

# The Dilemma Faced by Climate Displaced People

Xiang Xiang<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Foreign Language Literature, Shandong University, Jinan, Shandong 250000, China*

*\*Corresponding author. Email: xiangx@mail.sdu.edu.cn*

## ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, as climate change becomes more intense and pronounced, climate displacement has become a problem that cannot be underestimated. Different types of the dilemma faced by climate displacement are analyzed in this article, to promote further climate displacement research to fill up the gaps and help people get out of the plight. The terms “climate displacement”, “climate refugee”, “climate displaced people” and “climate migration” were used to search for papers on Google Scholar from 2000 to the present in this article. The analysis of this article covered a total of 25 papers. This paper concludes that, in terms of the social context, displaced people’s survival and inequality issues should be concerned, as well as the challenges the countries that receive the displacement face and the potential national security consequences. At the research level, the terms related to this group are still not uniform, and no systematic database has been produced. Protection is difficult in the international community due to the lack of a legal notion, and international organizations can only provide limited support in situations when states are not actively engaging in protection initiatives.

**Keywords:** *Climate displacement, Climate displaced people, Climate refugee, Climate migration*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Both climate and refugee issues are significant in the international community. However, at the intersection of these two issues, climate displacement has become a losing piece for the research field and the international community. People displaced by climate leave their homes temporarily or permanently and move within or across borders. Projections made by scientists indicate that the issue needs to be taken into consideration. Climate change is predicted to compel between 50 million and 200 million people, who are also called “climate migration”, to flee their homes by the middle of the century, according to current projections [1]. There are four types of climate migration: temporary displacement because of catastrophic events; involuntary permanent migration caused by repeated events; forced migration to escape escalating environmental deterioration; and adaptive strategy in response to environmental constraints [2]. The data derived from reality is also not encouraging, with an average of 25.4 million people displaced by disasters each year between 2008 and 2015. Eighty-five percent of them were displaced due to climate-related disasters [2].

Despite this, the predicament of climate displaced people, a group that is estimated to increase in number, has received little attention. This article focuses on the

dilemma from the perspective of the social problem, research and safeguard system, to analyze the difficulties faced by climate displaced people. Encourage further climate displacement research to fill up the gaps and help people get out of this bind.

In the process of literature review, it can be observed that the attention to climate displacement has gradually increased in recent years, and studies have gradually focused on the trend of this group’s gradual expansion, attempting to assess their plight and potential global consequences. However, the research is insufficiently systematic, and the database is still lacking. In this article, the keywords “climate displacement”, “climate refugee”, “climate displaced people” and “climate migration” were used as the keywords to search for articles on Google Scholar from 2000 to the present. A total of 25 articles were included in the analysis of this article.

## 2. THE DILEMMA OF CLIMATE DISPLACEMENT

Climate displacement has become a worldwide reality, but somehow the issues that this group faces remain multifaceted, according to mounting research. This article will conclude previous papers and describe the dilemma faced by the group from the perspectives of

social issues, academic research, and international social protection dilemma. Table 1 shows the particular categorization of these papers.

**Table 1.** Analysis of 25 papers containing the dilemma faced by climate displacement

No. of the papers	Type of the dilemma faced by climate displacement	Reference
9	The Crisis in Real Society	[1]-[9]
13	The Plight in Current Research	[2] [10]-[21]
10	The Absence of Safeguard Systems	[2] [4] [5] [11] [17] [18] [22]-[25]

**2.1. The Crisis in Real Society**

In the context of climate change, extreme weather is becoming more frequent, sea levels are rising and the climate is warming. These phenomena have, undoubtedly, caused disasters for people in some regions, making it necessary for them to leave their homes temporarily or permanently. From 2008 to 2015, disasters displaced an average of 25.4 million people each year, both within and across national borders. Climate-related disasters accounted for 85 percent of the total [2]. And for the countries affected and globally, the displacements generated by climate issues can create social problems.

**2.1.1. Survival Predicament of Displaced People**

For the displaced people, firstly the majority are concerned about their safety and health. A huge number of climate-displaced people are forced to leave their homes and seek new livelihoods because the local natural environment has harmed their survival. Almost everyone in Guatemala suffers some kind of uncertainty about where their next meal will come from in some way. Half of the youngsters are chronically hungry, and many are underweight for their age, with swollen stomachs and weak bones. It's also unclear whether they'll be able to relocate once they've moved out [3][4]. Inherently, climate displacement is more likely to occur in underdeveloped countries, and such losses increase poverty for some people. Meanwhile, many people's fundamental requirements are not met; for example, some studies in the Americas have observed the tremendous demand for food among these displaced individuals, as well as their severe rivalry at the bottom of the social ladder [3].

