Briefing Paper

Committee: CEP

Topic: The Question of Accommodating Climate Change Refugees

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Summary

Climate change is a significant driver of human displacement. Rising sea levels, prolonged droughts, extreme storms, and desertification are forcing millions of people to leave their homes. However, international law does not currently recognise "climate refugees" as a protected category under the 1951 Refugee Convention, leaving displaced populations without clear legal protections. The Committee on Environmental Protection (CEP) must explore legal reform, international cooperation, humanitarian burden-sharing, and integrated adaptation and mitigation strategies to address this growing crisis.

Definition of Key Terms

Climate Refugee – Individuals or groups forced to leave their habitual residence due to climate-related impacts such as sea-level rise, droughts, floods, and extreme weather events.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) – People who flee their homes but remain within their country's borders.

Environmental Degradation – Decline in environmental quality through climate change, pollution, deforestation, or biodiversity loss.

Adaptation – Measures to reduce vulnerability to climate impacts (e.g., flood defences, drought-resistant crops).

Mitigation – Actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and limit climate change.

Resilience – The ability of systems and communities to withstand and recover from climate impacts.

Background Information

Climate change has intensified both the frequency and severity of disasters. In 2022, an estimated 32.6 million people were displaced worldwide due to climate-related weather events. Many of these displacements are internal, with countries such as Bangladesh, the Philippines, Somalia, Tuvalu, and Kiribati being particularly vulnerable. Small island states are especially at risk due to low elevation, while countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia face droughts, desertification, and cyclones. Adaptation efforts such as early warning systems, resilient infrastructure, and planned migration programmes are ongoing but remain limited in scope and enforceability.

Major Countries Involved

Bangladesh – Bangladesh is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries due to extensive low-lying areas and high population density. Rising sea levels, cyclones, and riverine flooding have displaced millions internally and disrupted livelihoods, with repeated relocations in coastal and delta regions. Long-term projections suggest large-scale relocation pressures as sea levels continue to rise.

Philippines – The Philippines frequently experiences typhoons, intense rainfall, and flooding. These climate hazards repeatedly force communities - especially coastal and rural populations - to move internally, contributing to the country's consistently high disaster displacement figures.

Somalia – Severe and prolonged droughts in Somalia have driven significant internal displacement, particularly during periods such as the 2021-2023 crisis where millions were affected and over a million moved due to lack of water, food insecurity, and loss of livestock.

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) – Tuvalu & Kiribati: Low-lying Pacific island states like Tuvalu and Kiribati are on the frontline of sea-level rise. Their governments are exploring planned relocation programmes and climate mobility arrangements to anticipate future displacement needs as some inhabited areas become unlivable.

Additional Affected States – While not always labelled "climate refugees," several other countries - including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Türkiye - recorded significant climate-related displacement numbers (e.g., flooding, drought) in recent years.

Examples of Countries Hosting Climate-Impacted Populations

India – India sees large internal movements linked to climate hazards such as floods in the east and droughts in central and western regions. Many climate-affected populations move from rural to urban areas seeking livelihood stability and safety.

Uganda – Uganda hosts refugees from neighbouring countries affected by climate and conflict-linked crises. Many settlements for displaced people are located in regions that themselves face environmental stressors, complicating support and resilience efforts.

Germany – Germany plays a role in international humanitarian responses and asylum pathways for displaced people, including those whose displacement dynamics are compounded by climate and conflict. Its policies influence broader European approaches to humanitarian intake and integration.

Major Organisations Involved

UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) – UNHCR leads international efforts to protect refugees and displaced people, and it emphasises the growing climate dimension to displacement. According to recent UNHCR analysis:

- An estimated 250 million internal displacements worldwide over the past decade were due to weather-related disasters.
- Around three in four refugees and displaced people now live in countries with high or extreme exposure to climate hazards.
- Climate impacts are increasingly linked with conflict and displacement risks.
  UNHCR supports climate-resilient shelter, early warning systems, and legal and policy frameworks to integrate displaced people into national climate actions.

