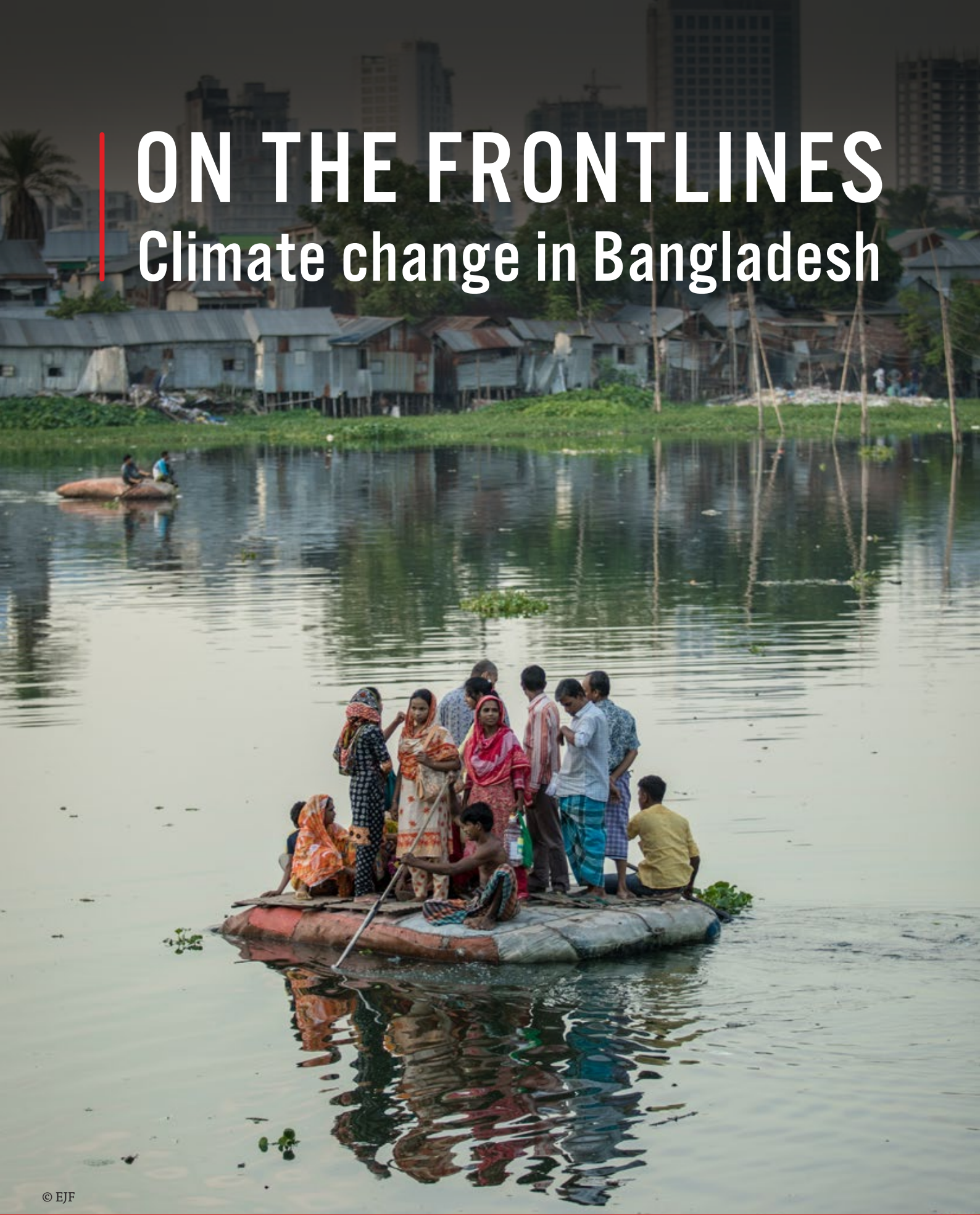
ON THE FRONTLINES

Climate change in Bangladesh



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ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOUNDATION

Protecting People and Planet

Climate displacement in Bangladesh

Worldwide, climate change is destroying livelihoods, infrastructure and communities, forcing people from their homes, towns and even countries.[1] Since 2008, weather-related hazards have displaced an average of 21.7 million people each year, equivalent to 41 people every minute.[2] This does not include the people forced to flee their homes as a consequence of slow-onset environmental degradation, such as droughts or sea level rise. Bangladesh is on the frontline of such impacts.

