United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Topic C: Situation of and assistance to environmental refugees and internally displaced persons affected by natural disasters and climate change.

“There are at least 20 million environmental refugees worldwide ... more than those displaced by war and political repression combined”--Stefan Lovgren

Climate change is currently one of the most talked about and debated topics in the international community. The effects of climate change are seen and measured across the globe; however, one of the biggest adverse effects of climate change remains out of focus for the international community. Since 2009, it is estimated that climate change displaces one person every second, with 22.5 million people displaced by climate or weather-related events since 2008. Climate change is projected to trigger larger and more complex movements of population, both within and across international borders. It is estimated that 150-200 million people will be displaced due to climate induced disasters by 2050. Environmental refugees are one of the newest and fastest growing vulnerable populations in the world, and while the UNHCR is increasingly committed to protecting the environment, there is still much to do to address this issue.

Background:

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

As outlined by U.N. General Assembly A/RES/43/53 on 6 December of 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change works to gather scientific data, assessments on climate change, and its effects around the world. The first comprehensive review gathered by the IPCC included information taken from the current knowledge of the science behind climate change; the social and economic impact of climate change, and strategies to be undertaken to create

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5 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. “History” https://www.ipcc.ch/organization/organization_history.shtml
an international convention for Member States to implement. Currently, the role of the IPCC is defined within the operational mandate known as the Principles Governing IPCC Work which gathers relevant data.

The inaugural IPCC assessment report of 1990 highlighted the necessary cooperation that must occur within the international community in order to fully address the issue of climate change. Moreover, upon its release and evaluation, it prompted the United Nations, Member States, and other relevant entities to create the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Reports are ongoing and continue to examine the most recent data on global weather patterns.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Kyoto Protocol & Paris Agreement

Member States from around the world gathered together in a formal session in 1992 to ratify the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The framework of the treaty called for direct multilateral action/cooperation to reverse the effects of climate change. Specific actions by the UNFCCC targeted an overall reduction in the average global temperature increases as well as being able to cope with the then impacts of climate change that were already underway. In the years that followed the Convention’s initial creation, additional treaties and agreements provided significant depth as well as strengthen the international response to climate change.

The first series of discussions to strengthen the international community’s response to global climate change occurred in 1995. Once discussions reached a pivotal point, the international community came together to create the Kyoto Protocol and later adopted on 11th of December 1997, which if signed by any state it would have legally bound developing Member States to reduce emissions based on specified reduction targets within a rapid time frame. The targeted way to combat the adverse effects of climate change was through significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The Protocol states, “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.”

Most recently, the international community met on 12 December 2015 to ratify the Paris Agreement. This agreement stands out in two distinct ways from the previous treaties that make up the U.N. climate change regime. The Paris Agreement as agreed upon by all parties involved

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7 Ibid.


9 United Nations Framework on Climate Change. “Background on the UNFCCC: The international response..."
marks a new direction in the means of addressing climate change. Through an accelerated and high intensity range of actions based on investment needed for a sustainably low carbon environment. The agreement’s main focus is to build up the international response to this threat by ensuring global temperatures and their rises stay below 2 degrees Celsius, pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase further to 1.5 degrees Celsius, and make efforts to help Member States better deal with the impacts of climate change. In order to obtain these objectives, several things must take place: financial flows [goal for provisional finance USD 100 billion], more stable framework for capacity building to help support developing/vulnerable countries, and the overall enhancement of transparency of action by a more robust transparency framework.10

**UNHCR and the Nansen Initiative**

While these agreements took center stage within the United Nations, the UNHCR was to be an invited party to the Nansen Initiative that both Switzerland and Norway introduced on October of 2012.11 The purpose of this initiative is to build an across the board consensus for an agenda of protection to adequately address the needs of people who are displaced globally as a result of natural hazards and climate change. The most recent assessment from the IPCC known as Working Groups II, gave detailed information on the risks that displaced persons currently face as climate change worsens.

