

## **The problematic definition of environmental migration: reasons and implications**

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Mobility, Migration and European Integration

### **Introduction**

The United Nations define climate change as “the defining crisis of our time” and disaster displacement as “one of its most devastating consequences”<sup>1</sup>.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an annual average of 21.5 million people have been forcibly displaced by weather-related events – such as floods, storms, wildfires and extreme temperatures – since 2008<sup>2</sup>, while a recent report from the international think-tank Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) predicts that there could be 1.2 billion people could be displaced globally by 2050 due to global warming.

Despite the shocking and immense vastity of the phenomenon, there is no internationally recognised definition of “environmental migration”.

This research paper aims to understand the causes and implications of this hole in international law.

### **The Geneva Convention**

People displaced by the effects of climate change cannot be defined as “refugees”.

The 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of Refugee and its development, the 1967 New York Protocol, do not recognise this category of migrants, probably because global warming was not the phenomenon that we all know *now*, therefore other causes of migration had the priority.

For this reason, a refugee is defined as someone who has crossed an international border “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html> “accessed 1 December 2022”

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2016/11/581f52dc4/frequently-asked-questions-climate-change-disaster-displacement.html> “accessed 1 December 2022”

membership of a particular social group or political opinion”<sup>3</sup>. Some attempts were made to expand the meaning of this definition by giving a broader interpretation of the word “persecution”: some migrants tried to affirm that they were being persecuted by the effects of climate change, therefore triggering the 1951 Geneva Convention and obtaining the status of refugee. However, this strategy did not work out.

The conception of refugees poses another obstacle to the recognition of environmental migration and its protection.

Refugees are people that for political, racial and religious reasons are obliged to flee from their country and *cross* international borders due to the threats posed on their lives. Environmental migration, on the other hand, is mainly an *internal* displacement phenomenon: people move within their own country.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 23.7 million were the people displaced by environmental disasters in 2021<sup>4</sup>, with more than 22 million migrants moving due to weather-related events, in contrast to 1.4 million moving as a consequence of geophysical events like earthquakes or landslides.

Refugees, however, play an unfortunate role in environmental migration. People already displaced for reasons other than disasters linked to hazards, including refugees, stateless people, and the internally displaced, often reside in climate change “*hotspots*” where they may be exposed to secondary displacement and reduced chances of being able to return home.

In addition to legal hurdles, climate-change migration is more difficult to be identified owing to environmental factors too. Global warming takes place in two different ways; through sudden-onset events and slow-onset processes.

Sudden-onset disasters are triggered by a hazardous event that emerges quickly or unexpectedly, like flooding, windstorms or mudslides. Their effects last for hours, days or weeks, and despite their probability of occurrence is usually low, as a consequence of climate change they have become more frequent. Slow-onset processes are more complex: they provoke environmental degradation through gradual changes, generating and aggravating phenomena like desertification, drought and sea level rise.

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<sup>3</sup> UN General Assembly, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3be01b964.html> “accessed 5 December 2022”

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2022/> “accessed 2 December 2022”

Both types of events can propel the movement of individuals, but while sudden-onset events generate migrants that are easier to be identified, slow-onset events are harder to be recognised. This is because climate change not only creates a threat by causing immediate harm to people and infrastructures, but it is also a long-term danger that can slowly destabilise societies and economies.

In a few words, people might migrate due to *indirect* consequences provoked by climate change, leading to a problematic distinction between environmental-caused migration and economic migration.

### **The role of economic migration**

The Sahel case is an example.

The Sahel region of Africa has been identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as a climate hotspot<sup>5</sup>, which means a region whose climate is especially responsive to global warming and therefore exposed to greater risk than other regions in the world. Temperatures in the Sahel are rising 1.5 times faster than the global average. Rainfall in the region is erratic and wet seasons are shrinking even as flooding is becoming more common.

Since the droughts of the 1970s, The Sahel has experienced significant poverty, with between 30 and 50 per cent of the population living on less than \$1.20 per day in many countries in the region, aggravated by situations of environmental degradation and political instability.

