

Defining environmental refugees

Written by Madi Sharma on 10 May 2019 in Opinion
Opinion

Environmental refugees will find themselves in increasingly vulnerable situations because there is currently no terminology to define them, writes Madi Sharma.

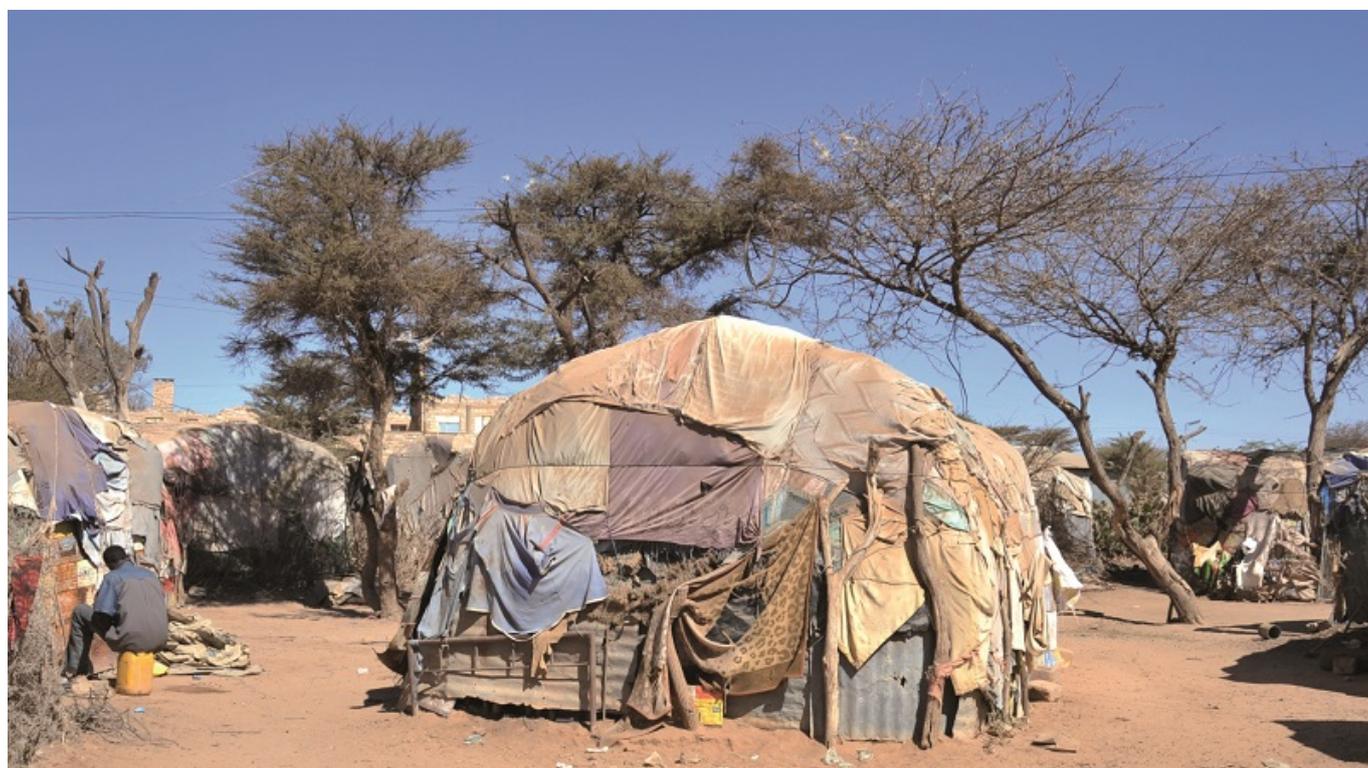


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As wildfires ravage neighbourhoods, droughts and changing weather patterns impact food supply, hurricanes wipe out entire islands and rising water levels flood homes, there has been a dramatic increase in environmental refugees.

The number of people forced to flee their homes is expected to increase to 200 million by 2050 as the effects of climate change worsen.

Of this, nearly 80 percent are expected to be women and children.

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To make matters worse, this growing migrant group will find themselves in increasingly vulnerable situations because there is currently no terminology to define them, meaning they lack the protection and rights guaranteed to other categories of refugees.

The current framework for international refugee protection stems from the 1951 Refugee Convention, a definition that only addresses forms of overt persecution by other people or groups.

There have been significant changes over the 68 years since this convention was written, including a recognition of the worsening effects of climate change.

However, without a term that encompasses these individuals in the 1951 Refugee Convention, their status will never be recognised by law.

"This growing migrant group will find themselves in increasingly vulnerable situations because there is currently no terminology to define them, meaning they lack the protection and rights guaranteed to other categories of refugees"

This makes them highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Acknowledging the existence of a new category of refugees challenges the longstanding existing assumptions of why people move.

To adapt to the emerging concept of the environmental refugee means breaking from the simplistic notion that a "migrant" voluntarily moves for work and a "refugee" is forced to move due to persecution.

Environmental refugees, in turn, are indeed forced to move, but without the overt persecution necessary to qualify for protection under the current law.

Thus, acknowledging the plight of environmental refugees is to acknowledge that attempting to categorise why people move is becoming increasingly murky.

There is justified concern from those advocating for an amendment to the 1951 text that by reopening the terms and definitions of this broadly-ratified document would create an opportunity for governments to further refine the definition, thus excluding more individuals seeking asylum.

The general response to this uncertainty has come in the form of a rigid and unmoving adherence to the existing law.

The existing frameworks and international organisations have, thus far, not been willing or able to recognise the needs of environmental refugees.

The global effort to add “organised migration and planned relocation” to the Paris Agreement was vehemently opposed by Australia and was ultimately not included.

This also accounts for the unwillingness of many EU states to expand the categories of people to be included in the term “refugee,” because expanding the definition will inevitably require these states to offer greater rights to a growing number of people.

While talk of definitions and attempted groupings of people may appear unimportant, the consequences of this indecisiveness are seriously affecting environmental refugees, particularly women, every day.

Without a consensus on how to define climate refugees, multiple terms are used, each with its own implication.

Since there is no linkage to current terms, existing refugee rights cannot be implemented and since there is no definition, it is impossible to create future rights for these individuals.

EU Member States cannot ignore requests from developing countries that have urged the EU to grant environmental refugees the same status as political refugees.

Considering the rate at which the number of environmental refugees is expected to grow, initiatives are urgently needed to give this new category of refugees effective rights and protection.

About the author

Madi Sharma is a member of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

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