Its low elevation, high population density and inadequate infrastructure, along with an economy that is heavily reliant on farming, mean it is exceptionally vulnerable to climate change.[3]

Because of the country's natural susceptibility to extreme weather, the people of Bangladesh have always used migration as a coping strategy. However, as conditions intensify under climate change, more people are being driven from their homes by more frequent and severe hazards. Sea level rise, storms, cyclones, drought, erosion, landslides, flooding and salinisation are already displacing large numbers of people.[4] Between 2008-2016, rapid-onset disasters, mainly associated with floods and storms, displaced an average of about 614,000 people every year in the country, according to the International Displacement Monitoring Centre.[5]

By 2050, one in every seven people in Bangladesh will be displaced by climate change, recent estimates suggest[6], and up to 18 million people may have to move because of sea level rise alone.[7] It is very often the poorest and most vulnerable who are at the highest risk of climate displacement, a risk which only rises once they have had to flee their homes the first time.[8]

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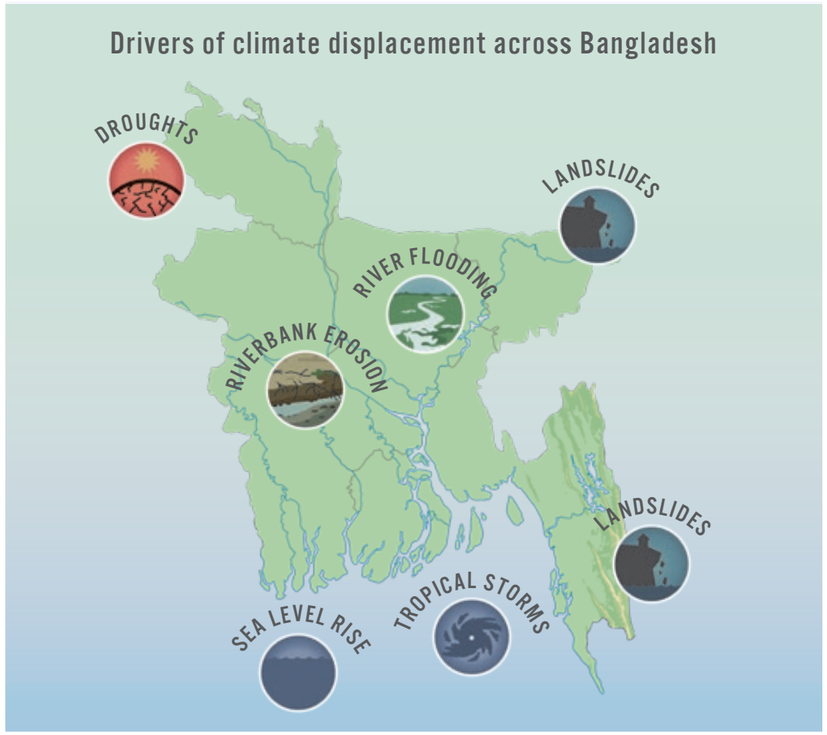

> EJF defines climate refugees as:
>
> "Persons or groups of persons who, for reasons of sudden or progressive climate-related change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad."

Displacement on the coast

Sea level rise

Bangladesh sits at the head of the Bay of Bengal, astride the largest river delta on Earth, formed by the junction of the Brahmaputra, Ganges, and Meghna rivers.[10] Sea temperatures in the Bay of Bengal have significantly increased, which scientists believe has caused Bangladesh to suffer some of the fastest recorded sea level rises in the world.[11] A 2013 analysis found that high tides in Bangladesh were rising 10 times faster than the global average.[12]

28% of the population of Bangladesh lives on the coast, where the primary driver of displacement is tidal flooding caused by sea level rise. Two-thirds of the country is less than five metres above sea level, and floods are increasingly destroying homes, crops and infrastructure.[13/14] By 2050, with a projected 50 cm rise in sea level, Bangladesh may lose approximately 11% of its land, affecting an estimated 15 million people living in its low-lying coastal region.[15]

A one metre sea level rise will submerge about one-third of the total area of Bangladesh, thereby uprooting 25-30 million of our people.[9]

Excellency Dr. Fakhru
The Chief Advisor of the Government
of Bangladesh

Bangladesh's low elevation makes it exceptionally vulnerable to flooding © EJF

"One night the water came in ... It was so high it almost reached the ceiling. Our house and all our land was washed away."

