



# HMUN 2025

**Constructing legal frameworks on climate migration**

**UNEP**

**Mia Billetter and Ece  
Törün**

**Main and Deputy Chair**



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**Name:** Mia Billetter, Ece Törün

**Position:** Main Chair, Deputy Chair

## Introduction

Climate migration, also known as environmental migration, is when people are forcibly displaced from their homes or countries due to major environmental disasters caused by extreme conditions often linked to climate change. By 2050, an estimated 216 million people are predicted to have to move from their homes if no action is taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In 2023, 56% of internal displacements globally were due to climate migration; that meant approximately 8

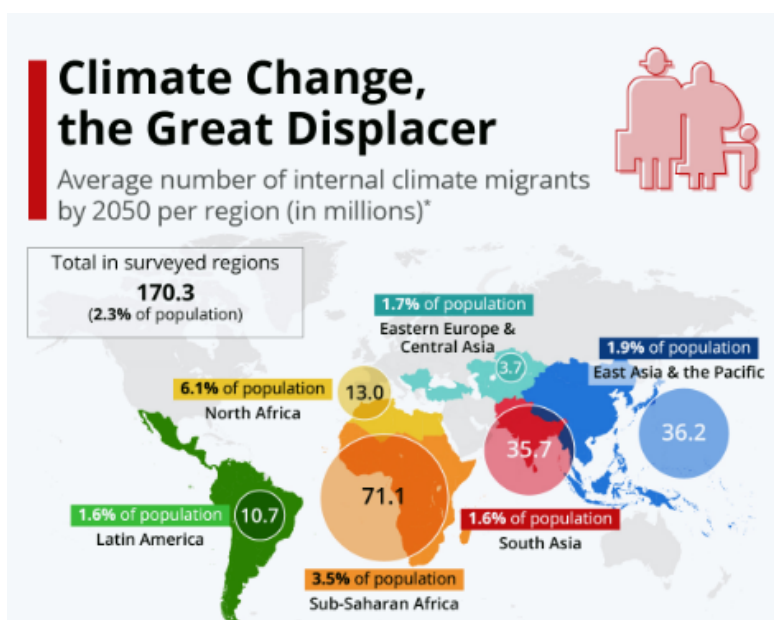


Fig. 1: Map of Climate migration by 2050

million people living as internally displaced peoples (IDPs) due to environmental disasters.

Climate change has become the main cause of the increasingly sporadic and extreme weather conditions that have been observed worldwide. Flash floods, hurricanes, wildfires, heatwaves, droughts, snowstorms, and intense winds have all been exasperated by climate change and carbon pollution. The increase in these weather conditions

has led to disastrous impacts on people's livelihoods and security in the area they are living in and has made the prevalence of climate migration much more likely. Currently, no legal framework is yet established for the definition or protection of these IDPs, even with organizations such as the International Organization for Migration [IOM] working towards developing such frameworks.

The issue of climate migrants is one that has been worsening in recent years due to the heightening climate crisis, and the establishment of proper and effective frameworks for their integration into host countries and future reintegration into their home countries have become vital.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Climate Change

The changes in weather conditions over the years can cause detrimental effects. A change in the natural climate of a location.

### Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

It serves as an urgent reminder to end income disparity and inequality and especially to save the environment. It serves as a reminder to all that there should be equality for all. Preventing forced relocation and equal access to housing.

### Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)

Disaster Risk Reduction intends to reduce any climate-induced disaster, aiming to achieve a development that is sustainable and diminishing migration related to risk.

### Climate Migration

As stated by the UN in the IOM, "Climate migration refers to "the movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently"

### Climate Refugees

The people who forcefully had to relocate due to detrimental climate events.

### Resettlement

The people who were forced to relocate settled in a new location.

### International Organization for Migration (IOM)

An intergovernmental organization that deals with the issue of migration. It aims to help with assistance in providing aid to people who were forced to migrate, trying to solve the issue of migration.

### Cross-border movement

It means a movement between different countries, usually caused by migration. Causing a need for resettlement. It might be to permanently or temporarily relocate.

## Managed Retreat

A group of people relocating due to a risk factor, for example, climate events like hurricanes and tsunamis. It is to aim to minimize the risks of these factors on residents.

## General Overview

Climate migration and climate “refugees” have become a topic in most countries around the world, either due to having a large diaspora of their population due to climate migration or due to taking in internally displaced peoples. The definition of an environmental migrant, submitted by the International Organisation of Migration in 2007, states, "Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad." This has been made deliberately flexible to various situations, including both voluntary and forced migration, internal and international displacement, and temporary or permanent movement. Climate migration is a subcategory of environmental migration, specifying the cause of the environmental disturbance causing the migration to be climate change.



