

**Barriers to Securing Human Rights for Climate Refugees: Examining the Relationship Between Discourse, Deservingness, and Development**

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## **Abstract**

Projections on climate migration show that under business-as-usual operations, hundreds of millions could internally migrate. The vast majority of these climate refugees will come from majority nations with limited adaptive capacity. Recent years have seen greater turns toward securitization against refugees accompanied by heightened nationalism and xenophobia. This phenomena rests on a history of maltreatment and negative rhetoric that have shaped the common imagination surrounding refugees. This paper seeks to examine how the relationship between discourse and deservingness impact the ability to secure human rights for climate refugees by drawing on literature of social psychology and critical discourse analysis. Further, this paper will examine how this relationship leads to the favored, proposed solution of development to aid climate refugees, exploring how this maintains dominant world systems with literature relating to fundamental cause theory.

## Introduction

The question of climate change is a question of time. When will the ice caps melt? How many days of extreme heat will there be this year? When will reliance on fossil fuels cease? How much longer until millions will have to move to escape the worst climate impacts? The effects of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere were first noticed by Eunacia Foote in 1856, but as we near the second century since that discovery, operations have remained largely business-as-usual (Thompson, 2019). Other than the fast action in the 1980s surrounding the hole in the ozone layer, progress on climate action has been slow (Waxman, 2019). There are a number of factors contributing to this slowness including: varying vulnerabilities due either to exposure or fundamental causes, how discourse shapes the perception of the problem, and how loss aversion contributes to avoiding proposed solutions. Each of these factors parallel barriers to taking action safeguarding the rights of climate refugees with the additional complicated layer of deservingness. What is clear as climate change becomes more felt than ever is that such slowness cannot continue if rights are to be secured.

The main impacts of climate change can be divided into water and heat. Increased rainfall, flooding, ocean acidity, reduced ocean wildlife, and sea level rise are expected to impact some while others could face drought, heatwaves, wildfires, and failing crops (Clement et. al., 2021). Beyond a global increase of 2 degrees Celsius, an extra 4.9 million people could die globally from extreme heat (Milman et. al., 2021). Making projections on what the climate is going to look like in the future is a difficult task when there are many unknowns that cannot be accounted for until they occur. What is known is that temperatures have already surpassed a 1 degree Celsius rise from pre-Industrial levels in which increasing wildfires and floods have become the norm (Lombrana, 2020) and a myriad of projections agree that the world is expected

to reach 1.5 degrees Celsius in the early 2030s (Grose, et. al., 2021) which would significantly threaten island nations (Sommer, 2021). With current global policies in place, we are on track to reach 2.7 degrees Celsius by 2100 (Climate Action Tracker, 2021). This rise of 2.7 degrees Celsius would make the earth largely uninhabitable to humans, and some of the worst-case scenarios predict a potential rise of 6 degrees Celsius in which the planet could take on so-called ‘apocalyptic conditions’ (Milman et. al., 2021). This foundation of the knowns and unknowns relating to climate change provides insight into the drastic changes that life on earth could endure in the coming years. For human life, a major response to these impacts will come in the form of climate migration.

Business-as-usual operations surrounding climate change could force 216 million people across six regions of the world to move within their countries by 2050 (Clement et. al., 2021). Hotspots of both internal in- and out-migration could emerge by 2030 (Clement et. al., 2021). Climate migration is defined broadly by this paper as the movement of people due to impacts relating to climate change which includes both displacement and internal migration. These climate impacts include everything from the slow processes of land arability and sea level rise to immediate climate disasters of hurricanes and wildfires (Clement et. al., 2021). Those individuals forced into climate migration will be known by this paper as climate refugees. This term does not yet have a legal definition—which minimizes the support they receive (UNFCCC, n.d.)—but it is accurate to their experience as many will not be able to return to the homes they leave behind. The term is also rhetorically more powerful in describing the acuity of their need that is ultimately caused by states. The broad definitions used in this paper are purposeful to capture the full breadth of need when it comes to human rights and the impacts on communities and nations.

Excluding the changing refugee crisis in Ukraine, there are more than 26 million refugees throughout the world, half of whom are children (Amnesty International, 2018). Protections for refugees stretch back to Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which guarantees everyone the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries (Amnesty International, n.d.). The 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are the major international agreements protecting refugees from refoulement (Amnesty International, n.d.). Beyond physical safety, it is necessary—but not always guaranteed—that receiving states provide refugees with the same rights as their own civilians such as the freedom of movement, economic, and social rights (UNHCR, 2002). Recent years mirror how refugees have historically been treated as they face freezing temperatures, limited access to food, inadequate shelter, inadequate access to healthcare, limited contact with human rights monitors or journalists (UN News, 2021a) and are often at high risk for experiencing discrimination, economic or sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect, and physical violence (Alberto & Chilton, 2019). These are the violations faced by a refugee population eight times smaller than the numbers climate migration may generate.

As determined by international agreements, the rights and needs of refugees are met by the state. One piece of why these rights are commonly violated can be linked to world hierarchy. The characterization of dominant and non-dominant countries used in this paper will draw on the terminology of Gibson-Graham et. al (2013). In this characterization, minority nations are the small number of countries—and percentage of the total population—who are responsible for creating and profiting from current world systems (Gibson-Graham et. al., 2013). Examples of nations that fall into this category include the United States, France, and Japan, and extends to all nations commonly known as the Global North, Western, or developed nations. Of significant

relevance, minority nations are also largely the decisionmakers on climate change and migration with more influence and leadership roles in international bodies (Novosad & Werker, 2019). Majority nations make up the vast majority of the world and are those who have been exploited and rendered vulnerable by current world systems (Gibson-Graham et. al., 2013). Examples of nations that fall into this category include Colombia, Nigeria, and the Phillippines, and applies to all nations commonly known as the Global South or developing nations. Using this terminology is important both because it is rhetorically powerful in changing how the world is perceived and because it is a more representative description of the world that is also free of impositional, development-based language. How this world hierarchy relates to the ability to secure human rights for refugees can be examined through fundamental cause theory.

Fundamental cause theory comes out of health literature, linking socioeconomic status to health disparities (Clouston & Link, 2021). The same lens can be applied to nations by examining how dominant world systems create disparate vulnerabilities in their ability to manage shocks—otherwise known as their adaptive capacity. These dominant world systems take the form of colonization and capitalism whose oppression of populations and exploitation of resources has created an imbalance between the minority and majority world (Kothari et. al., 2019). While contributing the least amount to carbon emissions, majority nations will experience the largest number of climate refugees (Lyons, 2021). Underlying this hierarchy and imbalance is a question of accountability, but a greater question is whether minority nations will act to take any.

