Carnegie Council Lesson Plan for Ethical Issues in Migration (60 minutes)

Overview

This session explores ethical issues surrounding human mobility in relation to climate change and war. A migrant is, on the most basic definition, someone who moves elsewhere, but human migration can be internal or international; voluntary or involuntary; spurred on by political persecution, poverty, climate change, war, environmental disasters, love, employment, or curiosity. In this lesson, students will explore the concept of "refugee," and its appropriateness for those displaced by climate change and war.

Core Objectives

1. Understand the distinction between key definitions of refugees and forced displacement, and how moral accounts attempt to capture the protection needs of climate migrants.
2. Learn about the moral and legal obligations that underlie responses to human displacement.

Carnegie Council principles that the lesson addresses:

- **The commitment to international cooperation** is a moral proposition because it goes to the essence of ethics—recognizing what is common for all, while managing the intrinsic and inevitable differences between and among people.
- **The defense of democracy in the U.S. and globally** requires confronting autocrats who discriminate based on ethnicity, gender, and religion, and who deny basic freedoms to their citizens.
- **Fidelity** means honesty, integrity, and a good-faith effort at serving the truth. Rhetoric certainly matters, and in an age of disinformation, leaders must fight against lies, willful deception, and deliberate misrepresentation of facts.
- **The humanitarian imperative** is the duty to save lives and alleviate suffering through humane and equal treatment. As violence and cruelty abound in conflict zones around the world, mounting effective humanitarian responses remains the essential moral imperative of our time.

1. Opening Ethical Provocation (10 minutes)

- **Prompt:** Imagine that in the next few years several low-lying island nations, such as Kiribati (138,000 population) or the Maldives (530,000 population), are rendered uninhabitable because of rising sea levels. What nation(s) should take in the displaced citizenry? Should a country be required to take all citizens or would it be permissible for different countries to decide how many (and which) to admit?
- Quick write and brief discussion.

2. Concepts of Migration and State Sovereignty (15 minutes)

- This section helps to distinguish between two major definitions of "refugees" and provides a basis for better understanding different ways that humans are displaced. As you work through this section, ask students to think about how the different definitions reflect different origins. For instance, the 1951 Refugee Convention was drafted in response to the situation in Europe at the end of World War II and only applied to Europe until the Protocol was added in 1967, whereas the 1984 Cartagena Declaration emerged from Latin America.
- According to the most important legal document on migration law, the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951/1967), a refugee is defined as persons,
    i. "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."
    ii. One of the key features of this definition is the reason for the persecution: "for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."
    iii. To qualify as a refugee, someone must cross an international boundary.
    iv. Those who are displaced within their own countries, due to "conflict, violence, persecution or disasters," are called "Internally Displaced People."

- Compare the Refugee Convention's definition to the Cartagena Declaration's, which defines **refugees** as,
    i. "persons who have fled their country because their lives, security or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order."
    ii. This definition, in contrast, focuses less on persecution on the basis of identity and instead "generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order."
    iii. A similar definition is provided for a "forced migrant" in Article 125 of the Model International Mobility Convention, developed by a committee of academics and policy experts.
- The distinction between who qualifies as a refugee is important because of the way that being a "refugee" changes an individual's relationship to other states. The key protection afforded to those who meet the definition of refugee is "non-refoulement," which prevents states from "expel[ling] or return[ing] ('refouler') a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (Article 33 of the 1951/1967 Convention)
- In practice, the states in which individuals seek asylum, to which they are then given non-refoulement, are those states nearest to the areas in which individuals are displaced. In Lebanon, because of its location, currently one in five residents of the country are refugees.
- The rights afforded to seek asylum, and the duty of non-refoulement, are, in tension with the ideas of sovereignty and self-determination, in which states can exercise jurisdiction over their territory, which includes questions about who gets to enter a state.
    i. To some, human rights also pose a similar restriction on state sovereignty because they are individual's rights against what a state can do to those possessing human rights.
    ii. One way around the objection based on sovereignty, though, is that states have signed and ratified treaties—such as the Refugee Convention and different human rights conventions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights—that provide the basis for their obligations.
- Aside from legal obligations, humanitarian moral obligations provide a basis for understanding why states, and the international community, have an obligation to help individuals in need.

3. Learning Activity (30 minutes)

In this activity, students will take on the role of participants in an international conference to respond to two major events of human displacement. In the scenario, students will classify those who are displaced in these scenarios, consider the responsibility each state has toward the refugees, and how the four states can responsibly and fairly respond to the humanitarian situation. Students will grapple with the trade-off between the ethical reasons for why a state should admit refugees or those who are forcibly displaced versus the domestic political and ethical reasons that may count against it. In this scenario, the Refugee Convention's definition of a refugee should be initially assumed, and the states bound by the principle of non-refoulement not to send back any asylums seekers.

Situation 1: A civil war has broken out in Country Y between the government and rebel forces. It is unclear how long the conflict will last. The country is now divided into two areas, each of which is controlled by the different forces, and it is nearly impossible for citizens to move into a different area in the country.

