

# Climate change and migration

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<sup>1</sup>This background paper has been realised in the framework of the "Faces of Migration" project (Migrant and SDGs, contract number CSO-LA/2018/401-798), co-financed by the European Union. The paper has been elaborated by Aurora Ianni and Mattia Giampaolo, researchers at the Centro Studi Politica Internazionale (CeSPI), with the coordination of Andrea Stocchiero (Focsv). This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union. [www.cepii.it](http://www.cepii.it)

## 1. CHALLENGING DEFINITIONS: CLIMATE REFUGEES, CLIMATE MIGRANTS OR CLIMATE DISPLACED PERSONS?

In recent years the attention to the effects of climate change on human movements has sharply increased. Climate-related hazards have become more frequent and intense, therefore modifying the pattern of human settlements. However, how should we refer to people forced to leave their homes in the context of natural disasters created or amplified by climate change?

Although **the Global Compact on Refugees**<sup>2</sup> recognizes that 'climate, environmental degradation and natural disasters increasingly interact with the drivers of refugee movements', there is no universally acknowledged or legal definition linking 'refugees' and 'environmental changes'.

The term '**climate refugee**' has been extensively used over the years by the media and common literature to refer to people who are forced to leave their homes or countries following sudden or slow onset disasters<sup>3</sup>.

It has to be noted, however, that this definition **does not exist in the international law**, since the 1951 Geneva Convention does not mention natural disasters among the causes of persecution.

The Global Compact on Migration<sup>4</sup>, issued in 2018, addresses under its objective n.2 the commitment of the International community to minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin such as, among others, those that may result from the adverse effects of climate change. Thus, the widely used (also by the IOM) definition of '**climate migrant**' could be considered more appropriate, considering that according to a brief paper elaborated by the European Parliamentary Research Service, the word 'migrant' may "suggest a degree of volition in the decision to move"<sup>5</sup>.



Ph. Climate migrants

<sup>2</sup> On 17 December 2018, the United Nation General Assembly affirmed the Global Compact on Refugees (with 181 votes in favor -Italy included-, two against -USA and Hungary- and 3 abstentions -Eritrea, Liberia, Libya), as an international agreement which provides a blueprint for governments, international organizations and other stakeholders, to ensure that host communities get the support they need and that refugees can lead productive lives. Its four key objectives are to: ease the pressures on host countries; enhance refugee self-reliance; expand access to third-country solutions; support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity. See <https://www.unhcr.org/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>

<sup>3</sup> Sudden onset disasters: disasters that arise suddenly, such as earthquakes, cyclones, hurricanes and typhoons.

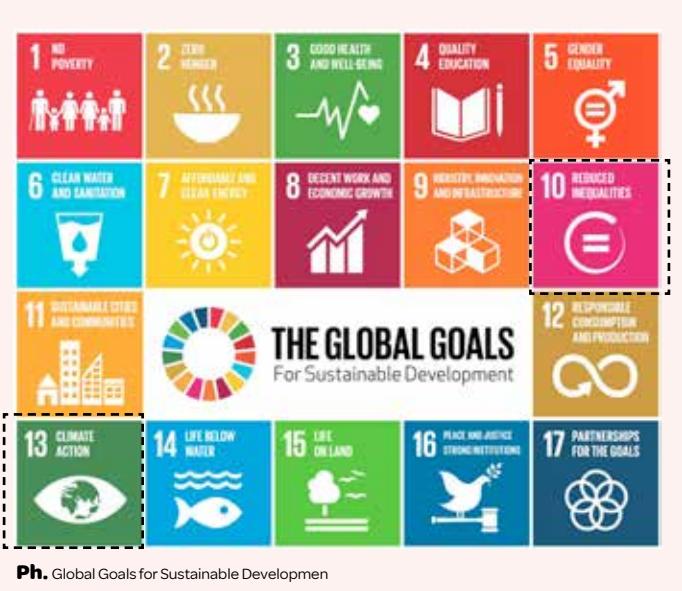
Slow onset disasters: very slow onset events, such as droughts, climate change, environmental degradation and desertification.

