

Forum: United Nations Environment Programme

Issue #1: Addressing the issue of population displacement due to climate change

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Introduction

Climate change affects our planet every year in various ways. But one of the most impacting, specifically to impoverished communities, is the displacement that is caused by it. Climate change can be easily pinpointed as the driving factor behind critical issues such as limited resources, unfavorable weather, unsuitable crop and livestock conditions, environmental degradation, and even violence and conflict. Thus, many are forced to flee their countries to escape their adverse conditions and seek better ones. These mass migrations cross international borders, creating new problems like discrimination, trauma, lack of protection, and loss of human rights. Additionally, the issue disproportionately affects low-income communities, leaving already socio-economically vulnerable people worse off. Although these communities have been impacted by climate change for decades (approximately since the '70s), environmental degradation is a problem that continues to rise and proliferate. This makes the issue a lot more difficult to tackle, since the root of the problem has not yet been solved and lies in the negative impact caused by many global communities.

Furthermore, the controversy around climate change and the lack of

governmental action in various nations can create further concerns. It is important to address the underlying causes of climate change and the solutions they entail in order to aid those who have become most affected.

Definition of Key Terms

Environmental Degradation

Environmental Degradation is the deterioration of the environment due to depletion of resources such as air, soil, and water. This refers to the destruction of ecosystems, extinction of wildlife, pollution and habitat destruction.

Climate Refugee

A person who has been forced to move out or leave their home or nation due to a natural disaster, environmental degradation, and other ecological issues.

Mass Migrations

Mass migration is when a large group of people migrate from one geographical area to another.

Climate change

Climate change is a long-term change in an area that has average conditions of the change in average weather patterns. These changes can include temperature and rainfall.

Resource scarcity

Resource scarcity is a situation where the demand for natural resources is significantly higher than the supply.

General Overview

The root of the issue

Environmental disasters, crop damages, weather events, and more have been known to impact societies, whether that is directly or indirectly. But when discussing this impact we must first discuss the root of the issue, that being climate change. Climate change is mainly caused by human activities. People burn fossil fuels and convert from forest to agriculture. When fossil fuels are burned it produces carbon dioxide, which is a greenhouse gas. When rainfall patterns change, it increases the demand for evaporation and it reduces availability of water for irrigation, which also threatens agriculture production. Climate change can reduce access to food, disrupt food availability, and affect food quality. Climate change causes major weather events such as droughts, flooding, hurricanes, and earthquakes. These are factors that force people to leave their homes. These people are called climate refugees which are defined as people who are forcibly displaced because of environmental factors which are caused by climate change. The impacts of climate change are many, and these trigger displacement and the living conditions of the ones who have already been displaced. This impacts their limitation of natural resources, for example, drinking water. Drinkable water is becoming more scarce as it already is in multiple parts of the world that host refugees. All of these factors connect to climate refugees. These refugees are obligated to leave their homes because of these major events, and this impacts their life in a negative way.

Small scale and large scale impacts of climate-induced migrations

Climate change and its repercussions on individuals and communities are widely seen and felt. As these migrants relocate, not only are their human rights affected, but their countries' socio-economic status is impacted too. Economic development of the country being migrated from is affected as most of those who flee are farmers, market owners, or simply put, "the very kind of people that are essential components of successful communities.". This loss of human capital leaves the country's already affected economical status worse off. The impact on the countries receiving migrants, may depend vastly on the nation's own migrant assimilation protocols and their economic repercussions. If the movement of people is too much for the "hosting country" to bear, the increase of urbanization can create further issues. As an example, more environmental issues may arise, like in the case of poorly managed refugee camps. Many have been put into place through the deforestation and clearing of areas in order to create make-shift settlements. Additionally, the influx of migrants into a country can also pose a security threat on both parties, as violent conflicts may arise. For example, as stated in a UNHCR report on the topic, "A study of civil wars between 1945-2005 finds that, of 103 ethnic conflicts, 32 involved violence between members of a regional ethnic (minority) group that considers itself to be the indigenous "sons-of-the-soil" and recent migrants from other parts of the country". In the case of host countries, they may also receive increased tensions over the consequences of surpassing their own population capacity. "...ensuing property damage, property claim disputes or overuse of local resources and the burden on their publicly funded health and social systems" are only some of the many possible social repercussions of mass migrations.

Problems regarding legal framework

As seen by the various stories and statistical data, climate refugees are a vulnerable group in need of international protection. But the issue further complicates itself as a legal problem arises. Although the term “climate refugee” has been used since 1970 and defined by UNEP expert Essam El-Hinnawi in 1985, there has been no clear and professionally-revised agreement on the term. Furthermore, the term has no official recognition under international law. This creates a lack of legal frameworks and guidelines to address the issue, thus invalidating the individual and depriving them of international protection. As the Director of Refugee Studies at Oxford University, Roger Zetter puts it.

