BRIEFING PAPER

February 2020 **CONFERENCE**

Description of the Committee: UNHCR

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is a United Nations programme with the mandate to protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people, and assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement to a third country. UNHCR was created in 1950, during the aftermaths of World War II. Its headquarters are in Geneva, Switzerland and it is a member of the United Nations Development Group. The UNHCR has won two Nobel Peace Prizes, once in 1954 and again in 1981 and a Prince of Asturias Awards for International Cooperation in 1991.

UNHCR's priority areas:

UNHCR strives to ensure that everyone has the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to eventually return home, integrate or resettle. During times of displacement, we provide critical emergency assistance in the form of clean water, sanitation and healthcare, as well as shelter, blankets, household goods and sometimes food. UNHCR also arranges transport and assistance packages for people who return home, and income-generating projects for those who resettle. Their help transforms broken lives.

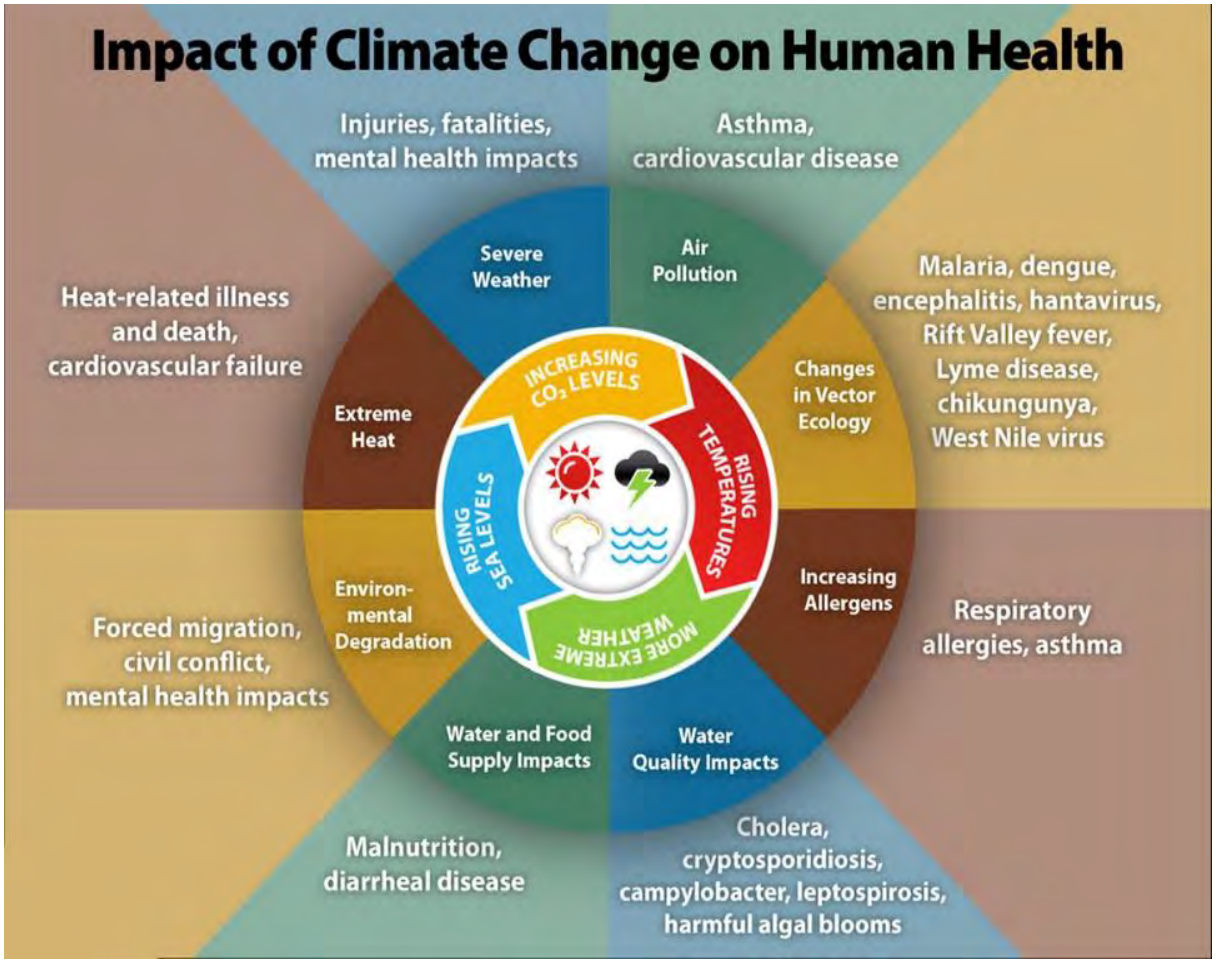
The issue at hand: Climate change as a driver of displacement and migration.

