

BACKGROUND GUIDE

CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISPLACEMENT



UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is launching the MUN Refugee Challenge to encourage students worldwide to shape solutions for people forced to flee their homes. This guide was drafted to help students prepare for their debates.

The Challenge

Climate change, extreme weather events, environmental degradation and natural disasters are increasingly interacting and overlapping with the drivers of refugee movements, such as conflict, human rights abuses and other forms of persecution. An earthquake, typhoon or flood might force people to abandon their homes very quickly; drought, erosion, desertification, gradual sea level rise or pollution might create slow-building crises. On occasions, communities can be affected by multiple factors – flooding in Somalia in 2019 followed years of drought, for example. Such events might drive displacement on their own, or when added to the Al-Shabab-related violence plaguing the country might be the “final straw” for already vulnerable communities.

Most climate change displacement is internal, with those affected remaining within their national borders: according to the [Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre](#), there were 18.8 million new disaster-related internal displacements recorded in 2017. According to the World Bank, climate change may cause as many as 143 million people to be internally displaced by 2050 based on scenarios in three major climate “hot spots” – Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America.

Displacement across borders also occurs and may be interrelated with situations of conflict or violence. Of the 20.4 million refugees under UNHCR’s mandate at the end of 2018, a third were located in the world’s least developed countries, which are often highly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, or which suffer from a scarcity of resources and infrastructure. According to Oxfam, low- and lower-middle income nations, such as India, are over four times more likely to be affected by climate-fuelled displacement than high-income countries like Spain or the US.

The impact of natural disasters and the more gradual effects of climate change – such as rising sea levels for coastal communities, longer and harsher droughts, floods affecting agricultural land in low lying coastal areas or the creep of desertification – can create new displaced populations and pose challenges for existing ones.

Both refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) tend to live in disaster-prone areas and climate change hotspots. In urban areas, they tend to settle in poorer areas, including in informal settlements that lack adequate shelter, infrastructure and basic services. This in turn increases the risk of further displacement – that they will be forced to move on in search of better conditions.

Climate change can also affect the idea of “safe and dignified” return, completely changing the idea of what a durable solution is. Natural and man-made disasters, competition for land and/or resources, and hardship or extreme poverty caused or exacerbated by those disasters can make returning home a practical impossibility.

Competition for resources can be intensified by large-scale movements of displaced people. Many IDPs and refugees rely on the environment for survival – for food, shelter, energy, fire and warmth, medicine, agriculture, income-generation activities and more. The sudden additional pressures on the environment can lead to friction with host communities, while the unsustainable use of natural resources can lead to environmental degradation, with lasting effects.



Legal problems and solutions

Should climate change or natural disasters cause people to flee across borders, they may not come under the definition of refugee as a person who has crossed an international border “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”. So, although the term “climate refugee” is often used in the media, it does not actually exist in international law.

However, where people are displaced as a result of disasters or climate-related factors that are interlinked with conflict or persecution, the 1951 Refugee Convention is likely to apply. (Internally displaced persons are protected by Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.)

Some people displaced across borders in the context of climate change or natural disasters may fall within the definition of “refugee” under regional instruments if and when flight is a result of a serious disturbance to public order. (These include the 1969 OAU Convention or the Cartagena Declaration.)

In sum, international law can have a role to play in a wide range of situations involving climate change and forced displacement. UNHCR is involved in developing the legal frameworks relating to climate change and displacement, addressing the protection gaps for people displaced in the context of climate change and disasters.



What is being done?

Responding to climate catastrophes: While the legal aspects of climate change and displacement are evolving, humanitarian aid organisations such as UNHCR are already involved in emergencies in which climate change, extreme weather events and environmental degradation are a factor. There have been several examples over the past decade, including:

- In 2010, after an earthquake devastated Haiti, UNHCR helped both Haitian IDPs and refugees in the Dominican Republic with access to livelihoods and returns, as well as taking on familiar protection roles such as reducing the risk of trafficking and sexual and gender based violence, and the promotion of family reunion.

- Since the mass displacement of Rohingya Muslims in mid-2017, UNHCR has been helping refugees in southern Bangladesh to mitigate the effects of monsoon storms, flooding and landslides.
- In November 2018, UNHCR airlifted thousands of tents to western Afghanistan for more than a quarter of a million people displaced by a mix of conflict and severe drought.
- When Tropical Cyclone Idai hit Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi in March 2019, UNHCR relocated refugee families to safer shelters and provided them with tents, plastic sheeting, sanitation equipment and clean water.

Anticipating and preventing climate-fuelled displacement: Early warning systems and forecasting can help better prepare the response to climate-related events. UNHCR has also issued guidance on planned relocation, which seeks to move people out of harm's way when hazards such as rises in sea levels threaten to render certain areas uninhabitable. In August 2017, for instance, the agency took part in an exercise led by the governments of Costa Rica and Panama to simulate a disaster and deal in real time with the “virtual fallout” — following up by issuing guidelines for the kind of protections displaced people in such a scenario might need.

Mitigating the environmental impact of displacement: UN agencies and partner organisations are also seeking new ways to reduce the environmental impact of mass displacement. For example, to reduce foraging for firewood, which can antagonise local populations as well as reduce the harmful health and environmental effects of burning fuel in inefficient and “dirty” stoves, UNHCR has supported a programme to distribute liquefied petroleum gas to Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh, providing a clean and reliable source of energy for cooking. In 2017, Azraq refugee camp in Jordan became the world's first refugee camp powered by renewable energy. And in northern Uganda, UNHCR is supporting a large-scale reforestation effort to replenish trees cut down for shelters and cooking fires.



Questions to guide debate

- Should the term “climate refugee” be used or avoided?
- Is there a need for a new legal framework for people displaced due to climate change? What would be the implications? How to take account of the fact that displacement may result from multiple factors? Are all people moving as a result of climate change in need of protection?
- Who takes responsibility when people are displaced because of climate change, extreme weather events, environmental degradation and natural disasters? If such movements increase because of rising sea levels affecting coastal communities, who should take the lead in assisting, protecting and resettling them?
- How can displacement movements fuelled by climate change and environmental catastrophes be better anticipated and prevented?
- How to limit the environmental impact of refugees, especially in camps with large refugee populations (e.g. Bangladesh, Kenya, Ethiopia)?
- How to make sure the international response to environmental displacement doesn't only focus on extreme weather events such as cyclones, but also on slow onset phenomena like desertification and rising sea levels?
- How to prevent tensions or conflicts that may arise between displaced communities and host communities as a result of competition over natural resources?
- How can refugees and internally displaced people be involved in mitigating environmental risks? Can involving displaced communities in combatting climate change present economic opportunities?