

The shift from localized issues to exponential demographic displacement

The historical trajectory of environmental migration has transitioned from a temporary flight into a compounding global crisis. Historically, environmental displacement was viewed as a series of short-term anomalies; however, due to the acceleration of global warming, these temporary disruptions transformed into permanent failures. An example of this can be the sheer volume of displacement in Bangladesh, The African Sahel and Pakistan. Global warming consequently shifted and expanded the scale of migration patterns from simple rural-to-urban movements into multi-directional human flows that overwhelmed existing domestic infrastructure and redefined regional demographics across the global South.

Key issues

The exacerbation of social tensions

The experience of rapid urbanization can overwhelm already overstretched urban infrastructure and exacerbate social tensions. Informal settlements, lacking basic services and infrastructure, often become the only option for displaced populations and worsen issues of poverty and inequality. The displacement of communities due to climate change can have far-reaching consequences for cultural identity, social cohesion, and traditional livelihoods. Furthermore, it threatens the erosion of cultural heritage and the loss of indigenous knowledge systems.

The underestimation of the urgency of 'climate migrants' and the absence of a proper legal framework

Unlike refugees fleeing persecution or conflict, environmental migrants are forced to relocate due to deteriorating living conditions caused by environmental degradation. These migrants face a multitude of challenges, including legal uncertainties and inadequate protection. Unlike refugees, they may not qualify for formal refugee status under international law, leaving them in a precarious position with limited access to legal rights and

protections. The absence of a clear legal framework for environmental migration exacerbates their vulnerability and impedes their ability to access essential services and resettlement opportunities.

The term 'climate migration' underscores the sheer scale and urgency of the phenomenon, as vast numbers of individuals and entire communities are compelled to abandon their homes in search of safety and sustenance. As demonstrated by these cases, these factors may further exacerbate the need for social awareness.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

State Actors

Tuvalu

As a low-lying island nation facing imminent physical threats from rising sea levels, Tuvalu advocates for urgent international legal recognition and protection of climate-displaced populations. Tuvalu emphasizes that climate migration should be treated as a matter of human rights and environmental justice rather than solely as a domestic border management issue. The nation actively advocates for multilateral agreements that safeguard the sovereign rights, cultural preservation, and statehood of vulnerable populations, even when physical territory is submerged or rendered uninhabitable. Furthermore, Tuvalu urges high-emitting developed nations to fulfill their climate finance obligations to support adaptation and managed retreat strategies.

People's Republic of Bangladesh

Facing extreme vulnerability to severe flooding, tropical cyclones, and coastal salinity intrusion, Bangladesh experiences significant internal and cross-border demographic displacement. Bangladesh maintains that climate-induced displacement places a disproportionate burden on developing nations that have contributed minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions. The government advocates for a comprehensive international

framework that integrates climate adaptation, loss and damage mechanisms, and structured migration pathways. Bangladesh emphasizes the need for capacity building, financial assistance, and technology transfer from the global community to build climate resilience and manage internal urban migration pressures effectively.

United States of America

The United States recognizes climate change as a major driver of global displacement and a factor compounding geopolitical instability. While supporting humanitarian aid, climate adaptation funding, and bilateral resilience initiatives, the United States remains cautious regarding the legal expansion of the 1951 Refugee Convention to include climate migrants. The U.S. approach focuses primarily on addressing the root causes of climate displacement through targeted development assistance, improving regional climate resilience, and utilizing existing domestic immigration frameworks to accommodate displaced individuals on a case-by-case basis.

Non-State Actors

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

UNHCR plays a key role in providing operational guidance, policy advice, and protection frameworks for populations displaced by environmental disasters and climate change. While UNHCR acknowledges that most climate-displaced individuals do not fit the strict legal definition of a "refugee" under the 1951 Convention, the agency actively promotes the application of regional protection instruments, such as the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration. UNHCR advocates for proactive adaptation measures, planned relocation strategies, and the integration of human rights principles into global climate governance.

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

As the leading intergovernmental body in the field of migration, IOM focuses on the nexus between climate change, environmental degradation, and human mobility. IOM emphasizes that migration can serve as a viable adaptation strategy rather than merely a failure of development. The organization provides technical expertise, data collection, and

policy recommendations to assist member states in managing climate-induced migration safely and orderly. IOM advocates for mainstreaming environmental mobility into national adaptation plans and regional policy discussions.

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)

The IDMC serves as a primary global source of data and analysis on internal displacement caused by natural disasters and climate change. By providing evidence-based reporting and monitoring toolkits, the IDMC highlights the scale and economic impacts of disaster displacement worldwide. The organization assists international bodies and national governments by identifying vulnerability gaps, assessing displacement risks, and informing policy frameworks aimed at prevention, mitigation, and long-term durable solutions.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Date	Description of event
July 28, 1951	The adoption of the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, establishing the foundational legal definition of a refugee based on well-founded fear of persecution.
September 28, 1954	The adoption of the Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, establishing protection frameworks for individuals lacking national citizenship.
December 12, 2015	The adoption of the Paris Agreement under the UNFCCC, explicitly recognizing the rights of migrants and vulnerable populations in climate action (Preamble).
December 10, 2018	The endorsement of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) by the UN General Assembly, explicitly acknowledging climate change as a driver of migration.

January 7, 2020	The landmark ruling by the UN Human Rights Committee, establishing that states cannot deport individuals back to countries where climate change poses an imminent threat to their right to life.
November 20, 2022	COP27 establishes the historical "Loss and Damage" fund to assist vulnerable nations impacted by climate-driven disasters and displacement.

Possible Solutions

Addressing the complex challenge of climate-induced migration requires a balanced approach combining legal protection, regional adaptation strategies, and multilateral cooperation within the UN Human Rights Council framework.

First, member states would work toward establishing a standardized global policy framework or supplementary protocol that explicitly defines the legal status and rights of climate-displaced individuals. Rather than attempting a controversial re-opening of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the HRC should encourage the adoption of temporary protection statuses, humanitarian visas, and regional non-refoulement guidelines tailored to environmental crises.

Second, international policy would promote migration as an active strategy for climate adaptation. To maximize the potential benefits of migration as an adaptation strategy, policymakers must adopt a holistic approach that addresses the underlying drivers of climate-induced migration and promotes inclusive and sustainable development. This includes investing in infrastructure and livelihood opportunities in both sending and receiving areas, strengthening social safety nets to support vulnerable populations, and fostering inclusive governance mechanisms that ensure affected communities' participation in decision-making processes.

Ultimately, efforts to address climate-induced migration could—as one potential strategic perspective—be grounded in principles of climate justice and equity, ensuring that

the needs and rights of displaced populations are prioritized and protected. While this framework illustrates how a committee might structure its resolution, delegates must formulate their own distinct positions grounded in their specific country's policy research. By adopting a proactive and inclusive approach to migration management, policymakers can harness migration's potential as a tool for adaptation and resilience-building in the face of climate change. Multilateral financial mechanisms, such as the Loss and Damage Fund, serve here merely as an example of a policy proposal that delegates should independently evaluate and adapt according to their assigned nation's interests to support vulnerable sending nations in executing planned relocations and building resilient urban infrastructure.

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