<sup>4</sup> The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, adopted by the Majority of the UN Member States (with 152 votes in favor, 12 abstentions -including Italy- and five votes against -Czech Republic, Hungary, Israel, Poland and USA) on 10 December 2018 in Marrakesh is the first inter-governmentally negotiated agreement of non-binding nature covering all the dimensions of the international migration, in order to address the challenges associated with today's migration and to strengthen the contribution of migrants and migration to sustainable development. See <https://www.iom.int/global-compact-migration>

<sup>5</sup> The concept of 'climate refugee'. Towards a possible definition. European Parliamentary Research Service. February 2019. See [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/621893/EPRI%282018%29621893\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/621893/EPRI%282018%29621893_EN.pdf)

In recent times, also the definition of '**climate displaced person**' has gained popularity and seems to be the most accurate. Although there is no accepted legal definition of 'displaced person', the issue of 'internally displaced persons' (IDPs) is addressed by International (non-binding) guidelines such as, for example, the UN principles related to internally displaced persons<sup>6</sup> which include, among others, natural disasters as a cause of fleeing.

All these efforts on disentangling the understanding on who the climate migrants are, as well as on the complex nexus between climate change



and migration, together with the Global Compacts for Refugees and for Migrants, are part of a more general and comprehensive policy framework of the international community, which is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>7</sup>.

Particularly, the linkage between SDG10 on reducing inequality within and among countries, which has the specific target (10.7) "Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies", and SDG13 "take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact", is the pillar of the UN commitment to respond to climate migrant challenges.



<sup>6</sup>The Guiding Principles presented by the then representative of the UN Secretary General on IDPs, M.Francis Deng, to the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1998, are consistent with and reflect international human rights and humanitarian law, as well as refugee law by analogy. The principles interpret and apply these existing norms to the situation of displaced persons. See <http://www.internal-displacement.org/internal-displacement/guiding-principles-on-internal-displacement>

<sup>7</sup>The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are a collection of 17 global goals set by the UN General Assembly in 2015 for the year 2030. They address the global challenges we face included those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, peace and justice. See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

## 2. WHAT IS BEHIND CLIMATE DISPLACEMENT?

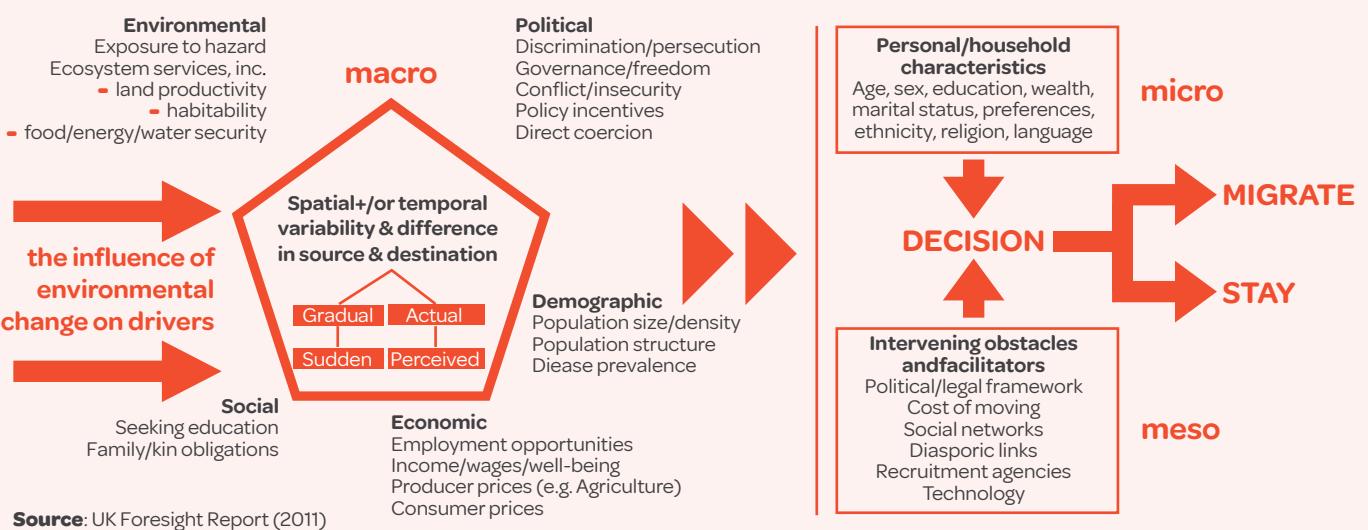
According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report<sup>8</sup> (IPCC, 2018), human activities are estimated to have caused approximately 1.0°C of global warming above preindustrial levels, with a likely range of 0.8°C to 1.2°C.