These fundamental causes can only describe part of the violations against the rights of refugees. The purposeful descionmaking of states to commit violence, unduly detain refugees, or increase the securitization of their borders (Alberto & Chilton, 2019) speaks to the role of the

mind. Much of these purposeful violations are coming from minority nations where it is not a lack of resources, but a lack of willingness. Just as the fundamental causes have allowed minority nations to gain dominance, so too have they created a society of isolation and unintentional indifference toward world problems (Kothari et. al., 2019) with short-term bursts of empathy for particular tragedies (Small et. al., 2007). Rhetoric and discourse are key shapers of the common imagination—a term which this paper defines as the subconscious beliefs held by the population, drawing from Jung’s idea of the collective unconscious (Cashford, 2018). Discourse is the public battleground that determines what meaning to give issues (Bail, 2012), key arenas of which occur in politics and media. Anti-refugee rhetoric in recent years has led to a rise in nationalism and xenophobia and become a central topic in many political campaigns (McDonnell, 2018). Whether the response to rhetoric diverges into aid or neglect comes down to deservingness—a complex belief determining whether someone deserves aid by the influence of ingroup sentiments and emotional investment (Ascher, 2020). Key to a lack of emotional investment is the distance and isolation that the world hierarchy creates, where the vast amount of stories about the majority that minority nations receive are steeped in rhetoric (Adichie, 2009). This is the central barrier toward securing human rights for climate refugees—how the shaping of the common imagination translates into a lack of willingness or deservingness. And this relationship directly impacts what solutions form regarding climate migration.

One of the most popular proposed solutions is development. The development championed by international organizations and the literature in relation to this issue can be characterized by the Sustainable Development Goals which seek to bring goals like eradicating poverty and providing access to clean drinking water into reality (DSDG, 2018). Lacking from the discussion of this solution is implementation, means to prevent exploitation, or how decades

of heralding development as a cure for supposed majority world problems has not yet achieved its goals. This is the myth of development. Increasing growth in order to support majority nations experiencing climate migration will not slow earth's approach toward planetary boundaries and tipping points nor does it challenge the current world order which created these conditions (Leach et. al., 2013). This proposed solution is representative of the hold of discourse and deservingness. Sending aid for development maintains the distance between majority and minority nations. Long-term change that would work toward reducing climate change and establishing balance between nations would require revolutionizing world systems and implementing principles of feminist economics, planetary boundaries, and a pluriverse of ways of living that would uplift Indigenous knowledge and practices (Kothari et. al., 2019). However, securing the human rights of climate refugees is a question of time. The tension between meeting immediate needs and knowing that they will not fix the deeper, fundamental issues makes development an imperfect solution for this issue. Yet even this solution hinges on the benevolence of minority nations with a common imagination already rooted in isolation, apathy, white supremacy, nationalism, xenophobia, and heightened arenas of political rhetoric—all of which may grow even more strained as climate change worsens due to cultural tightening in times of crisis (Roos et. al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a comparison for this situation in which, during a global crisis that depends on the world as a whole receiving care, minority nations like the United States have been resistant toward sharing the intellectual property and vaccines with majority nations (Stiglitz & Wallach, 2021). Under the current common imagination, will climate refugees reach a level of deservingness to receive aid and development when the minority world too will be experiencing worsened climate impacts?



The approach of this paper is anchored in time and scale. It seeks to explore the tension between slow political action and the potential for hundreds of millions of climate refugees in less than thirty years. Further, this paper explores *why* there is this slow action. This *why* leads to research questions asking: how does our exposure to discourse on refugees impact our beliefs and actions; how does the relationship between discourse and deservingness lead to the solution of development; *is* development a solution; can discourse alter the root causes of the problem? These questions lend themselves to the theoretical framework employed in this paper that grounds itself in Clouston and Link (2021)'s fundamental cause theory, Ascher (2020)'s work on deservingness, and van Dijk (1993)'s critical discourse analysis. The process of drilling down into the barriers to securing human rights for climate refugees reveals these areas to be key pillars of the problem as they respectively address the forces in world systems that are contributing to climate change and its disproportionate impacts; the factors determining whether people from the minority world are willing to provide aid and what that aid looks like; and how such factors like discourse can be harnessed in a way that is useful in motivating the general populace of the minority world to support aid for climate refugees. Ultimately, this paper situates itself amid existing literature by centering human rights relating to climate migration, emphasizing the important role of discourse in shaping what solutions are possible, and exploring the tension between time, scale, and fundamental causes surrounding the potential solution of development.

The barriers to securing human rights for climate refugees outlined in this paper present a very real, complex, and deeply rooted problem. As many issues in the human rights field are, there are no easy solutions. Our shared history, the messages we receive, the ways we feel and think are all part of the problem, as well as the solution. Examining discourse critically and

finding ways to harness it to endow climate refugees with deservingness can allow the needle of time to be threaded to meet short-term needs while pushing toward long-term solutions of systems change.

### **The Common Imagination on the Treatment of Refugees**

Unpacking the common imagination of refugees that is held by the general populace requires delving into the history of the issue and how that has translated into modern responses. This common imagination is shaped by the stories that are told as well as the framing, narratives, and politics surrounding them. This phenomena can be analyzed by drawing on research into psychological belief formation and its interplay with threat theory and the concept of deservingness. It is also informed Foucaultian perspectives on discourse and Bail's work on discursive fields. Beliefs in the common imagination—even that of unintentional indifference—remain strong barriers toward taking action on securing human rights for refugees which will further strengthen as climate migration increases.

### **Major Refugee Events and Their Effects**

Throughout human history, war, famine, disease, blight, and the climate have created refugees (Refugee History, 2018). What is key to understand in securing human rights is the results of and responses to these population shifts.

The Irish potato famine produced over one million refugees between 1847 and 1855. Those who settled in British cities lived in slums, struggled to find work, and “were represented in popular media and by politicians as feckless drunks, religiously backward and political agitators” (Refugee History, 2018). In the United States, Irish refugees faced similar discrimination rife with anti-Catholic and racially-inferior rhetoric, cementing the meaning of a ‘native’ American to be Anglo-Saxon (Lee, 2019).

The World Wars from 1900 to 1951 created the largest numbers of refugees ever seen in the world, each in the tens of millions (Refugee History, 2018). The responses by countries receiving these vast movements of people differed widely, such as the generally welcome reception of war refugees from Belgium and Poland into Britain versus the reluctance to accept Jewish refugees even after knowledge of the extermination camps (Refugee History, 2018). The First World War ended free movement across borders with the implementation of the Nansen passport for stateless persons while the Second World War—grappling with some 40 million refugees—created administrative operations including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as well as international legal doctrines surrounding refugee rights (Refugee History, 2018).

The drought and dust storms of the Dust Bowl drove 2.5 million people from their homes by 1940—the largest internal migration in the United States (American Experience, n.d.). Many fled to California in which a lack of work and space created roadside camps of migrants, prompting police—or as the press called them, the ‘bum brigade’—to turn away the so-called ‘undesirables’ (American Experience, n.d.). The Roosevelt administration built camps of temporary housing to help reduce this strain (American Experience, n.d.).