Shoripa Bibi from Kalikabari, southern Bangladesh

"[Bangladesh] is grossly threatened by the impacts of climate change. One of the biggest threats [...] is the case of sea level rise."

Major General Munir Muniruzzaman, Chairman of the Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change

Salinisation

The process of salinisation began as a result of the large-scale conversion of rice paddies to shrimp ponds[16], and has been exacerbated by rising sea levels. Coastal drinking water supplies have been contaminated with salt, leaving the 33 million people who rely on such resources vulnerable to health problems such as hypertension, pre-eclampsia during pregnancy, acute respiratory infections and skin diseases.[17] It may also increase the risk of diseases such as cholera, which thrive in the brackish coastal regions of Bangladesh.[18]

Agriculture, the mainstay of the Bangladeshi economy, is badly affected and crops damaged by rising salinity are doubly at risk from the resulting soil degradation. Many regions have already suffered large yield losses and significant price reductions as a result.[19]

Together these impacts drive migration. In areas with high rates of flooding and levels of salinisation men of working age are more likely to leave, a World Bank Study has found.[20]

"Once this village was green with paddy fields. But now the water is salty and the trees have died. We can only farm shrimp. I am devastated when I think that I will have to move."

Gopal Munda from Kara Mura, southern Bangladesh

Storms

Coastal regions are suffering from increasing frequency and severity of tropical storms. In 2016 there were four cyclones – Roanu, Kyant, Nada and Vardah – in the Bay of Bengal, whereas usually there is only one.[21] Nazmul Huque, an assistant meteorologist, said: *"This year, the quantity of signals [storm warnings] was more than any other year in the Bay of Bengal. Two or three depressions occur normally, but this year there were seven or eight, and four cyclones."*[22]

Such storms are another cause of displacement on the coast, leading to loss of human life, damage to houses, property and infrastructure, and disruption of agriculture.[23]

Displacement inland

Riverbank erosion

Approximately 10,000 hectares of land is lost in Bangladesh every year to riverbank erosion, which is the primary cause of climate displacement inland.[24] Up to 50% of people now living in Bangladesh's urban slums may be there because they were forced to flee their rural homes as a result of riverbank erosion.[25]

Those who live on Bangladesh's river islands, known as chars, are especially at risk. Located within some of the world's most powerful river systems, chars can be formed or completely eroded over weeks or even days. Char residents move between five and seven times in a generation because of river erosion or flooding, estimates suggest.[26] Already vulnerable, repeated displacement of this kind has the potential to trap people in a cycle of poverty. The population of these islands, who the government of Bangladesh refers to as *"immediately threatened"*, exceeds four million.[27]

Approximately 10,000 hectares of land is lost in Bangladesh every year to riverbank erosion.[28]

Erosion near Satkihra, southern Bangladesh © EJF

River floods

River flooding is already causing displacement inland, and along with erosion is likely to become more significant under climate change, as rainfall both increases and becomes more erratic, and the melting of the Himalayan glaciers alters river flows.[29]

"Bangladesh has a long history of floods, but what used to be a one-in-20-year event now happens one year in five. It is what we would expect with climate change models".[30]

Saleemul Huq, Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development

Two-thirds of Bangladesh is less than five metres above sea level.

