

The AMSSA Info Sheet series has been created to inform and support settlement service providers and key stakeholders across British Columbia. The Info Sheets cover a wide range of topics and highlight important facts and trends from across Canada and BC. Our goal is to assist organizations in navigating the rapidly changing landscape of the BC settlement sector.*

Environmental Migrants

For more than 25 years, governments have been aware that climate change may lead to the forced migration of millions of people.¹ Despite this fact, environmental migrants do not have the same legal protections as ‘refugees’. This edition of Migration Matters examines the scope and definition of ‘environmental migrants’, and highlights some important legal considerations.

Introduction to Environmental Migration

The effects of climate change are now unfolding. According to the United Nations World Meteorological Organization, 2014 was the hottest year on record.² Underlining a long-term warming trend across the planet, 2014 was the 38th consecutive year with an ‘anomalously high’ annual global temperature.³

Among its many impacts, climate change has the potential to displace extraordinarily large numbers of people. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 35 million people were displaced in 2012 as a result of extreme weather events.⁴

How many people will be uprooted by climate change?

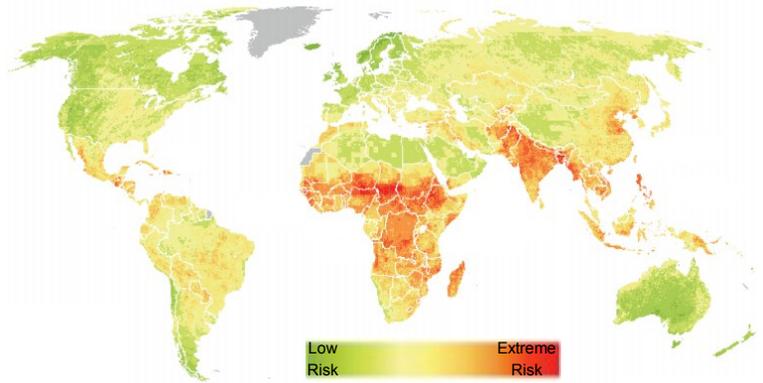
Estimates of the numbers of migrants and projections of future numbers are divergent and controversial, reaching up to 700 million by 2050. The International Organization for Migration takes a middle road with an estimate of 200 million environmentally-induced migrants by 2050.⁵

Some population displacement is expected to come directly as a result of rising sea levels or extreme weather events that leave large regions uninhabitable. However, much of the displacement will be caused indirectly, as a result of gradual environmental degradation leading to shortages in food, fresh water and energy.⁶

According to the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, differences between countries’ vulnerability and exposure to climate change arise from many non-climatic factors, such as inequalities often produced by uneven development processes.⁷ Richer nations generally have superior adaptive capacities to rebuild damaged property or to make proactive adaptation investments that reduce the threats of climate change.⁸ The least developed states in Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as small, low-lying island states, are the most likely to produce climate migrants.⁹

Figure 1 shows the relative vulnerability of regions around the world, according to the physical exposure of countries, and governmental capacity to adapt to climate change.

Figure 1—Maplecroft Climate Change Vulnerability Index (2015)¹⁰



Environmental ‘Migrant’ or ‘Refugee’?

Some organizations refer to “environmental refugees” while others, following the strong position of UNHCR, stress that the word “refugee” has a specific legal meaning in the context of the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.¹¹ Under these terms, a Convention Refugee is defined as:

“Any person who, owing to well-founded fear of **being persecuted** for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his origin and is unable, or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or... owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

Terms such as “environmental migrants” and “environmentally motivated migrants” been introduced as alternatives.¹² Environmental migrants are defined as:

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

Environmental migrants are not protected under International Law, and are not considered ‘refugees’ by the UNHCR.¹³

1, 6, 9. Parliament of Canada, ‘Climate Change and Forced Migration: Canada’s Role’, February 2013. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GbAPE>.
 2. World Meteorological Organization, ‘2014 on course to be one of hottest, possibly hottest, on record’, December 2014. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GbKMI>.
 3. Scientific American, ‘2014 to Be Hottest Year Ever Measured’, November 2014. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GbzYH>.
 4. Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, ‘Global Estimates 2014: People displaced by disasters’, September 2014. Available at: <http://ow.ly/Gcey3>.
 5, 11, 12. United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security, ‘Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement’, May 2009. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GbBtB>.
 7. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, ‘Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability’, March 2014. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GclPz>.
 8. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, ‘Preparing BC for Climate Migration’, November 2014. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GclVt>.
 10. Maplecroft, ‘Climate Change and Environmental Risk Atlas 2015’, October 2014. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GcFA1>.
 13. International Bar Association, ‘Climate Refugees? Addressing the International Legal Gaps’. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GbB6R>.

