

## **Climate Refugees Should Be Considered Refugees**

Whether it's from persecution due to race and religion, such as the Jews in Egypt and later in Germany and the USSR, or due to climate change, such as the early East African nomads who migrated in search of food for themselves and their cattle, humans have migrated in search of refuge for millennia. Although the number of people in search of refuge, displaced people, has been steadily growing over time, in less than a decade, the numbers of displaced people increased by a staggering 63%, from 43.3 million in 2009 to 70.8 million in 2018 (UNHCR).

Some of the most cataclysmic impacts of climate change include sea water rises, bush fires all over the world, the invasion of hundreds of millions of locusts in East Africa, and the global COVID-19 pandemic. These and many other factors have forced millions out of their homes in search for safety and refuge. This is why it is harder to ignore global problems now more than ever because all of these apocalypses, such as diseases, poverty, and war, can easily ride across international borders, putting everyone to risk including the global north as much as it does the global south (Andrea Redmond & Patricia Crisafulli).

Two direct results of the global warming are the melting of ice in the northern hemisphere and the rapid clearing of new habitats by masses of people migrating from poverty and droughts. Both create a risk of new pandemics including zoonotic diseases which can spread from animals to humans, such as EBOLA and COVID19 (Sonia Shah). The current global pandemic (COVID19) has added to the already extreme poverty and extreme situations of the displaced around the globe. From food shortages to food transportation disruptions due to limited

or restricted movements, COVID19 has created a global hunger crisis especially for those already in need such as the displaced.

The United Nations (UN) projects 200 million climate refugees by the year 2050; that is about 200 times more than the Syrian refugee crisis back in 2011 (UNHCR). In 2019, “70.9 million people were displaced,” 2.3 million more than the previous year and an average of 37,000 people each day or about 25 people each minute (UNHCR). The reasons for these displacements vary, but climate change is at the heart of it and “no-one now seems to deny” climate change “as a driving force of displacement” (François Gemenne). According to the International Organization for Migration, the greatest single impact of climate change could be on human migration, with millions of people displaced by natural weather disasters, shoreline erosion, coastal flooding, and agricultural disruption (Felicia Persaud).

Around 1% of the world's population or 70 million people are displaced and forced to leave their homes to escape war, violence, persecution, and climate disasters (UNHCR). All these people will be forced to leave their homes, some become internally displaced people, and others will try to cross borders. But absent a coordinated global humanitarian response, most will wander around endlessly in search of new homes, sometimes losing their lives before they succeed.

Becoming displaced and leaving one's home is never a wish for anyone. Sometimes it takes only a single handshake or signing a piece of paper to cause war that drives millions away from their homes; other times displacement is due to climate crisis such as drought and famine and more severe incidents like tsunamis, floods, and sea water rises. The physical and

psychological impact of getting displaced is enormous. Leaving your loved ones behind and risking your life on an unknown route is dreadful, and sometimes not being sure of whether you're going to make it or not is a reality for many of those migrating. More than half of all displaced people are women and children, some of them unaccompanied minors which makes them vulnerable for child labor, violence, and rape (UNHCR). Some of the displaced people die along the routes such as those migrating in boats (often plastic boats that are overcrowded) in the deadly ocean while others lose their family members and spend many years finding them. These tragedies occur because often migrations occur through land and sea since the majority of displaced people lack identification forms to travel by air.

Although all refugees have a shared struggle, every refugee has an individual human story. Take my mother's story, for example. She was a young woman when a deadly civil war erupted in her home country Somalia in the beginning of 1992. The cause of the war is not entirely clear. Whatever the reason, it led to a terrible tribal cleansing and genocide of minority tribes and annexation of land and civilian casualties by the military and major tribes.

After seeing her husband shot 40 times, my mother had no other choice but to leave her homeland. My mother barely escaped the scene barefoot, and with no belongings she took her one-year-old son, my older brother, with her and walked for two days in the bush without food. When she finally reached the port city of Kismayo, Somalia, she joined others who were escaping the horrors of the civil war in a ship that was going to Kenya. My mother paid all the money she had, which was \$300, to board the ship and came to Kenya with nothing but her son. Millions of other Somalis were forced to migrate to neighboring

countries such as Ethiopia and Djibouti. My mother was lucky because she was a recognized refugee under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention; she received help when she arrived in Kenya.

The UN and its special agency for refugees UNHCR defined the status of refugee, but both UNHCR and Nations conduct refugee status determination either individually or on a group basis. When an individual or a group of people approach a border of a country to seek refuge, they are not treated as criminal for seeking refuge and instead are usually accepted as refugees with the exception of active combatants or an individual who is dangerous to the security of that nation or to the society such as a terrorist, a murderer, or a rapist.