IOM (International Organisation for Migration) – IOM focuses on tracking human mobility, including climate-related internal and cross-border movements. It advises governments on migration governance, displacement preparedness, and policy integration, for example, advocating that climate risk and migration considerations be built into national planning.

NRC (Norwegian Refugee Council) – The NRC is a leading humanitarian NGO focused on assisting people displaced by conflict, disaster, and climate change. It provides emergency support, protection, and durable solutions (such as resilience programming) in more than 40 countries, including those severely affected by environmental displacement.

IRC (International Rescue Committee) – The IRC is a global NGO providing humanitarian relief, long-term support, and resettlement assistance to displaced populations. It operates in around 40 countries and supports millions affected by crises that are increasingly intertwined with climate impacts, such as floods and drought.

V20 (Vulnerable Twenty Group) – The V20 is a coalition of highly climate-vulnerable countries (predominantly small and developing states) that collaborates on climate finance, adaptation planning, and advocacy. It pushes for mechanisms that support climate adaptation and displacement risk reduction at international forums, including finance pledges and loss and damage funds.

UN System Coordination Bodies – Multiple UN agencies, including UNDP, UNEP, UNICEF, WFP, OCHA, and UNDRR, work alongside UNHCR and IOM under frameworks like the United Nations Action Agenda on Internal Displacement to integrate climate risk into humanitarian planning, early warning systems, and national policies.

Timeline of Events (Relevant UN Treaties)

- 1951 – UN Refugee Convention adopted (does not include climate refugees)
- 1967 – Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees
- 1992 – United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
- 2015 – Paris Agreement adopted
- 2018 – Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
- 2021 – Increased UN discussions on climate-induced displacement at COP26

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

1. Disaster Risk Reduction under the Sendai Framework:

The Sendai Framework (2015–2030) has promoted early-warning systems, resilient infrastructure, and community-based disaster preparedness to reduce displacement. For example, Bangladesh has built cyclone shelters and river embankments that have reduced displacement during major floods and cyclones. While effective at lowering disaster impact, the framework does not provide legal protection or long-term solutions for displaced populations.

2. Regional Temporary Protection Agreements:

Some regions have developed arrangements for temporary relocation of disaster-affected populations. Pacific island nations like Kiribati and Tuvalu have agreements with Australia and New Zealand to relocate citizens threatened by sea-level rise. These initiatives provide short-term safety but are non-binding, limited in scope, and offer no permanent legal rights.

3. Development Aid for Climate Adaptation:

International aid programmes have funded climate-resilient infrastructure, flood defences, and drought-resistant agriculture in vulnerable countries such as Bangladesh and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. These measures help reduce displacement by protecting livelihoods but are often underfunded and cannot fully prevent migration caused by severe climate impacts.

4. Voluntary Relocation Programmes:

Small island states have implemented planned relocation to move at-risk communities before areas become uninhabitable. Kiribati, for instance, purchased land in Fiji as a future relocation site. While this strategy prevents emergency displacement, it can disrupt social cohesion and requires long-term support for relocated populations.

Despite these efforts, most initiatives remain non-binding, lack enforcement mechanisms, and fail to provide comprehensive protection or legal recognition for climate-displaced people.

Possible Solutions

1. Expanding Legal Recognition for Climate Refugees:

A key solution is to expand the legal definition of refugees or create a new international status for climate-displaced populations. Currently, the 1951 Refugee Convention does not recognise people forced to flee due to climate impacts, leaving millions without legal protection. For example, residents of the Pacific island nation of Kiribati face existential threats from rising sea levels but have no formal right to relocate abroad. Establishing a legal framework would grant displaced populations rights to protection, asylum, and resettlement, as well as access to humanitarian assistance. UNHCR discussions and the Global Compact for Migration have highlighted this gap, but no binding global framework currently exists. While this approach could have a substantial long-term impact, it faces challenges including political resistance from some countries and the complexity of achieving international consensus.

