

## Environmental Displacement and Conflict

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### ABSTRACT

A key impact of climate change will be reduced availability of water, particularly in parts of the tropics, the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions and the Southern tips of Africa and Latin America. In contrast, water availability will increase in parts of Eastern Africa, the Indian sub-continent, China, and the Northern Latitudes. Hundreds of millions of people will be exposed to water stress (i.e. droughts and lack of water or flooding, mudslides etc). A decrease in crop yields is projected which increases the likelihood that additional tens of millions of people will be at risk of hunger. The most affected region is likely to be Africa. Due to rising sea-levels, the densely populated “mega-deltas” especially in Asia and Africa and small islands are most at risk from floods, storms and coastal flooding and eventual submerging, with a potential impact on tens of millions of people. The overall impact on health will be negative, especially for the poor, elderly, young and other marginalized sectors of society. Overall, the areas that will be most affected by climate change are Africa, Asian mega-deltas and small islands.

**KEYWORDS:** climate change, environmental displacement, flooding, society, populated, storms, islands

### INTRODUCTION

Climate change is usually referred to as “global warming” and as such does not displace people. Rather climate change produces environmental effects which may make it difficult or even impossible for people to survive where they are.



Most causes of displacement triggered by climate change, such as flooding, hurricanes, desertification or even the “sinking” of stretches of land, are not new. However, their frequency and magnitude are likely to increase. The challenge is to better analyze these causes of displacement, to identify the areas where the effects of climate change are most likely to occur and to examine the character of forced displacement and other population movements they

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could trigger. In this context, it might be required to review existing international legal instruments and to explore ways of filling potential protection gaps. The increase of hydro-meteorological disasters, such as flooding, hurricanes/typhoons/cyclones or mudslides, will occur in most regions, but the African and Asian mega deltas are likely to be most affected. Such disasters can cause large-scale displacement and huge economic costs, but depending on recovery efforts the ensuing displacement need not be long-term and return in principle remains possible as durable solution. [1,2]



**Pollution being the cause of global warming**

One should not forget that many hydro-meteorological disasters will occur regardless of climate change and other disasters such as volcanoes or earthquakes presumably have no linkage to such change. Nevertheless, they too may cause movement of persons and such persons should not be treated differently from those affected by the effects of climate change. Environmental degradation and slow onset disasters (e.g. reduction of water availability, desertification, long-term effects of recurrent flooding, sinking coastal zones, increased salinisation of ground-water and soil etc.): With the dramatic decrease of water availability in some regions and recurrent flooding in others, economic opportunities and conditions of life will deteriorate in affected areas. Such deterioration may not necessarily cause forced displacement in the strict sense of the word but, among other reasons, will incite people to move to regions with better income opportunities and living conditions. However, if the areas become uninhabitable because of complete desertification or sinking coastal zones, then population movements amount to forced displacement and become permanent. The case of “sinking” small island states caused by rising sea levels constitutes a particular challenge.[3,4] As a consequence, such areas become uninhabitable and in extreme cases the remaining territory of affected states can no longer accommodate the whole population or such states disappear as a whole. When this happens, the population cannot return and becomes permanently displaced to other countries. Disasters will increase the need for governments to designate areas as high-risk zones too dangerous for human habitation. This means that people may have to be (forcibly) evacuated and displaced from their homes and prohibited from returning there and relocated to safe areas.



