

SUBSCRIBER-ONLY NEWSLETTER

**The Interpreter**

## *Global Warming Is Bringing More Change Than Just Heat*

Climate change is already affecting the world in powerful ways. But it could also drive mass migration and reshape societies as its consequences add up.

**By Amanda Taub**

July 19, 2023

**You're reading The Interpreter newsletter, for Times subscribers only.** Original analysis on the week's biggest global stories, from columnist Amanda Taub. [Get it in your inbox.](#)

Climate change is here, heating the world today, with direct and devastating consequences on human lives, the environment and more.

But it will have rippling, domino-like consequences, too, just like other catastrophic events. The coronavirus pandemic not only left a death toll in the millions, it affected hundreds of millions through lockdown measures and transformations to work, and caused damage to individuals' health and health care systems that remains to be fully understood.

This year's powerful earthquakes in Turkey and Syria not only killed more than 20,000 people, they displaced thousands more and exposed systemic problems of corruption that continue to affect Turkish people.

So as climate change makes extreme weather more severe, threatening lives through intense heat and disastrous events, it also bears looking ahead to the ways it could reshape society — moving people and changing hierarchies and behaviors.

### **The problem with fears about 'climate refugees'**

Climate-related mass migration, and the political consequences it produces, may have profound consequences in addition to rising temperatures themselves. But when I first started thinking about the issue, I was extrapolating from what I knew about another kind of forced migration:

the refugee crises that result when people flee from persecution or conflict. And it turns out that wasn't the right way to think about the situation at all.

Refugees, under international law, are people who have been forced to flee their own countries because of persecution. That means that a lot of refugee policy debates are essentially about countries' obligations to vulnerable foreigners.

But climate change is most likely to displace people within their own countries, and drive them to seek protection from their own governments.

“When we talk about climate displacement, rather than thinking about future climate refugees across borders, we could already be thinking about people displaced by hurricanes or about more people displaced by fires in the United States,” said Stephanie Schwartz, a political scientist at the London School of Economics who studies forced migration. “It's hard to make that switch psychologically, because it's not other-ing refugees or migrants. It's ‘we could be refugees or migrants.’”

In some extreme cases, such as Pacific islands threatened by rising sea levels, internal migration might not be possible. And climate disasters can also exacerbate other causes of cross-border migration, such as violence or weak labor markets.

But research suggests that a lot of climate-related migration will amplify existing trends, such as people moving from rural areas to cities. The promise of urban jobs is already a lure for many people, and may become even stronger if droughts or other disasters make agriculture harder to make a living from — or more dangerous work to do in extreme heat.

Thinking about climate migration primarily as a domestic issue changes how you think about policy consequences, but also politics: Warnings about “climate refugees” coming to wealthy countries — or states or counties — can be useful to activists and politicians on all sides of the climate debate.

“For left-wing groups, it serves to raise attention to the issue of climate change, and the urgency to address this,” Hein de Haas, a professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam, wrote in an influential 2020 blog post. “For right-wing groups, it serves to raise the specter of future mass migration, and the need to step up border controls to prevent such an imagined deluge.”

Many political groups have found cause to push media coverage warning about a coming crisis of international climate migration.

But climate change will affect everyone — the emissions of heat-trapping gases, mainly caused by humanity's burning of fossil fuels, are heating the whole Earth, not just some countries. Migration within countries will require policy responses far broader and more varied than

border control, and will primarily be a matter of governments' responsibility to their own citizens.

Adding to that complexity, the issue may not be as simple as people moving from climate-affected areas to safer ones.

“People are as likely to migrate *to* places of environmental vulnerability as *from* these places,” a 2011 British government report found. “For example, compared to 2000, there may be between 114 and 192 million additional people living in floodplains in urban areas in Africa and Asia by 2060.”

And in some cases people may migrate from one form of risk to another: People might leave agricultural areas because of frequent droughts, for instance, but then be exposed to extreme heat in cities where they went seeking work.

In some countries, rapid migration to cities will require new housing so that people displaced by climate disasters won't end up mired in new ones, like heat waves and floods hitting the most vulnerable housing. Other places may see tourism industries — the shortest of short-term migration — affected by rising temperatures. Others may see conflict between newcomers and longer-term residents, or need to adapt social services to new residents' shifting needs.

And, in many places, the worst hit may be those who have no choice but to stay in places afflicted by extreme temperatures, natural disasters and other immediate consequences of a warming world.

“The people who are most likely to move are the ones who have the most resources,” Schwartz said. “So it may be that those most in need may be the ones who are unable to move as a result of the climate crisis.”

One of the most significant challenges of responding to climate change is that it requires new political strategies and agreements at a moment when many countries, including the United States, are increasingly polarized and deadlocked. As I wrote last week, politicians have an incentive to invest in emergency response, rather than more cost-effective preventive measures.

The looming problems of climate migration, similarly, could fall into the existing political debates over the movement of people — and leave people vulnerable to greater harm by focusing on the standard political divides rather than the new consequences the world is facing.

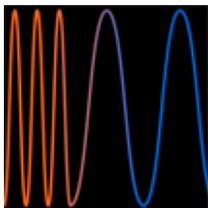
---

**Thank you for being a subscriber**

Read past editions of the newsletter [here](#).

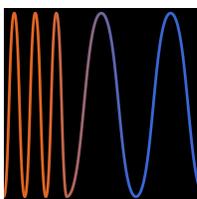
If you're enjoying what you're reading, please consider recommending it to others. They can sign up here. Browse all of our subscriber-only newsletters here.

I'd love your feedback on this newsletter. Please email thoughts and suggestions to [interpreter@nytimes.com](mailto:interpreter@nytimes.com). You can also follow me on Twitter.



---

### More from the The Interpreter Newsletter



#### **The Interpreter**

Original analysis on the week's biggest global stories, from columnist Amanda Taub. Sends twice a week. [Get it in your inbox.](#)