Secretary General (and former UN High Commissioner for Refugees) António Guterres has staunchly and consistently advocated for States to take the issue of climate change seriously and expressed his view that climate change will also affect food and water insecurity and competition over resources.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has observed that climate change will, in combination with other factors, drive more displacement in future.

States have begun exploring the legal gap regarding people who might cross borders as a result, but who would not be covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention (read more about this under the 'There's no such thing as a 'climate refugee' later in this guide).

Put simply, climate change will cause population movements by making certain parts of the world much less viable places to live; causing food and water supplies to become more unreliable and increasing the frequency and severity of floods and storms. Recent reports from the IPCC set out the parameters for what we can expect:



By 2099 the world is expected to be on average between 1.8ºC and 4ºC hotter than it is now. Large areas are expected to become drier—the proportion of land in constant drought expected to increase from 2 per cent to 10 per cent by 2050. Meanwhile, the proportion of land suffering extreme drought is predicted to increase from 1 per cent at present to 30 per cent by the end of the 21st century.

Rainfall patterns will change as the water cycle becomes more intense. In some places this means that rain will be more likely to cause severe floods (washing away top-soil and causing flooding). Changed rainfall patterns and a more intense water cycle means extreme weather events such as droughts, storms and floods are expected to become increasingly frequent and severe. For example, it is estimated that the South Asian monsoon will become stronger with up to 20 per cent more rain falling on eastern India and Bangladesh by 2050.

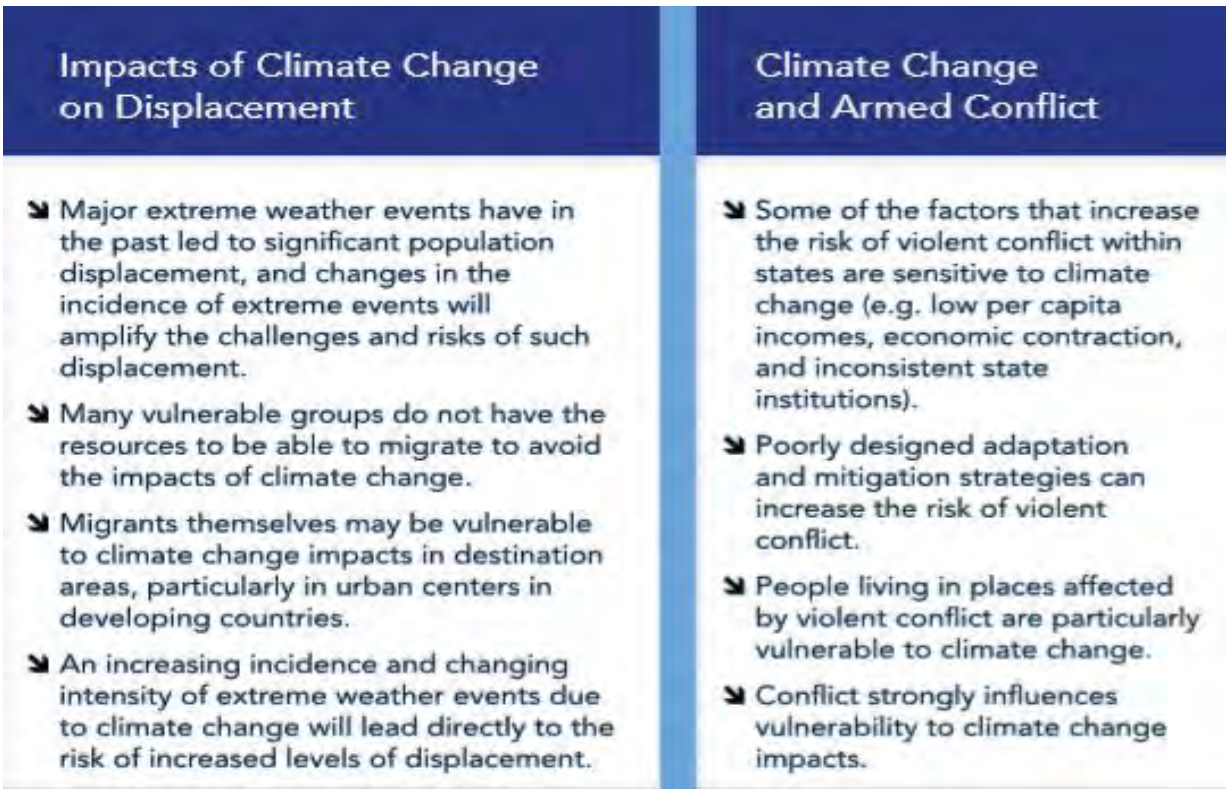
On the other hand, less rain is expected at low to mid-latitudes; by 2050 sub-Saharan Africa is predicted to have up to 10 per cent less annual rainfall. Less rain would have particularly serious impacts for sub-Saharan African agriculture which is largely rain-fed: the 2007 IPCC report of the Second Working Group estimates that yields from rain-fed agriculture could fall by up to 50 per cent by 2020.

Some fish stocks will migrate towards the poles and colder waters and may deplete as surface water run-off and higher sea temperatures lead to more frequent hazardous algal blooms and coral bleaching. Furthermore, climate change is predicted to worsen a variety of health problems leading to more widespread malnutrition and diarrhoeal diseases and altered distribution of some vectors of disease transmission such as the malarial mosquito.

Meanwhile, melting glaciers will increase the risk of flooding during the wet season and reduce dry-season water supplies to one-sixth of the world's population, predominantly in the Indian sub-continent, parts of China and the Andes. Melting glaciers will increase the risk of glacial lake outburst floods particularly in mountainous countries like Nepal, Peru and Bhutan. Global average sea level, after accounting for coastal land uplift and subsidence, is projected to rise between 8 cm and 13 cm by 2030, between 17 cm and 29 cm by 2050, and between 35 cm and 82 cm by 2100 (depending on the model and scenario used).

The number of people flooded per year is expected to increase by between 10 and 25 million per year by the 2050s and between 40 and 140 million per year by 2100s, depending on the future emissions scenario.

The statistics above translate into a simple fact that on the current trends the "carrying capacity" of large parts of the world, i.e. the ability of different ecosystems to provide food, water and shelter for human populations, will be compromised by climate change.



What are the challenges for Member States and the UNHCR?

At present, displacement risk is largely driven by the fact that more and more vulnerable people are living in disaster-prone areas. The majority of the 59.5 million people of concern to UNHCR are situated in 'climate change hotspots' around the world. They face the risk of secondary or repeated displacement due to natural hazards and the effects of climate change.

Countries already experiencing conflict are especially vulnerable to forced displacement in the context of disasters, rendering both the humanitarian needs and responses in such situations even more complex. Climate change and disasters can also exacerbate social tensions and act as an accelerator of armed conflict, which may result in displacement, for example, by exacerbating competition for scarce natural resources, such as water and land. Such people are entitled to UNHCR support.

Enhancing the resilience of people of concern and the communities hosting them is also a concern to UNHCR to avoid secondary displacement.

UNHCR is increasingly aware of the environmental challenges associated with hosting a large population in a small area. Competition over scarce natural resource, such as firewood, water and grazing land, has the potential to generate animosity and occasionally to spark friction or conflict between refugees and host communities.

Key issue: 'There's no such thing as a climate 'refugee' …

Climate 'refugee' or 'migrant'?

Labels are important. One immediately contentious issue is whether people displaced by climate change should be defined as "climate refugees" or as "climate migrants".

The definition we use will have very real implications for the obligations of the international community under international law. Campaigners have long used the phrase "environmental refugee" or "climate refugee" to convey added urgency to the issue. They argue that, in the most literal sense of the words, such people need to "seek refuge" from the impacts of climate change.

"A refugee is a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". The United Nations Convention. This means that there is a clear protection gap regarding 'climate refugees', who are neither clearly defined as a category nor covered by the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (the 1951 Refugee Convention).

Other complications: Climate 'refugee' or 'migrant' or 'IDP'?

There are other problems with using the term "refugee". Strictly speaking, categorisation as a refugee is reliant on crossing an internationally recognized border: someone displaced within their own country is an "internally displaced person" (IDP).

