

Climate Migration and the Future of Immigration Policy in the United States

by Mara A. Mahmud

DECEMBER 2022

1 Introduction

The 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) took place in November 2022. After nearly two weeks of collaboration, creativity, and negotiation, the COP27 offered a meaningful opportunity to reflect on the state of climate affairs within the global sphere and take collective action for the future. The goals and visions section of the [COP27 website](#) states, “Governments, the private sector and civil society need to work, in tandem, to transform the way in which we interact with our planet. We must introduce new solutions and innovations that help alleviate the adverse impacts of climate change. We also need to replicate and rapidly upscale all other climate-friendly solutions towards implementation in developing countries.” This vision is especially relevant when considering climate migration.

Humans have always moved because of changes in their environment. Historically this meant following food or access to better resources, but today, for those displaced by slow-onset environmental degradation or profound environmental catastrophe, movement is necessary and life-saving — purportedly. The US released a detailed report on the topic of climate migration in October 2021, but even up until and following the COP27, not much has been put into action, as the definition of “refugee” remains outdated and international protection schemes have failed to evolve to accommodate those fleeing environmental crises (The White House 2021).

In the western hemisphere, crises such as the hurricanes Eta and Iota in Guatemala in 2020 are examples of how extreme climatic and environmental events can effectively eliminate people’s capacity to stay in their communities by leaving them with little or

no access to support for rebuilding their homes and communities. US policy makers need to take into consideration the impacts crises like Eta and Iota can have on the existing challenges at the southwest US border, as more and more people are forced to flee and journey through Mexico to the United States because of little to no support or resources to be found in their urban centers or neighboring countries. There have been many pleas calling for the United States to reimagine its policy approach to migrants and refugees seeking support and asylum. Climate-induced migration is only purported to place more pressure on the existing situation.

The impacts of the climate crises are not limited to the western hemisphere. Small island states (SISs) like Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Maldives have brought into discussion the linkages between the destructive capacity of climate change relative to the longevity of their lands and the quality of life for their peoples (Brown 2007). This conversation has been brought forward within the international community to highlight the plight of their peoples and increasing threats to access to traditional land and resources linked to the effects of climate change. There has been discussion among nations looking to offer help to SISs, such as New Zealand, who are seeking means of support for these populations as they are under threat of becoming displaced (ABC News 2014).

Similarly, in some countries, there has been a massive movement of people from rural and coastal areas, to more inland urban areas. In Bangladesh, for example, a large majority moving to the capital city of Dhaka are coming from low-income, subsistence communities that have traditionally never sought work or financial opportunities in urban areas (DePaul 2012; Adamo 2010; Folberth et al. 2015). Given Bangladesh’s

topography and proximity to sea-level, many coastal communities in particular are at risk, leading higher and higher numbers of people to seek refuge in urban areas (Brown 2007).

As the conversation around migration adapts and evolves to take into consideration new drivers of migration, the notion of ‘climate-induced migration’ and ‘climate refugees’ has emerged as a leading concern for many developing countries.

2 Defining Climate Migration

There is limited but rich discourse attempting to decipher the meaning of “climate migration” (Berchin et al. 2017; Corendea 2016; Docherty & Gianni 2009; Brown 2007). Most definitions in existing research are based on similar concepts, namely displacement due to major climatic event; irreparable or immense damage sustained to infrastructure that leads to a large-scale movement of people; and/or the outcome of slow-onset land degradation created by climate-related factors such as drought or land salinization, for example (Bettini Nash and Gioli 2019; Detraz and Windsor 2014; Adamo 2010).

The subsequent question of how to define “climate migrants,” as both a concept and term, is contested. The most common definition refers to this group as “environmental refugees.” First popularized by Brown (1976) and cited by El-Hinnawi (1985), an environmental refugee is defined as a person “who [has] been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardize their existence and/or seriously affects the quality of their life.” However, it is important to highlight that people rarely migrate solely due to environmental factors (Osslon 2015). Notably, environmental factors tend to exacerbate existing detriments to societal development, sustained livelihoods, and overall human health.

