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IMPACT OF RISING SEA LEVELS ON GLOBAL MIGRATION & REFUGEE CRISES

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Abstract

The rise in sea levels caused by climate change is changing the world's landscape and stimulating migration patterns. The relationship between sea-level rise and the increase in climate-induced migration, especially focusing on how an entire community is displaced into migration and refugee statuses. With increased sea levels, however, many nations face immense difficulties in taking on the double burdens of internally displaced persons and cross-border migrants without sufficient resources or policies to support climate change migration.

Currently, international refugee law does not provide any special protection to "climate refugees," although regional and national laws have been set up as interim measures, which are limited in both scope and strength. The rising sea levels will make the low-lying coasts, small islands of the Pacific like Kiribati and Tuvalu, and certain parts of Bangladesh the areas that will face a very dangerous threat, and people will have to move either internally or across borders. These migrations of people against their will raise very important questions about national and international policies, human rights, and the need for new legal frameworks because the existing refugee and human rights laws are not suitable to meet the climate refugees.

KEYWORDS: Climate change, Sea-level rise, Climate-induced migration, Refugee crises, Coastal communities, Environmental statelessness.

1. Introduction -

Climate change is one of the most serious environmental and humanitarian challenges of this century, and one of its most evident and life-threatening effects is rising sea levels. The rapid melting of glaciers and the rising temperature of oceans are causing global sea levels to rise at a rapid pace, jeopardizing the stability of coastal regions all over the world. As this scenario continues, it causes challenges in economies, communities, and ecosystems, particularly among people who live in low-lying coastal areas. Climate change is one of the most horrible threats to human lives and livelihoods along the world's coastlines. The climate change scenario will make the already severe cyclonic and coastal flooding the worst threats in a drastic way. Besides, the rise in sea level, loss of freshwater vegetation, drought, temperature, and rainfall alteration are all areas of mankind's major emerging concern in terms of food, water, energy, and health security.

The risk of climate change is one of the gravest to coastal countries, from East Africa to Southeast Asia, in the Indian Ocean region. Several countries are at risk because they are coastal nations. Bangladesh and Vietnam are the most vulnerable countries due to the immense population that lives in the river

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deltas.[1399] Bangladesh's coastal lowlands are especially vulnerable to cyclones and storm surges since the Bay of Bengal is shallow and funnel-shaped in this region. Between the last two-thirds of the twentieth century, 29 tropical cyclones crossed over Bangladesh, one of the most deadly, killing 138,000 people in April 1991.[1400]

2. The Problem: Sea Level Rise & Climate-Induced Migration

Many factors cause sea level rise, such as ocean thermal expansion, melting ice caps in Greenland and Antarctica, and melting glaciers on land. The ocean absorbs nearly 80% of the heat given to the climate system, which causes it to expand because the atmosphere warms with increased radiation[1401]. Climate-induced migration is basically the movement of people from one place to another, who have been forced out of their original location due to a variety of reasons related to the environment, such as devastation from extreme weather, desertification, and sea level rise. Generally, migration driven by political or economic factors is the traditional one, while climate-induced migration that is due to environmental reasons raises the question of the legal status of such displaced persons as "refugees" according to international law. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change[1402] estimated in 2007 that climate change would raise the global sea level by more than 0.6 meters by 2100.[1403] Newer estimates, however, state that global sea level rise due to climate change will top 1 meter or more by 2100.[1404] Most recent sources say that the current global mean sea level rise has already reached 3.1 millimetres per year.[1405]

3. Effect of Increased Ocean Levels on the Coastline Community

It is a fact that the increase in sea level has affected the coastal zones of countries across the world, jeopardizing their land, economy, and even people. The positive tendencies of thermal expansion and glacial melting result in higher seawater levels, which lead to more floods, erosion, and saltwater intrusion. Such environmental changes are destroying the coastlines while flooding the low-lying areas, making them uninhabitable in some cases. For example, in the Pacific region and also in the South Asian delta region countries, the low-lying islands are facing increased land and community erosion losses.