**2.1.2. Difficulties in Receiving Displacement**

For the countries or areas that accept the displacement or migration, the acceptance of the migrant at both the natural and social levels is a challenge for the original society[5][6]. In some countries, the attitude towards

climate refugees is not favorable, for example, in Bangladesh climate refugees want to move to India, while the Indian government and population are more reluctant to do so [7]. Furthermore, when these displaced people are not properly resettled, they may join terrorist or anti-government groups to survive, increasing the instability of the area and threatening the security and stability of the relocation site [6]. Some countries are faced with the need to protect people displaced by climate change within their borders, while also accepting climate refugees from neighboring countries, for example, In 2017, Ethiopia had received Africa's largest refugee population. The majority of these refugees are from South Sudan and Somalia, which are neighboring countries [8]. Moreover, Ethiopia had a caseload of 2.6 million internally displaced individuals (IDPs) caused by drought and conflict by the middle of 2018 [4].

**2.1.3. Deepening of Inequality**

From the perspective of the international community, first and foremost, this kind of displacement and migration is a manifestation of inequality and has the potential to exacerbate inequality. According to Climate change, migration, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, migration from the 20 countries most affected by climate change has increased significantly over the last 30 years [2], while they do not contribute significantly to the problem. The least developed countries (LDCs) account for 42 of the 50 countries with the lowest CO2 emission rates, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [4]. This indicates they are being disproportionately affected by the effects of climate change, which is a symptom of inequity.

**2.1.4. Potential for Conflict and Political Fallout**

Furthermore, it is also important to focus on the possibility of conflict outbreaks in the process of climate displacement migration. Some scholars have affirmed that climate migration and resource shortages indirectly contributed to the outbreak of the Arab Spring, arguing that the instability of migration can put pressure on the political environment and cause social instability or even jeopardize national security [6][9]. Changes in the political landscape may also not erupt in the form of conflict, for example, as more refugees, including climate refugees, move into developed countries or developed regions, anti-migrant groups in those regions are also driving nationalist governments to grow [3].

**2.2. The Plight in Current Research**

Under the current circumstances, it is the consensus of many scientists that climate change will trigger large-scale population displacement. Since the beginning of this century, various predictions of climate refugees and

climate migrants have emerged. However, even though the existence of climate displaced people has become a scientific consensus, there are significant obstacles to going further at the research level.

### *2.2.1. Argument in Terms*

Scholars still do not agree on the terms. This paper is concerned with all those who are temporarily or permanently displaced within or outside the country by climate. However, the terminology used in the academic community varies, and scholarship is based on different measures, as will be seen in the examples of relevant academic projections later. Some scholars have suggested that it is not necessary to define “environmental refugees” or “climate refugees” separately, but that they can be considered under the existing refugee framework, but some scholars do not agree [10]. The consideration of refugees often excludes those who are internally displaced. Although most of the “environmental refugees” are “climate refugees”, the scope is still larger than that of “climate refugees”. Some scholars use “climate migration”, but it has been suggested that this term subjectively weakens the presentation of the plight of this group, because the term migration sounds more like voluntary migration [11]. Some scholars have also used “climate-induced migration” or “climate-forced migration” as terms to describe this group of people, and a degree of distinction is made between the two, with non-migration still an option for the former, and not for the latter [12].

### *2.2.2. Variety in Research Results*

Many academics have published projections about the number of people displaced by climate change, but the starting point and findings of these studies range greatly, making it difficult to say which is more convincing or accurate. Furthermore, the projections have evolved through time. For example, Myers in 2002 predicted that environmental refugees, including climate refugees, would reach 200 million by mid-century [13], while in 2005, United Nations University (UNU) predicted that there would be 50 million environmental refugees by 2010 [14]. Predictions that occurred after 2010 have become even less optimistic. In 2017, Cornell University released news that its academics predicted that rising sea level would likely cause about 2 billion people to be displaced by 2100 [15]. In 2020, scientists from China, the United States, and Europe together predicted that in 50 years, at the current rate of climate change, without climate migrants, 3.5 billion people will be outside of their current ecological niche [16].

### *2.2.1. Interference of Objective Factor*

Some objective natural or social factors also make research for climate displacement study and prediction

extremely challenging. There are uncertainties in climate projections, which makes determining correct data for climate displaced person study and prediction extremely challenging. Tsunamis, hurricanes, and other natural calamities can be forecast a little time ahead of time. Moreover, there are difficulties in identifying climate-displaced people when it comes to statistics. Climate often does not serve as a direct cause of displacement generation, but generates livelihood issues that further cause people to be displaced, for example, reduced food production and unsuitable land for farming due to climate [17].