The UK parliament’s partition of India along religious lines in 1947 and the subsequent creation of Pakistan produced at least ten million refugees, driven by violence and exacerbated by monsoons (Elgot & Hussain, 2017). The hasty decision and the trauma it caused remains a source of tension today (Elgot & Hussain, 2017).

The Indochina refugee crisis in the countries of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam created three million refugees from 1975 to 2000 driven by conflicts around communism and colonization (UNHCR, 2000). The length of the conflict and the large number of refugees it

produced caused states to waver on their commitments to take in refugees from communism (UNHCR, 2000). States grew suspicious of their motives for leaving and created measures to control departures and encourage repatriation—marking a shift by minority nations to uphold the principle of asylum but to deny large-scale resettlement (UNHCR, 2000).

The historical foundation of refugee treatment depicts an ebb and flow. There remains a general reticence toward refugees and their resettlement by host locations. Support for refugees grew after World War II but cooled as time spent on the issue, money spent on aid, and foreigners in their countries increased. This ebb and flow touches on the tension found in deservingness between the perceived self and action. Minority nations perceive themselves as charitable, willing to help—as seen by the creation of international agreements—however, cognitive empathy does not necessarily translate into actions (Ascher, 2020). This period of willingness to help came from a period of stronger emotional investment and greater interaction between nations of the world—key components of establishing deservingness (Ascher, 2020). However, due to the distance created by the world hierarchy, the years following the World Wars saw a greater amount of cooling on willingness to uphold international refugee agreements accompanied by a growing degree of suspicion. Such distance makes it easier to place negative characteristics on the outgroup when the ingroup cannot ensure fairness would be achieved in sending aid (Ascher, 2020). So refugees today are left in this tension between disdain and duty by minority nations.

### Recent History and the Political Climate

Refugee crises in recent years stand on the foundation of those that have occurred throughout human history. They also shape and are shaped by the current political climate and its

discourse. Some of the most significant include the Syrian refugee crisis, refugees at the US-Mexico border, and the Rohingya refugees fleeing genocide in Myanmar.

The Syrian refugee crisis has lasted since 2011, born out of a civil war in response to a corrupt regime and partially by climate change-driven droughts (Lal, 2021). It forced 6.6 million people to flee, the majority of whom have settled in neighboring countries, while another 6.7 million have been internally displaced (USA for UNHCR, 2021). This wave of refugees prompted an avoidant response from the European Union (EU) who outsourced border security by paying the Turkish government to hold them in Turkey and take back those who made it to the EU (Thornell, 2021). This arrangement gave Turkey and other border nations like Morocco, Egypt, and Libya power over the EU to blackmail them for more money with the threat of allowing refugees and migrants across their borders (Thornell, 2021). And within these periphery nations that took in large numbers of Syrian refugees, support waned. Jordan granted Syrians access to public services including free medical care, yet as the number of refugees increased, policies grew more restrictive (Alrababa'h et. al., 2021). Their sense of deservingness cooled. The Syrian refugee crisis became inextricable from politics in minority nations as they witnessed the sudden influx of majority world foreigners looking to them for aid and a place of refuge.

At heights in both the Syrian refugee crisis and the US presidential campaign, “in 2015 and 2016, several surveys indicated that a majority of Americans did not want the United States to accept any refugees from Syria at all” (Alrababa'h et. al., 2021, p. 63). At a similarly turbulent time in Europe, “majorities in Poland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, and the United Kingdom claimed that refugees from these countries were a ‘major threat’” (Alrababa'h et. al, 2021, p. 63). This refugee crisis was also a driving force in securing Brexit (Gray & Franck, 2019) with narratives

emphasizing the uncertainty, danger, and change coming from the influx of migration. Now twelve EU nations are calling for the finances to build physical border walls (Jilani, 2021).

Crossings across the US-Mexico border have a long and storied history, driving migrants and refugees from largely Central America into the United States. Instability and violence—often perpetuated by the infringement of the United States government and minority nation resource exploitation (Borger, 2018)—as well as prolonged droughts that have caused food insecurity (World Food Programme, 2017) are some of the main drivers across the border. Those who cross are met with an overburdened system, and at times of particular strain, tear gas and violence (Alberto & Chilton, 2019). Once in detention centers, they are at an increased risk of discrimination, abuse, and a lack of adequate healthcare, privacy, and access to information (Alberto & Chilton, 2019). The ‘zero tolerance’ policy piloted in 2017, implemented in 2018, and rescinded in 2021, separated thousands of children from their family when seeking asylum as a form of deterrence (Alberto & Chilton, 2019). Despite an official rescission, the Southern Poverty Law Center finds this separation is still occurring (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022). The US-Mexico border remains a popular political topic in the United States. The adage that then-candidate Trump would build a wall on the border was a major determinant in his getting elected and remained a popular slogan within the party (Golshan, 2017). Right-wing media and politicians used fearmongering about a ‘caravan’ of migrants from Central America as a fixture of the 2018 midterm elections (Stewart, 2018). The issue remains a constant focus of US politics.

Violence against the Rohingya people has lasted for decades when it spiked in 2016, sending the largest numbers of refugees yet seen in the crisis fleeing into Bangladesh (OCHA, 2019). There, they live in congested camps—one of which is the largest refugee camp in the world—under threat from monsoons (OCHA, 2019). However, in the years since, basic access to

food, water and shelter have been provided (OCHA, 2019). After years of colonization then military control, the media liberalization and synonymization of Facebook with the internet—and source of news for 40% of internet users—is theorized to be one of the major drivers of violence against the Rohingya people (Whitten-Woodring et. al., 2020). Simultaneously, the government was turning toward extreme speech against the Rohingya and foreign media—that often took more measured or pro-Rohingya stances—were discredited (Whitten-Woodring et. al., 2020) in a common ingroup response. The storm that necessitated hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee incredible violence is founded on the power of belief that is fueled and created by narratives, rhetoric, and framing in media and politics.

The rhetoric that fuels the common imagination is key to understanding the barriers to securing rights for refugees. The opening of Amnesty International’s “The World’s Refugees in Numbers” article begins with this statement: “many powerful politicians and influential media might give the impression that rich countries, particularly in the West, are doing more than enough to help people fleeing war and persecution. But in reality, the picture looks very different” (Amnesty International, 2018). This description matches the perceived self involved in deservingness where minority nations typically believe in upholding the rights of refugees, but a lack of broader awareness, relevance, and emotional investment leads to inaction at best (Ascher, 2020). Beginning their piece with this sentiment highlights how discourse is key in shaping the outcomes of refugees. The refugee crises of recent years have seen right-wing parties adopt “more ethnocentric arguments to mobilize support around protecting a ‘romanticized national culture from being “swamped” by foreigners”” (Tubakovic, 2019, p. 190). The push for border walls across Europe reflect—as an Amnesty International official puts it—a “new Iron Curtain across Europe, and politicians are using migration to gain power by playing on the fears of their

