

The Question of Climate Refugees

In September 2022, the International Environmental Partnership predicted that as many as 1.2 billion people could be displaced by climate change by 2050. From rising sea levels eating up land in the Ganges Delta to desert sands advancing across the Sahel, the effects of climate change are rendering lands millions have called home for generations inhospitable, and the foreshocks of climate-induced mass migration are already being felt. While nations worldwide are taking steps to mitigate the extent of global warming, the unprecedented numerical and geographical scale of climate-induced migration requires answers to the issues arising from it.

To begin with, there is not even a formally agreed definition of who qualifies as a climate refugee, nor any international framework of how they should be processed and absorbed, something delegates of ECAFF will have to address. Furthermore, some have called for wealthier nations to take in climate refugees from overwhelmingly poorer countries, or else commit funds to resettling and providing for them; the migrant crisis of 2015, however, and more recently the war in Ukraine have shown the difficulties and tensions that arise from large-scale refugee arrivals, and issues over liability for displacement and accusations of “ecocide” will doubtless provoke further controversy. Of particular concern also are cases where entire nations, like the Maldives and Tuvalu, may become climate refugees, where questions of resettlement (as proposed for Maldivians in India), nationhood and sovereignty will need to be radically resolved.

As with so much else in the young Anthropocene, the issue of climate refugees is without precedent in both concept and scale, and, if not addressed properly, could see worldwide starvation, statelessness, and war. The solutions delegates construct must aim to avert this and build an architecture of stability and safety for those displaced by climate change.