

## Refugee footprint

*“Hysteria and hypocrisy walk in the footsteps of refugees and migrants. The paranoia of wealthy countries is deeply ironic. Their carbon intensive lifestyles are driving global warming, which is likely to become the largest single factor forcing people to flee their homes around the world.”*

Andrew Simms, Policy Director, New Economics Foundation.

### So what is a refugee footprint?

There are several ways of looking at this.

At one level it is the footprint created by environmental, economic, social and political policies that force people to leave their homes and countries.

At another level, the size of footprint is demonstrated by the attitude shown towards refugees, by individuals, groups or as a nation. Are refugees welcomed or condemned and turned away?

At yet another level, there is the footprint created by **migration** itself: the impact refugees themselves may have on the places they move to. This can be positive – for example **migrants** often help countries develop economically – or negative, for example large refugee camps may devastate the surrounding environment or create shortages of resources such as water for people already living there.

### The Refugee footprint: how it measures up

- There are about 10 million refugees in the world and about 26 million **internally displaced people**
- Eight in every 10 internally displaced people are women and children.
- War, violence and human rights abuses force over 8,000 people a day to leave their homes
- 1 person in every 120 in the world today has been forced to flee his or her home as a result of persecution, violence or war
- Environmental factors such as expanding deserts, deteriorating soil and shrinking freshwater supplies displace more people than war; the number of **environmental refugees** is likely to increase dramatically in the next decade.

## Millions leave their footprints behind

Every day across the world people make the difficult decision to leave their home, families', possessions and connections with their local community and walk away to an uncertain and often frightening future elsewhere.

Refugees leave their homes and their country because they have no other choice. They are forced out by factors such as war, persecution, natural disasters, environmental crises and poverty. They may also leave because their government will not or cannot protect them from serious human rights abuses or meet their needs. Whatever the reason, refugees leave their homes because they fear for their own life or safety, or that of their family.

Many refugees leave their homes suddenly and are able to take very few if any of their possessions with them. Sometimes they face many days of travel, with little food and in fear of their lives. If they do get to safety, they then rely on the people living in the area they have fled to; these people often have few resources to share and may not welcome the new arrivals.

### Did you know?

**The United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees came into force as long ago as 1951.**

Initially the Convention was used to protect European refugees after World War II, but in 1967 the Convention was expanded as the problem of displaced people spread around the world. The Convention lays down basic minimum standards for the treatment of refugees.

Article I of the Convention also defines a refugee as, “A person who is outside his or her country of nationality...; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to... return there for fear of persecution”.

The Convention goes on to outline a refugee’s rights including such things as freedom of religion and movement, the right to work, education and travel documents. It makes clear that refugees should not be returned to a country where they fear persecution. In return refugees are expected to respect the laws and regulations of the country they stay in.

### **Environmental refugees**

People forced to leave their homes because of environmental factors are considered a new type of refugee. Some reports predict that rising sea levels, desertification, soil erosion and shrinking freshwater supplies – all made worse by climate change – could create up to 50 million environmental refugees within the next 10 years. Yet environmental refugees are currently not recognised under the UN Convention on Refugees or any other international agreements. This is despite the fact that the Red Cross say more people are now displaced by environmental disasters than by war. Furthermore, some argue that the homes of these displaced people are being destroyed because of the environmental and economic policies of the governments of developed countries and that it amounts to “environmental persecution,” making environmental refugees deserving of legal protection.

Environment-related migration has been most notable in sub-Saharan Africa, but also affects millions of people in Asia and India. Europe and the US face increased pressure from people driven from North Africa and Latin America by deteriorating soil and water conditions.

### **Did you know?**

**Half of all refugees come from just three countries: Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq. Other countries in the top 10 sources of refugees** are Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Yugoslavia, Angola, Croatia, and Eritrea.

