

Making Climate Migration Visible

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The lack of international legal recognition condemns climate migration to invisibility. In Italy, a few organisations are fighting for the rights of those who abandon their home and country of origin for climate-related reasons. But only a political shift can prepare Europe for a phenomenon that is bound to grow in the years to come.

Climate change caused by human activities is aggravating poverty and political instability, intensifying conflicts over fundamental resources such as water and pushing increasing numbers of people to migrate. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), 90 per cent of refugees in the world today come from countries on the front lines of the climate emergency. Natural disasters force 21.5 million people to leave their home every year, moving both inside and outside their country of origin.

Although Western countries are responsible for most of the world's carbon emissions, it is developing countries that pay the greatest cost of climate change; global inequalities are reflected in the climate crisis.

The Italian environmental association Legambiente reported that at least 76 per cent of migratory flows into Italy between 2017 and 2020 were connected to environmental causes. However, in addition to being a landing place for migrants, Italy is also a climate change hotspot like the rest of the Mediterranean region. According to the Italian Climate Pact Association (Euclipa), 198 Italian towns and villages were affected by disastrous climatic events between 2010 and 2018 and 340 were hit by extreme meteorological phenomena. 157 people died, and 45,000 were evacuated as a result of these events. Drought and the recent floods that hit the Emilia Romagna region are extreme situations whose occurrence is becoming increasingly frequent. The phenomenon of internal climate migration in Italy is already a reality. Several areas of the country could become uninhabitable in a few years.

And yet, the ever-growing phenomenon of climate migration is given very little importance both in Italy and internationally. Presently, no country grants those who move for environmental reasons refugee status.

The invisible climate migrant

The term “environmental refugee” appeared officially for the first time in a 1985 report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Since then, various terms have been used to identify those who move for environmental reasons: climate migrants, environmental evacuees, eco-migrants, and climate refugees.

The definition of refugee given in the Geneva Convention (1951) does not include people who leave their country because of extreme environmental events, but only those who migrate because of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”.

Accurately estimating the number of environmental refugees is not easy, partly because of the lack of a shared definition at the international level. According to the World Bank, in the next 30 years climate catastrophes will force 143 million people to leave their home. Areas that are vulnerable to droughts, such as the Sahel in Africa, and those threatened by a rise in sea level will suffer the greatest impact. Together with the Pacific islands, the latter category includes Bangladesh, the eighth most populous country in the world, whose land is on average only a few metres above sea level.

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Adil (fictitious name) is a young Bengali man who migrated to Italy after floods hit Bangladesh and India in the spring of 2022. The village he lived in was completely submerged, his house destroyed and the livestock decimated. And yet, Adil has not left Bangladesh because of an environmental disaster. “It is very rare for people to move to a foreign country because of the direct effect of the climate crisis,” said Eugenio Alfano, a lawyer specialising in immigration law and international protection who works with the project *Le rotte del clima* (Climate Routes).

Initially, disasters caused by climate change mainly result in internal displacement. In 2021, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre recorded 59 million forced migrants, of which 38 million were internal evacuees. Of these, only 14.4 million migrated because they were forced to flee from violence and persecution, while the remaining 23.7 million migrated due to environmental issues.

The reasons for Adil’s migration, Alfano explained, were both financial and environmental. It all began with a loan from a network of criminal loan sharks. Adil used his house as collateral to guarantee repayment of the loan. When the house was destroyed by the floods Adil, fearing repercussions, left Bangladesh. “Given that flooding is a structural phenomenon in Bangladesh, a lot of Bengali migrants do not consider themselves as climate refugees,” said Alfano.

If the migrants themselves do not associate their displacement with the climate crisis, it is because of the lack of recognition and legal protection associated with climate migration. The issue of definition has very practical repercussions: only once climate migrants are formally recognised as a specific category, forms of protection can be put into practice.

According to Veronica Dini, president of the research institute Systasis, which created *Le rotte del clima*, climate migration often goes unnoticed even by professionals who provide legal aid to migrants. “Lawyers are not required to obtain information from their clients about environmental issues, also because in the absence of regulation no one resorts to legal arguments connected to the climate emergency,” explains Dini.

No legal basis

Until 2018, humanitarian protection safeguarded the rights of migrants in Italy – including those who arrived for reasons connected to climate change – who could not obtain the status of refugees. In 2020, the “Security decree” promoted by then-Interior Minister Matteo Salvini introduced six-month residence permits for those who escaped natural disasters. The permit is only renewed if the disaster continues. Environmental catastrophes can occur very suddenly (earthquakes, floods) or gradually (deforestation,

drought, salinization of water). The six-month permit only protects people caught in sudden disasters, thus excluding a large part of climate migrants from legal protection. Migrants, especially from countries hit by conflict due to the scarcity of natural resources such as the Sahel, South Sudan, and Syria are excluded from this type of environmental protection, which is currently the only one available in Italy.

Analysing the answers migrants gave in questionnaires and anonymous interviews on the theme of climate migration, *Le rotte del clima* aims to identify case studies to take to court. Migrants without a residence permit who can demonstrate that they are climate refugees could create useful precedents in the recognition of legal status. The project may pave the way for similar initiatives elsewhere in Europe.

Political vacuum

Projects with a legal approach such as *Le rotte del clima* may contribute to the formal recognition of climate migration. However, legal precedents alone cannot replace the lack of political vision in both Italy and Europe.

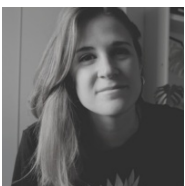
According to Angelica De Vito, a climate consultant at the United Nations, the reluctance to grant climate migrants a legal status could also depend on political calculation in countries like Italy, where governments are hostile to the phenomenon of migration.

In recent years, propaganda on an alleged “invasion” by migrants has become a common feature in the Italian public debate, and right-wing parties have exploited this narrative to increase their support. In April, Brothers of Italy’s Minister of Agriculture Francesco Lollobrigida spoke of “ethnic substitution” caused by migration flows and the parallel decline in the birth rate.

In the “Cutro decree” (which takes its name from the Calabrian village where a shipwreck took place on 26 February causing the death of 94 people) the right-wing government led by Giorgia Meloni focused on toughening the penalties for those who arrive in Italy illegally by sea, and on making it more difficult to remain in the country.

As for European migration policies, they lack a medium to long-term view. The recently struck Council agreement shows that deterring arrivals, enabling rapid returns and reducing so-called secondary movements within the EU are seen as the main objectives, while protection standards will be further reduced.

For now, the phenomenon of climate migration remains the prerogative of international conferences such as COPs. In November 2022 in Sharm el-Sheikh, governments agreed that developing countries that are hit hardest by climate disasters should receive funds to facilitate reconstruction after extreme meteorological events. However, details on how the new global fund will work are yet to be defined.



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