3.1 Physical and Economic Effects on Affected Regions

All these activities affect the economy of the communities as sea level rise targets several key industries that provide economic utility to these people, such as agriculture, fisheries, and tourism. It is common for agricultural fields to be flooded with saline water, which adversely impacts the yields of several crops and puts at risk the supply of food. In the same way, these also deteriorate fish stocks as their habitats are destroyed, which puts stress on the local people to find other means of making a living. Coastal areas that rely heavily on tourism as a source of financial income also experience a downturn in business activity because erosion and climate change events destroy most of the beaches and natural scenery. The economic burden associated with these losses is significant,

[1399] Dasgupta, Susmita; Yan, Jianping; Laplante, Benoit; Meisner, Craig M.; Wheeler, David. 2007/02/01. "The Impact of Sea Level Rise on Developing Countries: A Comparative Analysis." *Policy Research Working Paper 4136 (Washington, DC: World Bank)* 1. https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/156401468136816684/the-impact-of-sea-level-rise-on-developing-countries-a-comparative-analysis.

[1400] Ranaa Haider et al., Cyclone '91: An Environmental and Perceptional Study (Dhaka: Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, 1991).

[1401] United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Global Environmental Outlook: Environment for Development (Nairobi: UNEP, 2007).

[1402] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2019. Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate. Edited by H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, V. Masson-Delmotte, P. Zhai, M. Tignor, E. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, M. Nicolai, A. Okem, J. Petzold, B. Rama, and N. Weyer. Cambridge, UK and New York, USA. https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/home/.

[1403] Robert J. Nicholls et al., "*Coastal Systems and Low-Lying Areas,*" in M. L. Parry et al., eds., Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[1404] Catherine P. McMullen and Jason Jabbour, eds., Climate Change 2009 Science Compendium (Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme, 2009).

[1405] B. Wouters, D. Chambers, and E. J. O. Schrama, "*GRACE observes small-scale mass loss in Greenland*," Geophysical Research Letters 35 (2008).

causing a decrease in employment rates and an increase in the levels of unemployment.

3.2 Social and Cultural Consequences

On a social level, wherever there is displacement and fragmentation of communities, the people's cultural heritage and identity are also at risk of being lost. Over time, many coastal and fishing communities develop a firm and inextricable bond with their environments, rendering any drastic measures such as resettlement very painful. The dislocation further hampers or interrupts operating social structures, erodes society, and creates the risk of emotional disturbances due to the loss of the dwelling or the geographical identity of an individual or a family. For most Indigenous people and even those whose ancestry is historical to a place, the consequences are even tougher since such forced resettlement calls for the abandonment of practices and places that are part of the culture.

For coastal communities, the impacts of rising sea levels are indeed complex and emphasize the importance of developing and implementing strategies and measures to protect these communities and their economic and cultural activity in the context of growing environmental threats.

4. Case Study: The Pacific Islands (Kiribati, Tuvalu)

Out of the many countries that are vulnerable to the impact of global warming, Kiribati and Tuvalu rank closest to the top, thanks to the sea-level rise that is prevalent within their boundaries[1406]. Their population is distributed across tiny islands positioned at near-equatorial ocean surface levels and, therefore, very vulnerable to climate change and its impacts. Government policies in many nations have, for several decades now, been addressing the problem of environmental changes brought about by an upward trend in sea levels, including coastal erosion, freshwater supply contamination, and most flooding levels and their intensities. The environmental threat is, for low-lying nations, a threat to the environment and to life.[1407]

Over time, the government of Kiribati has demonstrated its concern and adopted a proactive "migration with dignity" policy, better preparing its citizens for what looks like an inevitable permanent change of home in the years to come.[1408] Equally so, the policy seeks to equip the youths with skills that will make them useful to other countries if migration cannot be avoided. For this reason, Kiribati managed to purchase land in Fiji,[1409] which it will occupy in the event that the elevation of the islands' level above the sea prevents any proficient human habitation.