Because of these mixed drivers of migration, debates have emerged both in defining climate migration and deciding where it fits into the existing nexus of migration research and policy. The definition of “refugee” in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees established by the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is limited, thus it does not include coverage and support for those who become forcibly displaced by climate-related factors. This is an important limitation which restricts definition of ‘refugee’ to a rigid description of those fleeing conflict or specific forms of persecution and/or discrimination.

This internationally-recognized definition of refugee is inflexible. Presently, the 1951 Refugee Convention set out by the UNHCR and signed by 114 nation states worldwide has no inclusion of environmental changes or disasters criteria which would allow a person to acquire refugee status. Additionally, there are no formal or universal treaties, agreements, or international standards that effectively dictate the response to climate-induced migration. Under current international refugee law, those displaced by environmental factors are not eligible for protection as they “do not meet the legal requirements to be considered ‘Convention Refugees’” (Hynie et al. 2020).

When considering the vast inequalities among migrants of varying legal statuses and barriers faced by people who are undocumented, there is a lot to consider relative to climate-induced migration. Climate migrants are often misnomered as simply “economic migrants,” a classification that erases the nuance of their plight and reasons for migrating in the first place. Misclassifying or seeking to file emerging classes of migrants within existing structures will prove to be inadequate in the long run.

3 What the United States Had Said about Climate Migration

In its groundbreaking October 2021 [progressive report](#), the White House highlighted the definition and general significance of climate change as a determinant of migration and the future of immigration policy in the United States. The report highlights several key points, including the geopolitical implications of climate-induced migration, the role of US foreign assistance, the protection and resettlement of affected populations, and the necessity of multilateral engagement (The White House 2021). Considering the limited official state-level documentation of and recommendations for

appropriate responses to climate-induced migration, this report stands out as significant.

Why is this important? First, it is one of the few formal reports of its kind. Relative to similar research findings establishing a link between climate change and human migration that have emerged for Nordic countries like Finland and Sweden, this report provides additional input into the state-level conversation about what constitutes an appropriate response to this looming crisis (Hush 2017). These state-level efforts are drawing from and building upon the academic and popular discourse around the topic. Second, while being one of the most prominent states based on economic capacity and political influence, the United States has historically fallen short in its efforts to both write and implement climate change policy.

This report should provide a meaningful step toward a more engaged policy discourse and response to climate change and related migration. The report offers a comprehensive high-level breakdown of the connection between migration and climate change. Within the body of the report, climate change-related migration is used as an umbrella term to describe the spectrum of relationships between human mobility and climate change, including “trapped populations” for whom migration is not even a viable option despite exposure to climate related threats (Hush 2017). The report also highlights that a large majority of this migration is not taking place across borders but within them. The report furthermore talks about the relationship between climate change, migration, and conflict as well as the notable relationship between climate-related migration and political instability. Generally, the report provides evidence to suggest that climate change places additional pressure on existing social and political stressors which may result in complex human rights crises and conflict.

In this report, the Biden Administration provides a meaningful and well-researched overview of the crises at hand, additionally offering the beginnings of a number of meaningful interventions and innovations that if implemented, would utterly transform the current policy response to migrants at the US-Mexico border. However, despite the eight months it took to produce the report, critiques have highlighted the lack of concrete policy developments coming out of the findings.

4 What the United States Has (Not) Done about Climate Migration

Thus far, many advocates agree that the follow-up to the report on behalf of the Biden Administration has fallen flat. As noted in a [Grist article](#) immediately following the release of the report, “Many organizations praised the fact that the document exists, [however] others pointed out how it failed to include actual policy prescriptions and pathways to move forward.” Despite input from organizations like the nonprofit advocacy group [Climate Refugees](#), it was highlighted that the final report did not reflect any of the policy recommendations the group put forward during their consultation. In fact, it was “but a repetition of what’s already known” said Amali Tower – founder and Executive Director of Climate Refugees (Rubiano and Mahoney 2021). This sentiment was shared by other prominent organizations in the research and policy space, including Kayly Ober, senior advocate and program manager for the [Climate Displacement Program at Refugees International](#), who stated that the report does not offer concrete recommendations or ideas about what a new legal pathway(s)—or other resettlement-related measures—should be (Ober 2021). In contrast, Erol Yayboke, director at [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), noted that although the information contained within the report is regurgitative, it is still significant in bringing these ideas to the fore in the White House (Yayboke, Nzuki, and Ballard 2021).

