
Climate action to secure human rights worldwide

A position paper for the German political landscape by the Environmental Justice Foundation



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Climate change is already wreaking havoc with the lives of millions of people. A changing climate and more unpredictable weather conditions are altering the face of our planet. Arctic winter temperatures may increase by three to five degrees by 2050, scientists have predicted, regardless of the success or failure of the Paris Agreement¹. The United Nations has warned that continuing global warming can lead to a sea level rise of up to 1.3 metres during this century². Many of those affected today have little to no opportunity to adapt: this lends climate change an evident yet underappreciated dimension of environmental injustice and inequality.

Over the past 200 years, just seven countries, Germany among them, have contributed 63% of all greenhouse gas emissions³. Moreover, the richest 10% of the world's population is currently responsible for around 50% of global emissions⁴. With these figures in mind, it was startling when Germany recently announced it would not meet its self-imposed climate mitigation goals for 2020 and that it would not phase out coal before the year 2038.

The Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) defines 'environmental justice' in this context as a de facto violation of human rights due to the blatant inaction by industrial nations to effectively combat climate change. In many of the countries most affected by the climate crisis, the severe impacts exacerbate existing political or economic tensions and people who have contributed the least to anthropogenic climate change find themselves under increasing pressure to leave their homes. In consequence, they face becoming climate refugees – a situation which puts their basic rights under threat.

In this position paper, EJF highlights the responsibility of industrial nations to protect people from the challenges brought about by climate change. As Germany is a central actor in the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN), EJF calls on the country to become a champion in the fight against climate change and to take action to protect those already suffering from the effects of climate change. This paper details the hardship that climate change is causing worldwide, and the actions Germany and the global community must take in response. These policy recommendations are based on our field-based research and exchanges with high-level policymakers and scientists worldwide.

Climate change, forced migration and the loss of livelihoods

To respond to the global challenge of climate change, the international community committed itself to take the necessary measures to mitigate the effects of climate change, by way of the 2015 Paris Agreement. Because of their history, the industrial nations, such as Germany, have a crucial role to play. Apart from the central goal of bringing emissions down in line with targets, the agreement also asks all parties to:

“respect, promote and take into account their respective commitments to human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and persons in need of special protection, and the right to development and gender equality, the empowerment of women and intergenerational justice when addressing climate change”⁵.

Climate change can take the form sudden disasters – such as storms, floods, heat waves and wildfires – but it can also be slow-onset environmental degradation, such as melting polar ice caps and rising sea levels; increasing salinization of groundwater and soil; or droughts and desertification caused by changing rain patterns.

Climate change is already destroying livelihoods and driving people from their homes, thereby causing forced migration. In 2016, extreme weather-related disasters displaced around 23.5 million people globally – a figure which does not even include those who were forced to flee because of the slow-onset environmental degradation⁶.

“The 20 warmest years on record have been in the past 22 years.”

World Meteorological Organization Secretary-General Petteri Taalas⁷.

Mass displacement caused by climate change can bring disparate communities with different ethnicities, religious or other cultural beliefs and identities into contact, driving the potential for conflict. Violence may follow, itself becoming a driver of migration.

Climate change will adversely affect the global economy as well as political and social security, with the accompanying suffering highest among society's poorest and most vulnerable. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report concluded in 2014 that “climate change is likely to increase human displacement in the 21st century”⁸. In 2018, the IPCC made it clear that even if global warming was limited to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the risks to health, livelihoods, food and water supply, security and economic growth are still projected to rise⁹.

Rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns will intensify competition for resources, food and water. Rising sea levels and extreme weather events will displace ever greater numbers of people. In 2014, Germany's Federal Development Minister Gerd Müller pointed out that 200 million climate refugees could be expected if industrialised countries did not meet their agreed climate mitigation targets¹⁰. In a speech to the German Bundestag, Mr Müller emphasised the nexus between climate change and forced migration and referred to over 20 million climate refugees who are already suffering the consequences of climate change in Somalia, Chad and Bangladesh¹¹.