Tuvalu is no exception, as close to 40% of its people live in coastal areas that are vulnerable to flooding. In this regard, the country has been active in international meetings in order to highlight the key issues of climate change and its impact and to seek additional resources for the implementation of adaptation strategies. However, it is conscious of the fact that there are few acceptable means of relocating its people, so it turns primarily to climate agreements bargaining for reduced emissions with its people's viewpoint on the Effects of Rising Sea Levels on Kiribati and Tuvalu: Another Danger Threatens the US[1410]. For the island nation of Kiribati, however, rising tides mean not only the loss of physical space but also the atoll community and national identity as well. In their situation, these nations indicate the need for international collaboration with laws to fight against climate change and its associated

[1406] Aucan, J. 2018. "*Effects of Climate Change on Sea Levels and Inundation Relevant to the Pacific Islands.*" Science Review. pp. 43–9. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/.

[1407] Barnett, J. 2001. Adapting to Climate Change in Pacific Island Countries: The Problem of Uncertainty. World Development. 29 (6). pp. 977–93. doi:10.1016/S0305-750X(01)00022-5.

[1408] Brown, N.J., A. Lal, B. Thomas, S. McClusky, J. Dawson, G. Hu, and M. Jia. 2020. Vertical Motion of Pacific Island Tide Gauges: Combined Analysis from GNSS and Levelling. Record 2020/03. Geoscience Australia. Canberra. http://dx.doi.org/10.11636/Record.2020.003.

[1409] Brown, P., A. Daigneault, and D. Gawith. 2016. "*Climate Change and the Economic Impacts of Flooding on Fiji*". Climate and Development. 5529 (May). pp. 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2016.1174656.

[1410] United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Sea Level Projection Tool. https://sealevel.nasa.gov/ipcc-ar6-sea-level-projection-tool

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issues, such as dislocation and forced migration. The cases of Kiribati and Tuvalu teach that we must act to prevent climate change; otherwise, we will lose irreplaceable things.

5. Case Study: Bangladesh

Bangladesh has a 710-kilometre coastline along the Bay of Bengal. One-third of the nation is defined as coastal, depending upon factors such as tidewater reach, salt intrusion, and the inland effect of cyclones and tsunamis. The outer edge of the Exclusive Economic Zone marks the seaward edge of the coastal zone. Bangladesh's shoreline has its risks and possibilities. It is endowed with a high diversification of natural resources: fisheries along the coast, forests, salt, and minerals, and also holds a great potential for extracting onshore as well as offshore natural gas. It also offers areas for harbors, airports, tourist attractions, and many other development opportunities.

Population rise and more competition for limited resources, both natural and artificial, posed risks to human activities and the environment, while the slow development of the regions, financial limitations, along ecological significance called for a more defined management of the coastal zone. The Government of Bangladesh is aware of the fact that climate change is a major hindrance to the country's development and thus protects coastal ecosystems and ensures efficient resource management as a matter of priority. The second Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, which the state is due to submit, addresses dangers from sea level rise.[1411]

Coastal and related vulnerabilities in the districts, as well as recommendations for feasible adaptation measures and short-term interventions from 2009 to 2011 to improve resilient infrastructure in the country, particularly in coastal districts.[1412] Bangladesh identifies the Ministry of Environment and Forests as a focal point for the UNFCCC.[1413] Recently, through the annual budget allocation from the Ministry of Finance, Bangladesh has allocated significant funds to address climate change, and to this end, it has established a national-level committee. Additionally, the Economic Relations Department has established a multi-donor trust fund to address the impacts of climate change in Bangladesh.

