

Background information

In 2018 alone, 17.2 million new displacements associated with disasters in 148 countries and territories were recorded and 764,000 people in Somalia, Afghanistan and several other countries were displaced following drought (*Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre*). Changes in the environment such as desertification, rising sea levels and coastal erosion are forcing more and more people to flee their homes in order to survive. Human mobility and climate change are two topics going hand in hand.

Predictions made by The World Bank state that by the year 2050 there ought to be internal migration amounting up to 143 million people, if no actions are taken. The majority of displacements linked to natural disasters and climate change is internal, however cross-border migration as a cause of climate change is not infrequent. In such cases it often brings conflicts and violence. Political awareness regarding this issue has grown in the past years with agreements such as the Paris Climate Change Agreement or the Global Compact for Migration. However, finding a solution to these challenges is a hard quest, especially if the outcome should benefit not only local communities but whole countries as well. In the future, climate change will make more and more people leave their homes, adding up to the problem of mass migration. Therefore, this is a very complex issue and its relevance is growing every single day.

UN involvement

UNHCR recognizes the impact of climate change on forced displacement as very serious. UN sees the issue as a challenge not only for refugees but for communities and whole states, too. In the Global Compact on Refugees, signed in August 2018, the UNHCR introduces several possible solutions and analyses the problem in detail. In order to tackle the problem, UNHCR currently works in 4 main areas:

1. **Legal advice, guidance and the development of norms** in order to enhance the rights of displaced people.
2. **Promoting policy coherence.**
3. **Research** and filling in information gaps.
4. **Field-based activities** to minimize and address displacement and to ensure a sustainable response to displacement.

UNHCR further continues with studies and researches, most often in areas directly affected. It also examines the protection provided to displaced people, concentrating on regions with increasing violence. However, there are still large data gaps, therefore further detailed research is necessary. The topic of rewriting UN's 1951 refugee convention and implementing a legal name for people displaced by climate change – “climate refugees”, has been opened. Nevertheless this proposal has been denied, which means there is no legal protection for people displaced by climate change.

Possible solutions

One of the possible solutions is upgrading migration practises, such as visa processes. Even though this does not concern internal refugees, it could distinctly simplify the process of cross-border migration. Next, creating a special status for refugees fleeing climate change or giving them a legal status of climate refugees could help these people seek refuge within their country or outside its borders more easily. Lastly, cooperation is key. Cooperation between national governments and communities is absolutely crucial to ensure a functioning state and a sustainable response to forced displacement.

Questions to consider

- Is my country directly affected? What are the first steps it should undertake?

- Could climate change and forced displacement be a potential economic, social or political threat to my country? If so, how could one prevent these threats?
- How should states not directly affected by climate change and forced displacement act?
- How could the Global Compact on Refugees be upgraded?
- Should the term “climate refugee” be implemented in the international law?

Sources

- Environmental migration portal:
<https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/>
- Migration and the climate crisis: the UN's search for solutions:
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/07/1043551>
- Climate change and disaster displacement:
<https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html>
- Climate migrants, not climate refugees:
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/06/lets-talk-about-climate-migrants-not-climate-refugees/>
- UN compact recognizes climate change as driver of migration for first time:
<https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-12-11/un-compact-recognizes-climate-change-driver-migration-first-time>