Country Y has almost 40 million people, and the citizens are split between their support for the different parties. Those who are allied with the government in rebel-controlled territories, or with the rebels in government-controlled territories, are not allowed to work and are being ostracized by their fellow citizens. Five million people have been displaced to Country Y's only neighboring country, Country A, and Country A has threatened to transfer these residents to the border it shares with Countries A, C, and D if a better solution is not worked out. Those who are displaced from Country Y also have preferences to move to Countries A, B, and C, though the exact number who want to be resettled and in which countries is unknown.

Situation 2: Country Z is an island nation with a very low elevation. It is directly off the coast of Country B. It has a population of 500,000. In recent years the politicians from Country Z have worked very hard to adapt the country's infrastructure to rising sea levels, but these efforts seem to be failing. Scientists predict that there is a 75 percent chance the country will be almost completely submerged within the next five years, and that a direct hit from a severe hurricane would be catastrophic for the residents. The residents of Country Z would ideally like to be resettled together and retain some form of political independence as a collective.

Students will be divided into four groups, each of which reflects a different country. All of these countries are in the same region.

Country A has a population of 10 million people and is a small territory. It is a middle-income developing democracy. It has some territory to accommodate those from Country Y, but those displaced from Y are placing a severe strain on the resources in Country A. Politicians in Country A are under intense pressure by residents to do something about the 5 million refugees the country is hosting, which is why Country A has threatened to transfer these refugees to the border so they can seek asylum in B, C, and D.

Country B has a population of 150 million and is one of the largest countries in the world by territory. It is not densely populated, and it is a developed and wealthy democracy. Country B is relatively open to admitting some refugees, but it is currently struggling with high unemployment.

Country C has a population of 50 million, is relatively wealthy, and has a decent amount of territory that is uninhabited. However, it is not considered a full democracy. It is a kingdom that has limited rights for its residents, and its leader will only accept refugees from Country Y's rebel group because they share the same religion.

Country D has a population of 20 million. It is a relatively poor but developing democracy. It has a lot of territory available, but it has a high poverty rate among its citizens. It is open to new arrangements that would cede some of its territory to those from Country Z under a shared political scheme, but it is not open to granting Z full independence. This plan would also require funds from the other countries to support it, but Countries A, B, and C have not yet specified whether they would be willing to contribute.

Part 1 (15 minutes) In the first part of this activity the groups will discuss amongst themselves the type of obligations they have toward those who are displaced in the first two scenarios. In doing so, they should think about the type of obligation they have toward those displaced. (Is it ethical or legal?) Each group should propose their state's contribution to this crisis (without knowing what the other groups' solutions are).

Guiding Questions

- How should states balance the trade-off between considerations for refugees and the interests or needs of their population?
- Should politicians be responsive to political backlash over migration-related issues?
- Is admitting migrants a legal or moral duty from the perspective of states or simply something good they sometimes do? (But aren't criticized for not doing?)
- Is there anything wrong with states prioritizing some migrants over others? How could be this be consistent with a principle of non-discrimination?
- Which features of migrants are acceptable to prioritize? (For instance, is it permissible to prioritize those who can speak a national language, have special skills, or share the same ethnicity?)
- Do states have stronger obligations to some refugees than others, especially if they can somehow be said to have "caused" or "contributed" to the displacing causes?
- What would be a fair way to distribute the obligations to refugees?
- Should individual refugees have more say in where they are resettled?
- Do those in Scenario 2 qualify as "refugees"? Is their situation more or less pressing than those in Scenario 1?

Part 2 (10 minutes) In the second part of this activity, each group will have a representative discuss their group's position as to whether and why they may have obligations to those in the two scenarios. (If they don't believe they have any, they should explain why.) They should present their "contribution" to these crises, and the activity facilitator should tally up the numbers to see how the two scenarios have been addressed.

Part 3 (5 minutes) If there are any protection gaps left from Part 2, the groups should briefly discuss among themselves whether they would be willing to take on any more of those displaced and, if so, whether this is a moral act on their part or a legal one.

4. Conclusion (10 minutes)

- Revisit prompt
- Final Reflection: How does it feel to discuss obligations to those who are displaced from the perspective of other states? What is lost when the voices or agency of those who are displaced is not fully present in these debates?

Additional Resources

- "'Forced Migrants,' Human Rights and 'Climate Refugees'," Michael Doyle, Carnegie Council, October 14, 2022 (Article)
- Model International Mobility Convention (MIMC), Carnegie Council, last updated 2025
- "The State of Migration in 2025: Balancing Values and Interests at the International and Local Levels," Model International Mobility Convention, Carnegie Council, April 23, 2025
- "Addressing Climate Migration & Considerations for the Future," *Ethics Empowered: Leadership in Practice*, Carnegie Council, November 5, 2025 (Event Recording & Transcript)
- "Climate Migration, Moral Dilemmas, and Moral Motivation," *Ethics & International Affairs*, Michael Blake, July 22, 2025 (Article)