**The top five countries that host refugees are:** Pakistan (1.1 million), Iran (985,000), Germany (960,000), Tanzania (650,000) and the United States (452,500). (2004 figures)

### **Economic migrants**

These are people who normally leave their homes and countries voluntarily to seek a better life elsewhere. They are therefore different from refugees who flee their homes and countries because of the threat of persecution. Economic migrants can normally return home when they choose to, will not face the threat of persecution and will continue to receive the protection of their government. Refugees on the other hand are not able to return safely to their homes unless or until the situation forcing them to leave has been resolved. However, according to a number of reports, some of these people may in fact be environmental refugees, but because there is no international recognition of environmental refugees they end up being classified as economic migrants.

### **Did you know?**

**The United Nations has a special Agency responsible for assisting refugees?**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the UN refugee organization with special responsibility for leading and coordinating international action to protect refugees and solve refugee problems. It’s most important purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees and to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find a place of safety in another State.

### **Where do refugees feet take them?**

Refugees have the right under the UN Convention on Refugees to apply to another government for protection. When they do this they are called **asylum seekers**. The government in the country that

the refugees arrive at decides whether an asylum seeker's life is seriously at risk in their home country.

It is very difficult for an asylum seeker to be allowed to stay in a safe country. The refugee definition is very strict, and asylum seekers have to meet a number of conditions including proving they are at real risk and in fear of serious harm in their own country; that their own government is not able or willing to protect them; and that their persecution is due to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

Asylum seekers are often turned away at country borders because they do not have the right identification or travel documents. If they are allowed into a country, they must apply for **refugee status** within a certain length of time or they will be forced to return to their home country.

Sometimes there is a "mass exodus" - when lots of people are forced to leave their region or country at the same time. When this happens, another country, often a neighbouring one, is faced with the prospect of large groups seeking refuge in their country. Emergency assistance in the form of food, water, shelter, medicine, blankets and sanitation is often needed in such situations. Refugee camps are sometimes set up comprising of tents made from blue plastic sheeting supplied by UNHCR. Some of these camps become more permanent. Indeed, the majority of refugees today are found in refugee camps in the poorest most inhospitable regions of developing countries.

### **Setting foot in a new land**

Life is never easy for refugees who have found sanctuary in a new country. Many refugees have left behind a life of pain and suffering and they have to deal with bad memories of past experiences. They may have lost or been separated from family and friends. They have to make a new home in a strange, new country. A lot of refugees cannot speak the language of their new country, have very few possessions, cannot get a job in the role they are used to (because their qualifications are not the same) and do not know anyone.

### **Refugees and human rights**

The issue of Human Rights is central to refugee status. People only become refugees because one or more of their basic human rights are abused. Many are victims of war, political, religious and other forms of persecution. In the chaos and confusion of fleeing their homes to try and find safety in another country, most refugees lose virtually all their rights as well as their material possessions. Many also lose their families and friends.

Every refugee has the right to safe asylum. Refugees should be granted the same rights and basic help as any other foreigner who is a legal resident, including freedom of thought and of movement as well as economic and social rights, e.g. access to medical care, to education and to work.

Child refugees are particularly vulnerable and often have their rights denied. There are an estimated 12 million child refugees in the world. These children are particularly at risk: they often become separated from family and there is the risk they will be mistreated. Some become recruited to fight, or are abused, exploited or forced to work in dangerous environments.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child grants special protection to refugee children (article 22). Refugee children who are not being cared for by their parents are entitled to further protection. Refugee children fleeing war are also entitled to special protection (article 38). Like all children, refugees are entitled to all other rights granted under the Convention including the rights to life, adequate food and medical care, education, and to be free from discrimination, exploitation, and abuse.

For information on the Convention on the Rights of the Child [click here](#)

### **Millennium Development Goals**

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were agreed at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 and nearly 190 countries have signed up to them. The goals are international targets for reducing global poverty. They aim to lift around 500 million people out of poverty by the year 2015. If this happens, fewer women will die in childbirth, fewer people will die from treatable diseases, many more boys and girls will go to school and the lives of millions of people will improve dramatically.