citizens” (Jilani, 2021). After terrorist attacks in Europe, newspaper discourse turned to fear-based coverage, making the link between the arrival of refugees and security threats (Gray & Franck, 2019). The influx of these narratives of securitization draw on racialized logic and colonial modernity—a dog-whistling that non-white populations are ‘threatening and violent’ (Gray & Franck, 2019). Securitization narratives hinge on ingroup and outgroup sentiments that impact even the majority world as 2019 elections in South Africa and India focused on stronger action against unauthorized migrants, Kenya is building a border fence with Somalia, Mexico and Venezuela are increasing their border controls, and the Dominican Republic is deporting Haitians (McLeman, 2019). Even maps used—including those made with the neutral intentions—reinforce the common imagination. Maps provide a “godlike overview of seemingly inscrutable global dramas [in which] war and conflict, migration, terrorism and other perplexing political issues appear intelligible to non-specialists” (van Houtum & Lacy Bueno, 2020, p. 196), simultaneously adopting the air of scientific truth while disguising the reality that each map is made up of an array of cartographic choices to elicit various emotional responses. Bail emphasizes the role of emotion in rhetoric in which displays of emotional intensity, particularly fear or anger, can capture public attention and shape outcomes of collective behavior (Bail, 2020). Alarmism surrounding early projections of climate migration has led to critique and calls for nuance for this reason (Fitch, 2020). There is an incredible power in rhetoric and humans are particularly vulnerable to it.

Belief formation is a key element of social psychology literature. Humans operate with what is known as a belief-dependent realism where beliefs determine reality (Grayling, 2011). Beliefs form for two reasons, “the brain's readiness to perceive patterns even in random phenomena...[and] its readiness to nominate agency—intentional action—as the cause of natural



events” (Grayling, 2011, p. 446). Part of this process comes from what Rutjens and Brandt describe as moralization which imbues issues with emotion, shaping how information is processed and grounding intuition with logic (Rutjens & Brandt, 2018). Beliefs are not equivalent to truth but they form the foundation of ideology as well as the common imagination—the reality humans operate in. According to Young’s analysis of Foucaultian discourse, “rules, systems and procedures comprise a discrete realm of discursive practices...a conceptual terrain in which knowledge is formed and produced” (Young, 1981 as cited in Hook, 2001, p. 522). Most important is how “the effect of discursive practices is to make it virtually impossible to think outside of them; to be outside of them is, by definition, to be mad, to be beyond comprehension and therefore reason” (Young, 1981 as cited in Hook, 2001, p. 522). This highlights the connection of rhetoric to power, how it can shape reality as “discourse itself is both constituted by, and ensures the reproduction of, the social system, through forms of selection, exclusion and domination” (Young, 1981 as cited in Hook, 2001, p. 522). This discussion gets at the psychological basis for the vulnerability of the common imagination—and how difficult it is to change what has been set in motion.

This has particular consequences for climate migration. Already there is a bent in coverage toward victimization and threat from climate refugees in majority nations. As critiques of alarmist climate migration projections point out, care must be taken not to romanticize poverty or operate under the assumption people will simply pack up and move without considering their emotional ties to their homeland (Fitch, 2020). For example, a New Yorker article highlights ‘dangerous’ migration hotspots in majority nations while high-risk minority world locations like New York, Amsterdam, Tokyo, and Hong Kong are rarely framed in alarmist terms or discussed as cities in need of resettlement (Konior, 2020). Rhetoric such as this is central to the

battleground of discourse, determining the deservingness of climate refugees. It is shaping the beliefs of the common imagination. Key to Atwell and Mastro's intergroup threat theory is cultivation theory in which the repetitive and homogenous nature of the media acts as a dominant form of socialization (Atwell & Mastro, 2016). And because "people rely on their 'intuition' of what constitutes correct information by believing things that they hear repeated often and that circulate in their immediate networks...[people] tend to believe information that corresponds to their existing beliefs" (Whitten-Woodring, 2020, p. 412). Beliefs about climate refugees are subject to a circular process where history constantly informs the present, shaping what policies are backed, what politicians get elected, and who people pay attention to.

### The Ukrainian Perspective

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 garnered widespread attention, pulling people from their general apathy to one of excessive empathy for the refugees fleeing war. The situation is still evolving, but currently more than five million refugees—many of them children—have fled into neighboring countries while over six million have been internally displaced by the war (BBC, 2022). More continue to flee daily. The European Union has granted Ukrainian refugees "a blanket right to stay and work throughout its 27 member nations for up to three years" as well as access to social welfare, housing, medical treatment, and schools (BBC, 2022). Experts characterize how there has been an unprecedented amount of aid for Ukrainian refugees (Gamboa, 2022). In particular, "the philanthropy research organization Candid has catalogued \$440 million in grants and \$333 million more in pledges for the victims," not including individual donations or nonprofits and corporations that haven't yet publicly announced (Gamboa, 2022). In addition to aid, the United States is adjusting its previous refugee allotments—which have been declining since the 1900s and sharply since 2016, where 2021 saw

only 11,411 refugees admitted (Statista Research Department, 2021)—and will now allow the entrance of 100,000 Ukrainians alone (Keith, 2022).

The question then is whether this marks a shift in the common imagination—toward long-term care about refugees, seeing them for their humanity, and pushing governments into action for their aid. The recent Poland-Belarus refugee crisis provides a counterargument for why this may not be the case. In an attempt to force the EU to lift sanctions against the Belarusian president, the government utilized disinformation to attract Middle Eastern migrants and moved them across the border to the EU—leading to 7,000 migrants living in tent camps along the Belarusian border (Jilani, 2021). Camps on both sides of the border face dire conditions with freezing temperatures coupled with limited access to food, water, and adequate shelter (UN News, 2021a). Poland reacted to the influx of migrants and refugees with abuse. Many refugees faced forced returns—even those with claims of international protection—were beaten and threatened by security forces, and faced systematic detention (UN News, 2021a). In this detention, they were not given proper healthcare, had limited contact with the outside world, independent lawyers, or human rights monitors (UN News, 2021a). This stands in sharp contrast to the warm welcome of the Ukrainian refugees of which Poland has now taken in more than 2 million (BBC, 2022). This disparity is similar in Greece which is known for harsh policies and poor treatment of refugees (Schmitz, 2022). The “Greek Migration and Asylum Minister Notis Mitarakis recently labeled the refugees from Ukraine ‘real refugees.’ Meanwhile, leading politicians have said asylum-seekers from the Middle East or Africa are ‘illegal immigrants,’” (Schmitz, 2022). Another comparison can be drawn with the US whose broad use of Title 42 under the guise of health crisis and despite regular mixing at international ports has been used to keep migrants out and prevent cases of persecution from being adequately heard (American