These responses followed shortly after the release of the report in 2021, but the critiques have remained consistent one year later. As discussed in the report, a key component of progress was creation of an interagency working group that would effectively coordinate the state response to both international and domestic climate migration (The White House 2021). However, as noted by AP News, citing “a person with knowledge of the administration's efforts who was not authorized to speak publicly,” the group “which was supposed to oversee policies, strategies and budgets to help climate-displaced people, still has not been established” as of October 2022 (Watson 2022). Ama Francis of the [International Refugee Assistance Project](#) responded to the slow-building follow-up to the report, stating, “we want to see real action. There are needs right now. But all we see is the administration moving

more slowly and staying in an exploratory phase, rather than doing something” (Watson 2022).

The reticence to put anything into action has been apparent in the response to recent climate crises in Honduras and Guatemala. In a [written statement](#) in September 2022, the leaders of 14 US NGOs, including [Church World Services](#), [International Refugee Assistance Project](#), [Refugee Congress](#), and [University Network for Human Rights](#), called upon the Biden Administration to give priority status, or P-2, to hurricane and drought victims from Honduras and Guatemala (Refugees International 2022). So far, there has been no response from Biden or any member of his administration (Rodriguez and Lo 2022).

Where does climate displacement fit into the US migration infrastructure? Presently, a major obstacle to migrants seeking access to asylum in the United States is the massive backlog in asylum courts. At the end of December 2021, the number of pending cases reached 771,236 – one of the largest in history (TRAC 2022). Considering the additional barriers that were put in place to hinder movement across the border related to COVID-19 by the previous administration on top of the overwhelming caseload predating the pandemic, the asylum court backlog presents as of the dominant obstacles in the way of migrants (Loweree, Reichlin-Melnick, and Ewing 2020). The prospective policy development plans laid out in the White House report, though promising, do not necessarily reflect the current situation at the border.

As previously noted, the existing international protection regimes for refugees does not include so-called “climate refugees.” This means that though people may be forced to flee their homes overwhelmingly due to climate-induced factors, or a combination of factors that includes climate change, their asylum cases may likely be rejected within the existing criteria. Yet, with little to no other legal pathways for climate refugees to seek protection, many climate refugees may still file asylum cases, adding to the existing asylum court backlog. Given the current insufficiencies of the asylum system to process existing cases, the situation is only expected to become more and more dire. This new development in connection with the existing backlog indicates the necessity of further pressure on reinventing the asylum

infrastructure in the near future, and rethinking how climate refugees fit into it.

One climate model, which predicted the migration flows as a result of the rise in temperatures in Central America, estimated that “in the most extreme climate scenarios, more than 30 million migrants would head toward the US border over the course of the next 30 years” (Lustgarten 2020). Given this region’s proximity to the equator along with the variety of socioeconomic challenges and political instability within individual states, there is an acute call for concern. When looking at data from Syracuse University’s TRAC Migration database, in the last five years, these estimates are within possibility. Among the top five nationalities awaiting asylum court decisions in the United States are the three Northern Triangle countries in Central America – El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (TRAC 2022). The number of cases as of October 2022 was approximately 188,000. Furthermore, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras are all facing complex high risk climate futures associated with both slow onset and sudden onset disasters (World Bank 2022). In 2020, all three countries recorded roughly one million people affected by extreme storms (World Bank 2022).

Presently, there is no specific data that draws a direct causal link between rising numbers of migrants coming from the countries mentioned and specifically climate-induced displacement. However, given climatic factors have the capacity to place additional pressure on existing social and political dissension and dysfunction, they may exacerbate the societal and structural insecurities which may contribute to higher numbers of people emigrating in search of resources, safety, and security.

Climate change is largely complex with many far-reaching implications on human mobility as well as all aspects of both state and international migration infrastructure. It will implicate how these structures both operate moving forward into an uncertain future. Based on the research presented above, climate-induced migration is very real and will only increase. Despite the promise and potential cultivated by the release of the White House Report, there is so much more work that needs to be done.

