



Source: United Nations University

CLIMATE MIGRATION

The Sustainable Development Goals

[SDG 10](#): Reduce inequality within and among countries

- 10.7

[SDG 11](#): Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

- 11b

[SDG 13](#): Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

- 13.3
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Possible Essential Questions

- What does it mean for climate change to be a “destabilizing force in the world”?
- What actions might address climate migration? Who can be involved in these actions?
- What is the relationship between human created borders and climate change?
- How can communities prepare to support and welcome climate migrants?

Background

According to the Institute for Economics & Peace, it is estimated that by the year 2050, more than one billion people will be at threat of displacement by environmental change, conflict, and civil unrest¹. The impact of climate change on human migration is becoming clearer and more pressing. In some areas, climate change has been a slow onset, impacting crop yields or shoreline access. In other cases, climate change has exacerbated natural disasters such as the immense 2020 wildfire season in California or the severe 2022 flooding in Pakistan, which killed hundreds and displaced millions from their homes. Climate change will increasingly affect the migration of people within and across borders. Understanding these trends may help target mitigation efforts and prepare communities for the challenge of welcoming and accommodating migrants.

It is important to distinguish how climate migrants differ from refugees seeking asylum across international borders. In 1951, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees established the key legal framework to define who is a refugee, the legal rights of refugees, and the legal obligation of states to protect them. The 1951 framework and its 1967 protocol define a refugee as someone who has fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and has crossed an international border. As of 2023, people who migrate as a direct result of climate related issues do not fit into the legal definition of a refugee. Therefore the term

¹ IEP, [Over one billion people at threat of being displaced by 2050 due to environmental change, conflict and civil unrest](#) (2020)

“climate migrant” is viewed as more accurate than the term “climate refugees”.

On top of this legal distinction, it is actually the case that most migration as a result of climate change results in movement within a person’s country of origin. This is known as “internal migration” or “internal displacement.” Migration researchers have come to understand a typical pattern: often rural farmers in regions hard hit by drought or flood seek financial opportunities in larger cities, usually with the intent of returning to their rural homes. However, an influx of rural migrants into cities can put a strain on a city’s infrastructure and resources. In some cases, those rural migrants may encounter a lack of opportunities or even persecution. As a result, some may choose to cross an international border with the hope of greater opportunity. This was the case when in 2018 a caravan of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador impacted by wide scale drought, crossed through Mexico toward the United States².

Migration researchers have started to identify patterns with the way climate change exacerbates large social events such as the 2018 migrant caravan. For example, drought in Syria led many to seek refuge in larger cities, sowing some discontent and influencing the Syrian civil war³. In Egypt and Libya, crop losses led to unemployment which stoked the Arab spring uprising. Arguably, the influx of migrants as a result of these and other conflicts led to Brexit, the decision of Great Britain to leave the European Union. As the United States Department of Defense has said, climate change is becoming a “destabilizing force” in the world.

The resources we have collected for this inquiry are organized using [Re-Imagining Migration’s Learning Arc](#).

² Milman, Holden, Agren, “[The unseen driver behind the migrant caravan: climate change](#)” (The Guardian, 2018)

³ Lustgarten, “[The Great Migration](#)” (NYT, 2020)

The Re-imagining Migration Learning Arc was developed by Verónica Boix-Mansilla, with Adam Strom, Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco.



Our Learning Arc



Resources

Moving Stories

- [Climate Change and Migration- Financial Times via Reimagining Migration](#) (Video, 5 min)
- [Meet Wolde, a 28-year-old from Ethiopia](#), World Bank (Video 90 seconds)
- [Meet Javier, a 26-year-old carpenter from Oaxaca, Mexico](#), World Bank (Video, 2 min)
- [Green Card Voices Student Voices](#) (video, 5 min)
- [“They Were Proud Houston Homeowners. Then It All Fell Apart.”](#) - Jake Bittle/New York Times (Opinion Article, 20 min read)
- [“One Uprooted Life At A Time, Climate Change Drives An American Migration” | Consider This](#) -NPR (Audio story, 12 min)
- [‘Climate migrant’ fled catastrophe in Puerto Rico for the safety of Minnesota](#)

Minnesota Star Tribune (Article, 8 minute read)

Understanding Migration

- [Environmental Migration Data- Migration Data Portal](#) (Data visualization)
- [Climate change is the overlooked driver of Central American migration](#), PRI (Audio news story, 10 minutes)
- [Migration, Immigration, and Climate Change](#), Re-Imagining Migration (Blog post, 10 minute read)
- [Climate change is already fueling global migration. The world isn’t ready to meet people’s changing needs, experts say](#), PBS (Article, 8 min read).
- [Climate Migration May Lead to the Next Great Housing Crisis](#), LX News (Video, 10 min)
- [“THIS Is the Safest Place to Live in the US as the Climate Changes”](#) PBS Terra (Video, 10 min)

- [Is the world ready for mass migration due to climate change?](#) - BBC (Article, 16 min read)
- [“In 2020, more people displaced by extreme climate than conflict”](#) -Aljazeera News (Article, 3 min read)
- [“Could climate change force a billion people to move?”](#) - Aljazeera News (Video, 25 min)
- [“The Climate Question: What can we do about climate migration?”](#) BBC (Podcast, 25 min)
- ProPublica/New York Times Magazine Partnership
 - [THE GREAT CLIMATE MIGRATION](#) (part 1) - New York Times Magazine (Article, 50 min read)
 - [HOW CLIMATE MIGRATION WILL RESHAPE AMERICA](#) (part 2)- New York Times Magazine (Article, 30 min read)
 - [How the Climate Crisis Will Force A Massive American Migration](#)- ProPublica (Video, 4 min)
- [Migrant workers who clean up climate disasters for work often pay a price](#)- NPR (Audio, 7 min)
- [Are The Great Lakes Ready for More People?](#) LX News (Video, 8 min)
- [Walking the Talk of Environmental Migration](#) - Geneva Policy Outlook (Article, 10 min read)
- [How AI can help us better prepare for climate migration, World Economic Forum](#), (Article, 12 min read)
- [“Photos: The Bangladesh town offering new life to climate migrants”](#) Aljazeera News (Photo Essay)
- [Cooling centers are turning into next-gen "climate resilience hubs"](#)- Axios (Article, 3-4 minute read)
- [People on the Move in a Changing Climate – Linking Policy, Evidence and Action](#) - IOM UN Migration (Policy Report, 60 min read)

Turning to Action

- [Author Gaia Vince says climate migration is ‘a matter of life and death’](#), ABC News (video, 5 minutes)
- [Monday Map: Where Will Climate Migrants Flock?](#)- Data Smart City Solutions, Harvard (Data Visualization)
- [Climate Change Is Fueling Migration. Do Climate Migrants Have Legal Protections?](#) Council on Foreign Relations (Article, 9 minute read)
- [Great Decisions Student Edition - Climate Change - Climate Refugees, Foreign Policy Association](#) (Video, 4 min)