### *2.2.1. Neglect of IDPs*

The term “climate displaced people” includes both climate refugees and climate IDPs, but there is still a scarcity of data in the internal displacement, despite, according to some research and documents, even more climate displaced individuals are internally displaced and relocating within the country [2][18]. As of December 31, 2020, there were more than twice as many IDPs as refugees, setting a new high [19]. IDPs’ data is difficult to research or anticipate systematically because the majority of them live in developing countries that receive little attention from the international community. Despite the World Bank’s estimates, by 2050, there will be 86 million internal climate migrants in Sub-Saharan Africa, 40 million in South Asia, and 17 million in Latin America if no action is taken [20]. This result still has a limited contribution to reality. Alice Thomas, director of the climate migration program of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), agreed that the data they had on displacement within countries was far from adequate [21].

## *2.3. The Absence of Safeguard System*

As indicated by the large majority of countries signing the Global Compact on Refugees, climate-related catastrophes are increasingly engaging with displacement or migratory flows [5]. Some academic and official documents have also recognized that migration activities are important and necessary as an adaptation strategy when dealing with climate change [2][4][5]. However, in order to protect climate displacement on a practical level, there are still several obstacles to be overcome.

### *2.3.1. Lack of Legal Status*

There is strong resistance to the issue of recognizing climate-displaced people across borders as refugees. Despite the fact that the definition of a refugee has changed several times in the international community, the most frequently accepted term still derives from a 1951 UN Article [11][22]. To be classified as a refugee, a person’s motive for fleeing the country must be related

to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion [23]. In other words, the essential criteria for a person to be classified as a refugee is the intention to avoid political persecution [11][24]. Furthermore, the term “climate refugees” may weaken support for political refugees and cause confusion in existing procedures [17].

### 2.3.2. *Lack of Dependable Guarantee for IDPs*

As for IDPs, the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement have been recognized as an important international foundation for IDP protection, but they are not universally obligatory [25]. It does not appear to provide a more dependable guarantee for IDPs at this time. In addition, proof reveals that if IDPs' livelihoods are threatened, more will seek to cross national borders illegally in search of a better life. This trend could lead to more conflicts, poverty, and human rights violations, as climate refugees are not recognized [18].

### 2.3.3. *Difficulty in Proving a “Climate Refugee”*

As a result, it appears that recognizing the legal status of climate refugees has become a major concern. Even if the legal status is established, there are practical challenges. Proving that one has chosen to migrate because of the climate is almost impossible. Although the four current definitions of climate migration distinguish between active and passive migration, the real cases of individuals are far more complicated. Many contend that environmental causes are not the main cause of “refugees”, but that they frequently combine with economic and societal forces to produce their eviction [17].

### 2.3.4. *Passive State Involvement and Limited Support from International Organizations*

Unfortunately, within the international community, states are not actively involved in the process of promoting the recognition of climate refugees [17][25]. Climate displacement generally continues to receive limited attention. In practice, most countries still do not recognize “climate refugees” as international refugees, let alone provide them with assistance. Tuvalu's application to recognize its islanders as “climate refugees” and to provide them with relief and assistance has not been received by any country [17]. Until now, there has been no case of a successful application for climate refugee status.

At present, finding means to preserve their rights other than recognizing the legal status of climate displacement could be a viable option [25]. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is attempting to bridge the legal gap by giving some protection to those displaced by climate change, utilizing

its constitutional authority to do so. However, without the involvement of states, especially the developed countries with more capacity to offer assistance, the number of climate refugees who can be helped is extremely limited.

## 3. CONCLUSION

The article indicates the dilemma of climate displacement from the perspectives of society, research, and international safeguard. In society, climate displaced people are faced with threats to their safety and health, while the inequality will demonstrate in this process. Further, the burden to the countries that receive the displacement is also a problem, which should be concerned seriously to not result in conflicts between native citizens and the displaced people. For research, both subjective and objective reasons are stumbling blocks to deeper academic research. On the one hand, scholars have not reached a consensus on the use of academic names, and there is a wide range of predictions and estimates of groups with certain gaps; on the other hand, the objective climate uncertainty also hinders the depth of research to some extent. In the international community, climate displacement, whether cross-border or internal, the legal status is still not recognized, and without the active involvement of national actors to help, the efforts of some international organizations alone are insufficient to form systematic protection for them.

In future research, further conceptual distinctions and agreement on the usage of concepts in academic research, as well as the construction of more systematic databases to support future study and conservation in practice, must be prioritized. Climate uncertainty needs to be taken into account in the analysis of their plight, and the different types of climate displaced people need to be modeled and considered from a variety of perspectives, with attention paid to the depth of previously under-represented aspects, and to add to the analysis of their plights.

