

Our Position Paper on:



IN A NUTSHELL

People become refugees for many reasons. War, political persecution and intolerance of sexuality or religion force people from their homes, livelihoods and land. Environmental problems like droughts, floods, and the food shortages they cause also create refugees. The UK is a stable, tolerant, and compassionate country, and we should take a lead in welcoming our fair share of these people in need. But we must also tackle the bigger issues – including climate change – that drive people to such desperate measures.

THE FACTS

- 1 An environmental refugee is someone who has been forced to leave their home because of an environmental issue.** It could be that recovery from a large-scale event, such as flooding, has been ineffective or is taking too long. Alternatively, 'slow onset events' such as soil erosion may be making their livelihood impossible. Environmental refugees do not have legal rights under the UN Refugee Convention.
- 2 It's hard to say how many environmental refugees there are because environmental problems often sit alongside other issues forcing people from their homes, such as conflict.** Estimates suggest that over 40 million environmental refugees already exist – and if ongoing threats to our environment and climate aren't dealt with, they will drive this up substantially over coming decades.
- 3 Non-environmental reasons for people becoming refugees include conflict (1.5 billion people live in conflict areas or unstable countries) and intolerance (it is still illegal to be gay in 75 countries).**

THE PROBLEM

Many events can force someone to become a refugee. Many of these are preventable. Intolerant societies can change. Armed conflicts can be averted. However, these changes rely on political will that is sadly often lacking.

Refugees from conflict or persecution have legal rights under the UN Refugee Convention. But people fleeing from droughts, desertification, rising sea levels and floods are not legally recognised as refugees and do not have international legal protection.

Some increase in extreme weather events, such as storms and floods, is now inevitable due to climate change. Although there is much that governments could do to reduce the impact on people, and reduce the need for people to leave their homes, developing countries aren't getting the help they need. Billions of pounds are needed to put protections in place, but wealthier countries are refusing to provide this money despite being most responsible for climate change.

We will see more environmental refugees in the future. The UK Government currently appears unwilling to accept many refugees of conflict, let alone environmental refugees. Some politicians and sections of the media are even stirring up toxic media debates to poison opinion against refugees.

WHAT WE THINK

Nobody leaves their home, possessions and community without good reason and becoming a refugee brings many risks and dangers. Countries need to take steps to address why people become refugees, including environmental refugees, and show greater compassion and support when people are forced to do so. This includes not stirring up suspicion or hostility towards refugees.

■ Reducing the drivers

Environmental degradation, such as droughts and flooding, intersects with unstable situations and can precipitate or exacerbate conflict. Addressing people's lack of personal security or access to justice, or income and power inequalities, and stemming the flow of weapons will help communities become more resilient to future environmental changes. But we must also reduce negative environmental changes themselves by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting land rights and introducing more sustainable farming methods, for example.

Providing developing countries with the money they need to make crucial adaptations to climate change and other environmental changes is also essential.

■ Supporting developing countries

Environmental refugees often travel from one part of their country to another or flee to a neighbouring country. These countries, particularly in the developing world, are not equipped to cope with these challenges.

The issue of climate displacement is being considered in global climate negotiations as part of discussions on 'loss and damage' – harm caused by climate change that cannot be

adapted to. Friends of the Earth is calling for a strong and fair outcome in these negotiations, including a legal and policy framework that protects climate refugees.

We believe that compensation and redress should be provided to vulnerable countries and communities for the losses they suffer from climate change now and in the future. This compensation should come from the wealthier nations that have most contributed to climate change, and include a carbon tax on fossil fuel companies.

■ Welcoming refugees

When refugees arrive in the EU and UK, they should be welcomed. As we see more droughts, floods and desertification over coming decades, we will need to accept our fair share of many more environmental refugees and refugees of conflict.

Environmental refugees should have the same legal rights as refugees of conflict and persecution, including a legal right to stay. They will bring net benefits to the country, including skills, cultural and economic benefits. However, they will need financial and practical support while they find their feet. This is currently lacking. Infrastructure plans, which must include many more energy-efficient homes and schools, need to take into account the future number of refugees.



KEY REFERENCES

Friends of the Earth's Policy Positions, including Cutting greenhouse gases, Climate change adaptation, Feeding the world, Housing:
www.foe.co.uk/page/friends-earth-policy-positions

Craig Bennett, Friends of the Earth CEO (2015), Failure to act on climate change means an even bigger refugee crisis:
www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/07/climate-change-global-warming-refugee-crisis

Friends of the Earth (2014), Climate change, poverty and environmental justice:
www.foe.co.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/climate-change-poverty-environmental-justice-46180.pdf

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Working Group II Report (2014), Chapter 12 – Human Security:
ipcc-wg2.gov/AR5/images/uploads/WGIIAR5-Chap12_FINAL.pdf

Dustmann and Frattini (2014), The Fiscal Effects of Immigration to the UK. The Economic Journal, 124:F593. doi: 10.1111/eoj.12181:
bit.ly/1x2YBLz

USEFUL LINKS

Safer World: www.saferworld.org.uk/

Refugee Action: www.refugee-action.org.uk/

Refugee Council: www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/

The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford:
www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

To give us feedback please visit: www.foe.co.uk/feedbackcomment.html



Our paper is totally recycled and our printers hold EMAS certification which means they care about the environment.

Friends of the Earth Trust, a registered charity. www.foe.co.uk
November 2015, 2241