



Contact: alex.randall@climateoutreach.org.uk / +44 (0)7779 517323
More info: www.climatemigration.org.uk

Climate Change and the Refugee Crisis

The unfolding refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East has left many people asking whether the situation is related to climate change. Several media reports have drawn connections between climate change and the current crisis, and predicted that similar crises might unfold more often in the future as the planet warms.

As one of the world's only organisations dedicated to the issue, we have produced this briefing which explores the relationship between climate change and human movement. It aims to set climate change in context along with the many other drivers of human movement. We conclude by outlining a series of legal and political responses that are designed to support and protect people who might be displaced by climate impacts, or who may want to move as a way of adapting to climate change.

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What is the relationship between climate change and human movement?

Natural disasters across the world displaced 22 million people in 2014. Most of the displacement was created by weather related disasters. There are important connections between climate change and the movement of people. When people are forced to move by the impacts of climate change, they usually move internally rather than across international borders.

In response to sudden disasters such as floods and typhoons, which are increasingly exacerbated by climate change, people often move a short distance to the nearest place of safety within their own country, and often return after the disaster during reconstruction.

"The water came at night and we didn't have time to save our belongings; we had to chose whether to save our children and ourselves or our property and assets, so we chose to save our kids. We left everything and ran to save our lives."

[Unnamed survivor of the 2010 floods](#) (World Food Programme)

In response to slowly unfolding climate change impacts such as droughts, people often move to find alternative work as their livelihoods are eroded. People usually move within their own country rather than crossing international borders. As agricultural livelihoods are degraded, people often move from rural to urban areas where alternative work is available. Rather than entire families moving together, one or two individuals will move at a time.

In some cases, both sudden and slowly unfolding weather-related disasters can create movement across borders. However, this is usually only the case when several other forces are at play. Cross border migration is more likely to happen when a climate linked disaster is combined with other political factors such as conflict or persecution.

"And since there was the war, we did not receive any support from the government. Therefore, there are combined factors that made us suffer: droughts and war. If war did not exist, then we might have been able to stay, but now that the land is looted, there is no way for us to claim it."

Somali farmer, Nakiavale Settlement, Uganda (UNHCR / UNU)

In the future, climate change is most likely to create patterns of migration and displacement that follow these existing patterns. There have been a number of media reports suggesting that climate change might create future crises like the one currently taking place in Europe and the Middle East. **However it is clear that most future climate-linked migration is likely to be internal and short distance rather than across continents.**

Are any of the refugees entering Europe fleeing the impacts of climate change?

Whilst climate change is increasingly a driver of internal displacement, most of the people currently entering Europe are fleeing the conflict in Syria. Others are fleeing from conflict and human rights abuses in other countries such as Afghanistan and Eritrea. However some research suggests a connection between climate change and the drought that immediately preceded the conflict in Syria.

The main driver behind recent increases in the numbers of people fleeing relates to the worsening of the violence in Syria, and the deteriorating situation in many of the refugee camps along the Syrian border.

- Analysis: [Climate change and the situation in the Mediterranean](https://bit.ly/MedSituation) - bit.ly/MedSituation
- Analysis: [Climate change and the refugee crisis in Calais](https://bit.ly/CalaisRefugees) - bit.ly/CalaisRefugees

Was the war in Syria caused by drought and the impacts of climate change?

The causes of the four-year conflict in Syria are primarily political. Key among these was the attempt in 2011 to overthrow the Assad regime, which subsequently descended into an ongoing civil war. Some recent research suggested that a prolonged drought just before the 2011 uprising may have been an important factor, but it should be seen as only one contributing factor.

- Analysis: [Climate change and the Syria conflict](https://bit.ly/SyriaClimate) - bit.ly/SyriaClimate
- Analysis: [Climate change, terrorism and the rise of ISIS](https://bit.ly/ClimateSyriaConflict) - bit.ly/ClimateSyriaConflict
- Analysis: [Evidence linking climate change and armed violence](https://bit.ly/ClimateConflictDebate) - bit.ly/ClimateConflictDebate
- Infographic: [Understanding the connections between climate and conflict](https://bit.ly/InfographicConflict) - bit.ly/InfographicConflict

How should we respond?

We support a **series of legal and political responses** that are designed to support and protect people who might be displaced by climate impacts, or who may want to move as a way of adapting to climate change. The need to create safe and legal routes for people to move are at the heart of these responses. This applies to both the current European situation and future displacement and migration that might occur in response to climate change.

1. **New international initiatives allowing people to move after disasters.** The Nansen Initiative proposes creating a new 'protection agenda' in which states would agree to allow people to cross international borders after natural disasters. The agreement which is currently being developed represents the most promising way of allowing people to move legally and safely after disasters - including disasters that are linked to climate change.
 2. **Migration as part of Adaptation to climate change.** In the face of slowly unfolding climate change impacts, people may need to migrate as a way of adapting to climate change. There are a great deal of international negotiations regarding Adaptation, including the upcoming UN Paris meeting, and many argue that migration must be recognised as a valid form of adaptation.
 3. **Using and modifying existing laws to help people move after disasters.** Governments also have several existing options that they should use more readily to assist people who need to cross borders after disasters. For example, many countries have offered temporary humanitarian visas to people who have been forced to move by disasters.
 4. **Protecting the rights of internally displaced people.** Existing international agreements already protect the rights of people who are forced to move internally by disasters or conflict. The key agreement is the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Governments will increasingly need to act during climate-linked disasters to ensure that the Principles are properly applied.
- Report: [Protecting the rights of people who move in the context of climate change](https://bit.ly/LegalProtection) - bit.ly/LegalProtection
 - Report: [Migration as Adaptation to climate change](https://bit.ly/MigrationAdaptation) - bit.ly/MigrationAdaptation

About us

We exist to challenge the lack of long-term strategies to support and protect people at risk of displacement linked to environmental change. The UK Climate Change and Migration Coalition is an alliance of refugee, human rights, development and environmental organisations. We believe the rights of affected communities must be central to the discussion of how this issue is addressed. We want to make the voices of affected communities and civil society central to the debate.

The coalition is run by Climate Outreach, a charitable company, limited by guarantee. Charitable registration number 1123315. Company number 06459313.