

Climate Justice and Migration: Position Statement

As members of the Climate Justice and Migration Working Group of the Mobilization for Climate Justice, we represent national and international faith-based, human rights and immigrant rights organizations concerned with climate change and its effect on migration around the world.

We acknowledge the implications of the ways in which governmental policies and corporate practices impact communities around the world, especially those most vulnerable. We also acknowledge and are concerned about national responses to the increasing phenomena of global migration that prioritize national security concerns and immigration restrictions, including for those who are forced to migrate.

It is estimated that between 25 and 50 million people have already been displaced due to environmental factors,ⁱ and that number could rise to 150 million by 2050.ⁱⁱ These “environmental refugees” suffer from the repercussions of our environmental practices and policies.

For example, desertification has severely threatened traditional agricultural practices of indigenous communities. People will migrate when land can no longer sustain the nutritional needs of their communities. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) representative Massimo Candelori has reported that the combined effect of climate variation and unsustainable agricultural practices causes erosion and soil depletion, which leads to meager harvests. Chacaltaya, a “dead glacier” in Bolivia that as recently as a decade ago was the highest ski slope in the world, has now melted into rocky soil that cannot support the traditional farming practices of its inhabitants. A staple food made by crushing and freeze-drying potatoes has become difficult to make without the low temperatures necessary for this process. Instead of being able to sustain themselves with their crops and sell the surplus, these Bolivian farmers face hunger as their harvests diminish; a casualty of climate change.ⁱⁱⁱ This and similar phenomena affect the traditional lifestyles of a range of citizens, and have led to the movement of peoples throughout Latin America.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, climate change may cut the amount of available food by 500 calories per person by 2050, a 21 percent decline that will cause malnutrition for 19 million children. This strain on healthcare facilities and economy will come from the failing rice, wheat, and maize yields, which may decline by up to 14 percent, 22 percent and five percent, respectively, as a result of climate change.^{iv} Africa will be especially vulnerable to these environmental strains because it lacks the resources and infrastructure to adapt traditional agricultural practices to new weather patterns and soil conditions. Most of African agriculture is rain-fed rather than irrigated, so it is vulnerable to both floods and droughts caused by climate change. Instead, individuals who can no longer feed themselves and their families will seek new land to cultivate. This process is already well underway in Sudan, where the expanding desert has pushed communities to neighboring territories.^v There, they are perceived as a burden on the already-strained local economies and are susceptible to the violent conflict intensified by competition for increasingly scarce resources.

Sri Lankans report unpredictable weather patterns induced by climate change; these have caused droughts in the southeast while the western regions suffer from heavy rainfall and monsoons.

Extreme weather conditions, such as the flash floods that hit the Vavuniya and Mannar districts of Sri Lanka in August 2009, threaten the economic and personal wellbeing of those who must consider relocating. Camps hold 260,000 Sri Lankans who are already displaced by ethnic war and who must relocate for a second time. The flooding and close quarters also severely increase the risk of infectious disease.^{vi} Indeed, these extreme weather conditions threaten the economic and personal wellbeing of all Sri Lankans.

As the sea level rises, it threatens to engulf entire island nations. In the Carteret Islands the sea is now contaminating scarce fresh water resources and the residents are more reliant on imports and foreign aid for food. The food they receive has a high sugar content which has led to serious health concerns, such as diabetes.^{vii} Climate change has already had an effect on the health and economies of residents in many regions. Bangladesh and coastal cities are especially vulnerable to increases in sea-level.

These repercussions, disproportionately caused by wealthy nations, take their highest toll on the poorest nations. For example, Anwarul Karim Chowdhury, the U.N. High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, estimated in 2007 that about one third of Least Developed Countries are threatened by rising sea levels, and have large proportions of their populations living in low-elevation coastal areas.^{viii} Often these countries do not have the capacity to cope with the destabilizing factors of climate change.

Understanding that climate change jeopardizes the traditional homes, lifestyles, health and means of survival for many around the world, we call for:

- The international protection of the human rights of people displaced due to environmental factors, including recognition of refugee status and guarantee of all corresponding rights and accommodations achieved through support and expansion of international rights agreements on refugees, the internally displaced and migrants, as well as the formulation of multilateral migration agreements.
- Recognition of the right of human mobility.
- Increased policy and public awareness of environmental refugee and migration issues, including investment in further research drawing the link between environmentally degrading practices, climate change, and migration.
- Provision of a legal framework and financial assistance to allow migrants displaced from their home countries entrance to other countries.
- International recognition of the ways in which climate change has impinged on the rights of nations, as outlined by United Nations conventions.
- Provision for nations whose security is threatened by the disappearance of habitable land. As these “disappearing states” lose territory, we affirm the right of every nation to sovereignty.

- A reduction of domestic carbon emissions, mindful of the ways in which our energy use endangers the environment internationally. We ask that the US and other developed nations model environmental responsibility by adhering to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's suggestions, which indicate that the global community must reduce emissions by between 25 and 40 percent by 2020 and by a minimum of 80 percent by 2050, below a 1990 baseline, in order to remain sustainable.

The issue of migration and displacement due to climate change continues to grow in its importance. We have already witnessed its effects and we will continue to see its consequences in the years to come. Action must be taken now to reduce the negative results and produce positive outcomes for current and potential environmental refugees.

CONTACT

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- Columban Center for Advocacy & Outreach
- Medical Mission Sisters Alliance for Justice
- National Network for Immigrant & Refugee Rights (NNIRR)
- Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
- Rise Up

ENDORSERS:

Other organizational endorsers of the Climate Justice & Migration Position Statement:

- Alliance for Human Rights Legislation for Immigrant Rights
- Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN)
- Border Agricultural Workers
- Center of Concern
- Climate Justice Project, Institute for Social Ecology
- Concerned Migrants Group (CMG)
- Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM)
- December 18
- East Bay Alliance for Sustainable Economy (EBASE)
- Education Not Incarceration, San Francisco Chapter
- Fuerza Mundial
- Grassroots Global Justice (GGJ)
- Holy Cross International Justice Office
- Idriss Stelley Foundation
- International Indian Treaty Council

- Jubilee Montana Network
- Missionary Society of St Columban Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation, Central Office
- Movement Generation: Justice & Ecology Project
- Pax Christi
- Portland Jobs with Justice
- Praxis Project
- Southwest Workers Union (SWU)
- Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC)
- The Leadership Conference of Women Religious

ⁱ Polk, T. (2009). Climate Change and Forced Migration: The Gathering Storm. In P. McMullan (Ed.), *Change: The Agenda for Mission Today* (pp. 100-142). Korea: Dulsum Nalsum. Page 102.

ⁱⁱ Vidal, J. (2009, November 3). Global warming could create 150 million 'climate refugees' by 2050. *The Guardian*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chávez, F. (2009, October 28). Climate Change-Bolivia: Climbing a 'dead' glacier. *Inter Press Service*.

^{iv} Godoy, J. (2009, October 13). Africa: Climate Change Worsening Farming's Trade-Related Woes. *Inter Press Service*.

^v Vidal, J. (2009, November 3). Global warming could create 150 million 'climate refugees' by 2050. *The Guardian*.

^{vi} Perera, A. (2009, September 30). Sri Lanka: Mixed Hopes amid Unpredictable Weather. *Inter Press Service*.

^{vii} Polk, T. (2009). Climate Change and Forced Migration: The Gathering Storm. In P. McMullan (Ed.), *Change: The Agenda for Mission Today* (pp. 100-142). Korea: Dulsum Nalsum. Page 108.

^{viii} Deen, T. (2007, May 23). UN Braces for New Breed of Refugees. *Inter Press Service*.