United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Background Guide

Written by: Lauren Radke, The American University of Washington D.C.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in December of 1950 to address the needs of Europeans displaced by World War II.1 Although it was originally going to only be active for three years, the establishment of the United Nations Conventions relation to the Status of Refugees caused the committee to become a permanent part of the UN system.2 The main goal of the UNHCR is to ensure that an individual has the right to asylum and to find safe refuge in another state.3 There are many ways that the UNHCR supports those seeking asylum and those who are displaced. The UNHCR provides critical assistance to those in need including: water, sanitation services, healthcare, shelter, transportation, and sponsorships for income-generating projects for those who resettle.4

I. Improving Living Conditions and Services in Refugee Camps

Statement of the Issue:

The population of refugees in the world grows about 44,000 people every day, many of who have no way to care for themselves and provide for their family once they leave their home countries. Sometimes, these refugees, asylum seekers, or internally displaced peoples seek out refugee camps to receive basic survival necessities. Even with refugee camps doing all they can with their budgets, the increasing number of those in need of help continues to put a strain on existing refugee care systems.5 The refugee camps, on average, have a lack of running water, no electricity, high rates of sexual assault, overcrowding, too little food, and some of the

---

2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
occupants suffer from a variety of mental illnesses. The lack of services and amenities at the camps make them unpleasant to live in and are occasionally dangerous to the health of refugees.

One of the largest issues facing many refugee camps is the shortage of water and food that is critical to the maintenance of health. More than 50% of camps do not provide the minimum of adequate water (20 liters a day per person). Having plentiful and adequate water sources are critical to individual and community health because illnesses like cholera and diarrheal diseases can spread without it. It is recommended that a household should have a water pump or water source no more than 200 meters away; if water is more than 200 meters away, it is inefficient and costly to retrieve it. Many camps, especially those in more arid climates, do not meet these standards. Water contamination from human waste and bathing is also a common cause for contaminated water and water borne illnesses; 30% of refugee camps suffer from lack of sanitation and adequate waste disposal. Along with water sources, the food supply in many camps is inadequate and limited. Rations in camps are small and lacking in variety, leading to malnutrition, and black markets for food being created in camps. Some camps are able to provide land for agricultural use to refugees, alleviating the effects of food shortage, but often it is not a viable option; it is either not allowed, there is no room, little rain, or the soil is too poor to be of any use.

Refugees experience deplorable conditions in their housing options as well. Houses in camps are normally poorly ventilated, consist of only one room, and are constructed in a haphazard manner out of wood and corrugated metal roofs. Such low living standards increase the chances of elemental exposure, increased dampness and mold, rodents, as well as a negative effect on physical and mental health (such as anxiety, stress, and high blood pressure). Because of the high number of refugees, supply of medical resources often does not keep up with the demand. Most deaths in refugee camps are the result of illnesses that could be prevented by mass immunization with vaccines, illustrating the importance of these lifesaving preventative measures. Additionally, reproductive health and emergency care is

---


8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.
lacking in camps; gender based violence, normally perpetrated against women and girls, is common and some women have been subjected to harassment, rape, and forms of forced sex work.  

With the constantly increasing population of people in need, overcrowding of camps continues to be a problem that shows itself in many facets of camp life. Overcrowding causes a decline in availability of housing resources as well as medical resources. Issues pertaining to mental health and trauma are increasingly prevalent in camp communities and although it is recognized as a critical area for refugee care, little is done to actually improve services. Often times, in cases such as Somalian refugees in Uganda in 2003, trauma contributes significantly to the degradation of mental health. Of Somali refugees interviewed, 73.5% said they were exposed to a dead or mutilated body, and 69.3% reported witnessing shelling or bombing attacks. Of those refugees in the Ugandan camp, 50.5% were diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by health professionals stationed there. Today, refugees that suffer from illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD are unaware of information pertaining to mental health help or diagnosis, or will not seek medical help due to stigmatization.

Refugee camps exist to provide a safe living space for those whose lives are threatened, but often refugees face a continuation of difficult times in camps. The struggle refugees or other camp dwellers face when trying to procure rations, water, or medical services puts additional strain on their overall health and wellbeing. Health care services that are lacking in camps include basic ones such as lack of vaccines, sexual health/reproductive health services, as well as mental health services.

