

Global Confluence Model United Nations
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

*Addressing the Needs of Climate-Displaced Populations: Ensuring Safety, Dignity, and
Long-Term Support*

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Letter from the Executive Board

Dear Delegates,

We hope this letter finds you well as you gear up for the upcoming conference. We, the Executive Board of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, warmly welcome you to our committee. As you prepare to delve into the discussions surrounding the agenda of "Addressing the Needs of Climate-Displaced Populations: Ensuring Safety, Dignity, and Long-Term Support," we would like to take a moment to share our expectations and aspirations for your participation in the committee.

This topic demands not only insightful analysis but also innovative solutions and collaborative efforts from all delegates. Approach the conference with an open mind and a spirit of diplomacy, for it is through respectful and productive dialogue that we can achieve constructive debate on the agenda. Embrace the diversity of perspectives within the committee, listen attentively to the viewpoints of your fellow delegates, and endeavor to find common ground whenever possible.

As you prepare for the conference, we wish you the best of luck in your preparations and deliberations. Your contributions to our committee will undoubtedly shape the discussions and outcomes of the conference, and we have every confidence that you will make a meaningful impact. We eagerly look forward to meeting you at the conference and working together towards our shared objectives.

Best regards,
Executive Board,
UNHCR

Aarnaa Mehta, Chairperson
Nirvaan Nagi, Vice-Chairperson

How to Research?

1) UN Reports: All UN Reports are considered credible information or evidence for the Executive Board of the UNHCR

Note: Under no circumstances will sources like Wikipedia, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, or newspapers like the Guardian, Times of India, etc., be accepted as proof or evidence. However, they can be used for a better understanding of any issue or even be brought up in debate if the information given in such sources is in line with the beliefs of a Government.

2) Government Reports: These reports can be used in a similar way to the State Operated News Agencies reports and can, in all circumstances, be denied by another country. However, a nuance is that a report that is being denied by a certain country can still be accepted by the Executive Board as credible information.

3) News Sources

- a. REUTERS – Any Reuters article that makes mention of the fact stated or is in contradiction of the fact being stated by another delegate in the committees can be used to substantiate arguments
- b. State-operated News Agencies – These reports can be used in support of or against the State that owns the News Agency. These reports, if credible or substantial enough, can be used in support of or against any country as such, but in that situation, they can be denied by any other country in the council.

Introduction to the Committee

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is a global organization dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights, and building a better future for people forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. It leads international action to protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people. Formally known as the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees,

It was established by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1950 in the aftermath of the Second World War to help the millions of people who had lost their homes. Today, UNHCR works in 137 countries. We provide life-saving assistance, including shelter, food, water, and medical care for people forced to flee conflict and persecution, many of whom have nobody left to turn to. It defends their right to reach safety and helps them find a place to call home, allowing them to rebuild their lives. In the long term, we work with countries to improve and monitor refugee and asylum laws and policies, ensuring that human rights are upheld.

It is mandated by the United Nations to protect and safeguard the rights of refugees. It also supports former refugees who have returned to their home country, people displaced within their own country, and people who are stateless or whose nationality is disputed. It is guided by and acts as the guardian of [the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol](#). In 2003, the General Assembly extended the organization's mandate "until the refugee problem is solved."

It relies almost entirely on voluntary contributions from UN member states, the private sector, and thousands of individuals to carry out its life-saving work to support refugees and other forcibly displaced people. It works with a wide range of partners, including governments, the private sector, sister UN agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to effectively deliver for people forced to flee. UNHCR is governed by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

The UNHCR Executive Committee approves the agency's annual programmes and the corresponding budget. These are presented by the High Commissioner, who is appointed by the UN General Assembly. The High Commissioner reports annually to ECOSOC and the UNGA on the work of UNHCR.

