



## The Issue of Climate Refugees

### Introduction

Over the last few years, the media has extensively covered one of the most pressing issues facing the world – climate change. Over 97 percent of actively publishing climate scientists agree that the planet is warming, from North Pole to South Pole. Since 1906, the global average surface temperature has increased by more than 1.6 degrees and this is already having severe consequences throughout various parts of the world. Sea levels are expected to keep rising throughout this century with countries such as Kiribati at risk of being wiped off the map altogether. Extreme weather such as hurricanes are expected to worsen as showcased by the current wildfires in Australia due to record breaking temperatures and prolonged drought. Consequently, the issue of ‘Climate Refugees’ has rightfully gained higher media attention of late with the most common projection being that the world will have 150–200 million climate change refugees by 2050.

### Definition

The term ‘Climate Refugees’ coined by the media repeatedly over the last few years has no official United Nations recognised definition. This is because the people it is applied to do not fulfil the typical criteria for refugees. However, the UNHCR uses the phrase, ‘persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change’ as this accounts for those who have moved locations but remain in their country. It is worth noting that when people move due to climate change impacts, they are often moving for a variety of other reasons. Despite the lack of a uniformly accepted definition for the term, the concept has had an increasing importance with the UNHCR estimating that there have been at 24 million who have been forced to relocate for reasons relating to their natural environment.

### Economic vs climate refugee

One of the problems from the recognition of climate refugees is the difficulty to distinguish between an economic and a climate refugee.

For example someone leaving their nation due to a lack of water affecting their livestock and crops, could be seen as an economic refugee whereas someone fleeing their country and seeking asylum in a richer country could qualify as an climate refugee on the basis that scarcity of resources and rising temperatures are sufficient reasons for being “unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to” their country, as detailed in the Geneva Convention? Some might argue that creating a status for climate refugees will open a Pandora’s box and only create a much larger world refugee problem, with waves of displaced people all around the globe.

### Worth Noting

In a 2009 report, the UNHCR “identified five climate change related scenarios that may directly or indirectly cause human displacement”

- Hydro-meteorological disasters (flooding, hurricanes/typhoons/cyclones, mudslides...)
- Zones designated by Governments as being too high-risk and dangerous for human habitation



- Environmental degradation and slow onset disaster (e.g. reduction of water availability, desertification, recurrent flooding, salinization of coastal zones...)
- The case of 'sinking' small island states
- Violent conflict triggered by a decrease in essential resources (e.g. water, land, food) owing to climate change

#### Recent developments

In 2018, the UNHCR undertook the study: In Harm's Way: International protection in the context of nexus dynamics between conflict or violence and disaster or climate change

The Global Compact on Refugees, adopted by an overwhelming majority in the UN General Assembly in 2018, directly addresses this growing concern. It recognizes that 'climate, environmental degradation and natural disasters increasingly interact with the drivers of refugee movements.'

#### Points to Consider:

- What does your country perceive to be the best solution to tackling the issue?
- What is your country's attitude towards climate change and to refugees?
- What should the definition of climate refugees be?
- Should wealthier nations assist in the resettling of those affected? • Should countries that are big polluters be responsible for granting asylum to climate refugees?

#### Useful Links:

<http://climatemigration.org.uk/climate-refugees-definition/>

<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/climate-change-and-disasters.html>