History:

Some of the earliest recognized movements of refugees were the result of religious persecution. In 1685, the first documented decision to oppress a religious group was enacted in France. The Edict of Fontainebleau allowed state sponsored persecution of the Huguenots, a protestant religious group in the mainly Catholic nation. It is estimated that around 200,000 people fled to neighboring ‘protestant friendly’ nations like Germany (Prussia), Russia, and the

---

14 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
United Kingdom. In 1881, another instance of severe religious persecution took place in Russia. In this case, those practicing Judaism faced violence in the forms of bodily harm, burned homes, stores, and places of worship. Another pogrom against Jews took place later in Russia. It was the result of latent religious hatred, yet again. In this instance, around two million Jews left Russia and sought out refuge in European nations as well as the United States.

Movement of people (refugees) in World War I was the greatest to date at the time. Over one million Belgians fled Belgium following the German invasion, and tens of thousands of Serbians fled their country when Austria-Hungary declared war. The first genocide of the 20th century took place at this time; the Armenian genocide and diaspora led to the displacement of over five million Armenians and many dead. The refugee crisis of World War I paled in comparison to that of World War II, where over the course of the war, over 40 million people were displaced in Europe alone. This caused the action of countries to alleviate the suffering of those who had to flee. Some of the major multi-governmental action took place in:

- 1938: Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees focused on the resettlement of people displaced by the war,
- 1943: United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration,
- 1946: International Refugee Organization created,
- 1948: Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created,
- 1949: Geneva Conventions outlined international law and wartime expectations,
- 1950: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established,
- 1951: Conventions relation to the Status of Refugees was passed.

Following World War II, there was little conflict in the European continent that would cause increasing populations, but around the world, refugee numbers began to increase. Civil wars, coups, and decolonization caused conflicts in Africa and Asia, which increased the numbers of refugees gradually. Today, humanity faces the task of helping the largest population of refugees in history. Around the world, over 68.5 million people are forcibly displaced due to conflict and

---

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
persecution that threatens their livelihood. Internally displaced people (40 million), stateless people (10 million), and refugees (25.4 million) are forced out of their homes and look for refuge in other nations, or nearby refugee camps. Over 55% of refugees are coming from three countries: South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Syria. The top hosting countries of refugees are: Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Islamic Republic of Iran, Uganda, and Ethiopia. Addressing the issues of refugees, the Interagency Standing Committee, a committee with all major humanitarian agencies in and out of the United Nations system, takes care of their needs through a “cluster approach.” This cluster approach works to bring resources and information together in a more effective manner. Through the Refugee Coordination Model, a cluster approach model is used, but the general cluster approach does not apply to refugees due to their special circumstances. It works at an international and local level, so that the international community can best address the needs of those who need supplies.

Analysis:

The issues that individuals face in refugee camps are not isolated and exclusive; each aspect of life for a refugee or otherwise displaced person is interconnected and has causational effect on the status of other parts of their lives. It is critical to human health to provide sanitation methods to protect the community from easily communicable diseases and other aspects of camp life that would negatively impact their livelihoods. Today, there is a regressive trend in migration policies around the world, most notably in western countries. In many countries, most recently France, there has been harassment and criminalization of workers/volunteers working with Non-Governmental Organizations providing humanitarian aid to refugees and migrants. This is effectively criminalizing aid to migrants and refugees, and promoting a culture of neglect. The international community should remain aware of the instances that further demonize refugees and work to ensure that they receive the help and proper treatment according to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), it is established that every person has the right to seek asylum in other

---

28 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
nations, which often includes refugees fleeing from conflict and persecution, and everyone is entitled to the movement and residence within borders of states (articles 13 & 14).34

The host countries of refugees often experience a variety of impacts on their economy, sense of security, politics, and society. About 84% of world refugees are hosted by developing countries, with most residing in urban areas. Hosting refugees has both negative and positive aspects. Economically, hosting refugees can be a burden; they may ‘take’ jobs from nationals, drive up costs of commodities, like vehicles and other goods and services, and can isolate themselves to remote borders that make providing resources difficult. Causing economic strain initially can actually help boost the economy of the host country. If given the opportunity, refugees can become entrepreneurs, start new firms, bring capital with them, and overall boost consumption that helps the economy thrive.35 In Akron, Ohio, U.S.A., there was a study that illustrated the positive net returns associated with the local refugee population, as well as successful integration into the local community.36 The community that is surrounding the hosted refugees may also face positive and negative externalities. A lack of cultural or ethnic ties can lead to the possibility of conflict, and economic integration is simpler than cultural integration. There is a rise of social problems related to refugee camps such as gambling, alcoholism, and gender/sex based violence. Despite these negative aspects that may develop, refugee camps may bring cohesion and cooperation between the camp and local community. With the promotion of integration and interdependence, conflicts are less likely to arise, and it can bind communities together.37 Political and security impacts on the host country are both serious concerns for native populations. Although often perceived as threats, the existence of refugees in a community can increase the level of security, therefore causing job creation. The fear of terrorist threats and community imbalance caused by an overspill of insurgents are exaggerated, as refugees are not more likely to commit a crime than a local population.38