It is those countries and regions which have contributed least to climate change that are suffering the worst of its effects. Rising temperatures and changing rain patterns will have far-reaching negative impacts on food production and food security. Between 1985 and 2007, droughts led to a decline of almost 14% in cereal production, compared with losses of only about 7% in the 20-year period before the mid-1980s¹². Drought is one of the main reasons for losses in agricultural production and it is estimated that the increase in the intensity, frequency and duration of such droughts will lead to significant decreases in crop yields¹³.

For countries and regions suffering from the effects of climate change, adaptation measures can be an important remedy. With the help of targeted programmes to build capacity or provide funding, the impact on affected people can be reduced by measures such as mangrove protection to combat coastal erosion, or the construction of dikes. Other such adaptation programmes might focus on sustainable agriculture, for example through schemes for effective water management or protection against soil erosion. It is the responsibility of the industrialised nations, in cooperation with the worst-affected states and all relevant stakeholders, to develop knowledge, capacity and specific programmes for effective adaptation to the climate change.

“During a heat period, summer temperatures of 45 degrees and even more would not be a rarity anymore. Three or four years of drought could then occur in succession instead of spread over longer periods of time.”

Director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Change Hans-Joachim Schellnhuber, on current heat records in Germany and the long-term consequences of the climate change for the country¹⁴.

A global threat to human rights

In the event that communities cannot adapt to climate change, they may be forced to leave their homes – potentially becoming climate refugees. This puts them at risk of losing their basic human rights. Yet, despite growing discourse in recent years, climate refugees still lack specific recognition and protection within the framework of international law¹⁵.

The existing legal and political framework structures of the international community on escape and forced migration, such as those at the level of the UN or the EU, lack clarity on the impacts of climate change and offer no protection for climate refugees. Although programmes to aid climate change adaptation exist for particularly affected countries and communities – and Germany helps to fund these – such adaptation measures do not have a rights-based approach for those affected.

A rights-based approach can only be developed at the international level, since climate change is not regarded as a reason for forced migration in the current framework.

Furthermore, there is a lack of concrete and internationally recognised definitions of climate-induced migration, or in short: when does someone become a ‘climate refugee’, and what are their rights?

The EJF report **Falling Through the Cracks** summarises the current legal framework for refugees in the context of climate change. The EJF report **On the Frontlines** highlights the vulnerability of communities in Bangladesh to climate change – among those who have contributed the least to climate change and benefitted the least from global fossil fuel use.



Climate change is increasingly recognised as a ‘threat multiplier’ which exacerbates underlying social, economic, demographic, political and environmental problems and tensions such as population growth, resource scarcity, poverty and poor governance. Although these linkages are undoubtedly complex, climate change and its consequences are expected to have an impact on food security, water resources, energy and infrastructure. States least able to respond are likely to be those already suffering from instability, poor governance and conflict. This connection was addressed at the Munich Security Conference in 2018, with the concluding Munich Security Report noting that an analysis of existing research showed that most studies on this topic found a positive correlation between climate change and violent conflict¹⁶. In January 2019, the UN Security Council recognised climate change as a threat multiplier in an open debate¹⁷.

Germany must pave the way towards protecting climate and people

Germany has a unique opportunity to become an international champion for climate change mitigation and the protection of associated human rights. Despite the German government announcing that the country will miss its target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2020 compared to 1990 levels, EJF believes Germany can and must become a frontrunner on climate mitigation. To do this, it will have to meet the 2020 target. Should it fail, the German government would need to agree to a committed, binding climate mitigation law, covering all relevant sectors, to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 at the latest, as suggested by the German government and the European Parliament.