**Melting of glaciers**

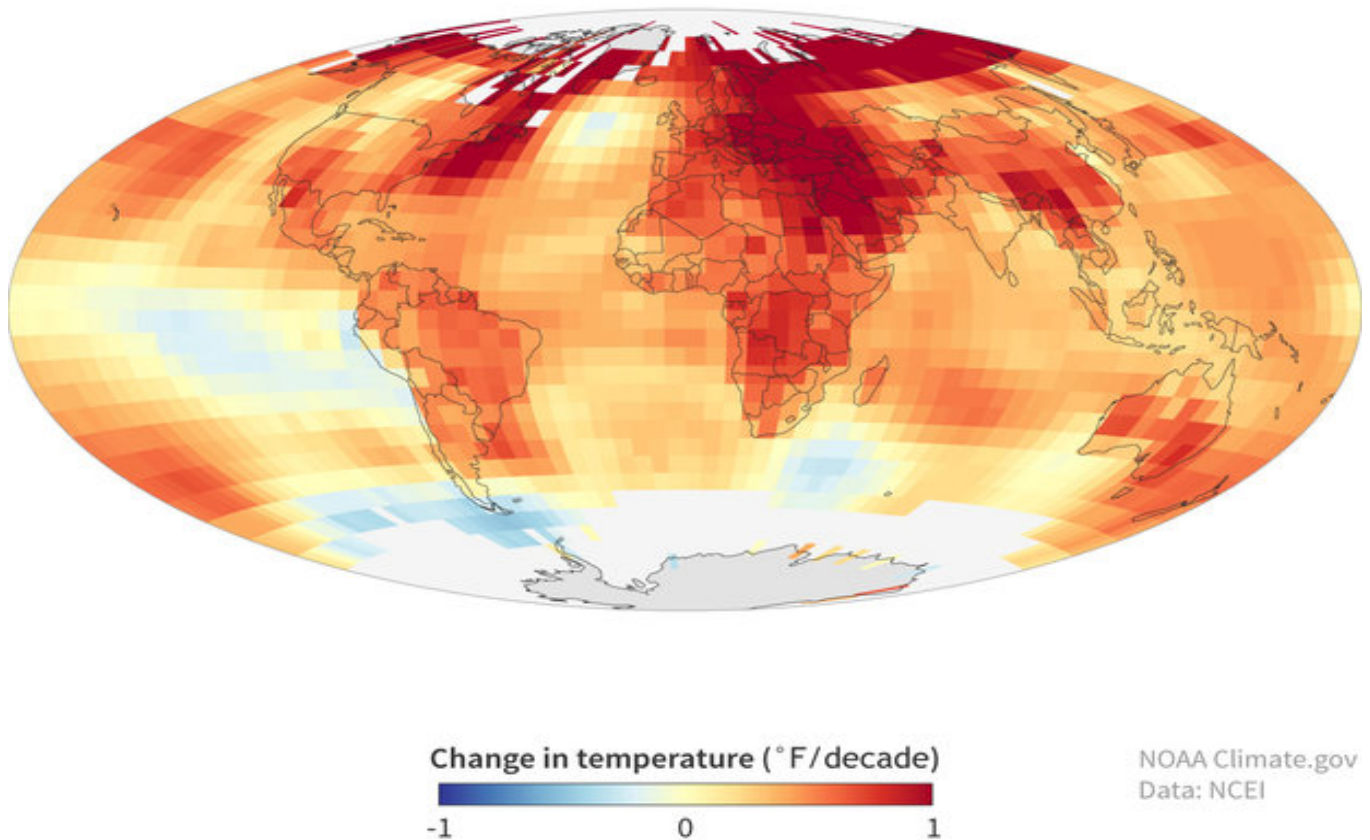
This could occur, for example, because of increased risk of flooding or mudslides due to the thaw of the

permafrost in mountain regions, but also along rivers and coastal plains prone to flooding. The difference between this situation and the previous typology of disaster-induced displacement is that return may not be possible, thus becoming a permanent form of displacement until other durable solutions are found for those affected. [5,6] A decrease in essential resources due to climate change (water; food production) most likely will trigger armed conflict and violence: This is most likely to affect regions that have reduced water availability and that cannot easily adapt (e.g. by switching to economic activities requiring less water) due to poverty. These armed conflicts may last for as long as resource scarcity continues. This in turn would impede the chances of reaching peace agreements which provide for the equitable sharing of the limited resources and thus prolong the conflicts, leading to more situations of protracted displacement.

