



tearfund

DIGGING DEEPER

Displaced Persons

“Displaced Persons” include refugees and those forced to relocate within their own country.

Who are these people and what forces them from their homes? What is trending and what can we do?



Photo: Kevin Riddell

What is a ‘displaced person’?

There are many different types of people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes. The UNHCR recorded that 79.5 million people were displaced around the world at the end of 2019.¹

That is 1% of the planet’s population who have been uprooted from their homes. This is nearly twice as many people who were displaced a decade ago, an increase of 100 million. Who are the 1% of the world’s population? Within this group are asylum seekers, refugees, stateless people, and internally displaced people. But what do these terms mean?

Internally displaced person

An internally displaced person (IDP) is someone who has had to flee their home to take refuge in another part of their country. They are the most vulnerable because their governments are either unable or unwilling to protect them.²

Asylum seeker

An asylum seeker is a person who has been displaced from their country and is seeking protection. They don’t become a refugee until their case for protection has been granted.³

Refugee

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.⁴

1. www.unhcr.org/ph/figures-at-a-glance

2. www.unhcr.org/internally-displaced-people.html

3. www.unhcr.org/asylum-seekers.html

4. www.unhcr.org/refugees.html



Once a displaced person reaches a new country and successfully applies for asylum, they can be recognised as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance.

Stateless person

A stateless person is someone who is not a citizen of any country.⁵ This can befall a person if their state were to fail (as happened to the former Yugoslavia) or when states discriminate against certain populations and strip them of citizenship. The exact number of stateless people is not known but at the end of 2019, there were 4.2 million stateless people according to UNHCR. The true number is likely to be far greater.

An example of this can be seen in the 2017 Rohingya refugee crisis. In Myanmar's 2014 census the Rohingya were not officially recognised as an ethnic group and found themselves essentially stateless and under threat. Armed conflict between minority groups and the government's military forces have gone on for decades in Myanmar, but it accelerated significantly in August 2017, causing the Rohingya's to flee. More than 1.2 million Rohingya refugees fled for their lives to Bangladesh from their homes in Myanmar (Burma). Unsafe for them to return, they remain in the largest refugee settlement in the world in temporary shelters with no hope in sight of returning home.

There are also large people groups outside of the official statistics such as the Kurdish* people and Palestinians who number in their millions. The lack of any nationality deprives them of rights that the majority of the global population takes for granted. Over a third of the world's stateless are children—40% of the world's displaced people. The stigma of statelessness could follow them for the rest of their lives, even past their deaths; if they have children of their own, this generation will also be stateless and the crisis perpetuated.⁶ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights underlines that: "Everyone has the right to a nationality."

* Some people dispute the claim that Kurds are stateless. Iraq granted Kurds an autonomous region in the Northern part of Iraq in 1970 known as Kurdistan. But Kurdistan is a geo-cultural historical region that spans several countries and while there the autonomous region of Kurdistan, there is no independent state. In many of the countries where Kurds have large populations, such as Syria and Turkey, they have been persecuted.

5. www.unhcr.org/asylum-seekers.html

6. www.unhcr.org/refugees.html

Other displaced people

Although the legal definition of ‘refugee’ currently only includes people who have been driven from their countries by conflict or persecution, a growing group of people are being displaced by climate change. As they are not recognised as ‘refugees’, these people struggle to access entitlements and assistance. This issue will only grow as climate change worsens, and countries like Kiribati and Bangladesh could disappear under rising seas.

Drivers of Displacement

Conflict and disasters don’t happen in a vacuum. Almost all crises which drive displacement are rooted in political issues. More than two-thirds of the people displaced across borders at the end of 2019 came from just five countries: Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar.⁷

Conflict

A common feature of such political conflicts is state-sponsored discrimination against a group of people, often based on religion or ethnicity. The Rohingya refugee crisis mentioned earlier is an example of discrimination on religious and ethnic grounds.

Much of the tension around conflict and statelessness stems from colonialism where lines on maps have been altered as colonising countries have come and gone over periods in history. This has left people groups within designated borders that do not necessarily represent their homes. These peoples can be alienated from the ethnic or religious groups that make up the majority in the region. This has often led to conflict and persecution. The Kurds are one such case of this. After the demise of the Ottoman Empire, they were left without a homeland and are scattered across several countries with many of them facing persecution.

Climate refugees

Rising seas have begun to swallow low-lying countries like Kiribati. Bangladesh is also in danger. Another increasingly important factor which drives displacement is climate change. Overwhelmingly, the countries which have contributed the least to climate change stand to lose the most. These are developing nations just starting their industrial revolutions. They tend not to possess the money necessary to build infrastructure to protect themselves. Even if they did have the money, some changes such as sea-level rise, rainfall patterns and land fertility can’t easily be protected against. Rising seas have begun to swallow low-lying countries like Kiribati. Bangladesh is also in danger with some 30 million people living in low-lying areas.

Case study:

The Disappearance of Kiribati

States can fail. States can be overthrown. States can merge into entirely new states. However, the physical disappearance of a state is as yet unprecedented! Each of these situations can be devastating to those populations who have to adjust to a new government, call their country by a different name, or even escape quickly from their former homes. Climate change is fast making this fear a reality for several low-lying countries around the world. Kiribati lies just two metres above sea level in the Pacific. Ten years ago, the government of Kiribati developed a plan to relocate their population of 100,000 to other countries if their land becomes uninhabitable or fully disappears under rising seas. Today, the sea has risen sufficiently to begin implementing this plan, as more people are forcibly displaced as the land they live on disappears.

Seeking a new home

Overwhelmingly, displaced peoples relocate within their region of origin; for example, the huge majority of Syrian refugees now live in Turkey and Lebanon. This happens for several reasons. It is easier to flee to a neighbouring country (often on foot) than one around

7. www.unhcr.org/refugeebrief/the-refugee-brief-19-june-2020/

the world, and also because the wealthier countries of the world generally have a greater ability to restrict the number of refugees they accept.

New Zealand is in the highly unusual situation of having almost complete control of who comes to our country. Our geographic isolation means that asylum seekers cannot walk across our borders or sail into our waters on large ships, as they can in nearly any other country in the world.

We have a quota system which welcomes 1,000 refugees to New Zealand each year, with a few hundred extra spaces allotted to family members and asylum seekers. The country is extending the quota to 1,500 but this move has been stalled due to Covid-19.

In comparison, Lebanon's population was similar to New Zealand's before the Syrian war but it has taken in 1.5 million Syrians, swelling its population to 6.8 million. It now has one of the highest numbers of refugees per capita in the world. Yet, in comparison to New Zealand, it is 25 times smaller in landmass has a fragile economy and higher levels of poverty.

Our Approach

Tearfund's work in this area falls into our Disaster and Conflicts cause, where we work with communities to prepare for and respond to disasters. Our partners provide the basic needs of displaced people. This includes providing emergency food, shelter water and healthcare and in many cases child-friendly spaces.

As well as this urgent response work, we also support peacebuilding initiatives and promote disaster preparedness and prevention. For example, we support projects working to build connections and foster the conditions for peace. Our Sri Lanka dairy project, for example, unites Tamil and Sinhalese farmers for a common cause. During the long-running civil war, they were on opposite sides.



Photo: Helen Manson