Immigration Council, 2021), while Ukrainian refugees have been readily welcomed. Ukrainian refugees are seen through a lens of kinship and similarity, where they are neighbors and people not unlike themselves (Jakes, 2022) while refugees from majority nations are seen as foreigners, dangerous and unworthy of entry or equivalent treatment. And when it comes to the free willingness to send aid, there have been many tragedies in the majority world such as the war in Syria (Alexander & Rozzelle, 2022), the famine in Yemen (Al Jazeera, 2022), and the sea-level rise in the Maldives (Pal & Ghoshal, 2020) that are nowhere near equivalent. This highlights the insulation of minority nations, looking out for their own first and caring more deeply for their plights—however similar a situation they face to those from majority nations. It follows the typical path of deservingness toward the ingroup. So strong are beliefs about the ingroup and its perceived self that additional characteristics like poverty—or in Ukraine’s case—ethnic differences correspond to differentiated treatment (Ascher, 2020). There is ready willingness to provide aid to the average Ukrainian while the neediest, like the Roma population or foreign-born citizens, are mistreated (Popoviciu, 2022). This disparity in deservingness paints an unlikely picture of equivalent outpourings of willingness for the vast numbers who will flee dire climate impacts in majority nations. Indeed, many of these impacts are already taking place—to little minority world attention.

### **Disproportionate Impacts Around the World**

Climate change will alter the conditions of the entire world, but its impacts will not be distributed equally. The IPCC characterizes this disparity between three contributing factors: exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity (Schneider et. al., 2007). This translates into the natural exposure to climate change due to location, the particular sensitivity of those in that location with factors like health or age, and the means with which to adapt or respond to these

vulnerabilities (Schneider et. al., 2007). Factors such as these point toward fundamental cause theory where the world systems which have perpetuated the differentiation between majority and minority nations translate into unequal distributions of impacts. What these impacts look like and the timeline in which they arise will inform the number of climate refugees they produce and where they will go. It is necessary to understand what resources are available to receive them and to consider the varying responsibilities nations have internally and externally in order to ascertain barriers to securing their human rights. The common imagination surrounding refugees remains the foundational barrier, but delving into the way these climate impacts will present highlights just how large a barrier this is.

### Island Nations

Island nations are typically considered to be part of the majority world—often characterized as Small Island Developing States—however the particularly dire state of climate change’s impact and their unique needs make it worth focusing on them separately. These island nations can generally be broken down into the regions of the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the Caribbean and collectively make up around 71.4 million people—though individual nation populations are often much smaller (Clement et. al., 2021). The main impact that island nations will face is sea level rise. Currently, an average of 30% of people in island nations are living less than five meters above sea level and oftentimes, much of the population is concentrated in a handful of coastal cities (Clement et. al., 2021). Actual and projected sea level rise will vary widely across island nations, but it is accelerating from 1.5-1.9 millimeters across the last century to 2.8-3.6 millimeters between 1993 and 2010 (Clement et. al., 2021). Such sea level rise causes salinization, threatening both agriculture and drinking water from sea water encroachment (Clement et. al., 2021). Sea level rise also leads to erosion, shrinking already small territories,

and threatening infrastructure (Clement et. al., 2021). More frequent and intense storms, temperature increases, ocean acidification, and the subsequent degrading of ecosystems are other impacts particular to island nations (Clement et. al., 2021).

Island nations have been fierce in advocating that the world's nations accept no higher than a 1.5 degree Celsius global temperature increase for the very existence of their nations is at stake (Sommer, 2021). A number of island nation leaders have taken drastic rhetorical measures in attempts to garner international attention to an existential problem that worsens every year. The former president of the Maldives gave a press conference underwater (Omidi, 2009) while Tuvalu's Prime Minister of Justice gave his COP26 speech standing in the ocean (Packham, 2021). Such reminders of the stakes of the climate crisis translate into international meetings like COP26 which include island nations in presence if not in voice as only a few were heard at the conference—partially due to COVID-19 protocols and travel costs (Timperley, 2021). Such maintenance of the perceived self of the minority-led conference translated into how many island nations were disappointed by the watered down results of COP26 which did not explicitly call for coal reductions nor their 1.5 degree Celsius goal (Frost, 2021). The degree of the threat that island nations face and the lack of minority world acknowledgement or progress highlights the climate injustice they face. These nations are some of “the lowest carbon-emitting regions in the world, responsible for just 0.23% of global emissions, yet [they have] suffered some of the earliest and most severe impacts of rising global temperatures” (Lyons, 2021). They are also some of the least equipped in terms of adaptive capacity. The size of these nations, their weak infrastructure, limited economic opportunities, and the frequency of the natural hazards they face make them particularly vulnerable (Clement et. al., 2021). Therefore, proposing development as a solution for island nations is unlikely and also fails to address the responsibility that minority

nations should have toward island nations. Further, the situation that island nations face—more than any other region—makes clear that focusing on internal migration does not capture the full nature of climate migration.

In a broad projection, the IPCC finds that 49 million could internally migrate from East Asia and the Pacific (Clement et. al., 2021). A general trend that is occurring in island nations as climate change worsens is migratory consolidation—from rural to coastal urban areas and from smaller, outlying islands to the main islands (Clement et. al., 2021). Half of all households have been impacted by sea level rise and fourteen percent of all movements in the low-lying nation of Kiribati are attributed to climate change (Alexis-Martin et. al., 2019). Climate disasters like hurricanes prompt immediate movement of thousands of people from already small populations (Clement et. al., 2021). Given the lack of international progress and the fact that the IPCC has found that each additional 0.5 degrees Celsius “causes clearly discernible increases in the intensity and frequency of heatwaves, heavy rainfall, droughts and extreme weather events” (Lyons, 2021) that are making island nation uninhabitable, they will be forced into out-migration (Clement et. al., 2021).

### Majority Nations

Majority nations make up the majority of the world. They occupy nearly all of South and Central America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. These nations carry the bulk of production and resource extraction due to exploitation that benefits dominant world systems (Kothari et. al., 2019). Most of the global poor live in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank Group, 2021) and climate change is projected to drive over 68 million more people into poverty by 2030 (World Bank Group, 2021). Poverty is often linked with a greater vulnerability to climate change, coinciding with all three factors of exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity, as for

example, 132 million of the global poor live in areas with high flood risk (World Bank Group, 2021). The Middle East and North Africa are some of the most vulnerable regions to climate change with temperatures rising well beyond the global pace as well as severe water scarcity and desertification threatening food production and raising the potential for conflict (Alaaldin, 2022). Central and South America have experienced increasing flood and drought-related food insecurity and malnutrition (IPCC, 2022). Over the next decade, Central America, Cuba, and the coastal regions of Mexico are likely to be much less livable while extreme heatwaves and rising temperatures may pose significant risks for India (Milman et. al., 2021). Crop failures are projected to hit every continent, particularly in India, Pakistan, Brazil, and Mexico (Milman et. al., 2021). Wildfires are likely to increase across the world as well, especially in the southern hemisphere such as northern Argentina, populous regions of Brazil, mainland Southeast Asia, Zambia and Zimbabwe (Milman et. al., 2021). In 2050, the world is likely to reach 2 degrees Celsius with severe heatwaves jumping up to reach more than a third of the population (Milman et. al., 2021). More than five billion people under these circumstances would have an inadequate water supply, following the rate of available water over the past twenty years that has dropped a centimeter per year (Milman et. al., 2021). Projections find that in 2050, Dust Bowl-era yields could become the norm with demands for scarce water increasing by 20% (Lustgarten, 2020). All of these factors will impact majority world nations more severely than minority nations, and as they become increasingly unlivable, people will need to move.