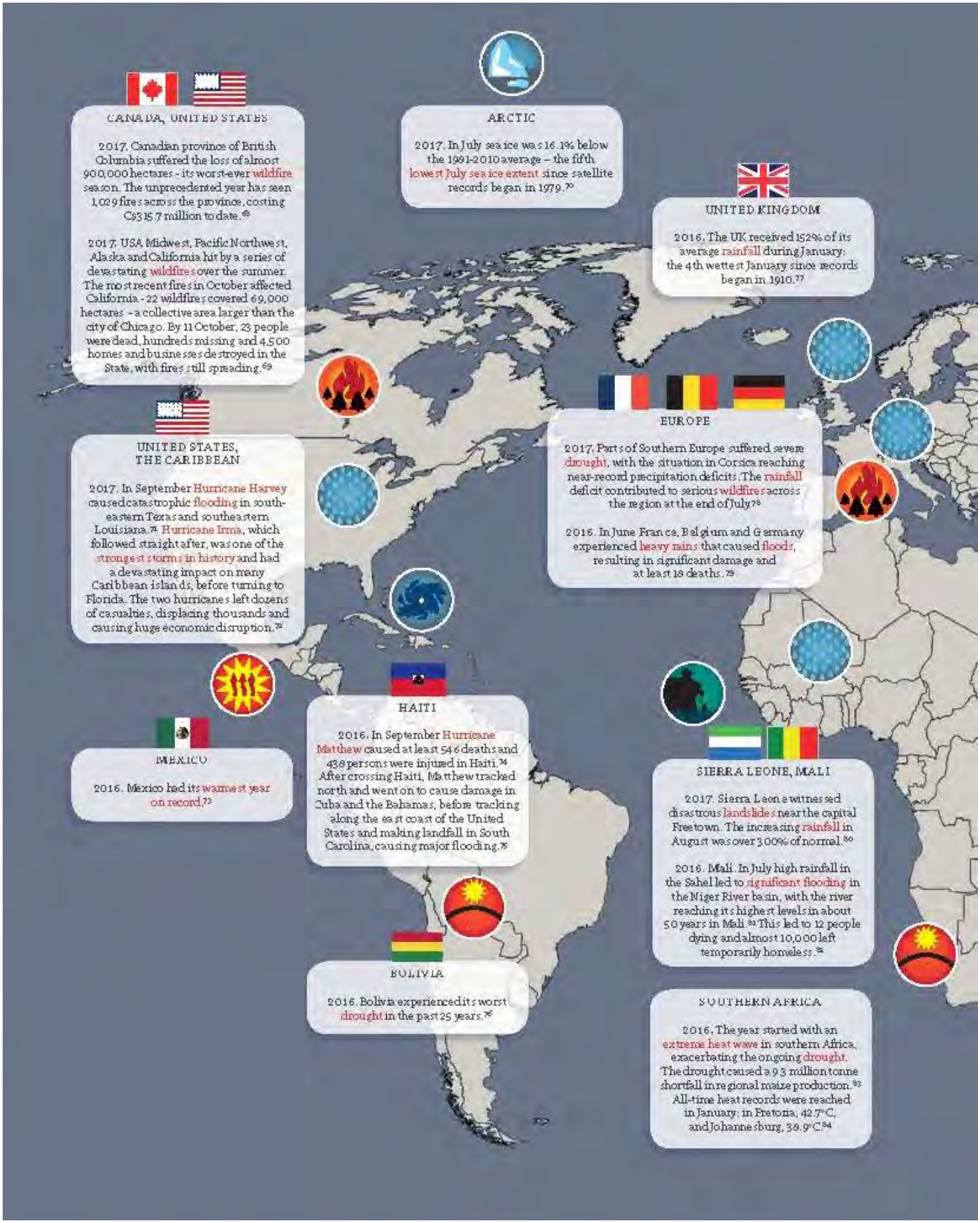
Given that the majority of people displaced by climate change will likely stay within their own borders, restricting the definition to those who cross international borders may seriously understate the extent of the problem. Furthermore, the concept of a "refugee" tends to imply a right of return once the persecution that triggered the original flight has ceased. This is, of course, impossible in the case of sea level rise and so again the term distorts the nature of the problem.

Lastly, there is the concern that expanding the definition of a refugee from political persecution to encompass environmental stressors would dilute the available international mechanisms and goodwill to cater for existing refugees.