The information that was gathered for the assessment indicates that as society gets further into the 21st century, climate change is going to exacerbate the displacement of different populations globally. Populations that lack the resources for planned migration will experience greater extreme weather events; rural and urban areas of low income developing countries. Civil war and inner group violence may occur to vie for those low resources.

**Defining an environmental Refugee**

To date, there is no universally accepted working definition to describe environmental refugees within international law. This is likely due to the fact that environmental refugees are a recent development within the global community and are yet to be incorporated within the realm of international law. However, entities such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) proposed a definition which states that, “Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.”12

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10 Ibid.

11 U.N. News Centre “Should international refugee law accommodate climate change?”

are some organizations that use the terms climate refugee, climate change refugee, environmentally displaced person, eco-refugee, and ecologically displaced person to describe this population as well, and all working titles generally refer to the same undefined population.

There are various types of environmental refugees. The IOM has put together four categories of migration that environmental refugees can fall into. The migration types are as follows: migration at less advanced stages of gradual environmental change, migration at advanced stages of gradual environmental change, migration due to extreme environmental events, and migration due to large-scale development and land conservation. The first migration type, migration at less advanced stage of gradual environmental change happens when farmers have fewer crops during harvest, catch less fish, and smaller areas of land for cattle. Second, migration at an advanced stage results in migration when persistent environmental degradation begins to deteriorate the lives of the local population; a temporary lack of resources becomes more protracted and possibly permanent. Third, which is the most familiar of the migration types is due to extreme environmental events in which large numbers of displacements happen because of a natural or industrial disaster. The final migration type occurs whenever major projects dedicated to the development of infrastructure (dams, roads, bridges, etc.) may force mass relocations for communities oftentimes permanently. It is important to note the multifaceted aspect of environmental migration, be it internal, international, or regional; temporary or permanent; forced, voluntary, or a mix thereof. There are many blurred distinctions and unique circumstances when it comes to environmental migration, which makes it difficult to establish clear definitions and standard terminology.

Causation

Environmental migration is a multi-causal phenomenon. There is no simple relationship between the environment and migration, hence its classification as an intersectional issue. The IOM hosted an International Dialogue on Migration focused on migration due to climate change and environmental degradation. In this dialogue, the empirical evidence base of environmental migration needs reinforcement; however, it is “recognized that environmental drivers play a significant and increasingly determinative role in migration phenomena.”

The Representative of the Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) identified five climate change-related scenarios that cause human displacement. Hydro-

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14Ibid.
16Ibid.
meteorological disasters (floods, hurricanes, mudslides, etc.), zones designated by governments as being too high-risk and dangerous for human habitation, environmental degradation and slow onset disaster (reduction of water availability, desertification, salinization, etc.), violent conflict triggered by a decrease in essential resources, and the case of “sinking” small island states. 17 In any of these cases, the affected populations have their lives and productivity levels put at-risk. The IOM states that climate change is accelerating the likelihood of these scenarios and is therefore a significant root-cause when it comes to environmental displacement of persons. 18

Current Issues:

Urbanization

A common misconception about refugees and displaced persons is that many are living in camps in a rural area near a border region, but in stark reality, many refugees and displaced persons are found within cities. This happens because the overall focus on camps shifts the attention of many away from mass refugees entering major cities. Population statistics indicate that 3.3 billion people live in cities, with those numbers set to increase to 5 billion by the year 2030. 19

Complicating things even more, cities that maintain a large population of displaced persons often face serious difficulty accessing these persons. The reason that this is troublesome is because most refugees in major cities are more dispersed rather than settled in one general area or region. A more recent example of this phenomenon occurred in Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens migrated from their country of origin to major cities within neighboring countries such as Damascus, Syria and Amman, Jordan.