Global warming is likely to reach 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 if it continues to increase at the current rate, even though according to World Bank forecasts, by 2050, there will be an increase of 4°C. The IPCC states that climate related risks to health, livelihoods, food security and economic growth are projected to increase with global warming of 1.5° and increase further with 2°<sup>9</sup>.

It is envisaged that several regional changes in climate will occur with global warming up to 1.5°C compared to preindustrial levels, including warming of extreme temperatures in many regions, increases in frequency, intensity, and/or amount of heavy precipitation in several regions and an increase in intensity or frequency of droughts in some regions<sup>10</sup>.

In addition, in the words of Dina Ionesco, head of the Migration, Environment and Climate Change Division at the UN Migration Agency (IOM), the future degradation of land used for agriculture and farming, the disruption of fragile ecosystems and the depletion of precious natural resources like fresh water will directly impact people's lives and homes, and there is a strong possibility that more people will migrate in search of a better future<sup>11</sup>.

**Tabella 1.** Interactions between climate change and structural causes of migrations



<sup>8</sup>IPCC, Global Warming of 1.5°C, 2018. See [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/SR15\\_SPM\\_version\\_report\\_LR.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/SR15_SPM_version_report_LR.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>Limiting Global warming below 2° and pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5° is one of the main goals of the Paris Agreement adopted by 195 countries in 2015 to avoid dangerous climate change. See Paragraph 4.

<sup>10</sup> See [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/SR15\\_SPM\\_version\\_report\\_LR.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/SR15_SPM_version_report_LR.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/07/1043551>

It has to be noted, however, that **climate change is not the triggering factor for climate migration/displacement**. Climate migration or displacement, as experts noted, is a **multicausal**<sup>12</sup> phenomenon that is linked with other key factors such as social, political and economic conditions of a given community.

Natural disasters do not directly cause migration or displacement; the main factor that influences and provokes climate displacement is **the lack of basic services** in a given community –infrastructure, access to the national resources and social support from the states- which could support them in restoring their livelihoods. Governments' unsustainable developmental policies, private investments and financing aimed at short term profits, the exploitation of the soil, extracting activities and the continuous overbuilding, create and sharpen the risks of natural disasters.

Floods, for instance, are an indirect result of climate change. In most cases, the direct effect of damage is caused by human actions, such as building hotels on the shores or obstructing the natural flow of rivers, to intensify the agriculture,. Thus, the main structural causes of climate migration are not only linked to climate change. Instead, they have strictly ties with 'human factors' that negatively sharpen its effect, especially on vulnerable communities.

On the other hand, also climate change is produced by human factors.

Recent studies<sup>13</sup> demonstrated how the gradual impoverishment of rural populations and the increasing level of the global temperature caused the displacement and migration of communities.

Migration to other countries occurs mainly in middle-income communities, while the low-income ones, due to their economic status, tend to move less without any chance to improve their living conditions.



Ph. USGS on Unsplash

Namib-Naukluft National Park is an ecological preserve in Namibia's vast Namib Desert. Coastal winds create the tallest sand dunes in the world here, with some dunes reaching 980 feet (300

<sup>12</sup> Multicausal phenomenon in: <https://www.aics.gov.it/oltremare/rubriche/dal-mondo-accademico/migranti-climatici-un-tema-molto-controverso/>

<sup>13</sup> Climate and environmental change in: <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/iom-outlook-migration-environment-and-climate-change-1>

### 3. CLIMATE DISPLACEMENT IN NUMBERS

According to the IDMC<sup>14</sup>, **17.2 million new displacements** following sudden onset hazards were registered in 2018. East Africa and the Pacific were reported to be the most affected regions (3.8 million new displacements registered in the Philippines, after storms, typhoons and tropical cyclones; 2.7 in India).

