



Issue Brief

Environmental Migrants: Considerations for the U.S. Government

October 2017

Key Considerations

- Current refugee definitions do not adequately take into account environmental migrants, leaving them at risk of being left behind or marginalized.
- An increase in the United States' humanitarian and security role abroad could help bolster states at high risk from climate change disruptions.
- The United States will likely experience the arrival of environmental migrants from Central and South America and the Caribbean, given its ability to better withstand climate impacts relative to those regions.

Climate change threatens to force population displacement on a scale never seen before. Although no one can be certain what the total number of people displaced will be, it will likely be in the tens of millions.¹ Unfortunately, many governments, international organizations, and institutions are currently ill-prepared and unequipped to respond to this challenge. There is no single solution to solving climate-induced migration because it will not have one root cause. For example, residents of Pacific Islands and Bangladesh will be forced to flee rising sea levels that will reduce livable space.² Farmers in Central and South America will likely face droughts that will decimate crop production.³ Others will have indirect, but no less severe, climate-related motives for migrating. To buffer the United States from these potentially seismic shifts, it is advisable that the plight of environmental migrants receive serious consideration and advanced planning.

Classification of Environmental Migrants

Displacement due to climate change will result from a variety of factors. These drivers can be direct environmental impacts such as rising sea levels and higher temperatures, or indirect contributors such as increased conflict over scarce resources and economic disruptions. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has described three types of environmental migration: 1) induced by a sudden environmental disaster; 2) caused by gradual environmental degradation; and 3) avoidance of future climate-induced threats.⁴ Environmental migrants will be both cross-border refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) whose movements could further perpetuate increased conflict over scarcer resources and less land.

Legal Protections for Environmental Migrants

Despite having similar resettlement situations and needs, environmental migrants are not currently classified as refugees. This lack of formal classification denies them the legal protections guaranteed by the United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention,ⁱ particularly the rights to non-refoulement (protection from forced return to a home country) and freedom of movement, as well as greater access to aid.⁵ Unlike migrants in previous refugee crises, these migrants will have nowhere to return to and will require permanent resettlement and integration into their new economies. There is a diplomatic urgency for host countries to acknowledge the plight of environmental migrants and afford them the rights and legal protections necessary to assist them in rebuilding their lives.

Impacts on the United States

Despite its relative lack of land borders with countries that will be most affected, climate-induced migration is still highly likely to impact the United States. Many strategic allies risk becoming overwhelmed by large numbers of migrants and may need logistical and humanitarian support. Furthermore, as a large, wealthy country with modern infrastructure, diverse agricultural climates, advanced technical capabilities, and abundant natural resources, the United States possesses the capacity to take in environmental migrants.

Potential for Increased State and Regional Instability

The large, sudden influx of migrants into (or within) a country has the potential to create state and regional instability, while straining a country's institutional capacity to respond. For instance, many experts cite climate change as a catalyst behind the conflict in Syria, where a drought led 1.5 million people to migrate to urban areas, contributing to unrest that triggered the nation's ongoing civil war. To better ensure states are able to effectively process and house large numbers of environmental migrants, the United States could provide support for resiliency initiatives in at-risk countries and regions.

Increased Need for Humanitarian Aid

In addition, as the largest humanitarian aid provider in the world, the United States will be looked to as a leader in responding to both immediate and long-term climate-related crises.⁶ As with the potential for global instability, this increased role will likely affect the U.S. military, particularly the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, which are key providers of humanitarian assistance due to their forward-deployed resources. The United States is also the largest distributor of humanitarian aid through military actors, with over \$1 billion worth of aid delivered between 2006 and 2010.⁷ As the frequency and scale of natural disasters increase due to climate change, the military will be both expected and required to facilitate the delivery and distribution of more aid, placing a further strain on its capacity and budget.

ⁱ Officially titled the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Convention originally included temporal and geographic restrictions on refugee classifications. The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees removed these restrictions. The United States ratified the Protocol in 1968.

Increased Migration Across the Southern Border

The United States is projected to see a huge increase of migration from Central and South America.^{8, 9} It is estimated that by 2080, agricultural declines could drive as many as 6.7 million people out of Mexico. Due to the unique relationship between the two countries, with many Mexican citizens having close ties to the United States, as well as a lack of other options, many of these migrants are expected to come north to the United States.¹⁰ Agriculture, which makes up a significant portion of the labor force for many Central and South American countries, will be one of the industries most affected by climate change. With climate change contributing to permanently raised temperatures, droughts, and irregular rain cycles, many people's livelihoods will be at risk. Moreover, heat waves are a known serious public health risk. If the United States fails to develop the capacity to aid these migrants, or simply denies their needs, the human cost could be devastating. The United States would have to balance the needs of these international migrants with internally-displaced citizens, further increasing the need for a comprehensive accommodation and resettlement strategy.

Conclusion

The plight of climate migrants is one the United States may be compelled to face in the near future. Failing to prepare for climate migrations could increase the likelihood of destabilizing states and regions and could result in resource strains for unprepared agencies that will need to respond to issues whether or not they are prepared to do so. It is in the strategic interests of the United States to prepare for climate migration and begin to develop policies and strategies that will, if not mitigate the problem entirely, at least allow it and other countries to respond in a comprehensive, humane way.

This issue brief is available electronically at www.eesi.org/papers.

Author: James Stanish

Editor: Brian La Shier

The Environmental and Energy Study Institute (EESI) is a non-profit organization founded in 1984 by a bipartisan Congressional caucus dedicated to finding innovative environmental and energy solutions. EESI works to protect the climate and ensure a healthy, secure, and sustainable future for America through policymaker education, coalition building, and policy development in the areas of energy efficiency, renewable energy, agriculture, forestry, transportation, buildings, and urban planning.

¹ Adamo, Susana. "[Environmentally Induced Population Displacements](#)" International Human Dimensions Programme. January 2009. (Accessed August 25, 2017).

² Gardiner, Harris. "[Borrowed Time on Disappearing Land](#)" New York Times. March 28, 2014. (Accessed August 25, 2017).

³ Deprez, Alexandra. "[Climate Migration in Latin America: A Future 'Flood of Refugees' to the North?](#)" Council on Hemispheric Affairs. February 22, 2010. (Accessed August 25, 2017).

⁴ Hugo, Graeme. "[Migration, Development and Environment](#)" International Organization for Migration. November 2008. (Accessed August 25, 2017).

⁵ "[Convention relating to the Status of Refugees](#)" UNHCR. (Accessed August 25, 2017).

⁶ "[Net ODA](#)" OECD. (Accessed August 25, 2017).

⁷ Poole, Lydia. "[Counting the cost of humanitarian aid delivered through the military](#)" Development Initiatives. March 2013. (Accessed August 25, 2017).

⁸ Deprez, Alexandra. "[Climate Migration in Latin America: A Future 'Flood of Refugees' to the North?](#)" Council on Hemispheric Affairs. February 22, 2010. (Accessed August 25, 2017).

⁹ Pearl, Mike. "[Trump's Wall Won't Stop Climate Change Migrants from Streaming into the US](#)" Vice. February 23, 2017. (Accessed August 25, 2017).

¹⁰ Corbyn, Zoë. "[Mexican 'climate migrants' predicted to flood US](#)" Nature. July 26, 2010. (Accessed August 25, 2017).