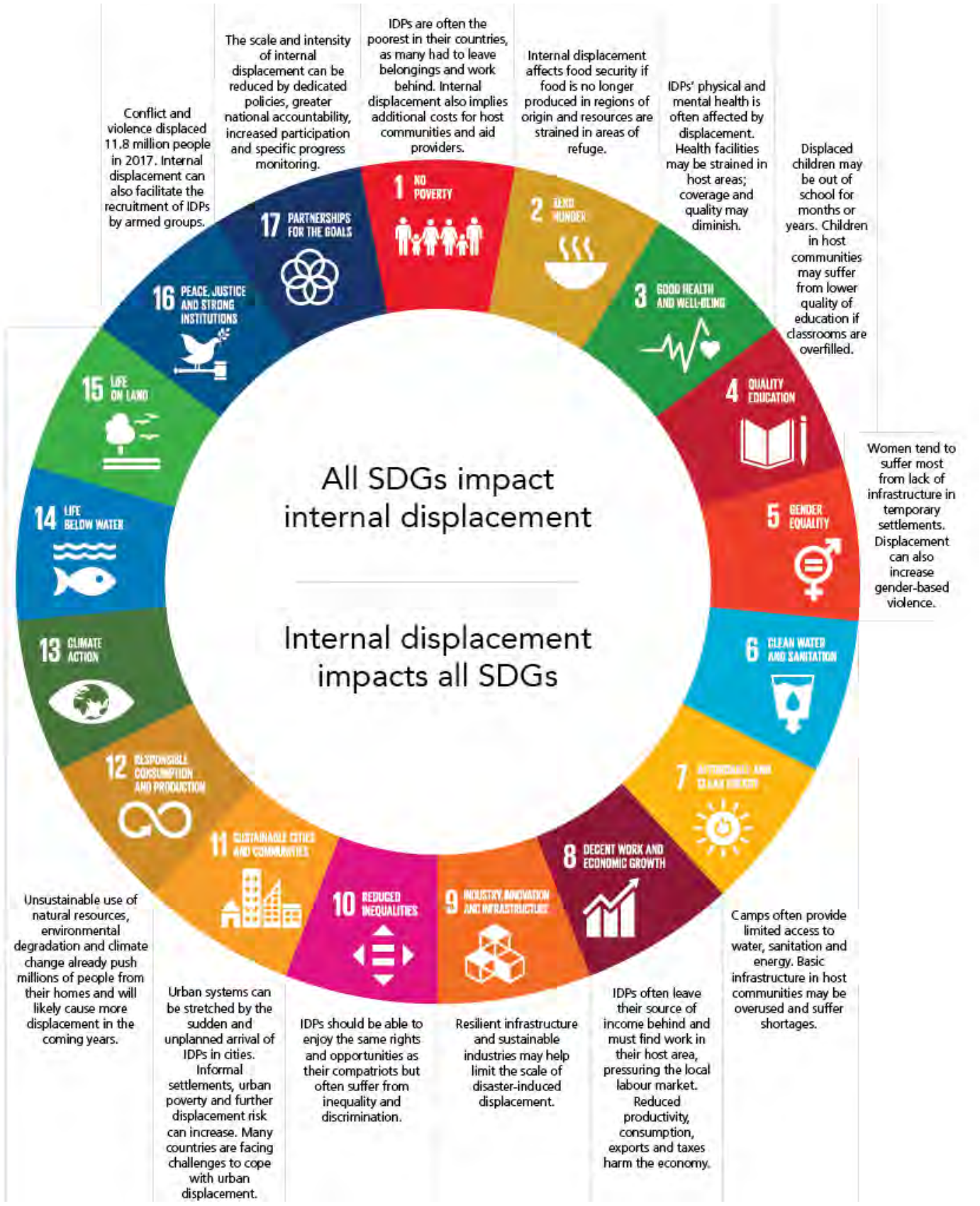
Environmentally induced displacement falls outside the scope of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its additional protocol.

This means, for instance, that the estimated 200 000 Bangladeshis, who become homeless each year due to riverbank erosion, cannot easily appeal for resettlement in another country.

Environmentally induced forced migration as a major problem has long been acknowledged by scholars, NGOs and the UN, but has yet to make the agendas of nation states. A change may be underway, however, with the realization that the prospect of mass migration is not only a humanitarian issue but a matter of national security.