Gaps in Canada's Regulations

None of the various streams in Canada's humanitarian immigration program - the refugee stream, a stream for humanitarian and compassionate cases, and cases where people are admitted temporarily when it is "justified in the circumstances" - recognizes climate migrants.¹⁴

The lack of provision in Canada's current immigration system for the admission of people displaced for reasons directly related to climate change is consistent with international law, which does not recognize such people as refugees. According to a report from the Parliament of Canada, if Canada decided to extend refugee-type protection to climate migrants, legislative changes would not necessarily be required. Regulatory changes or policy direction alone could suffice.¹⁵

How Canada can Accommodate Environmental Migrants

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) outlines three areas of Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) that could accommodate environmental migrants:¹⁶

"First, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada may temporarily suspend removal orders for people who become displaced while in Canada, such as was done with respect to Haitian visitors following the earthquake; this power could be used more extensively in the future following climate disasters.

Second, climate migrants requiring assistance could utilize section 25 of the IRPA, which grants permanent residency on 'humanitarian and compassionate grounds.' Generally, residency is granted to applicants who would face 'unusual and undeserved' or disproportionate hardship if they were to return to their country of origin. While applications are generally reserved for individuals who have already found their way to Canada, the Minister 'may' make a determination on applications originating outside of Canada.

Third, refugees situated outside of Canada may apply to immigrate if sponsored by Sponsorship Agreement Holders. Private group sponsorship allows for a relatively deliberate and supportive refugee process that could properly respond to the circumstances of some climate migrants."

For this third avenue to be successful, restrictions on who can be privately sponsored for refugee status must be eased.

Six International Priorities

A report from the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security released 6 policy recommendations to help governments address the threats of climate induced migration.¹⁷

- ⇒ Avoid dangerous climate change: Reduce greenhouse gas emissions to safe levels.
- ⇒ Focus on human security: Protect the dignity and basic rights of persons displaced by climate change.
- ⇒ Invest in resilience: Increase people's resilience to the impacts of climate change so that fewer are forced to migrate.
- ⇒ Prioritize the world's most vulnerable populations: Establish mechanisms and binding commitments to ensure that adaptation funding reaches the people that need it most.
- ⇒ Include migration in adaptation strategies: Recognize and facilitate the role that migration will inevitably play in individual, household and national adaptation strategies.
- ⇒ Close the gaps in protection: Integrate climate change into existing international and national frameworks for dealing with displacement and migration.

BC's Preparedness for Environmental Migrants

The CCPA released a report in November 2014 that examines British Columbia's preparedness for climate migrants. The report identifies three key shortcomings:¹⁸

- Neither our governments, nor the leadership of our health, housing and other core social services, are considering, let alone planning for, what climate migration may require of our health, housing and other core social services.
- Immigration and refugee policy and practice are not currently designed to accommodate the underlying reality of climate change and migration
- More migrants will require enhanced settlement and other social services, but service-provider organizations are already stretched thin.

A full copy of this report can be found on the CCPA's website, <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/climatemigration>.

14, 15. Parliament of Canada, 'Climate Change and Forced Migration: Canada's Role', February 2013. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GbAPE>.

16. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 'Preparing BC for Climate Migration', November 2014. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GcIVt>.

17. United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security, 'Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement', May 2009. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GbBtB>.

18. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 'Preparing BC for Climate Migration', November 2014. Available at: <http://ow.ly/GcIVt>.

To see previous editions of AMSSA's 'Migration Matters' Info Sheet Series, visit

<http://www.amssa.org/resources/Infosheet>

Funded by:

Financé par:



Citizenship and
Immigration Canada

Citoyenneté et
Immigration Canada