Projections show that sub-Saharan Africa could see 86 million people internally migrate from climate change, 19 million in North Africa, 17 million in Latin America, 40 million in South Asia, and 5 million in Central Asia (Clement et. al., 2021). Numbers of this scale have not been seen in the world. With majority nations potentially totaling an approximate 167 million



(not including island nations), this number eclipses the average of 24 million people displaced by weather disasters every year since 2008 (McDonnell, 2018). Due to fundamental causes, majority nations already have limited adaptive capacity which will make enduring these internal migration movements difficult. Most internal migration will drive refugees toward cities or nearby camps which is likely to exacerbate existing inequality, poverty, and worsen the exposure of all to environmental risks (Warn & Adamo, 2014). Nawrotzki et. al's examination of rural-urban climate-driven migration in Mexico highlights their interrelation where direct agricultural losses drive them into cities where urban occupants face increased food costs, strained infrastructure, and less employment (Nawrotzki et. al., 2015). Access to drinking water and for increased agricultural production would likely become a significant challenge (Warn & Adamo, 2014). Dense populations created by internal migration also increase the risk for the spread of disease (Zaman, 2020) which is particularly relevant as climate change will make diseases and pandemics more likely (Boukercherianna & Mohammed-Roberts, 2020). Often the cities where climate refugees will be forced to flee are exposed to significant climate risks especially when risks can amplify due to a lack of adaptive capacity such as essential infrastructure and services (Warn & Adamo, 2014). Thus, it must be taken into account that there will be significant out-migration. Already, climate change has driven migration from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe and from Central America to the United States in recent years (deSherbinin, 2020).

Such out-migration is a good thing, helping to ease the burden of internal migration in majority nations (McLeman, 2019). An article published by the UN describes the reasons why there will not be 'en masse' out-migration from majority nations, one of which being that the people most impacted by climate change will not have the means to move (Tanner, n.d.). Those

in this situation are known by the literature as ‘trapped populations’ (Ayeb-Karlsson et. al., 2018). These are the people with acute vulnerability, facing particular exposure, sensitivity, and minimal adaptive capacity. Language used by international organizations to emphasize internal migration is discourse informing the common imagination as it takes such care to dispel the fears of minority nations. It is double-think of those producing literature for the purpose of highlighting the need of climate refugees to simultaneously understand the existence of these ‘trapped populations’ and still emphasize how the main impact will be internal climate migration. Such resistance toward climate out-migration leans on white supremacist, dominant world ideologies. It raises such questions as why *not* focus on relocation pathways for climate refugees; and is the focus on sending aid and development to majority nations so that they might remain in their own countries? Aside from the dangers of this narrative, it is also unrealistic. Absorbing the shocks of internal migration may be feasible in minority nations with less exposure to climate impacts and the ability to better mitigate what they do experience, but majority nations under the oppression of the current world system may not be able to.

### Minority Nations

Minority nations make up the small portion of the world that benefits most from the labor, resources, and exploitation of the rest of the world. The dominant forces of capitalism and consumerism that support them are the same that drive climate change which will impact the world in its entirety. It is projected that there will be less rainfall in the northwest United States and crop failures will hit every continent, affecting the minority nation regions of the midwestern US and southeast Australia in particular, with worse crop yields in parts of Europe (Milman et. al., 2021). All of North America and Europe and the east coast of Australia are projected to be at significant risk of wildfires (Milman et. al., 2021). Heatwaves and rising temperatures pose a

serious risk for Japan, facilitating disease-carrying insects and diminishing the quality of crops (The Climate Reality Project, 2019). Worsening typhoons and monsoons are likely to impact East Asian nations like South Korea and Japan (WMO, 2021). The United States in particular will face climate impacts in every region with “increased storm surge, high tide flooding, and saltwater intrusion in coastal areas; more wildfires in the West; increased precipitation and flash floods in the Northeast; and heatwaves and drought in the Great Plains and western states” (Marandi & Main, 2021, p. 465). Lustgarten paints a dire picture of the United States:

“Across the country, it’s going to get hot. Buffalo, New York, may feel in a few decades like Tempe, Arizona, does today, and Tempe itself will sustain 100-degree average summer temperatures by the end of the century. Extreme humidity from New Orleans to northern Wisconsin will make summers increasingly unbearable, turning otherwise seemingly survivable heat waves into debilitating health threats. Fresh water will also be in short supply, not only in the West but also in places like Florida, Georgia and Alabama, where droughts now regularly wither cotton fields. By 2040, according to federal government projections, extreme water shortages will be nearly ubiquitous west of Missouri. The Memphis Sands Aquifer, a crucial water supply for Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas and Louisiana, is already overdrawn by hundreds of millions of gallons a day. Much of the Ogallala Aquifer—which supplies nearly a third of the nation’s irrigation groundwater—could be gone by the end of the century” (Lustgarten, 2020).

Minority nations will face significant climate impacts though not to the existential degree that island nations face nor the larger degree of uninhabitability that majority nations may face past 1.5 degrees Celsius. Once beyond this planetary boundary, “the heat in tropical regions of the world will push societies to the limits, with stifling humidity preventing sweat from evaporating

and making it difficult for people to cool down” (Milman et. al., 2021) and extreme heatwaves could make parts of the Middle East, China, and India unendurable (Milman et. al., 2021).

Climate change will cause internal migration for minority nations as well. Projections show that Eastern Europe and Central Asia could see 5 million move. Wildfires, extreme temperatures, and drought have already internally displaced 37.7 thousand people in Europe (Apap, 2021). Extreme rainfall and flooding in western Japan forced 2 million people to evacuate their homes in 2018 (The Climate Reality Project, 2019). However, projections on internal climate migration in minority nations are significantly limited despite the reality of the threats they face. The majority of the focus regarding climate migration for Canada (Hett, 2021), Australia (Higuchi, 2019), and Europe (Grievesson et. al., 2021) focuses on out-migration to their countries. The United States places more attention on internal climate migration with some projections showing anything from 13 million people forced to move to tens of millions beyond that size (Lustgarten, 2020). Sea level rise alone could produce 250,000 unforeseen, net migrants in the cities of Austin, Orlando, Atlanta, and Houston (Marandi & Main, 2021). More than 25 counties could see 100,000 migrants with a 1.8 meter sea level rise (Marandi & Main, 2021). Miami is “projected to lose over 2.5 million residents” (Marandi & Main, 2021, p. 468). The ability to flee is a key feature of minority nations’ experience of climate migration and fundamental cause theory in which individuals with higher socioeconomic status are able to avoid the ‘risk of risks’ (Clouston & Link, 2021). Minority nations will experience climate migration differently from the rest of the world.