### **Discussion**

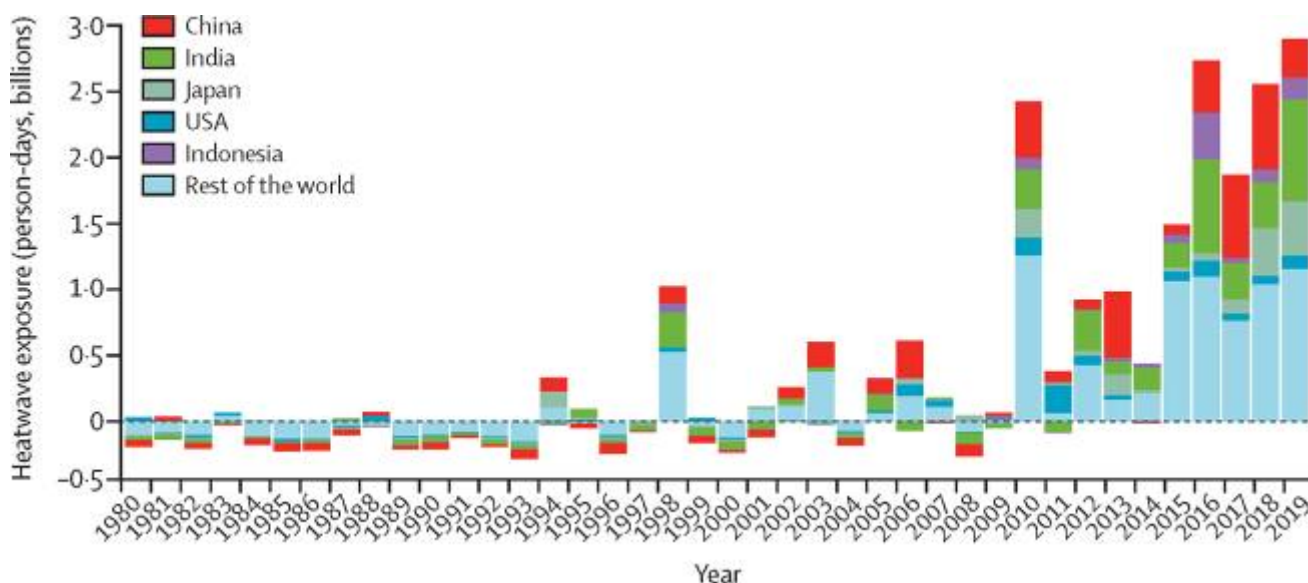
Most of the displaced remain inside their country and as internally displaced persons receive protection and assistance under human rights law and in accordance with the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. For these internally displaced persons, the existing normative framework is sufficient. Some of the displaced may cross an internationally recognized state border, e.g. because the only escape route leads there, because the protection and assistance capacities of their country are exhausted or because they hope for better protection and assistance outside their own country. They have no particular protected (legal) status, as they do not qualify as refugees, nor are they migrants. In the past, host governments have in some cases allowed such persons to stay temporarily for humanitarian reasons until they could return to their countries in safety and dignity, but practice has not been uniform. The status of these persons remains unclear and despite the applicability of human rights law, including in particular provisions applicable to migrant workers, there is a risk that these persons end up in a legal and operational limbo. General deterioration of conditions of life and economic opportunities as a consequence of climate change may motivate persons looking for better opportunities and living conditions to move to other parts of the country or abroad before the areas they live in become uninhabitable. [7,8] These persons are protected by human rights law, including, if they move to a foreign country, guarantees specifically protecting migrant workers .