The MDGs and targets apply equally to refugees and internally displaced people as they do to others, though the basic rights of these people often fall short of those of local populations.

For more information on the Millennium Development Goals [click here](#)

### **A more gentle refugee footprint**

There are three ways in which life for refugees and asylum seekers can be made better. Firstly, governments in both rich and poor countries need to consider the policies and actions which are forcing people to leave their homes. Direct and indirect responsibility for some of the most serious armed conflicts and resulting refugee movements are due to the actions of Western governments. For example, the US invasion of Iraq has caused an estimated four million Iraqis to flee their homes within four years.

Secondly, the way those seeking safety in another country are treated needs to be improved. For example, thousands of asylum seekers in the UK are being forced into poverty and misery because they are not allowed to work while they wait to see if they are granted refugee status. Refused asylum seekers are left homeless, hungry and without hope; they cannot legally stay in the UK, but nor will they return home for fear of persecution. What is needed is financial support and accommodation for refused asylum seekers and permission to work until they have left the UK or have been granted refugee status. They also need to be allowed full access to health care and education while they are in the UK.

Thirdly, richer countries should seek to take a more equal share and care of the global refugee population. The poorest parts of the world, and therefore those countries with the least resources to offer, actually host the greatest number of refugees: Africa and Asia have 60% of the world's refugees between them; the UK has just 3%. Linked to this is the increasing number of environmental refugees. Climate change could displace many millions of people due to increased storms and rising sea levels, particularly in highly-populated coastal and low-lying regions. Given that climate change is being driven by the lifestyles of rich western countries, developing countries face a moral obligation to share in the protection of these environmental refugees.

### **Putting your foot down: taking action on justice for refugees and asylum seekers**

The most important way to work for justice for refugees and asylum seekers is to be sure that you personally adopt attitudes and live your life in a way that shows you respect a person irrespective of their race, nationality, religion or background.

To make a more public demonstration of a commitment to refugees and asylum seekers ask your headteacher, teachers or school council to place **Refugee Week** firmly in the school calendar. Refugee Week is a UK-wide programme of arts, cultural and educational events that celebrate the positive contributions of refugees to the UK and to promote understanding about why people seek sanctuary. See the [Refugee Week](#) website for more details and how you and your school can get involved.

### **Campaign for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers**

As aware and active global citizens we can also work to persuade governments of the importance of just and fair treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. Here are some groups campaigning for justice for refugees and asylum seekers; they provide information on how to campaign effectively and suggest actions you can take:

[Latest amnesty campaign on asylum seekers](#)

[Just. Fair. campaign](#) – a Refugee Council website containing ideas on actions you can take to create a fairer asylum system.

[Amnesty International](#)

### Learn more

→ For more information about refugees download our Global Footprints leaflet [click here](#) (link to pdf download)

→ Links:

[The 1951 Refugee Convention: Questions and Answers](#) – a useful guide or extended glossary that explains terminology associated with refugees.

[Refugee Week Factpack](#) – more information about refugees and asylum seekers in the UK.

[OneWorld.net](#) – useful global perspective on issues around refugees

[Unicef youth voice](#) - Unicef's site for young people

[Refugee Council](#) – learn more about the asylum process in the UK

### Glossary

**Asylum seekers:** People who have left their own countries and have applied for refugee status in other countries and who are waiting to see if their application has been successful and they are able to stay.

**Environmental refugees:** People fleeing a natural or human-caused environmental disaster.

**Internally Displaced Persons:** People who, like refugees, have fled their homes due to persecution, war, violence, hunger, or other emergency but, unlike refugees, remain in their own country.

**Migrants** are people who move from their home to another place. This may be **internal migration** - movement within a country - or **international migration** where migrants leave their country to live in another country. Unlike refugees, migrants are free to return home if they wish to because, although they may be very poor, their lives are not in danger. These types of migrants are often called **economic migrants**.

**Refugee status:** a status awarded to anyone who is recognised as a legal refugee as described by the UN Refugee Convention.