

## What is a climate change refugee?

The term *climate refugees* refers to the subset of environmental migrants forced to move due to "due to sudden or gradual alterations in the natural environment related to at least one of three impacts of climate change: sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity" (Global Governance Project 2012). However, there is yet to be a universally accepted definition of "environmental migration" or "climate refugee." The International Organization for Migration formulated a working definition, which encompasses the complexity of the topic.

This working definition recognizes that:

- Environmental migrants are not only those displaced by the environmental event but also those whose migration is triggered by deteriorating environmental conditions
- Environmentally induced movement can take place within as well as across international borders;
- It can be both long and short term; and
- Population movements triggered by environmental forces can be forced as well as a matter of choice

## How many climate refugees are there in the world?

Estimates vary particularly because it can often be hard to say for certain whether environmental factors forced migration.

- The Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that in 2011, 14.9 million people were displaced within their own borders throughout the world due to natural disasters, mostly related to weather events such as floods and storms.
- The International Organization on Migration estimates that 200 million people will be forced to migrate due to environmental change by 2050

## What legal protection do climate refugees have?

The 1951 Refugee Convention relating to the Status of Refugees is the key legal document in defining who is a refugee, their rights and the legal obligations of states. That convention was meant to protect people who didn't want to return to their country for fear being persecuted because of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. The 1951 Refugee Convention does not include protection for environmental migrants or climate refugees. Therefore, people displaced by environmental threats who are forced to cross borders must seek citizenship or legal residency status through the same channels as any other immigrant.

## What can be done about climate refugees through international policy cooperation?

As part of the Cancun Adaptation Framework, Parties initiated consideration on approaches to address loss and damage associated with climate change impacts in developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. Following two years of deliberations on this issue, COP19 (November 2013) established the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts, as the main vehicle under the Convention to promote the implementation of approaches to address loss and damage in a comprehensive, integrated and coherent manner. However, because Loss and Damage is a mechanism for financial reparations, it does not directly address issues related to citizenship and the facilitation of relocation or settlement for environmental migrants.

Sources:

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