

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Securing recognition, protection and assistance for climate refugees



Homes flooded in Jaliakhali village, Bangladesh © EJF

The fifty Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are responsible for less than 1% of global CO₂ emissions¹

A changing climate

Scientific research shows that rainfall patterns are changing, surface air temperatures are rising and extreme weather events like flooding and storms are becoming more intense. Larger areas are being affected by more frequent and longer-lasting droughts and increasingly severe desertification. Crucial freshwater sources are being contaminated by saltwater intrusion, and soils are being rendered infertile by salinisation. Oceans are becoming warmer, more acidic and sea levels are rising. Our planet's climate is a dynamic system, but a large proportion of these changes are caused by the actions of man².

Human activities, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation and agricultural practices, have released vast quantities of greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere over time; more than 900 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) since industrialisation began³. Atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ and methane (CH₄) today greatly exceed the natural range over the last 650,000 years⁴, and the overall trend is an increase of GHG emissions. This has the effect of exacerbating natural processes, resulting in dramatic (human driven) changes to the global environment and climate.

Compounded by the effects of rapid population growth and the mismanagement of natural resources, climate change is a very serious threat to the planet. Its impacts are being felt most acutely in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and low-lying and marginal areas in developing countries. The countries that have typically had the lowest total and per capita GHG emissions are paying the highest price for climate change.

The impact on human rights

Climate change has a range of direct and indirect implications for the effective enjoyment of human rights⁵. In many countries, its impacts already undermine people's rights to life, health, food, water, housing and self-determination⁶. The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) Resolution 10/4, 'Human rights and climate change', adopted in 2009, affirmed that "*human rights obligations and commitments have the potential to inform and strengthen international and national policy-making in the area of climate change*"⁷.

Climate change and climate refugees

Climate change amplifies existing social, environmental, economic and political stresses and creates new ones. Its 'multiplier effect' will lock many more people in poverty, while strains on national and international governance structures are exaggerated and progress on development is obstructed. A large proportion of the planet's human population already live in conditions where they are denied their most basic human rights, and projections of climate change would see this exacerbated as food and water security decline, homes and assets are damaged or destroyed, and lives are put in jeopardy¹⁰.

Where people are given no respite, have no opportunity to recover or capacity to adapt to deteriorating environmental conditions linked to climate change, they may have no choice but to flee their homes and land, seeking refuge wherever they can. Those who are forced to migrate in this way have not just lost the 'bricks and mortar' of their homes, but in many cases they have also lost their possessions, their source of income and employment, and can be left isolated from traditional, cultural and family ties. In effect, they have become 'climate refugees'.

More than two decades ago, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) suggested that the gravest effects of climate change may be those on migration¹¹. Today, we are faced with overwhelming evidence that climate change is impacting on migration and contributing to forced displacement. Migration has always been an adaptation strategy to environmental change, but the impacts of climate change could see migration on a scale and of a nature never seen before.

Recent disasters demonstrate the potential scale of displacement resulting from climate-related, natural hazard events: 1.5 million homes were destroyed in Bangladesh by Cyclone Sidr in 2007¹²; floods in Pakistan displaced approximately 1.8 million people, and damaged or destroyed up to 1.6 million homes and approximately 6.8 million acres of crops in 2010¹³; and more than 950,000 Somali refugees have been displaced to neighbouring countries between January 2011 and January 2012 as a result of the complex East Africa crisis¹⁴. Experts estimate that there were more than 38 million people displaced by sudden onset, climate-related natural hazards in 2010¹⁵. Climate refugees now outnumber refugees fleeing persecution and violence by more than three to one¹⁶.



A house in Bangladesh that has been destroyed by Cyclone Sidr © EC/ECHO/Oliver Brouant

Climate refugees now outnumber refugees fleeing persecution and violence by more than three to one.



Flooded homes in New Orleans © Jocelyn Augustino/ FEMA



El Fatr Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp in Darfur © EC/ECHO/Malini Morzaria

"We went home [after the cyclone had passed] and saw that there was nothing left. There wasn't a single house that you could live in. Only the houses built around trees, somehow their structure was still there, but they were unlivable. All the mud houses, clay houses were completely gone." Ataur Rahman, describing the scene in his village after Cyclone Aila struck Bangladesh⁸

A legal void

Unlike refugees recognized under the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (also known as the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention), climate refugees have no legal status. There is no legislation, agency or institution specifically mandated for their protection and assistance. No existing frameworks or institutions in the domain of migration, displacement or climate change precisely and definitively address the issue of climate refugees, and no international institution has a clear mandate to serve the populations which need human rights protection and humanitarian assistance.

For these reasons, a new, legally-binding international instrument is urgently needed. Such a framework could provide legal recognition for people forced from their homes and land as a result of deteriorating environmental conditions associated with climate change. This could also secure the obligation on national governments to establish specific policies for their assistance and protection.