Fig. 2: Group of people waiting at an IOM location after forced migration

## History of climate migration

Climate migration has existed in a historical context, but the intensity of which it happened was lessened when compared to the 21st century. Climate migration has historically occurred due to the weather or climate shifts, making water and food scarcity occur, shelter harder to find, or life more difficult for the civilization. The earliest example of this is seen in the migration out of Africa in prehistoric times, thought to have been due to the difficulty of finding food and resources due to climate changes. The downfall of many ancient civilizations, such as the Mayan or Akkadian Empires, has also been linked to climate reasons such as prolonged droughts. These reasons cause many civilians to leave in search of a better life or to perish. Even once industrialization occurred at the



hands of the Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s, increasing the stability and resilience of human civilizations, climate changes still caused migration and gave people a reason to leave in search of more stable conditions.

The term "climate refugee" is one that has been debated since it was first used by Essam El-Hinnawi, an expert from UNEP. A "climate refugee" was defined to be "those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life" (*Apap, Joanna, et al.*). The formation of a clear definition for a climate migrant is the first step of many that need to be taken in order to build the frameworks needed for their legal recognition and protection worldwide. Understanding the difficulties that have been faced in creating an official definition will assist in coming to a consensus between all involved parties.

### Previously established frameworks

Previous attempts to address the issue, whether directly or indirectly, have occurred:

In 2016, the UN General Assembly passed the "New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants," which established the two groups of "refugees" and "other migrants." This was the first step in allowing the understanding and recognition of various types of migrants and refugees, opening the conversation for climate migrants. This was then furthered by the 2018 "Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration" [GCM] in Morocco, which acknowledges the existence of migrants forced to be displaced because of climate reasons. However, it still does not address a legal definition of this community, therefore continuing to place them in a limbo of status. The same issue was prevalent in the 24th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, or COP24, which again addresses the issue of migrants who are displaced due to climate change but still fails to define the group in an official manner.

### The current prevalence of climate migrants

The impacts the rapid escalation of climate change and the climate crisis have had on environmental migration have been enormous. In 2022 alone, approximately 36.2 million people faced the decision to migrate away from their home and/or country in order to escape the challenges they were facing at the hands of extreme weather conditions brought about by climate change. The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC] has projected that by 2050, this number will double. The climate crisis will only continue to worsen the

amount of people displaced if immediate action is not taken. In 2021-2022, flash floods across the globe, notably in Germany, France, Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxembourg, as well as Pakistan, caused hundreds of deaths and tens of thousands of displaced individuals. In 2023, hundreds of thousands of people were affected by extreme weather changes and natural disasters, both being worsened due to the increasing rate of climate change. Each disaster causes a surge of people willing to leave their homes in the hope of moving to another area or country with more stable conditions. Extreme storms caused over 12,000 deaths in Libya, with 40,000 more being forced to move from their homes. Floods in Italy caused over 50,000 displaced people, and the droughts experienced in the Horn of Africa led to widespread famine and, thus, migration of many families and communities. According to the head of a Displacement Monitoring Center, Justin Ginnetti, "People are now twice as likely to be displaced than they were in the 1970s." a large contributor to this statistic is the exposure to climate disasters.

### Major challenges of climate migration

The main issue currently facing climate migrants and their recognition is the lack of official legal status to support their reason for migration. Under the 1951 Refugee Convention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], climate "refugees," now better known as climate migrants, are not recognized or mentioned. This was one of the major blocks of establishing the legal frameworks for climate migrants, even when becoming part of a bigger discourse amongst the public. There has also been the challenge of separating those who are displaced internally, meaning within the borders of their home country, versus those who end up leaving internationally and crossing out of the borders of their country. The idea of internally versus externally displaced migrants in terms of climate migration has caused a lack of data and recognition, further preventing the establishment of proper frameworks to support and protect these communities.

Many of the host countries of the climate migrants also negate to understand the importance of supporting the climate migrants under a specially recognized status as they "prefer to seek to solve the problem at the root", by diminishing pollution and minimizing climate change" instead of establishing the definition and frameworks needed for climate migration (*Apap, Joanna, et al.*). Securing a legally binding and internationally recognized definition of this community is imperative for building the frameworks on climate migration. Then, further, necessary steps can be taken to ensure their safety, protection, and possible eventual reintegration into their homes or proper integration into their host countries politically, socially, and economically.

## Timeline of Key Events

### Date

### Event

**28 July 1951**

Convention Relating to the Status Refugees start date. It is a convention that according to the United Nations still applies to refugees today. It principles protecting the refugees and emphasizes how nations must act in refugee asylum.

**16 December 1967**

The 1967 Protocol shaped the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which started to apply globally and affected all refugees worldwide. Changed the structure of the Convention.

**5 June 1972**

The United Nations Environment Program was declared.

**16 June 1972**

The Stockholm Declaration was one of the first environmental global unifications. The issue of pollution, economic growth, and their effects on climate migration. Its significance is being one of the first declarations related to climate change.

**3-14 June 1992**

The UN Earth Summit took place in Brazil. It aims for a sustainable future for the environment, especially forests, while simultaneously diminishing the effects of climate migration.

**23 August 2005**

The event of Hurricane Katrina occurred. It is one of the most damaging events that happened. It caused a great number of people to migrate.

**12 December 2015**

Paris Agreement was established, and it mentions the rights of climate migrants.

Climate migration being one of the main issues discussed in the agreement.

**19 September 2016**

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants was put forward by the UN. It included the issue of climate events causing migration.