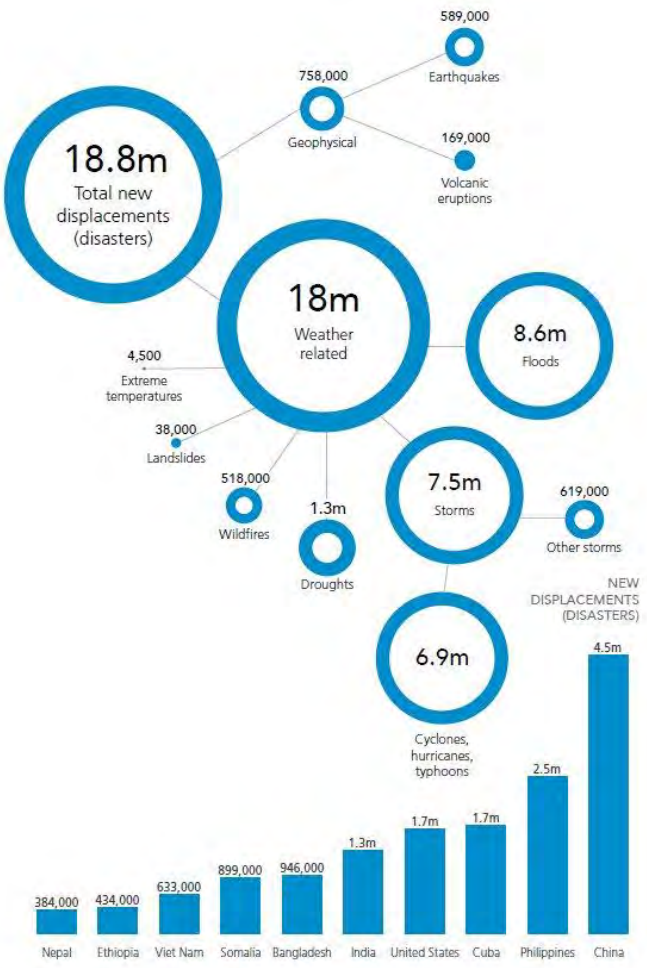

CANADA, UNITED STATES
2017. Canadian province of British Columbia suffered the loss of almost 900,000 hectares - its worst-ever wildfire season. The unprecedented year has seen 1,029 fires across the province, costing C$315.7 million to date.[68]
2017. USA Midwest, Pacific Northwest, Alaska and California hit by a series of devastating wildfires over the summer. The most recent fires in October affected California - 22 wildfires covered 69,000 hectares - a collective area larger than the city of Chicago. By 11 October, 23 people were dead, hundreds missing and 4,500 homes and businesses destroyed in the State, with fires still spreading.[69]
ARCTIC
2017. In July sea ice was 16.1% below the 1981-2010 average – the fifth lowest July sea ice extent since satellite records began in 1979.[70]
UNITED KINGDOM
2016. The UK received 152% of its average rainfall during January: the 4th wettest January since records began in 1910.[77]
UNITED STATES, THE CARIBBEAN
2017. In September Hurricane Harvey caused catastrophic flooding in south-eastern Texas and southeastern Louisiana.[71] Hurricane Irma, which followed straight after, was one of the strongest storms in history and had a devastating impact on many Caribbean islands, before turning to Florida. The two hurricanes left dozens of casualties, displacing thousands and causing huge economic disruption.[72]
EUROPE
2017. Parts of Southern Europe suffered severe drought, with the situation in Corsica reaching near-record precipitation deficits. The rainfall deficit contributed to serious wildfires across the region at the end of July.[78]
2016. In June France, Belgium and Germany experienced heavy rains that caused floods, resulting in significant damage and at least 18 deaths.[79]
HAITI
2016. In September Hurricane Matthew caused at least 546 deaths and 438 persons were injured in Haiti.[74] After crossing Haiti, Matthew tracked north and went on to cause damage in Cuba and the Bahamas, before tracking along the east coast of the United States and making landfall in South Carolina, causing major flooding.[75]
MEXICO
2016. Mexico had its warmest year on record.[73]
SIERRA LEONE, MALI
2017. Sierra Leone witnessed disastrous landslides near the capital Freetown. The increasing rainfall in August was over 300% of normal.[80]
2016. Mali. In July high rainfall in the Sahel led to significant flooding in the Niger River basin, with the river reaching its highest levels in about 50 years in Mali.[81] This led to 12 people dying and almost 10,000 left temporarily homeless.[82]
BOLIVIA
2016. Bolivia experienced its worst drought in the past 25 years.[76]
SOUTHERN AFRICA
2016. The year started with an extreme heat wave in southern Africa, exacerbating the ongoing drought. The drought caused a 9.3 million tonne shortfall in regional maize production.[83] All-time heat records were reached in January: in Pretoria, 42.7°C, and Johannesburg, 38.9°C.[84]