Wildfires in USA, Australia and Europe, were also clear effects of climate change and displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Instead, the data collection related to IDPs<sup>15</sup> due to slow onset disasters is still partial.

However, GRID 2019 reports that “drought conditions monitored in just nine countries – Afghanistan<sup>16</sup>, Brazil, Burundi, Ethiopia<sup>17</sup>, Iraq, Madagascar, Mongolia, Senegal and Somalia – were responsible for at least 760,000 new displacements during the year”<sup>18</sup>.

**Table 2.** Disaster-related new displacements by hazard category



Source: IDMC

<sup>14</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC).

<sup>15</sup> Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

<sup>16</sup> To know more about see <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/11/5bfd0be44/unhcr-launches-massive-airlift-tents-afghanistans-drought-displaced.html>

<sup>17</sup> To know more about see <https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/fighting-climate-change-iom-helps-ethiopian-farmers-adapt-drought-and-flooding>

<sup>18</sup> Global Report on Internal Displacement, Summary. GRID 2019. See [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019-IDMC-GRID-Summary\\_1.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2019-IDMC-GRID-Summary_1.pdf)

Some specific areas, which are better known as **hot spots**, are and will be the most affected by the impact of climate change and its consequent people displacement. Islands, coastal areas, deltas will experience erosion, floods, salinization of aquifers, changes in the local ecosystems.

Desertification and drought will intensify in semi-arid regions. As a consequence, people living in these areas, who largely depend on their immediate environment for food and income, will suffer from food and water insecurity and, probably, will move to reach urban and peri-urban areas for building new lives and livelihoods.

The great majority of these migrations will occur at the local, national and cross-border level in nearby countries, not through inter-continental flows.

According to a **World Bank<sup>19</sup>** report, **climate displacement/migration could reach 140 million people by 2050**, where 40 of them are in south Asia due to the increase in floods, 80 in the Sub-Saharan region, due to water scarcity and rainy season changes, and 17 in Latin America due to the lack of work related to Amazonia.



Ph. Madhav Rajesh on Unsplash

<sup>19</sup> See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/03/19/climate-change-could-force-over-140-million-to-migrate-within-countries-by-2050-world-bank-report>

## 4. MITIGATION AND RESILIENCE: EU and civil society actions to face dangerous climate change and climate migration/displacement

Limiting the impact of global warming and strengthening the capacity to adapt to environmental changes are issues currently addressed by the International community. The Paris Agreement, negotiated in the framework of the 2015 UN Climate Conference, represents the first-ever universally, legally binding global climate deal aimed at avoiding dangerous climate change.

The main goals of the agreement are: to keep the increase in global average temperature below 2°C, aiming at limiting the increase to 1.5°C, since it would significantly reduce risks and impact of climate change, as well as to undertake rapid reductions of global emissions<sup>20</sup>. Along this path, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, proposed the development of a **European Green Deal** with the aim of **making Europe the world's first climate-neutral**<sup>21</sup> continent, on top of the Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024 (My agenda for Europe).

In order to reach this ambitious goal, the plan includes the development of the first European Climate Law to enshrine the 2050 climate neutrality target into law, as well as the proposal for a European Climate Pact – bringing together regions, local communities, civil society, industry and schools, with the aim of designing and committing to a set of pledges to bring about a change for sustainable behaviors, from the individual to the largest multinational.

In addition, the Green Deal foresees the revision of the EU's emissions reduction targets for 2030, bringing them to at least 50% and possibly 55% (compared to 40% currently planned) and the prizing of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in each sector, among others<sup>22</sup>.

As outlined in the previous paragraph, climate migration/displacement is, however, not only or not directly linked to natural disasters or water scarcity, but rather to factors related to economy, politics and society. Thus, in order to strengthen resilience in terms of food and nutrition security, social protection and vulnerable livelihoods protection, the European Union deployed the EUTF- European Union Trust Fund, which aims, *inter alia*, to support governments in Africa to take action for more inclusive policies with the implementation of social services, and the protection for climate migrants<sup>23</sup>.

In addition, the European Union developed further instruments on climate change and environment such as the Global Climate Change alliance Plus<sup>24</sup>, which is a European initiative aiming at three main goals: to mainstream climate change into national development strategies, to increase resilience and to support the formulation and implementation of adaption and mitigation strategies. Even in this case, the project takes into account not only the climate change itself, but strives for developing local communities economically, socially and environmentally.

