



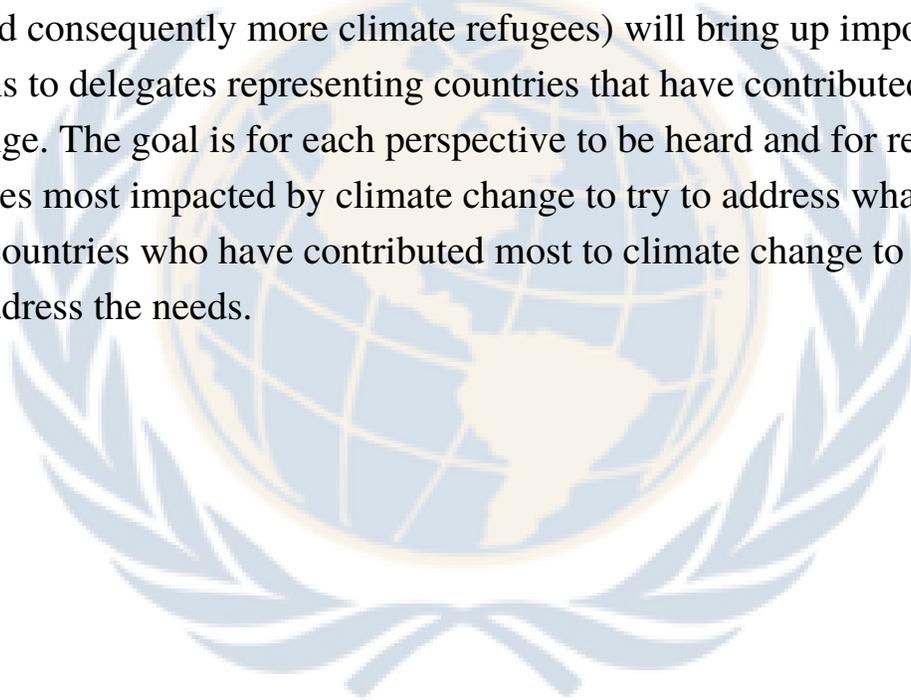
## BACKGROUND GUIDE

# *WAMUNC XXIV*

United Nations Environmental  
Programme

# *COMMITTEE OVERVIEW*

In this committee, we'll be discussing a wide range of issues surrounding climate change and climate refugees. One of the most important topics we'll need to begin with is defining what a climate refugee is, as the definition is widely contested. Next, we'll start talking about which countries have contributed the most to the climate disaster and which have suffered as a result of those actions. We'll discuss the responsibilities associated with rebuilding and repairing harm that has previously been done. Hopefully, delegates from countries with many climate disasters (and consequently more climate refugees) will bring up important conversations to delegates representing countries that have contributed the most to climate change. The goal is for each perspective to be heard and for representatives from countries most impacted by climate change to try to address what they need most & for countries who have contributed most to climate change to provide or otherwise address the needs.



# *LETTER FROM THE CHAIR*

Dear Esteemed Delegates,

I hope you're doing well and welcome to WAMUNC XXIV! My name is Arielle Geismar and I'll be your Chair for the UNEP! I'm studying International Affairs and Communications at the George Washington University and am currently a sophomore.

I've been doing Model UN since middle school and it's given me a wonderful opportunity to research, analyze, and connect with different topics concerning our world today. We're going to have a wonderful and productive session and I can't wait to dive into the topics together! This subject matter is incredibly important so I urge you to research your position thoroughly. While this is a powerful experience in practicing diplomacy, the issues we'll be grappling with are real and impact real people, so I urge you to be mindful of this. I know we'll have a meaningful conversation and I hope you leave this conference knowing you have the power to create change on this issue and so much more. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

All the best,

Arielle Geismar

# *BACKGROUND GUIDE*

## What is the UNEP?

Welcome to the United Nations Environment Programme, or the UNEP. The UNEP is the UN's authority on climate change, the environment, advocate for the environment, and promotes the environmental aspects of sustainable development for the United Nations. The self-proclaimed goal is to empower participating nations and peoples to coordinate action to protect the environment. Their headquarters are in Nairobi, Kenya. The UNEP categorizes its work into seven thematic areas: climate change, disasters and conflicts, ecosystem management, environmental governance, chemicals and waste, resource efficiency, and environment under review. The UNEP works with its 193 member states and representatives from civil societies, businesses, and other major stakeholders.

## History of Climate Change

Climate Change refers to long-term changes in the environment that occur over a period of time. Currently, the climate is increasingly unstable and less predictable. This is mostly due to the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas. As the world continues to deplete available resources, the earth has chemical reactions to humanity's actions. For example, the greenhouse effect, a result of burning fossil fuels, describes how gasses in the Earth's atmosphere prevent heat generated in our atmosphere from escaping, thus causing temperatures to rise.