Other causes of displacement

As rainfall patterns change, the drier regions of Bangladesh are at risk of droughts that cause crop failure and drive people away.[31] In 2016 there was no rainfall for six months in northern Bangladesh, leading to unprecedented water shortages.[32]

Bangladesh usually receives more than 75% of its annual rainfall during the summer monsoon season.[33] The 2010 season saw the driest monsoon since 1994, with a seasonal rainfall total of about 19% less than the long-term average.[34] This occurred despite an active and strong monsoon in Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka. While not currently a major factor in displacement, the risk and severity of drought is expected to rise as climate change progresses.[35]

Landslides, also induced by increasingly erratic rainfall, affect the hilly north-eastern and south-eastern regions of Bangladesh and can cause displacement by destroying homes and property, and disrupting agriculture.[36] As with drought, landslides are not currently a primary cause of displacement, but they are predicted to become more severe and frequent as a result of climate change.[37]

A fisherman in the Sundarbans, the mangrove forest that provides some protection against cyclones but is at risk of inundation from sea level rise. © EJF

Impacts on women

The women of Bangladesh are among the first to face the impacts of climate change[38], and their suffering is disproportionate. In the cyclone disaster of 1991, for example, 90% of the 140,000 people who died in the country were women.[39]

The reasons for this stark difference are manifold. As for women in many other countries, Bangladeshi women have less access to land, resources and decision-making than men, and their wages are lower, making it harder to survive post-displacement. They are bound by family responsibilities, both to their children and the elderly, and therefore may remain in dangerous situations when disaster strikes. In some Bangladeshi communities, women face societal pressure not to leave the house without a male guardian[40] and are not taught key survival skills, such as swimming. Social norms often dictate that they must wear clothing that restricts their mobility.

Women who migrate are often at risk of trafficking. The Indian anti-trafficking charity Prerana have said that the number of women being trafficked from Bangladesh to Mumbai brothels is rising.[41]

"The increased numbers dovetail with increased migration from Bangladesh, and migrants are particularly vulnerable to traffickers,"[42]

Priti Patkar, co-founder of Prerana

Not only should policies be revised to deal with these structural inequalities, it is crucial that women are involved that process – they must be part of the solution.[43]

In the cyclone disaster of 1991, 90% of the 140,000 people who died in the country were women.

Women in Gabura, Southern Bangladesh, an area that has been badly hit by cyclones © EJF

Women are bound by responsibilities for family, which can put them at risk during disasters © EJF

After displacement

Migration to Dhaka

Every day, between 1000-2000 people move to Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital.[44] It is one of the fastest growing mega cities in the world, with a population increase of 4.2% annually.[45] Rapid and unplanned urban growth is contributing to overcrowding and increased pressures on infrastructure, services and resources.

"Almost all, perhaps 90% of the migration is to one city, Dhaka, and that's bursting at the seams. It has 15 million people already and it can't take another 10 million people."

Saleemul Huq, Senior Fellow on Climate Change at the International Institute for Environment and Development

Research indicates that the majority of migrants come from coastal areas that are already experiencing rising sea levels, increased salinity, destructive floods and cyclones.[46] A 2012 study of 1,500 Bangladeshi families migrating to cities, mainly Dhaka, showed that almost of all of them cited the changing environment as the biggest reason for their decision.[47]

Most of those arriving in Dhaka end up in the urban slums around the periphery of the city, with rudimentary housing conditions, very high population density and poor sanitation.[48]

"*We suffer here a lot*" said Shoripa Bibi from Kalikabari Village, Borguna District, but now living in Mirpur slum in Dhaka. *"The temperature is high. We get bad smells from the drain, there is water logging when it rains [and] the floor remains under water. We fall sick... and we can't work regularly."*

"Water shortages are now a very serious problem in Dhaka. Power shortages are also a very serious problem. In the slum areas, there are also health challenges. Crime cannot be ruled out."[49]

Rabab Fatima, Regional Representative for South Asia for the International Organisation of Migration

Every day, between 1000-2000 people move to Dhaka.

Slum outside Dhaka © EJF

India's new border fence with Bangladesh © EJF

Climate migration across borders

Internationally, we must act on climate now to ensure that people can stay in their own countries in safety and in dignity.

In Bangladesh, the majority of migration as a result of climate change is likely to remain internal[50], however, cross-border movement must not be dismissed.