## RECENT TEMPERATURE TRENDS (1990-2020)



If areas start to become uninhabitable, because of complete desertification, salination of soil and ground-water or sinking of coastal zones, people may, during a first phase, leave voluntarily to find better (economic) opportunities elsewhere within or outside their country, but later movements may amount to forced displacement and become permanent as inhabitants of such regions no longer have a choice but to leave permanently. If the people stay within their country, they are internally displaced persons and fall under the ambit of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. If they go abroad, they have no protection other than that afforded by international human rights law including provisions on economic migrants; in particular, they have no right under international law to enter another country and stay there and thus depend on the generosity of other countries. This scenario poses two particular challenges: 1. there is a lack of criteria to determine where to draw the line between voluntary movement and forced displacement. Those forcibly displaced to other countries remain without specific protection as they do not qualify for refugee status and as their movement is forced they cannot be qualified as migrants either. The “sinking” of small islands states will be gradual.[9,10]

In the initial phases, this slow-onset disaster will incite persons to migrate to other islands belonging to the same country or abroad in search of better opportunities. If they migrate to another country, these persons are protected by human rights law including guarantees specifically protecting economic migrants. Later, such movements can turn into forced displacement because areas of origin could become uninhabitable and in extreme cases the remaining territory of affected states could no longer accommodate the whole population or would disappear entirely, rendering return impossible. When this occurs, the population would become permanently displaced to other parts of their country or to other countries. In this case, besides human rights law in general, the Guiding Principles become applicable in the case of internal displacement. However, there are normative gaps for those who move abroad, leaving them in a legal limbo as they are neither migrants nor refugees. It is also unclear as to whether provisions on statelessness would apply as it remains to be seen whether those affected become stateless persons under international law.[11,12]



### Countdown on health and climate change

These persons do not become stateless as long as there is some remaining part of the territory of their State, and even where a whole country disappears it is not certain that they become stateless in the legal sense. Statelessness means to be without nationality, not without state. It cannot be excluded that such small island states will continue to exist as a legal entity at least for some time even if their territory has disappeared as nobody will be ready to formally terminate statehood. Even if these persons end up without a nationality, international law on statelessness does not provide adequate protection for them. Obviously, such persons will be in need of some form of international protection. Their rights need to be identified and it remains to be determined whether these people require a specific legal status. The question of the responsibility of the international community, in particular regarding relocation, needs clarification as well. Affected persons are internally displaced persons. In terms of durable solutions they cannot return but must be relocated to safe areas or locally integrated in the evacuation area. Sustainability of the solution chosen is important to avoid permanent and protracted displacement situations or even return to high risk zones exposing the lives of returnees to a high risk incompatibly with human rights standards. International human rights law, the Guiding Principles and the analogous application of norms and guidelines on relocation in the context of development projects provide a sufficient normative framework for addressing these situations.[13,14]

“Climate change-induced” armed conflict and violence trigger forced displacement. Those fleeing abroad may qualify as refugees protected by the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and similar instruments or are persons in need of subsidiary forms of protection or temporary protection available for

persons fleeing armed conflict; those remaining inside their own country are internally displaced persons. The available normative frameworks are international humanitarian law, human rights law, refugee law and the Guiding Principles. They provide a sufficient normative framework for addressing these situations since affected persons are fleeing armed conflict, rather than the changes brought about by climate change.[15,16]

### Conclusions

As persons displaced inside their country, they cannot return to their homes for factual or legal reasons or cannot reasonably be expected to do so because of a lack of security or sustainable livelihoods there. They are persons internally displaced as a consequence of the effects of climate change or other environmentally related reasons. They should be assisted and protected within the framework of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. As persons displaced across internationally recognized state borders, they cannot return to their country of origin for factual or legal reasons or cannot reasonably be expected to do so because of a lack of security or sustainable livelihoods there. They are persons displaced across internationally recognized borders as a consequence of the effects of climate change or other environmentally related reasons.[17,18]

They should be granted admission to and temporary – and in some cases (e.g. sinking island states) even permanent – stay in the country concerned. The exact scope of their entitlements to assistance and protection needs to be further determined. Persons affected by the effects of natural disasters and other effects of climate change but not falling into any of these categories are not victims of forced movement and thus should not, in principle, be of concern to the international community as a special category even if their movement is triggered by such effects.