Natural Disasters

As climate change progressed over the past decade, relatively large numbers of natural disasters occurred as well. Even though not all natural disasters are linked to climate change, the UNHCR adjusted its mandate to include those persons that are displaced as a result of natural disasters. According to the major principles of international law, people that choose to leave because of natural disasters are not legally classified as refugees. Furthermore, the Inter-Agency Steering Committee created a list of natural disaster scenarios that may are incorporated into the UNHCR’s program to assist persons displaced because of natural disasters. The list includes: hydro-meteorological disasters (floods, hurricanes, typhoons, cyclones, and mudslides), evacuation from zones that have too high of a risk for human habitation, population movements due to

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environmental degradation with eventual disaster (available water, desertification, flooding, and salinization), and violent conflict or induced civil war brought on by a drastic decrease in required natural resources (water, land, and food).  

**Environmental Degradation**

Presently, the consequences of environmental degradation occur because of the misuse of natural resources, poor planning, deteriorating infrastructure, and poor government oversight. When land degradation and pollution of both the air and soil happen combined with environmental change, there are a massive number of people seeking refuge in areas where these threats are not present. Because the existing ecosystems and the services that they provide to individual livelihoods is compromised, stresses on populations continue to culminate in a mass exodus of populations. The importance of different ecosystems cannot be overstated; they provide a significant variety of services to society that includes food supplies, fuel, and other aesthetic benefits to nature enthusiasts. Once a particular ecosystem has went over its capacity for resilience of anthropogenic factors, then this can potentially serve as a major trigger for mass populations to seek new refuge.  

**Future Outlook:**

The IOM expects the scale of global migration to rise as a result of accelerated climate change.  

The IOM works closely with governments in promoting migration management that ensures humane and orderly migration that is beneficial to migrants and societies, and puts forth recommendations for policymakers around the world to take a proactive stance against climate change. One of the main recommendations is data collection. The IOM recommends collecting data on all aspects of climate change and the populations affected by it. By collecting data, the international community can create a working definition and create a legal framework to protect environmental refugees. The IOM recommends strengthening policy, institutional, administrative, legal frameworks, and reinforcing operational and technical assistance.

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20 Ibid


There are proposed policy responses to environmental migration that address migration and development, facilitating migration, and forced migration. Policy changes in the aspects of early intervention, sustainable development, and community stabilization must take effect within Member States in order to mitigate the negative effects of environmental migration. Between States, there must be dialogue regarding bilateral and multilateral agreements to address the consequences of international climate migration, such as quotas and legal channels. In the case of forced environmental migration (in the cases of irreversible stages of climate change), there needs to be a permanent, sustainable solution that is developed and agreed upon within the international community. This must include sustainable resettlement programs, addressing statelessness, and mitigating any negative social, economic, and political effects this phenomenon may have. In order to avoid environmental migration as a whole, there needs to be comprehensive solutions and action taken by States in order to make an impact in both policy and action. Bilateral, regional, and international cooperation is essential to address the root causes of climate change.

In order to properly address the needs of environmental refugees, a legal framework must exist to facilitate aid for the unique situations of environmental refugees. Many groups suggested a new multilateral legal instrument for this purpose. There is also the issues of statelessness, dual-citizenship, and addressing legal issues of disappearing countries that must be taken into account within this topic. One of the most concerning issues that the international community will soon face with environmental refugees is statelessness. In the case of many small island countries, some are “sinking.” Some small island states may not exist in the near future due to rising sea levels. This leaves an entire population stateless. The international community will have to devise a sustainable, durable solution to this issue before it becomes a reality.

Focus Questions:

1.) What environmental agreements, protocols, or treaties is your country a party to?
2.) Is your state currently experiencing an influx of environmental refugees?
3.) What efforts has your state made to combat the various causes of mass population migration?
4.) What efforts has your state made to help other Member States dealing with this issue?
5.) Is your state currently experiencing an influx of refugees as a result of urbanization, natural disaster displacement, environmental degradation, or other forms of ecosystem damage?
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