In May 2017, Bangladesh was the largest single origin of migrants arriving in Europe.[51]

"By the end of March last year only one Bangladeshi had arrived in Italy – and this year the number is more than 2,831 for the same period,"[52]

Flavio di Giacomo, spokesperson of the International Organisation for Migration

Closer to home, migration from Bangladesh to India has been common in the past. However, the Indian government has been building a border fence around its territory and announced in 2017 that it was 90% completed.[53]

While some have commented that difficult terrain along parts of the border may make securing it practically impossible,[54] the border fence imposes clear restrictions on the people of Bangladesh in terms of their options for migration.

Some of the most vulnerable coastal districts in the country – Khulna, Satkhira and Bagerhat – lie along India's border.[55] In the event of a disaster such as a cyclone or a flood, Bangladesh is sealed on three sides by India, and some may be left with nowhere to go.

Climate displacement 2015-2017

August/September 2017

More than **427,000 displaced by flooding** in the divisions of Chittagong, Dhaka, Khulna, Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Sylhet.[56]

August 2017

More than **300,000 evacuated** to emergency shelters as 27 districts in northern Bangladesh were hit by **monsoon rains**.[57]

June/July 2017

More than **8,400 evacuated** to shelters following **heavy seasonal rains** and **flooding** in Chittagong and Sylhet.[58]

May 2017

More than **470,000 displaced** due to **strong winds, storm surge** and **heavy rainfall** from tropical cyclone Mora.[59]

July/August 2016

Some **3.2 million people** across 16 districts of Bangladesh affected by **monsoon-induced floods** – 250,000 houses destroyed or damaged.[60]

May 2016

An estimated **513,000 displaced** due to **cyclone Roanu**, which also left dozens dead due to floods, landslides and damaged houses.[61]

July 2015

Tropical cyclone Komen leaves thousands of homes flattened or flooded, crops damaged and shrimp projects flooded, **600,000 evacuated** from southern coastal villages.[62]

June 2015

Torrential rains led to flash floods and landslides in the low-lying south eastern districts, **stranding over 200,000**.[63]

The legal framework

Current legal and policy frameworks are not sufficient to govern climate-induced displacement. Several frameworks, such as the legal instruments governing statelessness and refugees, are largely inapplicable and inappropriate. Individuals rendered *de facto* stateless by the slow or fast onset effects of climate change essentially constitute an entirely unprotected category.[64] This series of holes in global governance frameworks perpetuates the threat that climate change poses to our collective human rights and, in particular, the world's most vulnerable people.


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EJF's recommendations

- Climate change poses a clear danger to both the environmental integrity of the planet and the security, economic and social well-being and political stability of all those who call it home. Climate change is happening here and now, with very real impacts for millions of people who have done the least to contribute to it. We must act now.

- Governments must ensure that the development of legal protections and actions are migrant-centred, human-rights based and gender-responsive within a system of global migration governance.

- A UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Climate Change should be established in order to consolidate and guide international action on climate-induced displacement.

- There should be clarification on the obligations of states to persons displaced by climate change within new legal definitions. Definitions of climate-induced migration are urgently needed to ensure a rights-based approach and give clarity to the legal status of 'climate refugees'; these must be developed without delay.

- An international, binding agreement on legal recognition, protection and assistance for climate refugees should be put in place. National governments should also collaborate to develop and implement an innovative funding mechanism for this instrument, based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibility, supporting the needs of countries that are most vulnerable to climate change and least able to adapt to its effects. EJF is calling on the European Commission, Parliament and Member States to lead in this regard, designing and implementing such an agreement to coordinate a regional approach by the EU Member States.

- The EU should initiate the creation of a high-profile inter-agency taskforce to coordinate the work of the multiple bodies in the Commission, such as Environment, Climate Action, Migration and Humanitarian Affairs, as well as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in order to drive a more effective, integrated approach into wider international responses to climate change.

- All countries must rapidly and fully implement the global climate change agreement established in Paris in December 2015, and to support efforts to raise their emission reduction pledges over time and keep the global temperature level below 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

- Greater support should be available for adaptation and assistance in 'frontline' countries – states should work together and share innovation, technology transfer, expertise and localised capacity building. The overall goal must be to help prevent humanitarian crises, rather than to react to them.

- All stakeholders should be included in all deliberations and future negotiations, with special reference to local communities and the most vulnerable and disenfranchised on our planet. It is essential that marginalised communities are given a voice.

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