RUSSIA
2017. A cyclonic depression caused extreme precipitation, with 185% of monthly average rainfall falling in the last two days of June, causing casualties and economic disruption.[91]
NORTH KOREA
2016. In August Typhoon Lionrock caused destructive flooding in North Korea.[96] It is estimated that more than 130 people died and at least 100,000 were displaced.[97]
CHINA
2017. Tropical Cyclone Hato brought high winds and rain to Hong Kong and Macau on 23 August, causing devastation in Macau in particular.[87]
2016. The Yangtze basin in China had its most significant summer floods since 1999,[88] with the rainfall over the middle and lower Yangtze region being 140% of average in April to July.[89] The floods killed 310 people and caused an estimated US$ 14 billion in damage.[90]
JAPAN
2017. The Tropical Storm Nanmadol was associated with torrential rainfall in southern Japan. The city of Hamada in Shimane, saw hourly precipitation of over 90 mm on 6 July; leading to an advisory evacuation of nearly 60,000 residents in affected areas.[98]
BANGLADESH, INDIA
2017. Bangladesh. In May Tropical Cyclone Mora caused considerable damage and some casualties. This was followed throughout June by heavy monsoon rainfall, which caused severe flooding and contributed to deadly mudslides. Nearly 900,000 people were affected by floods as of 5 July.[92]
2017. India. As of 24 August, 32.1 million people have been affected by flooding across Assam, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. More than 600 people are known to have died.[93]
FIJI
2016. Cyclone Winston was the most severe tropical cyclone on record to affect the country.[99] 44 people lost their lives[100] and more than 56,000 people – an equivalent of 40% of Fiji's population – lost their homes and were forced to live in rudimentary, temporary shelters.[101] 350,000 were affected.[102]
KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN, GREATER HORN OF AFRICA
2016/2017. Extreme droughts continued to devastate the Greater Horn of Africa, with up to 24 million people facing critical food insecurity.[85]
2017. The Kingdom of Bahrain had its highest July mean and maximum temperature on record. The nation's July minimum temperature was the third highest on record.[86]
SRI LANKA
2016. In May, flooding and landslides in Sri Lanka, caused by Tropical Storm Roanu[94], left more than 200 people dead or missing, and displaced several hundred thousand.[95]
AUSTRALIA
2017. Australia had the second driest June on record, with rainfall 62% below average for the country as a whole.[103]
GREAT BARRIER REEF
2016. Abnormal temperatures contributed to a coral mortality of up to 50% in parts of the Great Barrier Reef.[104]


All SDGs impact internal displacement
Internal displacement impacts all SDGs
Conflict and violence displaced 11.8 million people in 2017. Internal displacement can also facilitate the recruitment of IDPs by armed groups.
The scale and intensity of internal displacement can be reduced by dedicated policies, greater national accountability, increased participation and specific progress monitoring.
IDPs are often the poorest in their countries, as many had to leave belongings and work behind. Internal displacement also implies additional costs for host communities and aid providers.
Internal displacement affects food security if food is no longer produced in regions of origin and resources are strained in areas of refuge.
IDPs' physical and mental health is often affected by displacement. Health facilities may be strained in host areas; coverage and quality may diminish.
Displaced children may be out of school for months or years. Children in host communities may suffer from lower quality of education if classrooms are overfilled.
Women tend to suffer most from lack of infrastructure in temporary settlements. Displacement can also increase gender-based violence.
Camps often provide limited access to water, sanitation and energy. Basic infrastructure in host communities may be overused and suffer shortages.
IDPs often leave their source of income behind and must find work in their host area, pressuring the local labour market. Reduced productivity, consumption, exports and taxes harm the economy.
Resilient infrastructure and sustainable industries may help limit the scale of disaster-induced displacement.
IDPs should be able to enjoy the same rights and opportunities as their compatriots but often suffer from inequality and discrimination.
Urban systems can be stretched by the sudden and unplanned arrival of IDPs in cities. Informal settlements, urban poverty and further displacement risk can increase. Many countries are facing challenges to cope with urban displacement.
Unsustainable use of natural resources, environmental degradation and climate change already push millions of people from their homes and will likely cause more displacement in the coming years.
1 NO POVERTY
2 ZERO HUNGER
3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
4 QUALITY EDUCATION
5 GENDER EQUALITY
6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION
7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY
8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH
9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES
11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES
12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION
13 CLIMATE ACTION
14 LIFE BELOW WATER
15 LIFE ON LAND
16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS
17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