Introduction to the Agenda

The increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters have given rise to a growing population of individuals forcibly displaced by environmental causes. From slow-onset events like desertification and sea-level rise to sudden disasters such as cyclones and floods, climate-induced disruptions are now a leading driver of displacement globally. The phenomenon disproportionately affects vulnerable populations living in low-lying coastal areas, arid regions, and small island developing states, where limited infrastructure, inadequate early warning systems, and economic fragility heighten exposure to climate risks. The result is a rising number of individuals and communities forced to leave their homes, sometimes within national borders, often across them, without the protections afforded to those traditionally recognized as refugees under international law.

While the 1951 Refugee Convention does not currently include climate change as a ground for refugee status, the international community, led by UNHCR, has acknowledged the urgent need to expand protections and frameworks for people displaced by climate-related events. In 2022 alone, over 32 million new internal displacements were linked to climate and weather-related hazards, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. The gaps in legal recognition and humanitarian assistance, particularly for cross-border climate-displaced populations who fall into grey areas of international protection.

As the world faces escalating climate challenges, this agenda calls on Member States to respond proactively to displacement that is no longer temporary or exceptional, but increasingly permanent and systemic. The objective is to move beyond reactive assistance toward anticipatory, inclusive, and coordinated approaches that uphold the rights and dignity of climate-displaced individuals and communities.

The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement describe internally displaced persons (IDPs) as: "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border." A refugee is someone who is outside their country and cannot return without risking their life or freedom due to conflict or persecution. Refugees are entitled to certain rights and protections under international law. An IDP has been forced to flee their home to escape conflict, persecution, or disasters; however, they have not crossed an international border and remain inside their country. Their national government is responsible for their protection. They should be afforded the same rights and freedoms as citizens and habitual residents of their country.

Key Terms (UNHCR)

- 1) Asylum Seekers: An asylum-seeker is an individual who has fled their country of origin and applied for asylum in another country, but their claim to refugee status has not yet been processed. Not every asylum-seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee was initially an asylum-seeker. Currently, climate is not a valid legal ground for seeking asylum.
- 2) Refugees: Refugees are people fleeing conflict, persecution, and human rights abuses who have crossed a border into another country. Often, when refugees arrive at a safe location, they are hungry, traumatized, and exhausted after a long and dangerous journey, many carrying little more than the clothes on their backs. Climate change is not considered a ground for seeking refuge under the 1951 Refugee Convention.
- 3) Internally Displaced People: Internally displaced people (IDPs) have been forced to flee their homes; however, unlike refugees, they remain in their own country. They are among the most vulnerable displaced persons in the world, often trapped in dangerous conflict areas and unable to make their way to safety. They must rely on their government to protect them, which may be unable or unwilling to do so. It may also be difficult for aid to reach them, leaving them cut off from supplies, such as food and shelter. Most climate displacement falls under this category.
- 4) Stateless People: Millions of people around the world are denied a nationality, leaving them stateless and without critical documentation, such as a birth certificate. As a result, they often are not allowed to go to school, see a doctor, get a job, open a bank account, vote, travel, or even buy a house. Generations can become trapped in this cycle of lost opportunities and poverty. Statelessness is not an automatic result of climate displacement, but the two can be linked.

Soft Law Tools

1) UNHCR Protection Agenda on Climate Change and Displacement

UNHCR has issued several guidance documents and policy briefs outlining the protection risks facing climate-displaced persons and encouraging states to apply existing legal tools flexibly. This includes advocating for complementary protection under human rights law where return to the country of origin would expose individuals to life-threatening conditions.

2) Global Compact on Refugees (2018)

While not legally binding, the Global Compact recognizes climate, environmental degradation, and natural disasters as drivers of displacement and encourages the development of national and regional protection mechanisms, including resettlement and temporary protection in receiving states. It promotes international cooperation and burden- and responsibility-sharing.

3) Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018)

This compact, adopted by the UN General Assembly, explicitly includes commitments related to climate-related migration. Objective 2 calls for the development of adaptation and resilience strategies in countries vulnerable to climate change and recognizes that migration may be necessary when in situ adaptation is no longer viable.

4) Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030)

The Sendai Framework, endorsed by the UN General Assembly, identifies the need to reduce displacement risks from climate-induced disasters. It calls on governments to include displacement-related challenges in their disaster risk reduction strategies, making climate preparedness a priority in national planning.

5) Nansen Initiative and the Protection Agenda (2015)

This state-led process resulted in a non-binding Protection Agenda that outlines practical recommendations for protecting cross-border disaster-displaced persons. Though not a treaty, it has been endorsed by multiple states and contributed to the development of national laws and policies recognizing climate-related displacement.

6) General Comment No. 36 and *Teitiota v. New Zealand* (2020)

It has been ruled that returning individuals to a country where climate change poses a real risk to life may violate Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Although not legally binding across all states, this case establishes a normative precedent on the intersection of climate risks and human rights law.

History of the Problem

1) Origin

The concept of climate-induced displacement first appeared in the 1980s as environmental scholars began forecasting the social consequences of global warming, including forced migration. Although the term “environmental refugee” entered academic discourse, it lacked legal grounding and was not adopted by the UN system. Displacement caused by environmental change remained outside the scope of traditional protection frameworks, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, which requires a well-founded fear of persecution. Throughout the 1990s, humanitarian agencies and development experts warned of the need to recognize emerging risks tied to droughts, rising sea levels, and natural disasters, yet the issue remained largely theoretical in multilateral fora.

2) Recognition

By the early 2000s, extreme weather events and gradual environmental degradation began causing large-scale displacement across multiple regions. Flooding in South and Southeast Asia, desertification in the Sahel, and tropical storms in the Pacific led to growing numbers of displaced persons. However, most of these individuals remained within national borders, falling into the category of internally displaced persons (IDPs), while those who crossed borders found little to no legal protection. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Cyclone Nargis in 2008, and recurrent droughts in the Horn of Africa began shifting the perception of environmental disasters from isolated humanitarian emergencies to recurring causes of population movement. Still, these developments did not produce binding legal reforms.

3) Breakthrough

The 2009 Cancún Agreements under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) marked a pivotal moment in the global approach to climate-induced displacement. For the first time in an international agreement, states acknowledged the need to address climate-related migration, displacement, and planned relocation. This political recognition did not create legal obligations but did set the foundation for future institutional responses. Around the same time, UNHCR began to issue technical guidance and participate more actively in discussions around environmental displacement, particularly as part of inter-agency coordination in disaster-prone regions.

4) Norm-Setting

In 2012, the Nansen Initiative was launched by Norway and Switzerland as a state-led consultative process to address gaps in cross-border disaster displacement. The culmination of this effort was the 2015 Protection Agenda, which outlined non-binding principles and practical recommendations for states responding to climate-related displacement. Though not a treaty, the agenda was endorsed by over 100 governments and contributed significantly to shaping soft law

in this area. That same year, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030) was adopted, incorporating displacement risk reduction into national resilience strategies. These frameworks marked the beginning of structured international dialogue on protecting those displaced by environmental causes, though enforcement mechanisms remained absent.

5) Mainstreaming

The 2018 adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) further elevated climate displacement on the international agenda. While non-binding, both compacts acknowledged climate and environmental degradation as significant drivers of human mobility. They encouraged states to integrate climate risk into migration governance, support adaptive capacity in vulnerable regions, and strengthen legal and operational responses to displacement. The UNHCR, while constrained by its mandate, began promoting the use of human rights law, temporary protection, and complementary protection to assist persons displaced by climate-related factors, particularly in the absence of formal refugee status.

6) Precedent

A milestone in climate displacement jurisprudence came in 2020 with the Human Rights Committee's decision in *Ioane Teitiota v. New Zealand*. Although the Committee did not rule in favor of the applicant, it affirmed that returning a person to a country where climate change poses a real risk to life could, under certain circumstances, constitute a violation of the right to life under Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). This marked the first time an international human rights body recognized the principle that environmental degradation may prevent deportation, setting a powerful normative precedent despite lacking direct enforceability.

