

Let's Talk About Climate Migrants, Not Climate Refugees



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In 2018 alone, 17.2 million new displacements associated with disasters in 148 countries and territories were recorded (IDMC) and drought displaced 764,000 people in Somalia, Afghanistan and several other countries.

“At first, we woke up to the sound of the wind and right after that the water came streaming into our house. We only managed to grab our children and run away to an area which lies on higher ground,” [explains](#) Rafael Domingo, a father of four in Mozambique,

where Cyclone Idai left more than 73,000 people homeless in March 2019.

In 2018 alone, 17.2 million new displacements associated with disasters in 148 countries and territories were recorded ([IDMC](#)) and 764,000 people in Somalia, Afghanistan and several other countries were displaced following drought ([IOM](#)).

“Many people who were displaced cannot return home. The drought in Somalia is happening all the time. People have no way to recover,” [said](#) Halima, a 30-year-old mother of three displaced in Somalia because of the drought.

Climate migrants have been invisible for many years on the migration and climate debates. Our work at [IOM](#) has been focused for over 10 years on bringing climatic and environmental factors to the light and on building a body of evidence proving that climate change affects – directly and indirectly – human mobility.

Hence, it might seem paradoxical in this context not to encourage the establishment of a climate specific legal status, parallel to the existing refugees’ status.

However, while the available evidence on how climate change and environmental degradation affect human mobility is growing and is uncontested, the current focus of the debate on establishing a climate refugee status can lead to a narrow and biased debate and would provide only partial solutions to address the complexity of human mobility and climate change.

Media are pushing again and again for features on “climate refugees” and request projections on how many climate refugees there will be in twenty years. In contrast, some emblematic small island States, among others, speak out that they do not wish to become climate refugees; they want to be able to stay in their homes, or to move in dignity and through regular channels without abandoning everything behind.

“When the grass is not enough, movement increases. In the spring, many migrants moved from the south to the north. There is no other way to overcome climate change. All the people wish to survive with their animals and come to a place where they can fatten their livestock,” [said](#) Mr. Chinbat, a herder of Sergelen soum in Mongolia, where the adverse effects of climate change are impacting the migration of herders.



Rubia (40) sits on a banana raft inside her house which is waist deep in flood water. Her husband is a farmer and they have three children. They came to this house five years ago after they lost their own land. 'Shifting house during floods or river erosion is hard but losing your land is a completely different experience, it is indescribable pain.'

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The image of “climate refugees” resonates metaphorically to all as it mirrors the current images we see of those escaping wars and conflicts. With the threat of climate change we imagine millions becoming refugees in the future.

Yet reducing the issue of migration in the context of climate change to the status of “climate refugees” fails to recognize a number of key aspects that define human mobility in the context of climate change and environmental degradation. Here are 10 of these aspects:

1. **Climate migration is mainly internal:** when migration is internal, people moving are under the responsibility of their own state, they do not cross borders and are not seeking protection from a third country or at the international level.
2. **Migration is not necessarily forced,** especially for very slow onset processes migration is still a matter of choice, even if constrained, so countries need to think first migration management and agreements rather than refugee protection.
3. **Isolating environment/climatic reasons is difficult,** in particular from humanitarian, political, social, conflict or economic ones. It can sometimes be an impossible task and may lead to long and unrealistic legal procedures.
4. Creating a special refugee status for climate change related reasons might unfortunately have the opposite effects of what is sought as a solution: **it can lead to the exclusion of categories of people who are in need of protection,** especially the poorest migrants who move because of a mix of factors and would not be able to prove the link to climate and environmental factors.
5. **Opening the 1951 Refugee Convention might weaken the refugee status** which would be tragic given the state of our world where so many people are in need of protection because of persecution and ongoing conflicts.
6. Creating a new convention might be a terribly lengthy political process and countries might not have an appetite for it. **Many responses can come from migration management and policy** as highlighted already in the 2011 International Dialogue

on Migration and the recently adopted Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The Nansen Initiative that was launched to look at gaps in protection for people being displaced across borders by disasters, after undertaking thematic and regional consultations also concluded with a document that proposes a “toolkit” of migration policies rather than recommending the establishment of a new status for these people.

7. **Climate migration discussions should not lose their focus on preventive measures:** the key objective of our generation is to invest in climate and environmental solutions for our planet so that people will not have to leave their homes in a forced way in the future. The Paris Agreement offers anchorage for climate action that considers human mobility to avert, minimize and address displacement in the context of climate change.
8. **IOM encourages the full use of all already existing bodies of laws and instruments,** both hard and soft law in humanitarian, human rights and refugee law, instruments on internal displacement, disaster management, legal migration and others.
9. **Human rights-based approaches are key for addressing climate migration:** states of origin bear the primary responsibility for their citizens’ protection even if indeed their countries have not been the main contributors to global warming; they should therefore apply human rights-based approaches for their citizens moving because of environmental or climatic drivers.
10. **Regular migration pathways** can provide relevant protection for climate migrants and facilitate migration strategies in response to environmental factors. Many migration management solutions are available to respond to challenges posed by climate change, environmental degradation and disasters in terms of international migratory movements and can provide a status for people who move in the context of climate change impacts, such as humanitarian visas, temporary protection, authorization to stay, regional and bilateral free movements’ agreements, among several others.