Displacement in Numbers

In 2017, 30.6 million new people have been internally displaced, 18.8 million of them (61%) due to extreme weather events and disasters, predominantly floods and tropical storms (85%). Of these 18.8 million, 8.6 million are located in Asia and the Pacific, and 2.8 million in South Asia alone: and this does not include migration due to slow-onset events. Not since the end of the Second World War have so many people been on the move world-wide, and the numbers are only projected to rise.



Sudden-onset impacts are extreme weather events like floods, droughts, or tropical storms; slow-onset impacts are rising sea levels, the contamination of freshwater supplies, soil degradation, increasing temperatures, erratic rainfall patterns, and desertification. Both kinds of impacts deprive vulnerable populations of their access to safe drinking water, their food security, vital infrastructure, and livelihoods, which in turn serves to further increase their vulnerability.

The number of climate migrants is predicted to become six times higher between 2020 and 2050, and one in every four internal migrants could be a climate migrant. Tens of millions of people in South Asia will be forced to move internally due to slow-onset impacts of climate change, leaving their homes when the rains become unreliable, the soil is no longer fertile or floods and storm surges threaten their lives.

It is likely that future climate migration will follow the existing migration patterns both within countries and between them. Migration is not always negative and can in fact be a proactive solution and a successful adaptation strategy: but in most cases, the forced displacement of farmers, their families, and poor rural populations only increases their vulnerability and place a heavy strain on the areas to which they migrate.

Solution case study: Bangladesh and 'Climate-friendly towns'

Bangladesh is not only confronted with the crisis of Rohingya refugees fleeing a brutal military crackdown in neighbouring Myanmar, but it is also dealing with the effects of climate migration.

In particular, the low-lying country's south-western areas struggle disproportionally with the adverse effects of climate change on sectors such as agriculture and health, as well as access to resources such as water.

Hundreds of thousands of people in Bangladesh have been affected by coastal flooding and river erosion, with the majority of those uprooted ending up in informal settlements in the capital, Dhaka. In a recent report, the Dhaka based International Centre for Climate Change and Development proposed the setting up of climate funds on the local level in order to support resettlement practices and strategies.

The ICCD is working making this process easier for migrants by working to create "climate-resilient, migrant-friendly" towns. It has identified a dozen inland towns which are far away from low-lying coastal areas and have populations of about 500,000 that can be increased to about 1,500,000 and transformed into climate-resilient towns.

Huq said the centre wants to turn what is seen as the negative phenomenon of climate displacement into a positive development. As part of the project, a

number of initiatives aim to prepare the inhabitants of the identified towns to help migrants reintegrate in their new environment and make them feel welcome. Newly arrived migrants will be supported by local communities in ways that are compatible with their traditional cultural practices, Huq said.

The ICCD is also encouraging and supporting students from vulnerable coastal areas to move inland for studies. "By providing scholarships, we are encouraging students to move from low-lying coastal areas, with the hope that their parents will follow them to the climate-resilient towns".

Questions a resolution must answer:

- What needs do those displaced by climate have? How can these be met?
- How can Member States take measures to respect, protect, and fulfil all human rights without discrimination and to provide access to protection and justice for those compelled to move as a result of climate change - in transit, at international borders and upon arrival?
- How can Member States improve multilateral cooperation to strengthen social protection systems? · How can Member States work together and share innovation, technology transfer and expertise and localised capacity building to help with the preparedness for natural disasters and extreme weather events, including slow-onset events?
- How can Member States include people affected in all deliberations and future negotiations, and give a voice to local communities and the most vulnerable and disenfranchised on our planet?
- Should the UNHCR recognise 'climate refugees' - if so, what additional provisions and support from Member States is required?

Questions to consider?

- Could climate change lead to citizens of your country becoming climate refugees, or becoming the likely destination of climate refugees from other countries?
- Does your country have the resources to support its citizens against the possible impacts of climate change?
- Does your country have the resources to support citizens of other countries against the possible impacts of climate change?

Useful links

https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health