Once a person is recognized as a refugee, they are entitled to certain rights and benefits. The main one is protection against refoulement, which means they can't be forced to return to where they came from if that puts them at risk of persecution. Other rights include and are not limited to physical security, access to the court, physical and material needs (food, clothing, shelter, medical care), freedom of movement, education, jobs, reunification of close family members (UNHCR). UNHCR's main mandate is to protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people and assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement to a third host country.

However, before refugees get these long-term solutions they usually live in a "temporary settlement" called refugee camps for a very long time. Unfortunately, these refugee camps are not neither temporary nor more than meager shelter. The average length of stay in a refugee camp is 17 years, before finally reaching a resettlement host country, where they believe

they can get a better life. Getting resettled is often seen as the solution to all their challenges; however, they still face financial, physical, and mental challenges once they reach their destination.

In the case of my mother she lived in two such temporary settlements in Kenya for two and a half decades. I lived with her in the second camp until I was 19. Life in the refugee camp is very difficult, and as refugees we weren't allowed to leave the camp or to work in the Kenyan employment sector. We were treated as an unwanted part of the society and faced constant discrimination and hate from politicians and people with a divisive mentality. We felt we were in a jail without a roof. My family and I were lucky enough to be resettled to the U.S in July 2016.

However, life is still difficult as we adjust to our new home. Coming from a refugee camp to a mega-city such as Seattle is difficult; we had to get used to many complex systems in a short period of time. Also, despite language barriers and not getting hired after more than 20 job applications, we had to find jobs quickly when we arrived in order to not be a homeless and be able to pay our travel loans and livelihoods. And once we finally got settled, we realized we had to face bias and discrimination at every turn.

Climate refugees are caught in the middle of what Kimberlé Crenshaw termed as intersectionality. They are mainly brown and Black people and immigrants from the global south who are displaced by climate change. At a minimum they face two biases or discriminations: 1. Black or brown. 2. Immigrant. Then layered on to that is if it is known they

are refugee, 3. Refugee, and if they are woman, 4. Religion. Systemic racism instills bias that Black and brown people are inferior and less than human; political rhetoric instills fear that immigrants are dangerous criminals, that refugees are a drain on resources, that other religions threaten our values. Because they look, talk, or pray different than the majority of the people in the places they seek refuge, i.e. Europe and U.S, they are seen as less than human. For these reasons, politicians in these nations lack empathy toward them and often vote for policies that make sure to keep the “dangerous criminals” away. Thus, there is no incentive for the politicians to make policies that will actually help refugees resettle in their country.

Because climate change displaced people are not recognized as “refugees” by the 1951 Refugee Convention, they are not even afforded the harsh and often dehumanizing temporary shelter we faced in the refugee camps or provided aid to resettle in a host country. But more significantly, they are not afforded the protection against refoulement or being treated as criminal for seeking refuge.

The 1951 UN Refugee Convention does not recognize climate displaced persons as refugees because it limited its scope to displaced persons after WW2. The goal of the UN post WW2 was to solve Europe's refugee crisis which they did successfully. Both the system, the classification of a refugees as persons fleeing persecution, and the means, intervention through aid and loans by which the US and other countries offered aid, worked for Europe.

But this classification and intervention no longer fit the global reality of today. The UN continues to refer to climate refugees as “climate induced migrants.” According

to François Gemenne, “forgoing the term ‘climate refugee’ is also, in a way, forgoing the idea that climate change is a form of persecution against the most vulnerable,” and this lack of recognition makes it so hard for climate refugees to get humanitarian and other assistance. In the recent and previous waves of climate refugees from South America, “no U.S. administration recognized the parallel between climate change and the need for immigration allowance officially but at least there was some heart in allowing Temporary Protected Status or TPS for those impacted” (Felicia Persaud).

Although Director Gemenne makes a compelling argument that climate change displaced people should be recognized as refugees by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, just recognizing them as refugees is not enough. Once they gain refugee recognition, they would still end up in a similar situation as my family. Instead, the time has come to reform the aid provided to all refugees.

Absent recognizing climate change displaced people as refugees by the 1951 UN Convention, the UNHCR and nations have created several proposals to respond to current issues and other future issues that include preparation and prevention of climate change displacement (CCD), responding to those impacted “climate refugees” through aid and humanitarian assistance, and giving them some form of a very limited resettlement through humanitarian visas.

Preparation and prevention of the climate crisis that causes displacement are common concepts between all actors in the international community, calling for actions on climate change and building systems to prevent CCD. However, while prevention of future CCD is important, it is

too late now to focus on that alone since climate change has already become one of the main causes of the current rapid displacement of people globally (Felicia Persaud).