6. Case Study: Louisiana, USA

The case of Southern Louisiana is perhaps the saddest one in the United States in connection with climate change relocation. Isle de Jean Charles, an island located in the southern part of Louisiana, has experienced a swift transformation in its surroundings, made up of a mixture of rising sea levels, sinking land, and hurricanes. The total area of this island has been reduced by over 98% in the last 50 years, and now the survival of the tribe Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, which has inhabited this place for hundreds of years, is in danger.[1414] The increase in water levels and accompanying oil and gas pollutions is one of the main motivating factors for some of the families to consider moving away; thereby, the trash floating in the waters tops engines, polluting the environment.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provided Louisiana with a total of $48 million for the relocation of Isle de Jean Charles inhabitants in the year 2016.[1415] This

[1411] M. F. Karim and N. Mimura, "*Impacts of climate change and sea-level rise on cyclonic storm surge floods in Bangladesh*," Glob. Environ. Chang., vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 490–500, 2008.

[1412] International Monetary Fund (IMF), "*Bangladesh Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper*," IMF Country Report No. 05/410 (IMF, 2005).

[1413] C. Field, V. R. Barros, D. J. Dokken, K. J. Mach, M. D. Mastrandrea, T. E. Bilir, M. Chatterjee, K. L. Ebi, Y. O. Estrada, R. C. Genova, B. Girma, E. S. Kissel, A. N. Levy, S. MacCracken, P. R. Mastrandrea, and L. L. White, Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

[1414] Tewari, S., Corrosion Map for Metal Pipes in Coastal Louisiana, Final Report 585, Louisiana Transportation Research Center, LTRC Project No. 16-5GT, SIO No. DOTLT1000094, December 2017. http://www.ltrc.lsu.edu/pdf/2017/FR_585.pdf

[1415] Tewari, S., and Manning. Spatial Delineation of Corrosion Zones for Metal Culverts Based on Coastal Louisiana Soil Characteristics. Presented at 97th Annual Meeting of Transportation Research Board, Washington, D. C., 2018.

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initiative was eventually the first one that got support from the U.S. government and was aimed at helping the population in the regions affected by climate change move. The geographical limits are very strict for the inhabitants of the Louisiana coastline. The relocation of people is made under the condition of a safer place, and the government is responsible for all aspects, like cultural continuity, new housing, and jobs for the people moved.[1416]

But the relocation and resettlement process has turned out to be a huge problem for every party involved. The old people in the community, in particular, are not ready to give up their homeland, where their social and cultural bonding has become a part of them. Moreover, the timetable for the resettlement plan has been pushed back, and the plan itself has faced other problems which can be related to and which come together with the hardships of climate-induced migration.[1417] Isle de Jean Charles' case, where cultural geography is accompanied by resettlement, indicates that dispossession is not only a matter of logistics but also of self, culture, and history.

The coastal communities of Louisiana that are in trouble are giving a call for adaptive policies to be put into practice, financial backing, and community-based approaches for dealing with climate-induced migration to be highly necessary. The case of Isle de Jean Charles has already proved that its lessons are useful not only for the coastal areas in the U.S. in the future but also for the regions where similar issues will become more pronounced and eventually lead to the need for increased accommodation due to the rise in sea level.

7. Rising Sea Levels and Migration Patterns

The increased level of the sea is changing the existing patterns of migration across the globe, bringing about new trends of both internal and external population movements. This is very common in the low-lying coastal areas of the country where, due to recurrent flood invasion, erosion, or depletion of the available land, residents are compelled to move out in search of safety and employment elsewhere.

7.1. Internal Displacement

This is sometimes referred to as downward displacement, wherein the most affected populations move to areas of urbanization near them. Most cities, nevertheless, have been strained, with cities unable to afford adequate housing, sanitation, and employment to the in-migrating IDPs. For this reason, and unless managed effectively, the development of cities will increase poverty and unemployment levels as well as communal friction between the old and new residents of the cities.