<sup>20</sup> See [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/international/negotiations/paris\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/international/negotiations/paris_en)

<sup>21</sup> Climate neutrality means that emissions are balanced by methods of removing warming gases from the atmosphere. So, the warming emissions that are created by cars and power plants should be counteracted by the greenhouse gases removed from the air by planting new forests or through carbon capture technologies which would see the CO<sub>2</sub> sinked underground. Getting to this point would require large cuts in emissions from the current position. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-46360212>

<sup>22</sup> For more information see Ursula Von der Leyen, My agenda for Europe. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024, 2019 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the EUTF has been criticized by CSOs for the implementation of migration management projects which do not respect human rights, as in the case of the support to Libyan Coast Guards. See [https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Call-for-consultants\\_Research-EUTF-Monitoring\\_CONCORD\\_July2017.pdf](https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Call-for-consultants_Research-EUTF-Monitoring_CONCORD_July2017.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Global Climate Change Alliance Plus in: <http://www.gcca.eu/>

The importance of having stronger societies, leaving no one behind –in terms of wealth and security- could improve their recovery actions after a natural disaster. For example, as a recent report from the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions<sup>25</sup> has outlined, after Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, more affluent communities recovered and attempted to mitigate the problem in less time than the poorer ones.



**Ph.** A new green deal in Europe

In order to avoid forced displacement, the first step is to reinforce people resilience to those risks. As we said, low-income individuals are the most vulnerable people due to their living conditions –lack of infrastructure, poor access to social public resources, etc.-.

In this context, allowing these communities to be resilient to this kind of vulnerability means to provide them with opportunities which reduce forced displacement. In this direction, the EU development cooperation has a leading role to play. NGOs and local CSOs may support the resilience of vulnerable communities.

For instance, we could mention the action carried out by the LVIA Association (member of FOCSIV) to help Afar vulnerable communities in Ethiopia to reduce the impact of frequent droughts in the region and to improve their living conditions.

After rehabilitating water wells, recovering lands and vaccinating animals, 50.000 people have now access to drinking water, 400 families have rebuilt their own herds, 3000 people can benefit from fertile lands<sup>26</sup>.

Finally, CSOs have a determinant role in pushing governments and parliaments at the European and National level to modify the economic system, which is causing climate change, in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, to drastically reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions implementing the Paris agreement, to support the sustainable development cooperation for resilient communities and adaptation measures, and to foresee humanitarian pathways for migrants who run away from natural and man-made disasters .

<sup>25</sup> See <https://www.c2es.org/site/assets/uploads/2019/04/what-is-climate-resilience.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> To know more about see <https://lvia.it/2019/09/09/in-afar-con-lvia/>

In this sense, **the Faces of Migration project**, co-financed by the EU, is supporting awareness-raising and advocacy actions on the linkages between migration and SDGs.

This background paper has been realized in the framework of the project, to spread data and information based on a scientific analysis.

If you want to know more about this project and be part of its activities, please feel free to contact the leading partner Diaconia in Czech Republic (email: nozinova@diakoniespolu.cz), as well as Focsv in Italy (email: f.novella@focsv.it).

**In Italy**, the project is participating in the campaign “**I welcome**” ([ioaccolgo: http://ioaccolgo.it/](http://ioaccolgo.it/)) and “**I was stranger**” ([erostraniero: http://erostraniero.casadellacarita.org/](http://erostraniero.casadellacarita.org/)) to improve the understanding on the migration issue and ask for a change in the national migration policy, in order to create safe, orderly and regular pathways for migrants (Target 10.7 of the SDGs) and to support a widespread and equitable reception of migrants in the municipalities.

Furthermore, Faces of Migration supports the National Diaspora Summit: a dialogue process to promote the participation and representation of migrant associations in the Italian development cooperation policy (**Summit Nazionale delle Diaspore**: <https://summitdiaspore.org/>), supported by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation.



Ph. Volti delle migrazioni



Ph. lo accolgo



Ph. Ero straniero

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FACES OF  
MIGRATION



Volontari nel mondo.



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