

Climate Change, Displacement, and Environmental Racism

This issue of Migration Matters explores the intersections between climate change, displacement, and looks towards a vision of climate and environmental justice.

Introduction

Currently, there is no refugee designation for those displaced by climate change. However, as the impacts of climate change become increasingly harder to ignore, so is the number of people displaced by natural disasters and environmental degradation. While the lack of refugee categorization makes exact numbers difficult to gauge, it is estimated that approximately one third of those forcibly displaced in 2017 (the highest displacement so far in human history) were displaced due to “sudden onset” weather events.¹

In 2018, the Global Compact on Refugees was adopted, which directly addressed that “climate, environmental degradation and natural disasters increasingly interact with the drivers of refugee movements.”² While many people will be internally displaced, climate change will increase the rates of natural disasters and over time will make some areas virtually uninhabitable.

Climate displacement

There are various projections of the number of global climate migrants, with estimates between 25 million to 1 billion³. The World Bank has estimated that by 2050, there will be 143 million more climate migrants from Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia alone.⁴ Internationally, Canada has a responsibility to accept these refugees⁵. However, these numbers do not necessarily reflect the whole picture. The effects of climate change interact with a number of other concerns, including:

- aggravating impacts of poverty and conflict⁶
- an increasing risk of infectious diseases and pandemics⁷
- increasing food insecurity.⁸

While there will be international migrants that Canada can and should accept, climate change has impacts within the country as well. For example, in B.C., we have already been seeing increased (albeit usually temporary) internal displacement due to seasonal forest fires.

Definitions

Climate change refers to the long-term shift in climate patterns, usually in reference to increasing global temperatures. This differs from weather, which can change day-to-day.⁹

Climate migration refers to the changing patterns of displacement and migration (both internally and globally) due to climate-related events, such as increasing natural disasters.¹⁰

Climate justice is the movement that acknowledges the social disparities related to climate change and sees climate change and its impacts as a social issue. Learn more about climate justice [here](#).

Environmental racism refers to policies and practices that disproportionately impact BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) communities based on race, often leading to disparities in health and quality of life.¹¹

Global North and South: Although sometimes criticized for being too simplistic and reductive, this term is commonly used in academia and refers to the economic disparities between countries in the Northern Hemisphere and those in the Southern Hemisphere.¹²

Environmental racism in Canada

One of the ways in which Canada is impacted internally is through the shameful history of environmental racism, particularly against Black and Indigenous communities. Environmental hazards such as [pipelines](#), [landfills](#), [open dumps](#), [mercury contamination](#), and [industrial facilities](#) in Black and Indigenous communities, along with the exclusion of these communities in policy-making or environmental decision-making, are among the ways that environmental racism exists in Canada. This puts Black and Indigenous communities at higher risk for the impacts of environmental disasters while simultaneously silencing the voices of those communities. In 2020, **Bill C-230, An Act respecting the development of a national strategy to redress environmental racism**, was put forth. This bill aims to address environmental racism on a federal level.

References

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² United Nations. (2018). [Global compact on refugees](#). Report of UNHCR.

³ UNHCR. (2012). Displacement

⁴ Kumari Rigaud, K. et al. (2018). [Preparing for internal climate migration](#). World Bank UNESCO

⁵ Becklumb, P. (2013). [Climate Change & Forced Migration: Canada's Role](#). Parliament.

⁶ Thompson, B. (2019, October 15). [Climate change and displacement](#). UNHCR.

⁷ WHO. (n.d.) [Climate change and human health: Risks and responses](#). World Health Organization.

⁸ IPCC. (2019). [Climate Change and Land](#). IPCC Special Report.

⁹ IPCC. (2019). [Climate Change and Land](#). IPCC Special Report.

¹⁰ National Geographic. (n.d.). [Climate change](#). Resource Library.

¹¹ IOM. (n.d.) [Migration and Climate Change](#). International Organization for Migration

¹² Waldron, I. (2020). [Environmental Racism in Canada](#). Canadian Commission for

Royal Geographic Society. (n.d.). [The Global North/South Divide](#)

Intersectionality

Thinking of environmental and the fight against climate change as social justice issues, the need for an intersectional approach to climate justice is essential. Climate change and displacement impact those who are already marginalized. However, as more people become displaced by climate change, those with the most resources will have the ability to migrate somewhere safer.¹³ Below are some examples of the intersections of oppression with climate change:

Examples

Women and girls make up more than half of internally displaced people around the world; displacement also makes them more vulnerable to increased violence and human trafficking.¹⁴

Climate justice is also an **LGBTQ2S+ issue**. For example, LGBTQ2S+ youth are already at an increased risk of homelessness and displacement in Canada and LGBTQ2S+ folks face violence and persecution around the world, the risk of which is increased with further displacement.¹⁵

BIPOC and poor communities are more likely to live in areas impacted by climate change, pollution, and scarcity of clean water. **Black and Indigenous** communities are especially at risk of environmental racism.¹⁶

As with most emergencies, **people with disabilities** have more severe health impacts than their able-bodied and neurotypical counterparts.¹⁷

Environmental racism, classism, colonialism, and climate change are intrinsically linked, both in global and internal displacement. [Climate justice writer Mary Annaïse Heglar writes](#): “In the environmental space, we love to tell ourselves that it all started with the Industrial Revolution. But we’re telling ourselves a lie. It started with conquest, genocides, slavery, and colonialism.” The changing climate that causes migration and displacement has long displaced Indigenous Peoples from their land. Lands stewarded by Indigenous Peoples show the richest biodiversity and [may play a critical role in helping endangered species survive](#). Our fight for racial and migrant justice, for Indigenous sovereignty and decolonization, and for the rights of women and LGBTQ+ folks, are all intrinsically tied to environmentalism and the fight against climate change.

Canada and the settlement sector

Canada’s stance on climate migrants is consistent with international law, where there is no specified stream for those displaced by climate change.¹⁸ British Columbia has significant gaps in preparedness for climate migrants, including that there is little to no governmental planning for settlement, integration, and social services. Furthermore, service providers in the settlement sectors are already working with limited resources and the immigration policy and practice do not currently reflect the realities of what climate migration numbers could do to the sector.¹⁹

Lastly, given the intersectional nature of climate justice and the interconnectedness with environmental racism, there will be greater need for a cross-sectoral approach to climate justice. Conversations around climate change can no longer occur without also talking about racism, colonialism, capitalism, and a path forward that includes climate justice, anti-racism, Indigenous sovereignty, and decolonization.

Resources

- [Video: Planet SOS from Palau to Alaska: Where will climate refugees go when the tide rises? - Al Jazeera](#)
- [Report: New Approaches to Climate Change and Migration Building the Adaptive Capacity of Mobile Populations - Migration Policy Institute](#)
- [Video: Ensuring Human Rights for Climate Refugees - Global Philanthropy Forum](#)
- [Info Sheet: Environmental Migrants \(December 2014\) - AMSSA](#)
- [Website: Climate-refugees.org](#)
- [Book: There’s Something in the Water: Environmental Racism in Indigenous & Black Communities by Ingrid Waldron](#) (supporting [documentary](#) available on Netflix Canada)
- [Website: LandBack.org](#)

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- ¹⁴IDMC. (2020). [Women and girls in internal displacement](#). Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
- ¹⁵Campo, J. (2020). [The Intersection of Climate Change and the LGBTQ+ Community: Where Does Canada Stand?](#) PPG Review
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