Nations and the UNHCR have also responded to current displacement through aid and other humanitarian assistance. Through generosity, some nations and agencies donate money to international organizations such as the UNHCR which then provides aid and support to those impacted. While the UNCHR does not recognize climate refugees, it has adopted some level of responsibility toward those impacted by climate change and has assumed the lead role in responding to CCD (UNGA 2003). This proposal is also important because it creates a moral responsibility to the global problem of displacement. However, one of the challenges of this proposal is the lack of consistency and enforcement. Since there are no rules and legal obligation for nations and agencies to intervene, the nations and the agencies can choose for whom and when they want to intervene. This is not a sustainable and efficient way to respond to CCD, and it will create a vacuum in the difference between how many people get help and how many do not.

Expanded Protection Mechanism (EPM) is also one of the policy solutions that nations and the UNHCR have adopted. This is a cross-border resettlement proposal for climate refugees through temporary or permanent humanitarian visas (Ober). An example of a temporary visa is the U.S Temporary Protected Status (TPS) which was begun in the early 90's. Foreign nationals from 10 countries, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, were eligible for TPS due to ongoing violence and natural disasters in their countries.



However, TPS's policy changes in every administration. For instance, when Trump got elected, his administration announced the termination of TPS for 6 countries: El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, and Sudan (Wilson).

In 2017, New Zealand offered humanitarian visas to the Pacific Islanders that were impacted by CCD. However, this plan was not adopted since the Pacific Islanders asked for humanitarian assistance in other priority areas such as emission mitigation and migration with dignity (Ober). While New Zealand's visas and the U.S.A's TPS could work, they are often politically controversial and very limited in scope. Also, similar to the EPM, these are not regular plans and have no universal rules and regulation for nations to follow.

Other experts have made proposals such as creating means of adapting to changing environmental conditions, planned relocations, and regular migration pathways (UN).

Creating means of adapting to changing environmental conditions is always necessary, and including those impacted in the decision making is especially important. However, we should be careful about making this issue an environmental issue alone or an issue that simply requires the people displaced to adjust. Rather, it must be "a very political issue" that requires UNHCR and nations to address and intervene (François Gemenne). While displaced people are resilient, they often have no other option but to flee their homes to survive. They can't continue to live in the same climate impacted regions by simply adjusting their lives.

Planned relocations are also a common recommendation, calling for relocating villages that are exposed to or impacted by climate disasters internally (in the same country) to a safer region. The Pacific island nations, especially Vanuatu, are leading the way and have created a comprehensive policy on climate change displacement (Ober). However, this is not efficient or relevant always. For example, island nations that are going to disappear entirely due to sea water rises will have no land left for relocation. The inhabitants of such island nations will have no other option but to migrate to another country. The other issue with this recommendation is that ethnicity and politics play a major role in identifying who gets to live where and most people live with the same ethnicity. Relocating villages requires making sure it doesn't cause war and disagreement between different ethnic tribes when brought together in the same region.

Another proposal is to adopt regular migration pathways to enhance the availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration. This solution is impossible with the current political situation in the western countries. There is a perception that immigrants are enemies to the safety and security of host communities, including taking away jobs and causing violence. This perception is wrong; immigrants are a resource to the host community and country. For example, during COVID19 outbreak many immigrants in the U.S were working as farmers, nurses, delivers, drivers, stockers, doctors and many more roles to contribute to the society which they are part of, even if that got them exposed to the pandemic. Some of these roles are roles that many in local communities would not do. Currently, there are no rules and legal obligations to take this recommendation.

Finally, while many of these proposals and other efforts by the nations and humanitarian sectors that are advocating and trying to do something about CCD and for climate refugees are much needed, these efforts are not enough. Only the UN has the capacity to create a coordinated global humanitarian response for the current rapid CCD and for climate refugees. And unless the global leaders come together to do this, just as they did in the UN 1951 Convention after WW2, there will be no efficient and regular policies to overcome this CCD catastrophe. A new definition of a “refugee” is required to respond to the current global issues and main causes of migration, namely climate change. and to include climate refugees who are suffering and have no other option left to live.

It will take a global effort to respond to climate refugee issues: to prevent and prepare for climate change, to give a humanitarian aid and accept more climate refugees in temporary settlements or refugee camps, and to give access to a regular and safer pathway for resettlement to a third host country, just like other refugees. Climate refugees have the rights to live like any other human being; we must understand that at some point in time each one of us was a migrant unless they are native to the land in which they live. For these reasons we owe to climate refugees to create a new definition of refugee that includes them.

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