Contemporary Situation

As of 2024, climate-related displacement is not a peripheral concern but a rapidly expanding global phenomenon. These displacements are occurring across all continents, but disproportionately affect countries in the Global South, particularly small island developing states (SIDS), low-lying delta regions, drought-prone parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, and fragile states with limited disaster response capacity. In most cases, displacement remains internal; however, slow-onset processes such as desertification and sea-level rise are increasingly forcing cross-border migration, presenting significant legal and institutional challenges.

Despite the scale of the crisis, no international legal instrument explicitly defines or protects persons displaced by climate-related causes. The 1951 Refugee Convention does not include climate or environmental degradation as grounds for refugee status. As a result, many climate-displaced persons fall into a protection gap, lacking access to asylum procedures, legal recognition, or durable solutions. Existing responses are largely ad hoc and depend on national policies, bilateral arrangements, or humanitarian assistance, often without long-term support frameworks. Even within countries, internally displaced persons affected by climate events frequently face challenges accessing housing, healthcare, civil documentation, and livelihood opportunities, particularly in post-disaster contexts.

UNHCR has progressively expanded its operational and normative engagement in this space, though its core mandate remains focused on refugees and stateless persons. It supports governments in strengthening climate resilience and integrating displacement risks into disaster preparedness plans. In some cases, it has protected the application of human rights norms, such as the principle of non-refoulement under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), or by supporting the use of complementary or temporary protection mechanisms. However, such solutions are unevenly applied, vary across jurisdictions, and lack enforceability.

National and regional responses are evolving, but remain fragmented. Countries like Fiji and Bangladesh have developed climate-resilient relocation policies, while others, such as Kenya and the Philippines, are beginning to incorporate displacement into national adaptation planning. At the regional level, frameworks such as the Kampala Convention in Africa provide a basis for protecting internally displaced persons, including those displaced by environmental causes. The Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD), successor to the Nansen Initiative, has facilitated knowledge exchange and coordination, but lacks legal authority. Moreover, few states have legal pathways for cross-border climate migrants, leaving many stranded in legal limbo, particularly in situations where climate factors are compounded by poverty, conflict, or weak governance.

Legal Frameworks and Instruments

1) The 1951 Refugee Protocol

<https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees>

2) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

3) International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

4) Kampala Convention

https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36846-treaty-kampala_convention.pdf

5) UN Convention to Combat Desertification

<https://www.unccd.int/convention/overview>

6) Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement

<https://www.unhcr.org/media/guiding-principles-internal-displacement>

7) Global Compact on Refugees

<https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/global-compact-refugees>

8) Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/migration/global-compact-safe-orderly-and-regular-migration-gcm>

9) Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction

<https://www.undrr.org/implementing-sendai-framework/what-sendai-framework>

10) Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda

<https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/nansen-initiative>

Questions A Resolution Must Answer

- 1) How might Member States cooperate in identifying and supporting climate-displaced populations?
- 2) In what ways could existing protection frameworks be interpreted or adapted to address climate-induced displacement?
- 3) What forms of assistance could host countries receive to better accommodate climate-displaced individuals?
- 4) How might international actors contribute to ensuring dignity and access to basic services for affected populations?
- 5) What strategies could be encouraged to support long-term relocation and integration where return is not possible?
- 6) How may displacement be incorporated into national adaptation and disaster risk reduction plans?
- 7) What voluntary guidelines or practices could be developed to address cross-border movement linked to climate stress?
- 8) How might funding and technical support be mobilized to assist communities most vulnerable to climate displacement?
- 9) What role could regional cooperation play in strengthening coordinated responses to environmental displacement?
- 10) How could awareness-raising and data collection be improved to support evidence-based policymaking?