At the international level, Germany will assume its two-year membership at the UN Security Council starting from 2019 and can thus ensure that climate change and security are a priority issue at UN level. In July 2020, Germany will also assume the EU Council Presidency and will be in a prime position to set important milestones for the EU, including the responsibility to protect climate refugees. The German government is in a promising position to drive multilateral cooperation between key nations and must call on international institutions as well as the scientific community to address the relationship between climate change, human rights, international development and food and water security. In short, Germany must demonstrate that climate change is one of the most pressing threats to environmental justice, and it must play a key role in addressing this relationship.

Keeping in mind the significant role Germany has regarding climate mitigation and the protection of climate refugees, the role of environmental justice should be a key part when it comes to recommendations for Germany’s current and future climate mitigation agenda. EJF is of the opinion that Germany has the necessary know-how, capacities and influence to create real change and to become a global champion. It will be imperative to encourage people – from key decision-makers to everyday consumers – to truly understand the fragility of our natural world due to climate change, and how our actions can affect millions of people around the world.



Recommendations to Germany and the international community

CLIMATE MITIGATION

- The German Federal Government, along with all states, must commit itself to uncompromising and active climate mitigation by actively implementing the measures of the Paris Agreement.
- If the German Federal Government misses its 2020 targets, it must agree on a binding national climate change mitigation law that fully respects the goals outlined in the Paris Agreement, and focuses on achieving net zero emissions by 2050 at the latest.
- The German Federal Government must explore opportunities to accelerate the coal phase-out before the announced deadline of 2038 and promote alternative investment schemes in renewable energies.

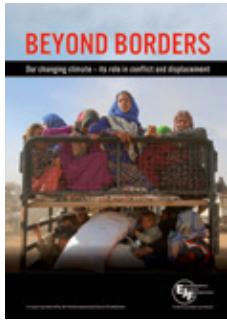
CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRATION

- Germany must rapidly advance the development of an international convention which clarifies the rights of climate refugees and guarantees their protection.
- Germany should support work on precise definitions of climate-induced migration and climate refugees. These definitions are urgently needed for a rights-based approach and to clearly establish the legal status of those people referred to as 'climate refugees'. There is also a need to clarify the obligations of states to climate refugees under the new legal definitions.
- Germany must set out concrete milestones for the creation of inclusive and multilateral action to respond to climate-induced displacement worldwide.
- Multilateral cooperation driven by the German Federal Government and with affected countries, the scientific community, international institutions and other relevant interest groups must address the link between climate change and development and food security and must respect the approach of environmental justice.
- Given the scale of the challenge and the high number of existing initiatives, the appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Climate Change is recommended to examine the issues related to climate change and forced displacement.
- A roundtable of experts on climate change, human rights and forced displacement should be convened at international level on the advice of the European Commission or the UN Secretary-General. Germany could actively and publicly call for the appointment of such a Special Rapporteur and assembly experts on an international level.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND SECURITY

- International security policy must recognise climate change as a global risk multiplier, the effects of climate change should be a central part of security policy conferences and summits, such as the annual Munich Security Conference taking place in Germany.
- The German Federal Ministry of Defence should endeavour to publish a white paper in order to make Germany's future international security policy measures in connection with climate change transparent and comprehensible. It is essential to take care not to address climate-induced migration and escape as a threat scenario, but as a threat to human rights worldwide that is in urgent need of a rights-based approach.
- Germany should advocate for an official resolution at UN level to continue this debate on climate change and security and to call for binding action as a direct outcome ahead of the UN Secretary-General's Climate Summit in September 2019.

REPORTS



Beyond Borders



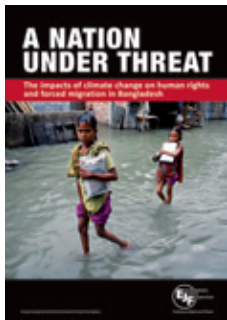
On the Frontlines



Falling Through the Cracks



The Gathering Storm



A Nation Under Threat



No Place Like Home

FILMS



Beyond Borders



Falling Through the Cracks



The Gathering Storm



No Place Like Home

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