What responsibility do minority nations have to the most vulnerable in the majority world who will become climate refugees in the next decades? Minority nations bear the lion’s share of responsibility for causing climate change while they will endure the least of its consequences

(Lyons, 2021). The minority world's modern stance on refugees is already one of disproportionate responsibility. Currently across the world, majority nations "host 85% of the world's 25.4 million refugees and approximately half of the world's 3.1 million asylum seekers" with 46% of them being hosted in the Middle East and Africa" (Arababa'h et. al., 2021, p. 35). This contrasts sharply with how, in 2019, "Japan granted asylum to less than 1 percent of refugees and asylum-seekers who applied...despite having the third-largest economy in the world" (Chase-Lubitz, 2021). According to Amnesty International:

"The international community, and in particular wealthy nations, are failing to meaningfully share the responsibility for protecting people who have fled their homes in search of safety. In other words, they are failing to agree on and support a fair and predictable system for protecting people forced to leave everything behind because of violence and persecution. Instead, lower- and middle-income countries are doing much more than their fair share—hosting more than double the number of refugees that high-income countries are" (Amnesty International, 2018).

There is little evidence that this phenomena will change anytime soon. A study found that Japanese citizens were less likely to support policies that increased the number of climate refugees they would take in despite retaining a high positivity toward increases of climate aid (Uji et. al., 2021). Indeed, the main position of minority nations who believe in the threat climate change poses remains aid and development, but will that be enough?

### **Solutions**

The common imagination, shaped by discourse, determines deservingness of climate refugees in whether their human rights are secured. Proposed solutions echo what form this deservingness takes. Those explored here include development and discourse itself.

## Development

Perhaps the most favored solution—by the literature on climate migration, minority nation governments, and international organizations including the UN and the World Bank—is development. The 2021 Groundswell Report mentions development upwards of 500 times (Clement et. al., 2021). Development itself is a somewhat catch-all term but in the context of climate migration, typically takes on the role of the Sustainable Development Goals developed by the UN to form partnerships between minority and majority nations with goals that include ending poverty, building resilient infrastructure, increasing sustainability, and promoting peace (DSDG, 2018)). This is built on a history of the minority world attempting to develop the majority world (Kothari et. al., 2019). Decades have passed and these problems persist with additional, compounding consequences from a development-growth mindset (Kothari et. al., 2019).

A problem with the solution of development proposed in relation to climate migration is that it lacks specificity. The World Bank’s Groundswell Report offers suggestions like: “enable new and existing social protection systems to act before extreme climate events become disasters” or “piloting participatory approaches for sustainable and efficient water and land management at the local level, diversifying economic opportunities, supporting income-generating activities, and creating jobs especially for women and youth” (Clement et. al., 2021, p. 11). But these proposals are broad, without details on how to actually achieve them either in terms of execution, funding, or local perspectives. The Sustainable Development Goals themselves are broad. Development has a history of leading to exploitation. Development without deep planning and local perspectives can “inadvertently alter the social balance and economic incentives of a region” (Zaveri et. al., 2021, p. 125). Development of water

infrastructure has shown that conflict can arise from an abundance or shortage of water which points to deeper, fundamental problems that must be solved (Zaveri et. al., 2021). Unspecificity also gives nations cover to do less. Such can be seen from the results of the most recent international conference which produced the COP26 Glasgow Climate Pact that ultimately only “calls on 197 countries to report their progress towards more climate ambition next year, at COP27” (UN News, 2021b). Many climate activists were disappointed by the results of COP26 when the time for radical action is becoming more and more necessary. Instead, the Climate Pact softened language by China and India to ‘phase-down’ coal use, leading activists to characterize the agreement as the ‘least-worst outcome’ (UN News, 2021b). With development, there is no outline for how much aid a country should provide, no binding mechanism to ensure they do, nor even which countries this aid should explicitly come from or go to. It relies on the goodwill of largely minority nations.

The common imagination surrounding refugees makes development the favored solution for climate migration. It upholds the perceived self of minority nations who cognitively value the human rights of refugees while still maintaining world systems of dominance. However, discourse can alter this perceived self and thus, political realities make development a less viable solution. For example, how the 2015 Paris Agreement suffered from the oscillating politics from the Obama to the Trump to the Biden administration (Jackson & Gastelumendi, 2020). When it comes to development, as Schrayner puts it, the concepts of ‘foreign’ and ‘aid’ present an uphill battle politically (Schrayner, 2017). The amount of development necessary to mitigate the impacts of climate migration in majority nations will be significant. According to UNEP, most majority nations are creating National Adaptation Plans however the costs of increasing their adaptive capacity are estimated at \$70 million annually and are expected to increase between \$140-300

billion in 2030 and \$280-500 billion in 2050 (UNEP, 2021). There are some international funds to help with this financing, but they are not enough to meet the need (UNEP, 2021).

Development will also be slow to actualize during a time when minority nations will be grappling with their own climate impacts (Milman et. al., 2021). During times of crisis, the ingroup will turn their deservingness inward (Ascher, 2020).

Development also perpetuates minority world oppression that limits what solutions are considered possible. Preparing cities for incoming climate refugees in terms of their “affordable housing stock, transit and resiliency plans, and investments in critical infrastructure such as sewage and drinking water” (Marandi & Main, 2021, p. 469) requires funding and control from the minority world toward the majority who lack that adaptive capacity (Clement et. al., 2021). But a top-down approach to development leaves out local perspectives. Conversely, the concept of the pluriverse highlights the strength of many ideologies operating together in interdependence under planetary boundaries (Kothari et. al., 2019). This concept relies on uplifting Indigenous ways of doing in the place of current economic and social systems (Kothari et. al., 2019). For example, adaptation decisions in small island nations like Samoa utilize traditional knowledge systems which is important in climate risk management approaches to ensure measures are appropriate for their individual context (Handmer & Nalau, 2019 as cited in Clement et. al., 2021). However, most development—even that which is ‘climate-smart’—follows the standard that minority nations have used which can perpetuate negative climate impacts (Kothari et. al., 2019). In this way, development maintains current world systems of dominance with a common imagination steeped in capitalism. Movements of alternative ways of securing needs like degrowth, solidarity, or ecofeminism would then require years of education in broader minority world populations to become politically viable. This



arises the tension between short-term necessity and long-term solutions. Focusing on development pushes the world further from reaching long-term solutions that get to fundamental causes that threaten human rights, but focusing on long-term solutions which would reject development for its role in systems of oppression would place those suffering in the interim at risk. So development may be necessary, akin to a bandage for a bullet wound.