Apart from creating internal zones of dislocation, sea level rise is a cause of international migration. For example, citizens of Pacific Island countries such as Kiribati and Tuvalu, who are at risk of losing their homelands to flooding, seek to relocate to countries like New Zealand. These individuals who experience displacement, however, are unable to obtain legal refugee status most of the time due to the nature of laws, which, for example, the 1951 Refugee Convention, does not deal with those displaced because of climate. Climate cross-border migrants lack such protection when asylum laws in some countries do not extend to them, making them find it hard for residency, employment, or other available social services in the countries where they migrate.[1418]

[1416] Galloway, D.L., D.R. Jones, and S.E. Ingebritsen (eds.) Land subsidence in the United States. U.S. Geological Survey Circular 1182, 1999, 177 p., http://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/circ1182/.

[1417] Locke, G., J. Lubchenco, J. H. Dunnigan, and M. Szabados. Sea level variations of the United States, Silver Spring, Maryland: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2009, pp 1854-2006.

[1418] Professor of Law at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington. Prof Iorns has undertaken research for the Deep South National Science Challenge pursuant to their Impacts and Implications Programme; see "*Sea level rise, housing and insurance: Liability and compensation*" Deep South National Science Challenge . The material for this article was produced through work undertaken pursuant to funding from the Deep South National Science Challenge. The views expressed here are those of the author.

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7.2 Cross-Border Migration and Refugee Crises

The economic and social consequences of this migration on the receiving communities cannot be understated. Especially in the case of developing countries, with every additional entry of immigrants, the stress on services such as housing, healthcare facilities, and education tends to multiply further. Sociocultural factors such as differences in language or culture may also serve as a potential source of conflict between internally displaced persons and the local population, further exacerbating social cleavages.

In particular, the rising tide of climate change-induced migration brings to the fore the importance of policies and legal regimes that recognize the existence of environmental refugees and the need to provide them with protection. The world will be able to meet the concerns of the rise in sea levels by restructuring international migration, which does not put pressure on the host areas and respects the rights and dignity of the displaced people.

8. International Responses and Legal Challenges

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) proclaims that the maritime boundaries of a country are determined by its coastal baselines, which are defined as the waterlines where the ocean meets the land. It is stated in the convention that an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of a country is a maximum of 200 nautical miles from the territorial sea baseline, while the territorial sea is 12 nautical miles from the coast. A 2012 report from the Expert Committee on Baselines of the International Law Association states that coastal baselines are under general international law "ambulatory". In other words, the legal baselines of a nation change as its natural boundaries change over time.[1419] The doctrine of international law, which states that "the land dominates the sea", is the basis for the ambulatory border rule.[1420] The International Court of Justice explains, "Maritime rights are based on the sovereignty of the coastal State over the land,"[1421]. If rising sea levels result in the shifting of coastal baselines, it can be legal to redraw the national borders, marine rights, and EEZs.[1422]

8.1 Gaps in International Refugee Law

The mechanisms on which the world communities rely to address climate-induced movements are still few and lacking coherence, as existing legal regimes still do not regard the environment as a basis for establishing claims for granting refugee status. The 1951 Refugee Convention and the protocols that follow it state that the term "refugee" means any person who is outside his or her country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on his or her race, religion, nationality, membership in a specific social group, or political outlook. This definition does not take into account the persons affected and displaced by climate change, thereby contributing to the challenges of finding legal remedies for 'climate refugees'.

8.2 Role of International Organizations

This implies that due to the lack of such official recognition, there is no political or legal responsibility in most countries to receive or shelter such people displaced by climate change, thereby creating problems for climate-affected cross-border migrants. Nevertheless, several nations' agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)[1423] and the International Organization

[1419] David Freestone and Duygu Çiçek, "*Legal Dimensions of Sea Level Rise: Pacific Perspectives,*" World Bank, 2021, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/519021624599026730/pdf/Legal-Dimensions-of-Sea-Level-Rise-Pacific-Perspectives.pdf.

[1420] Malcolm N. Shaw, The Law of the Sea (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 553–644, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/international-law/law-of-the-sea/EB82701938256F1E595F7FF4D1F7E162.