“well-established international, regional, and national legal instruments, covenants and norms to protect the rights of people forcibly displaced by conflict, persecution, natural disasters and development projects. It is therefore surprising that a similar framework to protect people forced to move because of climate-induced environmental change does not exist”

Thus, in order to address the issue at hand, it is vitally important to define the term regarding those displaced by climate change. Additionally, legal frameworks and protocols must be taken into consideration when handling this.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States

Current president Joe Biden put forward an executive order in which he asked for a six month study on climate change repercussions and the possible resettlement aid of those affected by it. Although the proposal

hasn't been put into effect yet, it could place the US in a leadership role regarding climate refugee action. That being said, the US is still the second most polluting country in regards to CO2 emissions. The new administration has increased general public awareness on the environmental issue, and has proposed many orders to help the planet, but no concrete action has been taken to date.

Iraq

As one of the mospills, sanitation, pollution, land degradation, lack of river basin management.

Syria

Aside from its political conflict, many Syrian refugees have fled the country due to environmental reasons. Up to 60% of Syria's land suffered a major drought from the years 2006-2011. This caused many crops to fail which for a country in which 75% of families depend on agriculture, caused heavy economic decline.

Níger

Sahel countries have had up to 1.6 million internally displaced people as a result of rapidly evolving climate change.

Afghanistan

The northwest of the country was greatly affected by a 2018 drought, which caused rural families to have to sell their properties and landstock in order to economically survive.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1985	Term "climate refugee" was first defined by UNEP expert, Essam El-Hinnawi
1990	The IPCC First Assessment Report stated, in its climate change impact assessment, that "Migration and resettlement may be the most threatening short-term effects of climate change on human settlements."
2006	Syria began to experience extreme periods of drought that led to the migration of 1.5 million people and likely exacerbated their political conflicts.
2019	Cyclone Idai and Cyclone Kenneth struck Mozambique, both storms being only six weeks apart. The floods, crop loss, infrastructure damages, disease, and insecurity affected approximately 2.2 million people including the internal displacement of 146,00 people. As of March 2020, 100,000 people were still living in resettlement sites.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Although the United Nations has acknowledged and proposed solutions to refugee problems for a very long time, climate-induced migrations and their consequences have been a more recent issue.

- In 2010, the UNFCCC established the Cancun Adaptation framework in which they call upon “All Parties to enhance action on adaptation through, inter alia... Enhancing understanding/coordination/cooperation on climate change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation”
- The UN General Assembly recognized the problem of climate-induced displacement and its possible social repercussions. This was done in the 2013 Dialogue on International Migration and Development
- The 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development includes various environmental and social goals such as “1.5 By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters”.

Past action

In 2011, the EU provided a study on climate refugees titled “Climate Refugees’ Legal and policy responses to environmentally induced migration” in which they highlighted the issues regarding terminology and further expanded on the lack of protection status of the refugees. Additionally, there have been several instances of humanitarian aid response to those affected, especially from the UNHCR. This organization has helped countries like Afghanistan and Mozambique to combat the effects of certain climate catastrophes (severe droughts and a cyclone, respectively) with shelters and tents. Furthermore, they have taken steps to plan responses to a climate migration beforehand with the use of “practice drills” of disaster and

displacement situations in countries like Panama and Costa Rica. It is also worth noting that, although not as effective, action has been taken worldwide to resolve the root of the problem, through climate change action strategies. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change started in 1994, March 21. Nowadays about 197 countries have joined this convention to put a stop to this issue.

Possible Solutions

When viewing the issue of climate refugees, we must first take into account the gaps in legal framework. The most notable would be the definition, or lack thereof, of "climate refugees". Furthermore, the implementation of this definition on international policy and migration laws must be reviewed.

Problems may arise from this though, as one must take into account both the migrating country and the host country's legal systems and their positions on refugee protection and assimilation. In addition, the problem of climate change may also be addressed, although it also carries its own national and international policy issues.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

The Sustainable Development Goals linking to this issue are Goal 13: Climate Action and Goal 17: Partnership for Goals. Goal 13, being climate action, takes urgent action to fight climate change and the impact that it has in the world. Climate change affects every single country in the world. This issue not only affects lives but it also disrupts national economies. Weather patterns are changing in every country, and this has a great impact on climate refugees. Since it is an issue that is throughout the world, this makes it extremely hard for

climate refugees to find a stable place to live. Goal 17, partnership for goals, refers to countries making global partnerships for sustainable development. Global partnerships or alliances can be extremely helpful for the circumstances of climate refugees. Climate change can happen gradually over time, or a change can be seen in an instant. Having countries globally unite would greatly benefit climate refugees, this is because they would have a country to go that was in alliance to the country they were forced to leave because of climate change.

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Appendix

- I. Detailed analysis and plan of action by the UNDP towards the natural disaster known as El Niño
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