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Climate Refugees Are Refugees and Deserve UN Recognition

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Abstract

The United Nations (UN) projects 200 million climate refugees (people displaced by climate change) by 2050. All those people will lose their homes and wander searching for new homes; some will become internally displaced, and others will try to cross borders only to meet walls. The average person lives 17 years in a refugee camp before they relocate to a third country and get resettled. Refugee camps are some of the most populated and overcrowded places globally. This makes refugees vulnerable to communicable and other diseases easily transmitted from person to person or through a vector. The rapid rise of global warming and the global pandemic crisis we are amid (COVID19) make it harder for people to ignore the refugee crisis or to act slowly. Most climate refugees are not even afforded recognition as refugees and are not allowed to live in the harsh life of the refugee camps. As a refugee myself who lived in a refugee camp for 19 years, I will discuss the causes, the impacts, and solutions of the climate refugee crisis through a refugee's lens.

Humans have migrated in search of refuge for millennia; this includes those who faced persecution due to race and religion, such as the Jews in Egypt and later in Germany and the USSR, and those who are impacted by climate change, such as the early East African nomads who migrated in search of food for themselves and their cattle. The number of people in search of refuge, displaced people, has steadily grown over time. In less than a decade, the number of displaced people has increased by a staggering 63%, from 43.3 million in 2009 to 70.8 million in 2018 (UNHCR, “Global Trends”). Each year, climate change forces an average of 20 million people (approximately the population of New York) out of their homes and into new territories (UNHCR, “Climate Change”). While these statistics are horrific, the real and collective human suffering due to climate displacement is massive. It is time for the global community to act; that starts with recognition and building bridges for climate refugees and all displaced people, creating legal pathways to migrate instead of building walls. Climate refugees should be considered refugees.

A few years after the Second World War (WWII) ended, a United Nations (UN) Convention on refugees was overseen by the UN Refugee Agency, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1951. There were 149 states who were present during the convention and together “they defined the term *refugee* and the legal obligations of countries to protect them” (UNHCR, “1951 Refugee Convention”). However, the 1951 UN Refugee Convention does not recognize climate displaced persons as refugees because it limited its scope to persecuted persons; someone who is forced to leave their home to escape (or in fear of) hostility due to identity (e.g., race, nationality, religion, etc.), political opinion, belief, or membership in a particular social group.

The goal of the UN post-WWII was to solve Europe’s refugee crisis, which they did successfully. The UN created a system: the classification of refugees as persons fleeing persecution, and the means was intervention through aid and loans by which the US and other nations offered aid to Europe; this worked for European nations amid crisis at the time. But because climate change displaced people are not recognized as “refugees” by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, they are not even afforded the harsh and often dehumanizing temporary shelters refugees face in refugee camps or provided aid to resettle in a host country. More significantly, they are not afforded the protection against refoulement or being treated as criminal for seeking refuge. However, 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 US 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” (Persaud). Although 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, it does not remove difficult obstacles, something that my family and I are familiar with. Instead, the time has come to reform the aid provided to all refugees including *climate refugees*. Global warming (climate change) is a threat to our very own existence, our humanity, and will continue to displace and impact millions of lives.

Global warming is also causing new pandemics and diseases that were not known to people. Two direct results of global warming are the melting of ice in the northern hemisphere and the rapid relocation to new habitats by masses of people migrating from poverty, droughts, and other climate catastrophes. When masses of people inhabit new areas they cut forests, bring new domestic animals, and humans and wild animals get in contact which create a risk of new pandemics including zoonotic diseases which can spread from animals to humans, such as EBOLA and COVID19 (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. Examples of cataclysmic impacts of climate change include sea water rises, brush fires all over the world, and the invasion of hundreds of millions of locusts in East Africa. These and many other disasters have forced millions out of their homes in search of safety and refuge. For this reason, it is harder to ignore global problems now more than ever. Diseases, poverty, and war, can easily ride across international borders, putting everyone at risk, including the Global North as much as it does the Global South (Crisafulli and Redmond).