## REFERENCES

- [1] S. Behrman, A. Kent, ‘Climate Refugees’, Routledge, New York, 2018, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315109619>
- [2] E. Wilkinson, L. Schipper, C. Simonet, Z. Kubik, Climate change, Migration and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2016, <https://odi.org/en/publications/climate-change-migration-and-the-2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development/>
- [3] A. Lustgarten, “The Great Climate Migration”, The New York Times, July 23, 2020, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/great-climate-migration>
- [4] The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Office of the High

- Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS), *Climate Change and Migration in Vulnerable Countries*, International Organization for Migration, Switzerland, 2019.
- [5] J. Reis, K. Gerdau, A. Buguet, P.S. Spencer, *Migration, Environment and Climate Change*, in: M.E. Alaoui-Faris, A. Federico, W. Grisold (Eds.), *Neurology in Migrants and Refugees*, Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, 2021, pp. 54–67. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81058-0>
- [6] N.P. Gleditsch, R. Nordås and I. Salehyan, *Climate Change and Conflict: The Migration Link*, International Peace Academy, New York, 2007.
- [7] N. Spadotto, *A Well-Founded Fear of Environment: International Resistance to Climate Refugees*, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/08/05/a-well-founded-fear-of-environment-international-resistance-to-climate-refugees/>
- [8] O.A. Maunganidze, *AU summit 30: Will Africa allow the free movement of people?*, Institute for Security Studies, 2018, [https://issafrica.org/iss-today/au-summit-30-will-africa-allow-the-freemovement-of-people?utm\\_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm\\_campaign=ISS\\_Today&utm\\_medium=email](https://issafrica.org/iss-today/au-summit-30-will-africa-allow-the-freemovement-of-people?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Today&utm_medium=email)
- [9] M. Werz, M. Hoffman, *Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict*, in: C.E. Werrell, F. Femia (Eds.), *The Arab Spring and Climate Change*, The Center for American Progress, Washington, DC, 2013.
- [10] M. Prieur, *Towards an International Legal Status of Environmentally Displaced Persons*, in: S. Behrman, A. Kent (Eds.), *‘Climate Refugee’*, Routledge, New York, 2018, pp. 233–242. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315109619>
- [11] I.I. Berchin, I. Ibrahim, I.B. Valduga, J. Garcia, J. Guerra, *Climate Change and Forced Migrations: An Effort towards Recognizing Climate Refugees*, *Geoforum*, no. 84, 2017, pp. 147–150. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.06.022>
- [12] B.F. Pérez, *Beyond the Shortcomings of International Law*, in: S. Behrman, A. Kent (Eds.), *‘Climate Refugee’*, Routledge, New York, 2018, pp. 214–229. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315109619>
- [13] N. Myers, *Environmental refugees: A growing phenomenon of the 21st century*, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B: Biological Sciences*, vol. 357(1420), 2002, pp. 609–613. DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2001.0953
- [14] R. McLeman, *Climate Change, Migration and Critical International Security Considerations*, UN-ilibrary, 2011, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18356/cbe15386-en>
- [15] M. Voskresensky, *2 billion people will become refugees due to the rising sea levels*, *Sputnik*, 2017, <https://sputniknews.cn/20170628/1022962330.html>
- [16] Y. Zhong, *350 million people may lose their “comfort zone” in 50 years*, *Popular Science*, no. 7/8, 2020, pp. 54–55.
- [17] X. Shi, H. Liu, *International Law Protection Dilemmas and Responses for Climate Migrants*, *Nankai Journal* 2016, no. 6, 2016, pp. 68–77.
- [18] The Nansen Initiative, *Agenda for the protection of cross-border displaced persons in the context of disasters and climate change volume 1*, 2015, <https://disasterdisplacement.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/PROTECTION-AGENDA-VOLUME-1.pdf>
- [19] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2021*, IDMC, Geneva, 2021.
- [20] The World Bank, *Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration*, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2018/03/19/groundswell---preparing-for-internal-climate-migration>
- [21] J. Wang, *Focusing on climate migration research through multiple perspectives*, *Chinese Social Science Journal*, no. 3, 2018, pp. 1–2. DOI: 10.28131/n.cnki.ncshk.2018.002303
- [22] G. McFadyen, *The contemporary refugee: Persecution, semantics and universality*. University of Glasgow. e-sharp. Special Issue, 1951, pp. 9–35.
- [23] United Nations, *Article 1, Convention relating to the Status of Refugees*, 1951, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/StatusOfRefugees.aspx>
- [24] R. Eckersley, *The Common but Differentiated Responsibilities of States to Assist and Receive ‘Climate Refugees’*, *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 14(4), 2015, pp. 481–500. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1474885115584830>
- [25] M. Garlick, M. Franck, E. Bower, *Enhancing Legal Protection For People Displaced in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change*, in: S. Behrman, A. Kent (Eds.), *‘Climate Refugee’*, Routledge, New York, 2018, pp. 118–125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315109619>