The latest development follows the end of COP27, with the White House releasing a Fact Sheet detailing the list of initiatives set out by Biden and his administration moving forward into the next year. Most notably, the sheet mentions a newly announced contribution of \$5 million to the Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund to support climate-affected vulnerable migrants. According to Biden’s statement from the COP, “This program underscores our commitment to the vision of the Global Compact for Migration, including improving cooperation on international migration.”. The sheet also asserts that this contribution “also advances the Biden Administration’s climate strategy, reflected in the 2021 White House Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration, to address the impact of climate change on vulnerable populations across the globe” (The White House 2022). Despite this new effort, real progress remains to be seen relative to honoring a number of the high-level commitments laid out in the original [Climate Migration Report](#).

Moving into the new year, the US should take several steps to respond to the plight of climate refugees. This includes finding and establishing more legal pathways for their protection, seeking means of either expanding or reorienting the existing UNHCR definition of who qualifies as a refugee to be more inclusive of new displacement factors, and developing means of cooperation between other states to establish better protection measures for climate migrants. This discourse continues to evolve in a complex way, and there will be a lot to navigate in the future, both at the state and international levels. The US should seek to pre-empt this complexity through an innovative and future-oriented approach to action.

References

ABC News. 2014. “Pacific Islanders Reject ‘Climate Refugee’ Status.” September 5, 2014. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-05/pacific-islanders-reject-calls-for-27climate-refugee27-status/5723078>.

- Adamo, Susana B. 2010. “Environmental Migration and Cities in the Context of Global Environmental Change.” *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 2(3):161–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2010.06.005>.
- Berchin, Issa Ibrahim, Isabela Blasi Valduga, Jéssica Garcia, and José Baltazar Salgueirinho Osório. 2017. *Climate Change and Forced Migrations: An Effort towards Recognizing Climate Refugees.* *Geoforum*, 84:147-150. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016718517301732>.
- Bettini, Giovanni, Sarah Nash, and Giovanna Gioli. “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? The Fading Contours of (In)justice in Competing Discourses on Climate Migration.” *The Geographic Journal*. 183(4):348-358. <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12192>.
- Brown, Lester R. 1976. *Twenty-Two Dimensions of the Population Problem*. Worldwatch Paper 5. Washington: Worldwatch Institute.
- Brown, Oli. 2007. *Climate Change and Forced Migration: Observations, Projections and Implications*. Human Development Report Office Occasional Paper. United Nations Development Programme. Geneva, Switzerland: UNDP. https://www.iisd.org/system/files/publications/climate_forced_migration.pdf.
- Corendea, Cosmin. “Legal Protection of the Sinking Island Refugees” Lake Mary, FL: Vandepas Publishing, LLC. (2016).
- DePaul, Miles. 2012. “Climate Change, Migration, and Megacities: Addressing the Dual Stresses of Mass Urbanization and Climate Vulnerability.” *Paterson Review of International Affairs*, 12: 145-162.
- Detraz, Nicole and Leah Windsor. 2013. “Evaluating Climate Migration: Population Movement, Insecurity, and Gender.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 16(1):127-