2. Increasing Funding for Adaptation and Resilience:

Investing in adaptation measures helps reduce the need for displacement by protecting communities in vulnerable regions. This includes flood defences, cyclone shelters, drought-resistant agriculture, and climate-resilient housing. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) provides a concrete example of such measures, encouraging nations to implement early-warning systems, strengthen disaster preparedness, and reduce vulnerability to hazards. In Bangladesh, international funding has been used to build river embankments and cyclone shelters, helping protect millions of people in coastal districts from flood-related displacement. Similarly, Tuvalu and Kiribati have invested in coastal protection and water storage projects to maintain the habitability of their islands. While adaptation reduces displacement risk, it cannot prevent all forced migration, and funding for many low-income countries remains insufficient.

3. International Burden-Sharing Mechanisms:

Equitable sharing of responsibility among states can reduce pressure on frontline countries hosting displaced populations. Burden-sharing could include financial contributions, humanitarian aid, or resettlement provisions. For example, Uganda hosts over 1.5 million refugees, including people fleeing climate-impacted areas of South Sudan, which places significant strain on local resources. The Vulnerable Twenty (V20) coalition advocates for climate finance to support adaptation and displacement management in vulnerable nations. While burden-sharing could substantially improve protection and reduce strain on host states, political challenges and the absence of enforceable international agreements limit its effectiveness.

4. Planned Relocation and Migration Pathways:

Planned relocation allows communities to move before regions become uninhabitable, reducing emergency displacement. Kiribati has purchased land in Fiji as a long-term solution to rising sea levels, and Australia has piloted climate-linked visas for Tuvaluan citizens. Within Bangladesh, internal relocation schemes have moved communities from flood-prone coastal areas to safer inland districts. These strategies improve safety and allow better integration into host areas, but they can disrupt social cohesion, challenge cultural continuity, and require sustained support for relocated populations. Planned relocation is most effective when paired with adaptation measures, such as those promoted under the Sendai Framework, to reduce the overall risk of displacement.

5. Enhancing Data Collection and Early-Warning Systems:

Accurate data and early-warning systems enable governments and humanitarian organisations to anticipate displacement and prepare responses. The UNHCR and IOM use climate monitoring and displacement tracking to guide interventions during typhoons, floods, or droughts. The Sendai Framework also emphasises the importance of disaster risk information and monitoring to reduce vulnerability. For example, cyclone early-warning systems in Bangladesh have allowed hundreds of thousands of people to evacuate safely, reducing mortality and emergency displacement. While this approach is highly effective for preparedness, it does not address the lack of legal protection or long-term resettlement needs.

6. Integrating Mitigation Measures:

Addressing the root causes of climate-induced displacement through mitigation such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions is essential for long-term solutions. International agreements like the Paris Agreement encourage nations to limit global warming, which can reduce the scale and frequency of climate hazards that trigger displacement. While mitigation provides significant long-term benefits, it requires sustained international cooperation, and the effects on migration patterns take decades to materialise.

Useful Links

1. United Nations – How the Climate Crisis Worsens Displacement and Conflict: An overview of how climate change interacts with displacement globally and increases risks for displaced populations. At the crossroads of crisis: How the climate crisis worsens displacement and conflict (UN)
2. UNHCR – No Escape: Climate Change and Forced Displacement: A major UNHCR publication exploring how climate change exacerbates forced displacement and what the implications are for refugees and displaced people. No Escape: On the frontline of climate change, conflict and forced displacement (UNHCR)
3. UK for UNHCR – Climate Change and Disaster-Related Displacement: A concise explanation of how climate change increases disaster-related displacement and its effects

on vulnerable communities. Climate change and disaster-related displacement (UK for UNHCR)

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4. https://reporting.unhcr.org/global-report-2023/focus-areas/climate-action
5. https://www.unrefugees.org/news/unhcr-report-reveals-extreme-weather-driving-repeated-displacement-among-conflict-affected-communities/
6. https://www.concern.net/news/climate-refugees-explained
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