In the international community, there have been debates over and calls for “equal sharing” of the burden created by refugee populations. In Greece, many of the refugee camps on the islands, comprised of individuals crossing waterways from Turkey, are overcrowded, unsanitary,
and in poor condition.\textsuperscript{39} Dimitris Tzanakopoulos, a Greek politician, lawyer, and spokesperson on behalf of the Greek government, stated that, "the only way for an overall solution to the immigrations crisis is an equal and proportional sharing of refugees throughout Europe".\textsuperscript{40} Doctors without Borders went as far as to determine that an immediate emergency evacuation of vulnerable people should take place, and that they should be taken to the mainland for asylum processing.\textsuperscript{41} Some countries, to combat overcrowding of their own refugee populations and to help the main host countries, have committed to Community-Based Refugee Sponsorship Programs. The six countries that issued the joint statement were Canada, Britain, New Zealand, Argentina, Ireland, and Spain. To alleviate the struggles of refugees, they will provide financial and emotional support to new refugees in an attempt to help the resettlement process.\textsuperscript{42} The process of resettlement has been extremely successful, with more than 300,000 refugees being integrated into Canadian society; this is more successful than resettlement methods and actions taken up by local authorities of countries.\textsuperscript{43} The actions of a select few countries could be a start to strong support network for countries that house a large refugee population, encouraging an international community for resettlement assistance and best practices.

It is critical to establish why refugees cannot often return to their home country; it is often a case of safety, rather than unwillingness to do so. In the case of Syria, lulls of quiet and little conflict can seem to allude to the establishment of peace, but that is not usually the case. Refugees can still have a well-established concern for their safety because they fled not only because of the wars, but because of starvation, torture, religious persecution, and a lack of opportunity.\textsuperscript{44} Refugees can face discrimination and persecution upon return to their home countries, driven by the belief that they betrayed their country. They can end up facing torture or even jail time based on petty accusations and false pretenses. Despite the protections that these refugees have, granted by international documentation and law, they face harsh push back against their right to seek refuge in countries that are safe, and face deplorable conditions

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
in refugee camps. Stronger collective action is needed in the international community so that refugees receive the care that they desperately need.

Conclusion:
Solutions to problems that refugees have in camps already exist, but they lack implementation in the areas that need it most. Increasingly, human lives are being neglected through the quality of help they receive. It is easy to see why improved conditions are needed in the short run because of instances of communal sickness, malnutrition, and overall enhanced struggles relating to living conditions. In the long term, children and whole communities will face the consequences of camp conditions. It is possible for children to develop emotional and behavioral problems, which in turn fosters issues that will be challenging to their ways of life in the future.\(^\text{45}\) Without further help and development of resources, it is almost certain that refugees will remain unprotected and in danger. A consensus must be reached in the international community in regards to how to best assist in refugee care, how to address the increasing population of refugees, and how to improve health conditions and services at refugee camps.

Questions:
1. Are there existing actions that could be improved to increase effectiveness and applicability?
2. What are the most pressing issues? Does it vary depending on region? On the status or characteristics of persecution or conflict?
3. How do deteriorating conditions in camps impact refugee families and the futures of refugee children?

Resources


II. Addressing Barriers for Environmental Refugees

Statement of the Issue:

As the impacts of climate change and global warming grow, an increased number of people encounter consequences of these issues in their everyday lives. As time goes on, the interconnected nature of environmental issues and human rights, including those of refugees, becomes more complicated. This makes it a critical issue that requires immediate attention. In 2017, there were around 18.8 million long term and short term disaster related displacements.\(^{46}\) The displacements, which are hard to track, may cross national borders and coincide with both environmental factors as well as conflict driven ones. The United Nations General Assembly recognizes that “climate, environmental degradation, and natural disasters increasingly interact with the drivers of refugee movements,” but the terms “climate refugees” and “environmental refugees” are not enforced terms by the UNHCR.\(^{47}\) This leads to a variety of issues pertaining to the validity of refugee status for those displaced by environmental factors.