146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2013.789640>.
- Docherty, Bonnie and Tyler Giannini. 2009. "Confronting a Rising Tide: A Proposal for a Convention on Climate Change Refugees." *The Harvard Environmental Law Review*. 33(2):349-403. <https://climate.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/5c3e836f23a774ba2e115c36a8f72fd3e218.pdf>.
- El-Hinnawi, Essam. 1985. *Environmental Refugees*. United Nations Environment Programme. . Nairobi, Kenya: UNEP. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/121267?ln=en>.
- Folberth, Gerd A., Timothy M. Butler, William J. Collins, and Steven T. Rumbold. 2015. "Megacities and Climate Change – A Brief Overview". *Environmental Pollution*, 203:235-242. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0269749114003844?via%3Dihub>.
- Hush, Emily. 2017. "Developing a European Model of International Protection for Environmentally-Displaced Persons: Lessons from Finland and Sweden." *Columbia Journal of European Law*. <http://cjel.law.columbia.edu/preliminary-reference/2017/developing-a-european-model-of-international-protection-for-environmentally-displaced-persons-lessons-from-finland-and-sweden/>.
- Hynie, Michaela; Prateep Kumar Nayak, Teresa Auntora Gomes, and Ifrah Abdillahi. 2019. "Refugee Sponsorship and Canada's Immigration Policy in Times of Climate Change." *Local Activism for Global Climate Justice: The Great Lakes Watershed*. ed. Patricia E. Perkins. (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429320705-9>.
- Loweree, Jorge, Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, and Walter Ewing. American Immigration Council. "The Impact of COVID-19 on Noncitizens and Across the U.S. Immigration System." 2020. American Immigration Council.
2020. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/impact-covid-19-us-immigration-system>.
- Lustgarten, Abrahm. 2020. "The Great Climate Migration Has Begun." *The New York Times*, 2020. July 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/23/magazine/climate-migration.html>.
- Ober, Kayly. 2021. "Refugees International on Today's White House Climate and Migration Report." Refugees International. October 21, 2021. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2021/10/21/refugees-international-on-todays-white-house-climate-and-migration-report>.
- Osslon, Louise. 2015. "Environmental Migrants in International Law: An Assessment of Protection Gaps and Solutions." *Örebro Universitet*. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:861312/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Rubiano, María Paula and Adam Mahoney. "Disappointing': The US's First Climate Migration Report Falls Flat". *Grist*. October 25, 2021. <https://grist.org/climate/disappointing-the-uss-first-climate-migration-report-falls-flat/>.
- Refugees International. 2022. "Letter: Leaders of Refugee, Policy Organizations Call on Biden Administration to Prioritize Climate Impacted Populations for Resettlement." September 8, 2022. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/9/8/letter-leaders-of-refugee-policy-organizations-call-on-biden-administration-to-prioritize-climate-impacted-populations-for-resettlement>.
- Rodriguez, Sebastian and Joe Lo. 2022. "Joe Biden's Abandoned Climate Migrant Reforms Leave Hurricane Victims Stranded." *Climate Home News*. October 21, 2022. <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2022/10/21/joe-bidens-abandoned-climate-migrant-reforms-leave-hurricane-victims-stranded/>.

- The White House. 2021. "Report on The Impact of Climate Change on Migration." October 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>
- The White House. 2022. "FACT SHEET: President Biden Announces New Initiatives at COP27 to Strengthen U.S. Leadership in Tackling Climate Change." November 11, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/11/fact-sheet-president-biden-announces-new-initiatives-at-cop27-to-strengthen-u-s-leadership-in-tackling-climate-change/>.
- TRAC (Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse). 2022. "Immigration Court Asylum Decisions." Accessed December 6, 2022. <https://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/asylum/>.
- Yayboke, Erol, Catherine Nzuki, and Sierra Ballard. 2021. "The White House Report on Climate Migration, Explained" *Centre for Strategic & International Studies*. November 5, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/white-house-report-climate-migration-explained>.
- Watson, Julie. 2022. "After Raising Hope, Biden Still Lacks Climate Migration Plan." *AP News*. October 19, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/biden-science-national-security-droughts-climate-and-environment-a168993c37a8be94767799cdfb63ea64>.
- World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal. "Guatemala", *Climate Change and Knowledge Portal*. (2022). <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/el-salvador>
- World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal. "Guatemala", *Climate Change and Knowledge Portal*.
- (2022). <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/guatemala>
- World Bank Climate Change Knowledge Portal. "Honduras", *Climate Change and Knowledge Portal*. (2022). <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/honduras>.

About Center for Migration Studies of New York

The Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS) is a think tank and an educational institute devoted to the study of international migration, to the promotion of understanding between immigrants and receiving communities, and to public policies that safeguard the dignity and rights of migrants, refugees, and newcomers.

Contact Information

Phone: (212) 337-3080

Email: cms@cmsny.org

Address: Center for Migration Studies
307 East 60th Street, 4th Floor
New York, NY 10022

www.cmsny.org

Authors

Mara A. Mahmud

Suggested Citation

Mahmud, Mara A. 2022. "Climate Migration and the Future of Immigration Policy in the United States." Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS) Report. New York, NY: CMS.

@ 2022 The Center for Migration Studies (CMS)

All Rights Reserved.



[Sign up](#) to receive CMS's weekly newsletter and information our publications, journals, and events.