Currently, over 1% of the world’s population (more than 70 million people) are displaced and forced to leave their homes to escape war, violence, persecution, and climate disasters (UNHCR, “Global Trends”). Forced to leave their homes, some become internally displaced, and others will try to cross borders. But without a coordinated global humanitarian response, most will wander around endlessly in search of new homes, sometimes losing their lives before they succeed. “The United Nations projects 200 million climate refugees by the year 2050” that is about 200 times more than the Syrian refugee crisis back in 2011 (Wallace-Wells 8). 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, “Global Trends”). The reasons for these displacements vary, but climate change is at the heart of it and, “no-one now seems to deny [environmental factors] as a driving force of displacement” (Gemenne). Additionally, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) declares that climate change’s most significant impact could be the increase of human

migration, which displaces millions out of their homes due to weather disasters, coastal flooding, and agricultural (food) disruptions (Persaud).

The UN and its special agency for refugees, UNHCR, defines the status of refugees, but both the UNHCR and countries 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, "Refugee Protection"). The 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 neither temporary nor more than meager shelters. 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.

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, at the beginning of 1992. The cause of the war is not entirely clear. 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 went 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. 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 was very difficult; as refugees, we weren't allowed to leave the camp or work in the Kenyan employment sector. We were treated as an unwanted part of 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 US 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 homeless and to 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.

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 to child labor, violence, and rape (UNHCR, "Self-Study Module 2"). Some of the displaced people die along the routes, such as those migrating in boats (often plastic boats that are overcrowded) on the deadly ocean, while others lose their family members and spend many years searching for them. These tragedies occur because, often, people migrate through land and sea, since the majority of displaced people lack identification forms to travel by air.

Climate refugees are at the center of what Kimberlé Crenshaw termed as intersectionality: the unique and layered experiences of discrimination and oppression individuals go through. They are mainly Brown and Black people migrating from the Global South who are displaced by climate change. At a minimum, they face two biases or discriminations based on race, immigration status, religion, and sex/gender orientation. 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 differently than the majority of the people in the places they seek refuge, i.e. Europe and US, 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 politicians to make policies that will help refugees resettle in their country.

In the absence of recognizing climate change displaced people as refugees by the 1951 UN Convention, the UNHCR and member states have created several proposals to respond to current issues and other future issues. The proposals include preparation and prevention of climate change displacement (CCD), responding to the 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 (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. This is important because it creates a moral responsibility to the global problem of displacement. However, one of the challenges with the UN's response is the lack of consistency and enforcement. Since there are no rules or legal obligations for states 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 a temporary or permanent humanitarian visa (Ober). An example of a temporary visa is the US Temporary Protected Status (TPS) which began in the early 1990s. 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 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 United States' 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 regulations 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. 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 the UNHCR and countries to address and intervene (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. 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 always relevant. 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, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, advocates for adopting regular migration pathways to “enhance the availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration” (qtd. in Pécoud 21). This solution is impossible with the current political situation in Western countries. Thus, there are no rules or legal obligations to take this recommendation. 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 their host community and country. For example, during the COVID19 outbreak, many immigrants in the US were working as farmers, nurses, deliverers, drivers, stockers, doctors and many more roles to contribute to the society which they are part of, even if that meant exposure to COVID. Some of these roles are roles that many in local communities would not do.

Finally, while many of these proposals and other efforts by 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 to the current rapid CCD and for climate refugees. And, unless global leaders come together to do this, just as they did in the UN 1951 Convention after WWII, there will be no efficient and regular policies to overcome this CCD catastrophe. A new definition of a “refugee” is required to respond to current global issues and main causes of migration, namely climate change. The UN and its Refugee Agency UNHCR are responsible for caring for 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 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. Migration shouldn't be permitted only to those who can afford to choose to move—climate refugees don't have the choice. Climate refugees have the right 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 it to climate refugees to create a new definition of refugee that includes them: a person(s) who is (are) forced to leave their home (both their native and adopted country) to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster (climate change disasters) and seek refuge inside or outside the borders of another country.

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