**4 November 2016**

Paris Agreement entered into force.

**19 December 2018**

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration came into force.

## Major Parties Involved

### Afghanistan

Afghanistan is an incredibly vulnerable country in terms of climate change due to facing "devastating impacts of climate change" (*"In Global Climate Talks, Let Afghanistan In - Refugees International."*). The doubling of droughts experienced in recent years, when compared to previous decades, as well as the lack of sufficient resources to combat the climate crisis, has left the population incredibly weak against disasters caused by climate change. Each year, Afghanistan faces an increasing amount of migrants out of the country and into its neighboring nations due to a lack of water, food, or income needed to survive.

### Australia

Australia, due to its proximity to many Pacific/Oceanian nations and territories, faces an alarming number of migrants due to climate reasons every year, increasing in the past decade as climate change takes a turn for the worse. Due to the slowly rising sea levels, many island nations are beginning to "sink" underwater, leaving many of their citizens searching for an alternative place to live. The Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese declared, "Developed nations have a responsibility to provide assistance," showing their willingness to work together with other nations to mitigate the negative impacts of climate migration (*"Australia's Offer of Climate Migration to Tuvalu"*).

### Bangladesh

Bangladesh is another vulnerable country due to its low-lying geography and proximity to the sea, making it susceptible to the slowly rising sea levels. There are constant flash floods and



cyclones, causing millions of displaced Bangladeshi people. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, over 4 million people were displaced in 2022 within Bangladesh, and approximately 13.3 million of its population could become climate migrants by 2050.

### China

China is the largest emitter of carbon dioxide in the world, making its people incredibly vulnerable to climate migration. Especially due to a large portion of its population living in rural areas and depending on agriculture, climate change has caused a large migration of people to urban cities and environments in hopes of better work opportunities.

### Colombia

Colombia has experienced climate migration both internally, within their own borders, but also by taking in many migrants from their neighbors, such as Venezuela. They help to provide environmental and economic stability for those who are affected, as well as move towards legal recognition of climate displacement (primarily internally, but the future possibility for external displacement as well).

### Honduras

The increasingly extreme impacts of climate change on the communities in Honduras, specifically the poorer parts of the population, are due to starvation, lack of food security, and lack of safe drinking water. According to a UN expert, "Communities in Honduras have faced prolonged droughts, severe flooding due to hurricanes, coastal erosion, and coastal inundation due to climate change...forcing people to leave their homes and seek more sustainable livelihoods in other countries". The Central American country is facing hundreds of thousands of migrants leaving the country every year due to climate reasons.

### International Organization for Migration (IOM)

The International Organization of Migration, or IOM, is a UN inter-governmental organization that works towards supporting and improving migrant management and advocating for their rights and presence in over 171 countries. They aim to "ensure the orderly and humane management of migration, to promote international cooperation on migration issues, to assist in the search for practical solutions to migration problems and to provide humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, be they refugees, displaced persons or other uprooted people" (*"Our Work"*).

### **International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)**

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] is a UN body that is in charge of assessing the scientific findings behind climate change. They support policymakers globally in understanding and interpreting assessments on climate change as well as how to mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis. Further, it has had previous implications for the development of climate migrants' status legally and in the public view.

### **Kenya**

Kenya has assisted in supporting many of their neighbors and other countries in the Horn of Africa by taking in the refugees and displaced people moving due to rampant droughts, food shortages, and famine. Though facing climate issues of their own, they have hosted a significant number of displaced individuals in various refugee camps around the country. However, the integration of these people into Kenyan society remains a challenge both for the government and local Kenyan people, as well as the migrants themselves.

### **Sudan**

Already suffering due to political and economic instability, the population of Sudan is made even more vulnerable due to the many climate disasters and extreme weather conditions they face every year. The fragile country's population relies heavily on agriculture and primary sector jobs for income, which are made nearly impossible by the many natural disasters occurring regularly. This, additionally impacted by the internal conflict and civil war, has caused a large portion of the population to migrate out of the country, leaving its already struggling economy without the workforce needed to restabilize itself.

### **UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

The UN High Commissioner of Refugees [UNHCR], otherwise also referred to simply as the UN Refugee Agency, is the UN body that advocates for the rights of refugees worldwide. They assist asylum seekers and people fleeing violence, persecution, or war in their home country. They have had previous discussions pertaining to issues similar to climate migrants but have failed to clearly mention or define the group of displaced people.

## **Possible Solutions**

Climate migration is caused by various risk factors of climate events, from hurricanes to tsunamis to floods, yet it is not inevitable. Climate migration has been one of the severe subjects of

UNEP, aiming to prevent horrific climate events. Some ways to prevent climate migration are enhancing technologies of meteorology and risk assessment. Even though it is most effective in more developed countries, it is still a possible prevention of climate migration. Most vulnerable communities suffer from the issue of climate migration, and one way to fix this issue is by providing education in risk assessment and giving financial aid to support climate adaptation in LEDCs. Holding conferences and educating countries on risk management, such as inspecting whether structures are built in accordance with natural events or not.

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