Nevertheless, they may profit from protection and assistance available under general human rights law, including in particular provisions addressing the specific needs of migrants, and the exact scope of these entitlements needs to be further determined. Persons displaced inside or across internationally recognized state borders by armed conflicts over resources becoming scarce as a consequence of climate change, are internally displaced persons, refugees or persons under temporary protection regimes and their entitlements to assistance and protection are determined by the respective normative regimes (Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement; refugee law; etc.).[19,20]

## References

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- [2] IPCC SR15 Ch1 2018, p. 54: These global-level rates of human-driven change far exceed the rates of change driven by geophysical or biosphere forces that have altered the Earth System trajectory in the past...
- [3] Our World in Data, 18 September 2020
- [4] IPCC AR6 WG1 Technical Summary 2021, p. 59: The combined effect of all climate feedback processes is to amplify the climate response to forcing...
- [5] IPCC SRCCL 2019, p. 7: Since the pre-industrial period, the land surface air temperature has risen nearly twice as much as the global average temperature (high confidence). Climate change... contributed to desertification and land degradation in many regions (high confidence).; IPCC SRCCL 2019, p. 45: Climate change is playing an increasing role in determining wildfire regimes alongside human activity (medium confidence), with future climate variability expected to enhance the risk and severity of wildfires in many biomes such as tropical rainforests (high confidence).
- [6] IPCC SROCC 2019, p. 16: Over the last decades, global warming has led to widespread shrinking of the cryosphere, with mass loss from ice sheets and glaciers (very high confidence), reductions in snow cover (high confidence) and Arctic sea ice extent and thickness (very high confidence), and increased permafrost temperature (very high confidence).
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- [10] IPCC AR5 SYR 2014, pp. 13–16; WHO, Nov 2015: "Climate change is the greatest threat to global health in the 21st century. Health professionals have a duty of care to current and future generations. You are on the front line in protecting people from climate impacts – from more heat-waves and other extreme weather events; from outbreaks of infectious diseases such as malaria, dengue and cholera; from the effects of malnutrition; as well as treating people that are affected by cancer, respiratory, cardiovascular and other non-communicable diseases caused by environmental pollution."
- [11] IPCC SR15 Ch1 2018, p. 64: Sustained net zero anthropogenic emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> and declining net anthropogenic non-CO<sub>2</sub> radiative forcing over a multi-decade period would halt anthropogenic global warming over that period, although it would not halt sea level rise or many other aspects of climate system adjustment.
- [12] IPCC AR6 WG1 Technical Summary 2021, p. 71
- [13] United Nations Environment Programme 2021, p. 36: "A continuation of the effort implied by the latest unconditional NDCs and announced pledges is at present estimated to result in warming of about 2.7 °C (range: 2.2–3.2 °C) with a 66 per cent chance."
- [14] IPCC SR15 Ch2 2018, pp. 95–96: In model pathways with no or limited overshoot of 1.5 °C, global net anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub> emissions decline by about 45% from 2010 levels by 2030 (40–60% interquartile range), reaching net zero around 2050 (2045–2055 interquartile range); IPCC SR15 2018, p. 17, SPM C.3: All pathways that limit global warming to 1.5 °C with limited or no overshoot project the use of carbon dioxide removal (CDR) on the order of 100–1000 GtCO<sub>2</sub> over the 21st century. CDR would be used to compensate for residual emissions and, in most cases, achieve net negative emissions to return global warming to 1.5 °C following a peak (high confidence). CDR deployment of several hundreds of GtCO<sub>2</sub> is subject to multiple feasibility and sustainability

- constraints (high confidence).; Rogelj et al. 2015; Hilaire et al. 2019
- [15] United Nations Environment Programme 2019, p. xxiii, Table ES.3; Teske, ed. 2019, p. xxvii, Fig.5.
- [16] United Nations Environment Programme 2019, Table ES.3 & p. 49; NREL 2017, pp. vi, 12
- [17] IPCC SRCCL Summary for Policymakers 2019, p. 18
- [18] IPCC AR5 SYR 2014, p. 17, SPM 3.2
- [19] Trenberth & Fasullo 2016
- [20] NASA, 5 December 2008.

