



# Climate-Induced Displacement in Small Island Developing States: The Next Threat to Global Governance?

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## Abstract

Changes in climate have significant effects on the ecosystem goods and services upon which nationals of Small Island Developing States rely for their survival. As sea levels continue to rise, disappearance of such islands becomes an incumbent reality posing conceptual challenges for statehood and sovereignty. Although causality has not been proven, a compromised environment could be the driver for cross-border displacement of peoples causing fundamental disruptions in societal structures and global governance at large. Given the novelty of the phenomenon of “disappearing states” and existing resettlement policies, the present research inquires how international law will incorporate disappearance of SIDS into its framework with minimum disruption and instability in global governance.



Source: Huffingtonpost.com

## Disappearing Islands

Projected increases in sea-levels, mainly caused by anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere, pose a major threat to the continued existence of Small Islands Developing States. Given their low-lying topology, SIDS face the threat of disappearance due to inundation by surrounding waters. As these islands may soon become uninhabitable, populations would be permanently displaced either internally or to other countries causing major implications for international law, in particular state continuity and succession.

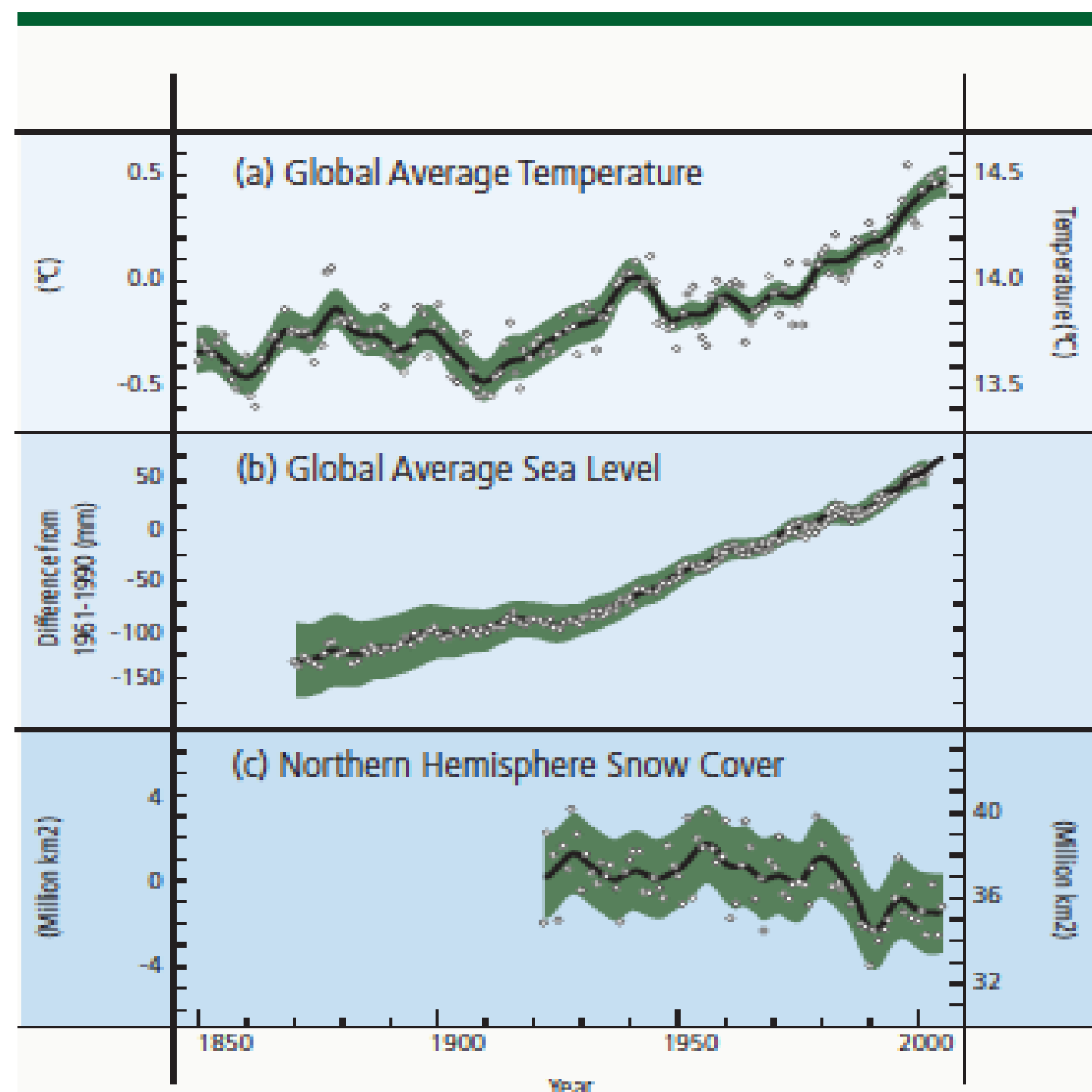


Source: Frontline.in

## Conceptualizing Climate-Induced Displacement

Despite minor differences, all SIDS share high dependency on the surrounding environment for their inherent survival. If the effects of global climate change will not be addressed collectively in the immediate future, nationals of SIDS will be forced to leave their countries of origin. Substantial changes in the environment could, therefore, induce migration, resettlement, and additional forms of human mobility.