[1421] Case Concerning Maritime Delimitation and Territorial Questions Between Qatar and Bahrain (Qatar v. Bahrain): Judgment of 16 March 2001," International Court of Justice, accessed February 13, 2025, https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/87/087-20010316-JUD-01-00-EN.pdf.

[1422] Nitya Labh, "The Legal Threat of Climate Change to Small Island States," SAIS Review of International Affairs 43, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2023): 39–55, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/892221/summary.

[1423] https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/climate-change-and-displacement/law-and-policy-protection

for Migration (IOM)[1424], have insisted on the need to take measures to mitigate the effects of displacement due to climate change. The UNHCR says that environmental refugees may be viewed under the alternative protection concept, which, however, is only suggested and not backed by statute.

International organizations are taking on more and more importance, with more and more insistence on the need to modify international law to cater to climate refugees. An international treaty addressing the issue of climate-induced displacement should set out the requisite legal protection and enable the processes while ensuring fair relocation alternatives. Given the rapid onset of climate change, the world must put in place blanket measures to ensure that people who are forced to relocate because of changes in the environment are legally recognized and protected.[1425]

8.3 National Policy Approaches

These efforts are beginning to manifest at the regional level. For instance, the Kampala Convention, instituted by the African Union, addresses environmental-determined internal displacement, notwithstanding the absence of similar strategies on most continents.[1426] For instance, countries such as New Zealand have established legal provisions for people from the Pacific Islands who are suffering due to climatic changes, but options providing limited legal migration have been offered in very few cases only.[1427]

9. Conclusion

One of the most tangible effects of climate change is the increase in sea levels, which has begun to affect the lives of populations in coastal areas around the world. The paper makes a case for the complex effects that come with sea level rise and change, including loss of land and instability in the economy, social instability, and loss of one's culture, among others. Coastal areas all over the world, ranging from small island states to deltas and even developed countries, are under siege, with an estimated displacement of millions of people projected by the close of the century. The cases of Kiribati and Tuvalu, Kyoto, Japan, and Louisiana in the USA depict the inter-selectional and terrain of climate change mobility where people struggle with the loss of their cultural heritage and community as the habitat becomes a hostile place.

The existing international laws and systems of protection regarding refugees, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, fail to take into consideration calamities due to climate change as they do not define environmental conditions as factors for refugees. This challenge means that the people who get displaced have no legal recourse for protection or for getting resettled; thus, the silence on refugee law needs to be rethought and reoriented. Such efforts are not enough, as there are scattered attempts and training, as in the case of Poland's migration initiatives for people from the Pacific Islands countries, which are all uncoordinated and cannot be considered as a global action. The increasing problem of migratory movements and displacement because of climate change necessitates reform of current policies. It is also proposed that an international legal instrument that defines sustainable resettlement of those protected as "climate refugees" be adopted as a matter of priority. In this way, people disposition from their homes as a result of changes in the environment would be able to be given legal protection, assistance in relocation, and general support. In addition, some of the effects on at-risk communities can be lessened by taking anticipatory actions, such as improved urban planning and building climate-resilient infrastructure.

[1424] https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/activities/env_degradation/compendium_climate_change.pdf
[1425] https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/migration
[1426] Jonathan Boston and Judy Lawrence "*The Case for New Climate Change Adaptation Funding Instruments*" (Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, Working Paper 17/05, August 2017). See also Jonathan Boston and Judy Lawrence "*Funding climate change adaptation: The case for a new policy framework*" (2020) 14 PQ 40.
[1427] Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment Preparing New Zealand for rising seas: Certainty and Uncertainty (November 2015).

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Other than changing laws and policies, however, other sacrifices such as climate change mitigation should be made as climate change is a causative factor of sea level increases, hence more displacement. The worldwide community can protect the populations under threat at greater levels due to the integration of global efforts, flexible action, and the legal framework that provides support.