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A rising tide may lift some boats but sink others: How climate change is driving mass migration

“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 chose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.”

International Organization for
Migration

Migration is often misperceived as the failure to adapt to a changing environment. It is, however, one of the main coping and survival mechanisms that is available to those affected by environmental degradation and climate change. Climate change is bringing both gradual, pervasive environmental change and sudden natural disasters; both of which are influencing the nature and extent of human migrations. There are currently 64 million forced migrants in the world fleeing wars, hunger, persecution and a growing force: climate change. The United Nations forecasts estimate that there could be anywhere between twenty-five million and one billion environmental migrants by 2050. Understanding the climate change-migration nexus will prove instrumental in addressing the current climate emergency.

Climate Change and Migration

Climate change is emerging as both a direct and an indirect driver of migration that exacerbates existing vulnerabilities. Whether in terms of limited access to clean water, food scarcity, agricultural degradation, or violent conflict, climate change will intensify challenges and be a significant push factor in human migration patterns. Today, there are 70 million refugees worldwide, and finding suitable homes for them has caused monumental political strife and human rights issues.⁴⁹ Without action to curb climate change, 3.5 billion people, a third of the world's future population, would have to migrate. Although there has always been a core interdependency between human migrations and climate, the phenomenon of global warming, and the extreme weather, rising sea levels and instability that it brings, has compounded the relationship.



Italian navy rescues asylum seekers traveling by boat off the coast of Africa on the Mediterranean, June 7, 2014. [Massimo Sestini](#)

Climate change “is the unpredictable ingredient that, when added to existing social, economic, and political tensions, has the potential to ignite violence and conflict with disastrous consequences.”

Environmental Justice Foundation

North America: Across the United States, some 162 million people — nearly 1 in 2 — will most likely experience a decline in the quality of their environment, namely more heat and less water. For 93 million of them, the changes could be particularly severe, and by 2070, if carbon emissions rise at extreme levels, at least 4 million Americans could find themselves living at the fringe, in places decidedly outside the ideal niche for human life.

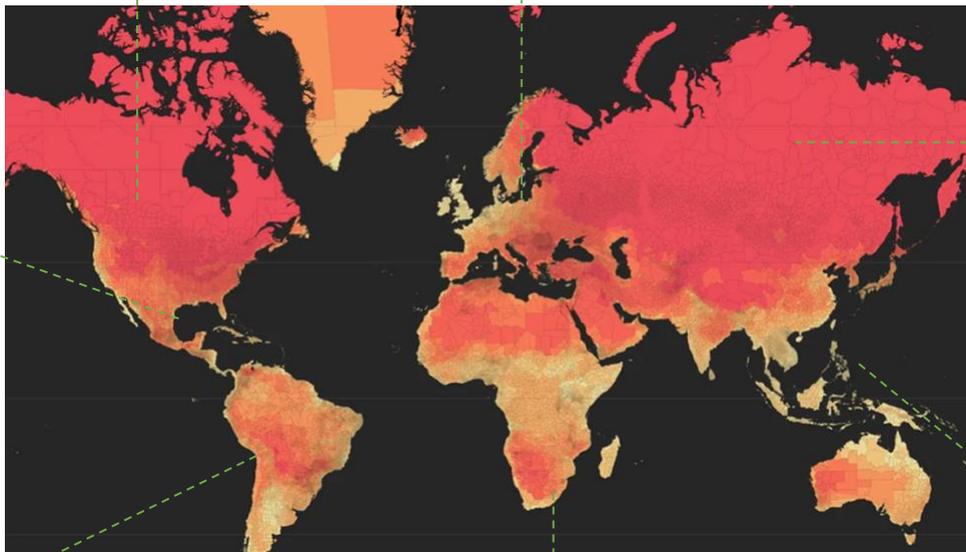
Central America: The fluctuation between droughts and sudden storm patterns in Central America is expected to become more frequent as the planet warms. Average temperatures in Central America have increased by 0.5°C (32.9°F) since 1950 with estimates of another 1°C to 2°C (33.8°F to 35.8°F) temperature increase before 2050. Furthermore, the number of storms, floods, and droughts in the region continues to rise, which means rainfall will decrease just as prolonged droughts increase.

South America: More than 99% of the world's tropical glaciers are in South America. As they melt due to increased temperatures, sea level rise in South America is more likely to affect urban rather than rural dwellers – 77% of those considered to be in at risk areas live in cities.

Europe: In Europe, where the stresses and strains associated with processing large numbers of migrants have already reached crisis proportions, experts predict that the annual stream of those seeking safety within its borders will triple by the end of the century due to climate-related migration. If global warming gas emissions continue at the present pace, the number of asylum-seekers to Europe could increase by nearly 200 percent.

Asia: In Asia, increasing temperatures, sea level rise, more frequent cyclones, flooding of river systems fed by melting glaciers, and other extreme weather events are exacerbating current internal and international migration patterns. The World Bank projects that the South Asian region, where nearly one-fourth of the global population lives, will soon have the highest prevalence of food insecurity in the world. Crop yields in central and south Asia could fall by 30 per cent by the middle of the 21st century.

Oceania: Small island states around the world, such as the Bahamas, Kiribati, the Maldives and the Marshall Islands, are particularly vulnerable to sea level rise because in many cases, much of their land is less than three or four meters (approximately ten feet) above present sea level. By 2080, flood risk for people living in small island states will be 200 times greater than if there had been no global warming.



“The World Temperature Change by 2050” depicts rising temperature, September 9, 2018 [Dipika Kadaba](#)

Africa: There is a direct causal link between climate change, land degradation, and climate migrants in Africa. At current trends, much of Africa would be climatically challenging for human survival by 2050. Without major action to mitigate climate change, a third of the world's population could live in a climate similar to the Sahara in

As long as you look on migration as a problem, as something to solve, you're not going to get anywhere. You have to look at it as a human reality that's as old as humankind. It's mankind's oldest poverty reduction strategy. As citizens, we have to find a way to manage it.

International Organization for Migration Director General
William Lacy Swing

Looking Ahead

There is no one single solution to respond to the challenge of environmental migration, but there are many solutions that tackle different aspects of this complex equation. Nothing meaningful can ever be achieved without the strong involvement of civil society actors and the communities themselves who very often know what is best for them and their ways of life. With enhanced knowledge of how environmental factors affect migration, and how they also interact with other migration drivers, such as demographic, political and economic conditions, there is more incentive to act urgently, be prepared and respond.