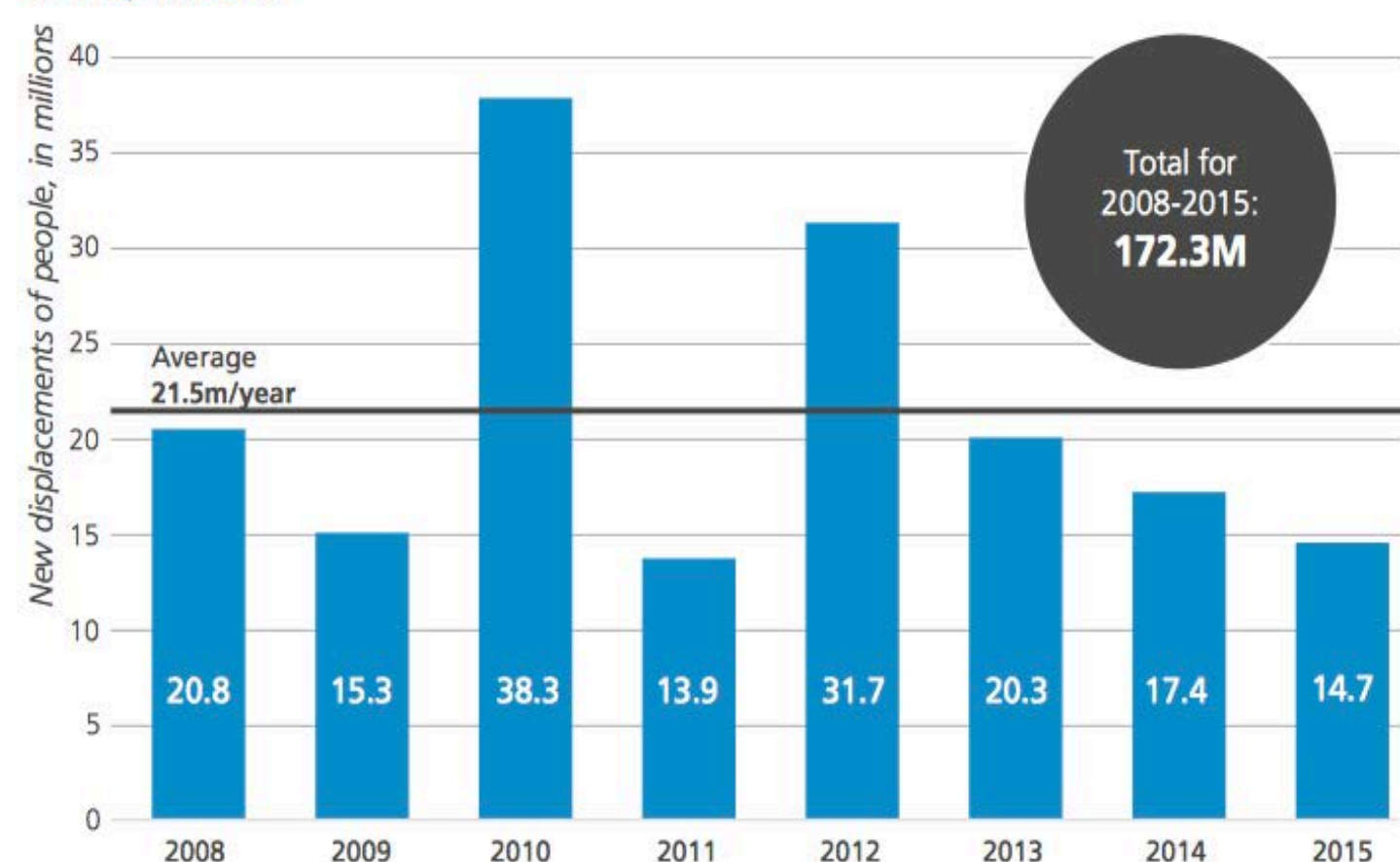
Figure 1: Observed Changes in Temperature, Sea Level and Snow Cover\*



\* Source: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2007). *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Parry M, Canziani O, Palutikof J, van der Linden P, Hanson C (eds). Cambridge University Press, C

As disappearance of states due to climate change represents a new phenomenon, existing international instruments fail to offer resolutions to climate-induced displacement. Given the discretionary application of legislations on migrants and the lack of specific provisions to address the unique needs of nationals of SIDS, the issue of climate-induced migration remains unclear. The question is whether, as with other migrants, climate-induced migrants will become stateless and should be treated as such under the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons.

FIGURE 1: TOTAL NEW DISASTER DISPLACEMENT RELATED TO RAPID-ONSET WEATHER HAZARD EVENTS, 2008-2015



## Closing the Normative Gap

Gaps in global governance reveal the unavoidable need for preparation of policies and programs aimed at overseeing climate-induced displacement and their insertion at the core of international law framework.



Source: Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS)

In moving towards the recognition of a climate-induced migrant, the international community will need to develop new instruments while identifying existing norms that might constitute guiding principles for protection of basic human rights. Protection regimes of cross-border displacement can be developed either at the domestic, regional or international level through complementary and temporary provisions.



Source: UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency

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