Women and children are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change © EJF

“We are here simply because of the flood... There was heavy rainfall. Hens, ducks, doors, furniture - everything got smashed. We were starving. We had no choice but to move... I am not sure how many families left the village, but a lot of them have done so. I may not return to the village. I have no place to live in. The house is not safe. There will be more floods in the future.” Haowa Begum, resident of Tupera Taltola slum, Khulna, Bangladesh⁹

- 1 EIA International Energy Statistics (2009) - <http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=90&pid=44&aid=8&cid=regions&syid=2005&eyid=2009&unit=MTCDPP>
- 2 IPCC (2007) Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007
- 3 Costello. A et al (2009) Managing the health effects of climate change. The Lancet. Vol. 373 (9676)
- 4 IPCC (2007) Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007, Synthesis Report
- 5 HRC (2009) Human Rights Council Resolution 10/4: Human rights and climate change
- 6 OHCHR (2009) Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the relationship between climate change and human rights (A/HRC/10/61)
- 7 HRC (2009) Resolution 10/4. Human rights and climate change. Human Rights Council, Tenth Session
- 8 Extracts from transcripts of EJF interviews in Bangladesh in 2010
- 9 Extracts from transcripts of EJF interviews in Bangladesh in 2010
- 10 Human Rights Council Resolution 10/4 ‘Human rights and climate change’
- 11 IPCC (1990) AR1 - Working Group II: Impacts Assessment of Climate Change
- 12 Disaster Management Bureau, Ministry of Food and Disaster Management (2008) National Plan for Disaster Management 2008-2015. Government of Bangladesh
- 13 USAID – Pakistan: Disaster Assistance at a Glance - http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/countries/pakistan/template/index.html
- 14 UNHCR - East Africa Crisis, Overview - <http://www.unrefugees.org.au/emergencies/current-emergencies/east-africa-crisis>
- 15 IDMC (2011) Displacement due to natural hazard-induced disasters: Global estimates for 2009 and 2010. IDMC, NRC, Norway
- 16 UNHCR (2011) Global Trends 2010 - <http://www.unhcr.org/4dfa11499.html>
- 17 UNHCR (2011) Statement by Mr. António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Intergovernmental Meeting at Ministerial Level to mark the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

“A growing number of people are uprooted by natural disasters or lose their livelihoods to desertification, with climate change now found to be the key factor accelerating all other drivers of forced displacement. These persons are not truly migrants, in the sense that they did not move voluntarily. As forcibly displaced not covered by the refugee protection regime, they find themselves in a legal void.” António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees¹⁷

Recommendations

1. An international binding agreement on legal recognition, protection and assistance for climate refugees.

- National governments should support the development and implementation of an international, legally-binding mechanism that confers legal recognition, protection and assistance to climate refugees.
- National governments should also collaborate to develop and implement an innovative funding mechanism for this instrument, based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibility, supporting the needs of countries that are most vulnerable to climate change and least able to adapt to its effects.
- Individuals should press their government to show leadership on climate change and displacement, and to support a new legal agreement.

2. Greater commitment and accountability on climate change mitigation.

Worst-case scenarios of climate change can still be prevented through robust, ambitious GHG emissions cuts.

- Developed countries should make legally-binding commitments on GHG emissions reductions targets, including a 40 percent reduction in emissions from 1990 levels by 2020.
- Developing countries should make binding commitments to improve efficiency across their economic sectors and reduce their total GHG emissions.
- Individuals should reduce their own carbon footprints through careful consumption, reducing wastage, recycling and investment to increase their domestic energy efficiency.

3. Greater support for adaptation and assistance in 'frontline' countries.

Even with immediate targets agreed and implemented, historical GHG emissions in the atmosphere will have long-term effects. Efforts must be made to abate the negative impacts of climate change, with particular support for developing countries that are least culpable but already experiencing some of the worst effects.

- Countries should collaborate to ensure increased and more equitable, transparent and timely distribution of funding for climate change adaptation.
- Greater financial support should be given to reducing vulnerability to climate change, disaster risk reduction and sustainable development to enable adaptation *in situ*. The overall goal must be to help prevent humanitarian crises, rather than to react to them.
- Developed countries should enable and facilitate 'green' technology transfer to developing countries.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME – campaigning for environmental security and human rights

Each year, millions of people are forced from their homes and land by climate-related, natural disasters. Some of these people are displaced by sudden onset storms and flooding, others by less headline-grabbing hazards like drought and desertification. Most are from the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries. Many face an uncertain future, with nowhere to go and no means to survive. EJF works to raise awareness of and improve the well-being and welfare of these climate refugees. We campaign for a new, legally-binding instrument for their legal recognition, protection and assistance.

Help us get their voices heard

EJF's Home Truths – the Climate Witness Network is working to connect people around the world, empowering everyone to start a dynamic conversation on climate change, providing a platform where people can share their thoughts, ideas and hopes. EJF is helping individuals and communities document the issues that affect them, using photography and film to show what it is like to live on the frontline of climate change.

To support our work, get involved today by visiting www.ejfoundation.org



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