It is estimated that around 65 per cent of the Sahel's cultivable land is degraded. Most of the Sahel is rural, with approximately 79 per cent of people living in rural areas and reliant on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods.

Roughly 50 million people in the Sahel who make their livelihoods herding animals compete for land, including farmers who are seeking to expand land area under cultivation to make up for reduced crop yields<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Isabelle Niang and others, "Africa," AR5 Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2014.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR sahel report

Since 79 per cent of the population relies on agriculture as the main source of subsistence in an area defined as climate hot spot, we could ask ourselves how people migrating from these territories can be defined: are they environmental migrants or economic migrants?

The truth is that is impossible to define them sharply.

Both sudden-onset events and slow-onset processes provoke environmental degradation that is becoming harder and harder to adapt to. In addition, although climate change is a worldwide phenomenon, poor people and poor countries are more severely affected by its negative effects. According to the World Bank, more than 140 million economically disadvantaged people from Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America will be forced to migrate internally due to climate change impacts including water shortages, decreasing agricultural productivity, and rising sea levels by 2050<sup>7</sup>.

Strictly distinguishing people migrating in search of better opportunities and jobs from people migrating due to drought, for example, will be more and more difficult, if not impossible.

### **From Sahel to Syria**

Political instability is a factor that can be identified as a further issue in defining environmental migration. The Syrian civil war is quite explanatory.

The Syrian war was triggered by a complex mix of social, political, economic and environmental factors. But new research finds that human-caused climate change could also have had an influence. Of course, nobody is saying that environmental degradation caused the war, but rather that, added to all the other stressors, it helped kick things over the threshold into open conflict.

Syria has been hit by three droughts since the 1980s. The most recent stretched from 2006 to 2010 and was recorded as the worst multiyear drought in around 900 years.<sup>8</sup> Decreased precipitation combined with rising temperatures resulted in desertification and devastation of agricultural land, particularly in eastern Syria. Along with this, 800,000 people lost their income and 85 per cent of the country's livestock died.

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2018/03/19/groundswell---preparing-for-internal-climate-migration> “Accessed 29 November 2022”

<sup>8</sup><https://www.dw.com/en/how-climate-change-paved-the-way-to-war-in-syria/a-56711650> “Accessed 2 December 2022”

“Since crop yields had also plummeted by up to two-thirds, the country had to start importing large quantities of grain. Consequently, food prices doubled.”<sup>9</sup> Decisions by the Syrian government to withdraw food and fuel subsidies made food even less affordable.

The drought, however, continued leading 1.5 million farmers and their families to abandon their land and headed to urban areas for work.

“The growing urban populations resulted in overcrowding, unemployment and crime, but the worsening situation was neglected by the Syrian government. This growing unrest was the trigger for the uprising.”<sup>10</sup>

In a few words, Staffan de Mistura, former UN Special Envoy for Syria between 2014 and 2018, said “Climate disruption was an amplifier and multiplier of the political crisis that was building up in Syria”.

In the Syrian case, climate change is not only a cause of migration but also an additional source of political instability which, in an already fragile context, can be truly explosive.

## Conclusions

The aim of this research paper is to explain why there is no internationally recognised definition of “environmental migration”, despite the size of the phenomenon. From the low-lying islands of the Pacific to the Sahel area, people are already migrating as a consequence of the climate’s worsening conditions, with no protection or recognition from the international community. As we have seen that is due to many different factors.

First of all the lack of mention of environmental disasters as a cause of migration in the 1951 Geneva Convention, which, in addition, applies to cross-border migration, while climate change movement is mainly an internal phenomenon. Then, we had a brief look at the different types of climate change events and how they make it even more difficult to identify this category of migrants, since they often overlap with socio-economic and political factors, generating uncertainty on the main cause of migration.

Certainly, this hole in international law is also a result of the lack of political interest in addressing environmental migration and mitigating the effect of climate change.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.carbonbrief.org/scientists-discuss-the-role-of-climate-change-in-the-syrian-civil-war/>

A future study on the topic might be on if and how different legal protection could be created towards slow-onset migrants and sudden-onset migrants.