Temperatures rising even 1°C can have catastrophic impacts on life as we know it. Unfortunately, previous actions have already caused irreversible damage. This damage manifests in natural disasters, such as floods, droughts, hurricanes, and more. These natural disasters often affect already vulnerable populations and cause mass fatalities. According to the WHO, 24% of all global deaths are linked to the environment. As a direct result of these natural disasters, damage done to these vulnerable populations have created climate refugees,

A blanket term used to describe individuals and groups who have to flee their location of origin because of climate change. Our topic in this committee is focused on helping that population.

However, just because damage has already been done doesn't mean that we can't work to prevent further damage. There is still time to prevent further harm to the planet.

## What are Environmental Refugees?

Before we get into the definitions of environmental refugees as defined by the United Nations, it's important to review some vocabulary surrounding the issue.

Types of Migration:

- Return Migration : Migration that fits into either voluntary or involuntary return.
  - Voluntary return is the return of a migrant to the location of origin. This must be a voluntary decision for the returnee.
    - Spontaneous Return: the voluntary independent return of a migrant to their country of origin, usually without proper assistance of a state or international system
    - Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: The support given to migrants willing or able to return to their country of origin
    - Voluntary Humanitarian Return: The next step of assisted voluntary return, “often represents a life-saving measure for migrants who are stranded or in detention”
    - Involuntary: Migrants do not have an option whether or not they'd like to return
    - Seasonal Migration : Migration according to a schedule or circumstance
    - Economic Migration : Migration in pursuit of economic opportunities or fleeing lack of economic opportunities.
    - Political Migration: To escape persecution on the basis of political belief, practice, or system, or to escape war or the effects of such.

- Social Migration : To flee a country due to social exile, in pursuit of a higher quality of life or to be closer to family or friends
- Environmental Migration : To escape an unstable climate or the effects of a natural disaster or migrate in pursuit of a more stable climate

#### Factors of Migration:

- Destination
  - When someone moves within a country or across country lines. Dependent on the destination.
- Duration
  - Seasonal, semi-permanent, and permanent migration. Depending on the amount of time the individual is to stay in the host country or away from the country they have fled.
- Causes
  - Environmental, political, social, and economic reasons for migration are all causes someone may migrate.
- Choice
  - Voluntary or involuntary migration. Dependent on whether or not the migrant has a choice.

#### Adjectives for Moving Individuals

- Migrants
  - A migrant is someone who has left their home and is relocating (this can be either in their home country or across international borders.) Migrants do not have fear of persecution driving their decisions - this would be a refugee or asylum seeker.
- Immigrants
  - An immigrant is someone who makes the decision to leave their country of origin and cross an international border with the intention of settling in another location, for any period of time semi-permanent.

- Refugees
  - A Refugee is someone who must flee their home because of unexpected conflict. They cannot return until their needs are able to be met in their home. An official entity must declare someone a refugee.
- Asylum seekers
  - An Asylum seeker is someone who is under similar circumstances as a refugee, but whose status as refugee has not yet been legally declared. With the title of “refugee” comes certain legal implications. An asylum seeker is someone whose label does not yet have a conclusion.
- Environmental Migrants:
  - Environmental Migrants are people or groups of people who, mostly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.
- Environmentally Displaced Persons:
  - Environmentally Displaced Persons are people who are displaced within their country of habitual residence or who have crossed an international border and for whom environmental degradation, deterioration or destruction is a major cause of their displacement, although not necessarily the sole one.
- Disaster Displacement:
  - This term refers to situations where people are forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of a disaster or in order to avoid the impact of an immediate and foreseeable natural hazard.
- Planned Relocation:
  - Refers to situations where people flee or are displaced across borders in the context of sudden- or slow-onset disasters, or in the context of the effects of climate change.

Push and Pull factors are external factors that drive people to and away from a place. Push factors are those that drive people away from a place, such as religious or ethnic persecution, lack of social stability, war, lack of economic opportunity, or specific events and the effects of a natural disaster like the 2005 Hurricane Katrina in the United States or the 2010 Haiti Earthquake. Pull factors are those that drive people towards a place, such as economic opportunity, climate stability, political affiliation, or cultural similarity.

Now that we've gotten a better understanding of the terminology that goes into the issue surrounding climate refugees, we can better approach defining a climate refugee. The definition of a climate refugee is widely debated and not synchronous across governing bodies. This means that it is more difficult for climate refugees to receive assistance. The term "climate refugees" are not entirely covered by international law, thus they are incredibly vulnerable. Some researchers believe that the definition of "climate refugee" should include, "forced migration, temporary or permanent relocation, movement across the borders, disruption consistent with climate change, sudden or gradual environment disruption, and a more likely standard for human contribution to the disruption". Delegates from present countries should engage in meaningful conversation on how to define a climate refugee and include these various phrases in their conversations.

