

The total number of refugees and displaced persons is becoming a global concern. A range of geo-political stability questions and humanitarian interests are self-evident. But effective policy response needs to be based on well understood causes of cross-border and domestic migrations. This short paper focuses on developing an understanding of what is meant by the much used, confused, and over worked term "environmental refugees". A number of questions arise. For example, is there a need to consider redefining the internationally-agreed upon definition of a refugee to take into account a class of so-called environmental refugees? Moreover, how does one identify environmental refugees as opposed to environmental migrants or conventional refugees?

Refugees and Environmental Refugees

The international community, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), makes a distinction between a refugee and a displaced person. A refugee is a person who crosses an international border because of persecution.

The UNHCR stipulates that refugees are persons recognized to be outside their country and they include i) persons recognized as refugees by governments having signed the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, or the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) [C]onvention; ii) persons recognized as refugees under the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention governing the specific aspects of refugees problems in Africa and those recognized in accordance with the principles enshrined in the Cartagena Declaration; and iii) persons recognized by UNHCR as refugees according to the definition contained in the High Commissioner's Statute.¹

Hence, if no international border is crossed a person is not included in the international legal definition of a refugee. Secondly, if the persecution criteria is not met, a person also falls outside of this definition.² The criteria for persecution is set out in Article 1 A (2) of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as, a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion,

¹Shin-wa Lee, "In Limbo: Environmental Refugees in the Third World," paper for the NATO Advanced Workshop on the Environment and Conflict, Bolkesjic, Norway, 12-16 June 1996. p. 1.

²Canada is a Party to both the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol.