



News and media Magazine 2022 There could be 1.2 billion climate refugees by 2050. Here's what you need to know

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Extreme weather, rising seas and damaged ecosystems could threaten the lives of billions of people. A collective effort is needed to help climate refugees: the "world's forgotten victims" of climate change.

By Sean McAllister

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Imagine losing your home or livelihood due to a devastating flood. Going hungry because of a failed harvest or drought. Or being forced to flee your home due to rampant desertification, rising sea levels or a lack of clean drinking water.

This is the reality for millions and millions of climate refugees who live on the frontlines of the climate crisis. For them, climate change is real, and it is happening now. And as the threat of climate change increases globally, their numbers will grow exponentially.

According to UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency, an annual average of 21.5 million people have been forcibly displaced by weather-related events – such as floods, storms, wildfires and extreme temperatures – since 2008. These numbers are expected to surge in coming decades with forecasts from international thinktank the IEP predicting that 1.2 billion people could be displaced globally by 2050 due to climate change and natural disasters.

## Who are climate refugees?

The term "climate refugees" has been used since 1985 when UN Environment Programme (UNEP) expert Essam El-Hinnawi defined climate refugees – also called climate or environmental migrants – as people who have been "forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of marked environmental disruption." But the extent of the definition still causes some confusion.

For instance, when two category 4 hurricanes hit Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador in November 2020, people poured across the border into Mexico and headed towards the U.S. as torrential rains and landslides meant they lost their homes, livelihoods and access to clean water.

In this case, the cause and effect are clear. It is easy to see how unlivable conditions in their home countries caused by extreme weather led people to cross borders as climate refugees.

But Amar Rahman, Global Head of Climate Change Resilience Services at Zurich Insurance Group, believes the definition should apply to a much broader range of people. Namely, "anyone who has been impacted by disruption in their society that could somehow directly or indirectly be related to short- or long-term change in the environment."

This means acknowledging that climate change does not just pose a threat by causing immediate harm to people and infrastructure, it is also a long-term danger that can slowly destabilize societies and economies. Take for instance sea-level rise. Over the past 30 years, the number of people living in coastal areas at high risk of rising sea levels has increased from 160 million to 260 million, 90 percent of whom are from poor developing countries and small island states.

Rahman explains the situation is made worse as climate risks are interconnected and can cause a domino effect. "When temperatures rise in a country, for instance, it can reduce water availability and water quality. This may increase the spread of disease and raise the likelihood of drought leading to crop failures that will reduce incomes and food supplies."

## How conflict worsens the climate crisis

This domino effect was felt in Syria, where the desertification of formerly fertile farming land between 2006 and 2010 meant crop yields plummeted, 800,000 people lost their income and 85 percent of the country's livestock died. As people lost their livelihoods, food prices soared and 1.5 million rural workers moved to the city to find jobs. Those left behind facing poverty were an easy target for recruiters from the Islamic State.

These are not the only factors that led to the Syrian civil war, with the Arab Spring and strict restrictions from the Syrian government playing a key role. But societal issues caused by climate change worked to exacerbate existing tensions. The result was a conflict that fueled the world's worst refugee crises in decades with around 6.6 million Syrians (roughly a quarter of the population) forced to flee their country.

The experience in Syria is sadly not unusual as there is a strong correlation between countries most vulnerable to climate change and those experiencing conflict or violence. According to the UNHCR's report Global Trends in Forced Displacement 2020, 95 percent of all conflict displacements in 2020 occurred in countries vulnerable or highly vulnerable to climate change.

The good news is that international governments are starting to recognize climate migration as an issue that needs to be tackled. In November 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden released the Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration – the White House report represents the first time the U.S. Government has officially recognized a link between climate change and migration.

The report recognizes that climate migration can have significant implications for international security, instability, conflict and geopolitics. And it calls for the development of strategies that would allow the humane, safe, and proactive management of climate migration flows.

## How can we help climate refugees?

One way to tackle climate migration is by creating economic opportunity in societies threatened by environmental change. For example, in Bangladesh cyclones causing floods have increased the salinity of 53 percent of farmland. This means farmers are unable to grow their normal crops, which poses a deadly threat to communities who rely on agriculture to survive.

However, farmers have been able to adapt to the new conditions with support from Dutch research project Salt Solution and local NGOs who are teaching them to grow salt-tolerant crops, including potatoes, carrots, cabbages and coriander. So far 10,000 farmers have received training, resulting in two to three extra harvests per year.

Bangladesh is also home to more than 900,000 Rohingya refugees from neighboring Myanmar, many of whom live in refugee camps. To prevent these political refugees becoming climate refugees, the UNHCR is working with local partners to plant fast-growing trees in parts of refugee camps that are prone to landslides during monsoon storms to stabilize the ground.

This all requires investment. But at COP27 in November 2022, a breakthrough agreement was reached to provide "loss and damage" funding for vulnerable countries hit by climate disasters. This could help climate refugees internally displaced within their own country. Details of the new funding arrangements were not decided, but countries agreed to operationalize them at COP28 in Dubai. It marks an important first step that acknowledges the people and countries least responsible for climate change are being affected first and most severely.

The White House report also highlights the need for climate financing – from U.S. foreign aid and international financial institutions, for example – to support vulnerable communities to respond to, prepare for, and adapt to climate and migration risks. It also urges the U.S. government to establish an interagency working group on climate migration to coordinate its efforts to address the challenge. It would oversee the drafting of U.S. policy, strategies and budgets to help those impacted by climate change and migration, either domestically or internationally.

## Protected status for climate refugees

But another issue is protected status. Most experts argue climate change refugees need access to the same protected status offered to other refugees, such as those who have escaped conflict.

In March 2018, the UN Human Rights Council found that many climate refugees do not fit the definition of "refugees" and called them "the world's forgotten victims." This means they cannot access legal protections to their human rights, which could protect them from threats like deportation.

To rectify this, governments and legal bodies must reframe conditions caused by climate change as a threat to human rights and recognize the deadly threat that climate refugees face – even if that threat is not always as immediate as the dangers faced by refugees fleeing war.

Even the White House report says current legal instruments to protect refugees "do not readily lend themselves to protect those individuals displaced by the impacts of climate change, especially those that address migration across borders." One of its key legislative suggestions is for the U.S. to expand use of its migrant protection program known as Temporary Protected Status.

But the ultimate solution is to curtail climate change by achieving the goals set out in the Paris Agreement to limit temperature increase to well below 2 degrees Celsius (°C) and ideally to 1.5°C.

"We need to act collectively to manage this crisis," says Rahman. "It requires a huge team effort starting from governments through to civil institutions, academia and companies. Even as individuals, we must carefully consider our responsibilities as consumers, voters and global citizens. Together we can have a big impact."

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