

Keswick Reminder 10.10.25: NfWW No.97 Why do they keep coming? Asylum seekers, migrants and climate change.

People coming to Britain in small boats have been much in the UK news recently. While the numbers arriving this way represent a small fraction of the total migration into the UK (last year about 4%), they command a disproportionate amount of the headlines.

If they are genuine refugees, as many will be, by international law they have a right to seek asylum once they are here. They just don't have the right papers and can't get in any other way. But why, if it's so dangerous, do so many take the risk?

There are several reasons. Many – the genuine asylum seekers – are fleeing persecution, violence and conflict. Others – so called economic migrants – are fleeing poverty. But increasingly what lies behind all their circumstances are the direct and indirect effects of climate.

From 2006 to 2010 Syria suffered its worst drought in modern history, which, according to one study, was made three times more likely by climate change than by natural variability alone.

Causing extensive crop failures and livestock losses, the drought came on top of pre-existing economic hardships. As it wore on it led to massive civil unrest, which in turn led to a very harsh military crackdown, which spiralled into the horrible civil war, which killed at least half a million people.

This in turn led to mass migration of more than 6 million people, the majority of whom were sheltered in neighbouring countries.

While it is very unlikely that any of those who fled their country said they were doing so because of climate change, nevertheless climate change, along with years of poor soil and water management and of bad governance, played an indirect, amplifying role in the bloody story.

Currently burning fossil fuels has increased the average global surface temperature by just under 1.5°C. The aim of the 2015 Paris Agreement was to avoid temperature rises exceeding this value. However, if we continue to burn these fuels at the current rate, as proposed by some of our politicians who should know better, we expect to reach a temperature increase of between 2.6°C and 3.1°C by 2100, within the lifetime of today's children.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change such a temperature rise is projected to lead to the desertification of much of the world, including large parts of the United States, Africa, South America, China and India, as well as areas of Europe up to the latitude of mid-France.

With most of the world's population living in these regions, massive migration will occur. According to the Institute for Economics and Peace, up to 1.2 billion people could be displaced by climate related disasters by 2050, a figure making current migration numbers pale into insignificance, requiring a global response, not piecemeal national ones.

As the boats keep coming, we urge you to start talking about this and join us in our local work via sustainablekeswick@gmail.com.

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