Climate change fosters many changes in ecosystems and habitats around the world, and often, it causes case and irreversible changes. Humans, unlike animals, cannot move freely away from an area when it starts to change. There are limitations on movement such as family, socio-economic status, as well as governmental laws and restrictions that legally limit the boundaries of movement.\(^{48}\) Climate change has a variety of impacts such as: limiting resources (such as water), creating climate “hot spots” where conditions are not suitable to sustain crops and animals, as well as increasing food insecurity.\(^{49}\) Health impacts of climate change can range from heat-related morbidity to expanding infection ranges for diseases and other illnesses.\(^{50}\) Weather events in the area can become more severe than they were previously. This can cause increased levels of flooding in many areas and result in the destruction of homes and increase in water-borne illnesses for months.\(^{51}\)

The variety of health risks that people face from climate change depends on the geographical region in which they live in. Different regions and climates across the world can


\(^{47}\) Ibid.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.

\(^{49}\) Ibid.


face very different threats to their populations. In the Pacific islands, rising sea levels, heavy rain, flooding, and food and water shortages are what they may experience due to climate change. In the Americas, cyclones and hurricanes happen not only more often, but they are stronger than in years previously. In Africa, desertification is a large issue that leads to crop troubles, issues providing for animals, and can have an impact on the rise of terrorist organizations, such as Boko Haram, that seek to take advantage of suffering communities. In such situations, people may choose to migrate to cities with almost nothing in the hopes of having a better life. There, in cities, they face poor living conditions and very little social protections.

Internal migration, especially in cases involving environmental causes, is more common than international migration. However, with the increasing levels of trouble that people experience, international migration can be expected to increase. Countries, such as the island nation of Kiribati, search for solutions such as “migration with dignity,” and are forced to deal with citizens leaving the country because of rising sea levels. Developing countries also face issues of overcrowding in cities and health hazards and have a hard time dealing with the consequences of climate change. Citizens of developing countries most affected by the repercussions of pollution happen to produce the least amount of it; instead they face the consequences of the pollution created by 20 countries and receive no help to rebuild their livelihoods both domestically and internationally.

History:

One of the earliest warnings of climate refugees came from the International Organization for Migration in 1982. In its report, it stated that environmental degradation was already causing an increasing number of migrants. Despite this warning, it was sure to establish that there are other variables that play into migration including political conditions, family composition, and other broader contextual issues. Issues that have an impact on the decision to migrate, whether voluntarily or forcefully, can take place at a macro, meso, or micro level.

53 Ibid.
54 Sharalaya. “Taking India’s Climate Migrants Seriously.”
56 Ibid.
57 “Climate Change and Disaster Displacement.” UNHCR
Common macro aspects that influence movement are society, culture, history (most often in relation to colonialism), and state development programs that are lacking. The environmental factors of the region can contribute to the decision to move at any of these levels.  

Historically, migration happens for many reasons, and is not just limited to a situation where the previous area is unlivable. Migration has and does act as a household risk diversification strategy. This can be an effective way to reduce household strain over food and money. By sending family members away, there is less need for food and the member that lives away can make money and send it back to support the other household members. Sometimes, though, men leave their homes for opportunities in a city, leaving their wives to take care of the agricultural work, as well as the household duties. This can lead to women being trapped in an area in which there is little opportunity to advance in society. While internal migration is more common to seek opportunities, international migration grows as situations worsen and grow to affect a wider area.

In 2001, the First Assessment Report of Climate Change in Cities (FRC3) was published, addressing the nexus of environmental issues, climate change, and how these issues impact urban life. FRC3 established how issues that people are facing in rural areas, which cause them to migrate or seek refuge in other areas, also impacts city life, threatening the opportunities there. According to the research conducted, poorer populations and countries with lower per capita gross domestic product will be more heavily affected. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has also established that climate change in cities, much like rural areas, will cause issues with critical health and safety aspects to living such as: infrastructure, sewers, and clean water availability.