### Discourse

Discourse is the battleground that gives issues meaning (Bail, 2012) and thus it has the potential to be harnessed in securing human rights for climate refugees. Using discourse as a solution is ultimately an acceptance of the time-sensitive nature of this problem—and thus an acceptance of development. It requires operating within the system—of hierarchy and dominant world systems—for now, to get the bandage of meeting the immediate needs of climate refugees. Human rights cannot wait for a revolution. Harnessing discourse could bolster deservingness to ensure development and aid funding are secure and that positive refugee policies are put in place. The added benefit of focusing on discourse is how it can work over time toward those long-term solutions away from dominant world systems that can provide true change and ultimate securitization of rights.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to care about the whole world at the same time. Deservingness requires awareness, relevance, and emotional investment (Ascher, 2020). Thus, there is a need in the discourse to close the distance between the minority and majority world by heightening emotional connection and interaction across the divide. Emotion plays a key role as a medium of exchange and in deciding whether to intervene (McNaughton, 2013). Part of what gets people to act comes from loss aversion (Jervis, 2017). People are often more annoyed by the loss of ten dollars than finding the same amount on the street (Jervis, 2017). Research into the

psychology of leaders has shown that they will take great risks to avoid loss and this aversion contributes to perseverance or stubbornness in a goal because of the sunk time and costs (Jervis, 2017). This mirrors the gamble being taken with climate change and migration—avoidance of the loss of current ways of life. Acting on an opportunity is rare compared with acting out of fear (Jervis, 2017) which highlights the power of current discourse as leaders are acting to securitize (McLeman, 2019) against migration but have repeatedly stalled on climate change action. As time goes on with a lack of aid for climate refugees, the potential for conflict rises (Zaveri et. al., 2021). This is dangerous when it comes to deservingness because if the outgroup becomes too loud or aggressive, realistic group conflict theory can come into effect, where the perceived need drops and the outgroup is instead seen as underserving by ‘taking’ from the ingroup through illegitimate means, and thus leaving room to rationalize halting aid (Ascher, 2020). Discourse is an unwieldy tool, but a tool all the same.

In many ways, academia and the literature act counter to providing, what is described by this paper, as ‘useful’ discourse. Critics of the term ‘trapped populations’ cite how it is vague and discursive (Ayeb-Karlsson et. al., 2018). However, this is a term that is naturally imbued with emotional resonance. The pursuance of nuance for nuance’s sake in academia strips this emotion and necessarily maintains the distance between the minority and majority world, the ingroup and outgroup. It becomes a question of what is useful to securing human rights. Useful discourse must ask what can forge connection, interaction, or at the very least empathy that might change hearts, minds, and votes. Much of the literature on climate migration also focuses on internal migration and very little on external migration, becoming discourse. Such care is taken to assure there will be no mass exodus from the ‘others’ to the ‘us.’ It informs policy that centers development which bolsters the perceived self with the idea of providing aid, but still keeps them

‘over there.’ Academia’s role in discourse in the production of research and theory can be examined through critical discourse analysis, driven largely by the work of van Dijk. Demands for nuance, the exclusion of emotions, discursive language, or ‘politics’ create precisely that (van Dijk, 1993). In other words, silence is a statement. When it comes to suffering for critical analysts, there cannot be neutral positions (van Dijk, 1993). McNaughton’s critique of the absence of emotion in medical education despite its presence in all aspects of training highlights how this limits whole knowledge—and mirrors literature surrounding climate migration (McNaughton, 2013). Refugees and climate impacts are talked *about* from the ingroup of the largely minority world in a top-down sense, but those impacts and lives are rarely contextualized so that their situation might be *felt*. Language, text, power, dominance, and society are all related and endlessly reproducing one another (van Dijk, 1993). Thus, academia can play a role in shifting discourse in order to increase deservingness for climate refugees by taking a more critical stance.

Harnessing discourse is more important than ever in shifting the common imagination to protect refugees. Burdened by the current anti-refugee discourse and operating out of that fear, minority nations are investing in security rather than protections. Technological advancements and the increasing use of military technologies are creating ‘virtual borders’ that are blurring the lines between detection and deterrence, enemy and refugee (McLeman, 2019). For many nations, this will be the choice in the coming decades. Tomas Vytautas Raskevicius, the chairperson of the Committee on Human Rights in Lithuania’s parliament has said that as climate change worsens: “I honestly don’t know how we can both protect our national security interests and take humanitarian interests seriously” (Jilani, 2021). This is the ultimate danger facing climate refugees and the majority world—whether discourse can be shifted in time to alter the common

imagination and convey a sense of deservingness before climate impacts grow to affect everyone, and the minority world closes itself off.

### **Conclusion**

Will it be enough? Will we make it in time? These are the seminal questions when it comes to climate change and climate migration. There is much we do not know. Perhaps the projections will be lower than they're assumed to be or perhaps there will be a reversal of international stagnation on climate action that will lower the worst impacts of climate change. With bold climate action, the World Bank projects there could be as much as an 80% reduction in projected climate refugees by 2050 (Clement et. al., 2021). Or, perhaps tipping points and other unforeseen factors will be more dire than we anticipated. This uncertainty leaves those who seek to plan for and protect human rights torn between hope and despair, apocalypse and salvation. Due to legacy effects in the atmosphere, it is relatively certain that these next decades will see increases in the storms, wildfires, floods, heatwaves, and crop failures that have already begun (Milman et. al., 2021) just as they will likely produce many millions of climate refugees (Clement et. al., 2021). And only in recent years has climate migration become part of the discussion and planning surrounding climate change (Lustgarten, 2020).

The barriers to securing the human rights of climate refugees can be traced to the relationship between discourse, deservingness, and development. Discourse has the power to shape the issue of climate migration and the perception of climate refugees, determining their deservingness and what subsequent actions are taken. It shapes whether minority nations reduce their climate impacts or if they are willing to provide aid to majority nations. It makes development the preferred solution of minority nations, to satisfy the perceived self by providing aid without altering dominant systems. But the common imagination is vulnerable to

inflammatory, anti-refugee discourse, growing nationalism and xenophobia (McDonnell, 2018). Border walls are being constructed (Jilani, 2021), anti-migration campaigns are getting their politicians elected (McDonnell, 2018), and refugees from the Middle East and Africa are met with tear gas while Ukrainian refugees receive far warmer welcomes (Jakes, 2022).

There is power in discourse to set the meaning of the issue and to confer lasting deservingness on climate refugees. Harnessing discourse with emotion and framing the issue around loss aversion could help to increase that perception of deservingness from minority nations. Creating useful discourse is in many ways a moral imperative. It can work in the short-term to secure development and the long-term to move away from systems of oppression. Because with business-as-usual projections, islands nations will submerge, coastlines will flood, swathes of land will become unlivable—and all of these people will need somewhere to go. Reshaping discourse surrounding refugees can help to ensure they receive aid and development, and eventually redistribute balance between majority and minority nations. With an ever-shortening time scale, shifting the discourse soon is vital to securing the human rights of climate refugees.

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