Another consideration around the definition of a climate refugee is the duration of the event. Should a climate refugee status be granted to someone fleeing from a single disaster or only a series of disasters? What if their country of origin is highly likely to have repeat disasters but they have not yet occurred? If they are given such status, whether permanent or temporary, should they be forced to return to their country of origin after the disaster? If so, what time period or rebuilding circumstances warrant a mandatory return?

To discuss this return, there are three major considerations. The first is a legal impediment. Is there a legal basis for this person to get political standing as a climate refugee and all that comes with that definition? Will the climate refugees return to an environment that puts them at risk of having their human rights violated? The second is a factual impediment. This means there is a physical barrier (such as resources and money) and there are no means to resource people to relocate. The final consideration is a humanitarian impediment - where there are humanitarian considerations and grounds for not returning someone to their country of origin. Should these be the only three? Are there other impediments you find to be valid? Discussion on this topic is encouraged.

## Past International Agreements

In 1992, the international community began conversations in Rio de Janeiro with the UN Conference on Environment and Development. The first significant mistake of Rio was failing to introduce any binding legislation, which occurred again in Kyoto in 1997. The conference in Rio did not contain any specific targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and only focused on greenhouse gas emissions. It is widely regarded as a failure for what it set out to accomplish, which was concrete action on climate change prevention strategies and policies. According to experts, “Rio did not produce enough binding new principles of international environmental law sufficient to protect the environment”.

The purpose of the Kyoto conference was to cover the gaps that the Rio conference did not address. The USA and Canada, among others, are not party to the Kyoto Protocol. While it was created in 1997, it was not enacted in 2005, effectively halving the allotted time to complete the goals. The Kyoto protocol did not sufficiently address the climate change actions needed. The only focus was reducing greenhouse gasses and did not address environmental refugees.

On December 12, 2015, the international community came together to ratify the Paris Climate Agreement. However, the Paris agreement had significant shortfalls. With no binding commitments and no action plan, it is unlikely that the goals the Paris accord set forth will be accomplished. The Agreement hopes wealthier countries will commit funds to marginalized countries but sets no requirements. The goal of the Paris Agreement was to prevent warming beyond 1.5°C, but according to scientists, there is a “catastrophic” shortfall - even if every single clause was enacted perfectly, it would only reduce warming to 3°C. No mention of environmental refugees were made in the Paris agreement. Delegates should come to committee with a depth of knowledge about these three pieces of legislation and what they do and do not include to further the effectiveness of their resolutions.

## Existing Important Documents from the UN

Unfortunately, in legal terms of documents in the United Nations, the right to a healthy and safe environment has not been specified. However, in October of 2021, the United Nations took a momentous step and declared that having a healthy environment is a human right by the UN Human Rights Council. The commission noted significant pressure from civil rights organizations, youth groups, human rights institutions, Indigenous peoples’ organizations, and many more.

In 1972, the Stockholm Declaration regarding the UN Conference on the Human Environment found a “fundamental right to freedom, equality and all adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and wellbeing”. In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child notes rights for children to combat disease and malnutrition and mentions clean drinking water, “taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution”. In 1998, the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement provided a foundation for victims of climate disaster who do not cross an international border. Should refugees have to refrain from crossing an international border to get help?

What if they do? In 2008, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights found the requirements to be proven before climate change is a human rights violation. They are: 1) proving one country's emissions are harming another country, 2) showing human rights violations are caused solely by global warming, and 3) noting the human rights framework is in response to human rights violations whereas climate change is concerned with potential future harm. Do you as representatives of your countries agree that climate change is a future harm?

In this committee, delegates should come prepared to debate definitions and policy. Hopefully, this committee leaves with resolutions that properly address both climate change and the climate refugee crisis. This background guide should serve as a jumping off point into further research.

## Questions to Answer

- How do we define a climate refugee?
- Should resourced countries be required to accept climate refugees?
- What responsibilities do companies contributing to climate change have to address this problem?
- When climate refugees relocate to new places, should they be permanent residents or return to their country of origin eventually? If they are to be permanent residents, how will the international community continue to take care of them? If they are to move back, how can the international community ensure their wellbeing?

## Further Reading

- The Convention relating to the Status of Refugees - 1951
- The International Conference on Population and Development - 1994
- The Kyoto Protocol - 1997
- The Paris COP21 Agreement
- The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
- The UN General Assembly Declaration for Refugees and Migrants - 2016

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