Analysis:

The international community, including the United Nations, recognizes the issues that global warming and climate change are causing today. As such, there are instances of global cooperation helps in assisting environmental/climate refugees. As for other groups of refugees, the UNHCR works in ‘global protection clusters’ to assist and protect people outside of their home countries. When called upon, the UNHCR has effectively provided emergency teams, documentation support, and shelter, food, and sanitation materials for refugees. For

59 Hunter, Luna, and Norton. "The Environmental Dimensions of Migration."
60 Ibid.
61 Sharalaya. "Taking India's Climate Migrants Seriously."
63 Ibid.
64 "Climate Change and Disaster Displacement," UNHCR.
environmental refugees, the UNHCR also provides services but they are less expansive than those of other assistance programs. The largest amount of help comes in the form of legal guidance and development of norms for the refugees. Action is taken to also ensure policy coherence of countries dealing with those affected, and research is being developed to further improve field based action in regards to the refugees.\textsuperscript{65} Since it is difficult to establish that environmental refugees have a “well-founded fear of being persecuted” as outlined in the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, aid is rare from the UNHCR, and environmental refugees are not labeled in any international action documentation.\textsuperscript{66}

There are some issues with the methods that were developed to address the hardships that environmental refugees face. The biggest of which is that action in slow. From the onset of issues like rising water levels, moving entire communities is slow going, and extremely costly.\textsuperscript{67} In countries such as Papua New Guinea, planned relocations are extremely high in cost. Not only are the efforts costly, but depletion of economic, human, and social capital is common in both of the local population and the host.\textsuperscript{68} A barrier to helping these peoples is also faced in instances where domestic migrant and refugee policy does not align with the communities situations, and it delays help. The Global Compact for Migration and Global Compact for refugees (both actions in the General Assembly) both mention how climate change can play a role in instances of migration and refugee status, but it does not state that it can be a singular cause to drive movement.\textsuperscript{69} It is no help that many refugees and migrants are excluded from conversations of asylum and politics of conflict. In these situations, it is the norm to assume that they are “evil” and are the cause of more crime. Often, refugees are deduced down to a box of economic desirability which invalidates their possible contributions to their new community, as well as the situation from which they come.\textsuperscript{70}

There have been arguments on how basic human rights and refugee rights are being violated in relation to environmental issues and how the international community has a duty to protect these individuals. The rights in question are: right to life, right to sources of livelihood, tight to capacity development, and right to participation. The right to life is threatened through

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Schwerdtle, Bowen, and McMichael. “The Health Impacts of Climate-related Migration.”
\textsuperscript{69}McDonnell. “The Refugees The World Barely Pays Attention To.”
\textsuperscript{70} Heslin, Deckard, and Montero-Colbert. “Displacement and Resettlement”
insufficient food sources, energy sources, and contaminated water. Increasing crop failure and availability of clean water absolutely comes into question, seeing as these are two of the biggest reasons why a family or community would need to seek refuge in other areas. Because these resources are scarce and difficult to come by, there is a threat to the livelihoods of those living in the areas, another right guaranteed to humans. Peoples’ rights to capacity to develop is also hindered through decreasing opportunities in areas that they seek refuge in, and lack of validity in their status as an environmental refugee. Seeing as many immigrants in general are valued only for their economic benefits and are excluded from general political happenings in regards to their condition, their right to participation is violated.

Conclusion:

The lack of explicit recognition of environmental refugees’ situational issues creates a lack of validity in their refugee status. Despite this issue, there are millions of people in need of improved and faster help from the international community. Current actions by the international community, including the UNHCR, can be viewed as inefficient and lacking the means necessary to truly help the individuals that fall under the umbrella of “environmental refugees.” While it is difficult to assess whether environmental refugees face “well-founded fears of persecution,” it is imperative that the international community takes action to address the needs of environmental refugees. Increased international support for environmental refugees is needed to address the complicated and often confusing nature of an environmental refugee’s life.

Questions:

1. What could be broader impacts of expanding the definition of “refugees” in international documentation to include those who may be considered “environmental refugees”?
2. How can existing methods used by the international community to provide aid be improved? Can they be made faster? Can it be done more efficiently?
3. Can programs be made to assist those impacted by environmental issues not only internationally? Can there be enough incentive for these programs to be implemented domestically in countries?

---

71 Ozcan, and Strauss. "New Urban Agenda."
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
Resources


