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**A global view of demography
and refugee populations:
challenges and trends by region**

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and trends by region**

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Abstract:

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of forced displacement as a global and structural demographic phenomenon, underlining its unprecedented growth—more than 120 million displaced persons in 2024—and its scant consideration in traditional demographic studies. The text explains the need to overcome statistical invisibility in population censuses of displaced populations to ensure their inclusion in humanitarian planning frameworks. Through a detailed characterisation of the different categories of displaced population (refugees, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, among others), their sociodemographic profiles are examined, the main host countries and the challenges associated with access to rights, the chronification of crises and the limitation of access to durable solutions established in international refugee law. Institutional responses to forced displacement are also examined, with emphasis on the lack of effective international cooperation mechanisms and the disproportionate burden borne by low- and middle-income countries. The chapter also provides a comparative view of forced displacement by region (Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East, Latin America and North America), showing how displacement affects differently according to geographical contexts, political and economic.

Keywords:

Forced displacement, Demography, Durable solutions, Protracted crises, Regional perspective.

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, both in scale and complexity. At the end of April 2024, around 120 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced, meaning that approximately one in every 69 people on the planet had been forced to leave their home (UNHCR, 2024a). This figure is double the proportion recorded just ten years ago, showing that we are in a "decade of increases" in forced displacement.

Although displacement dynamics have a direct impact on global demographic patterns—altering compositions by age, sex, and territorial distribution—the displaced population remains, to a large extent, largely overlooked in traditional demographic studies. Classical demography has focused its attention on variables such as fertility, mortality and population growth (Hugo *et al.*, 2018), leaving phenomena such as migration and, even more so, forced displacement in the background.

This omission is due, among other factors, to a series of challenges inherent to the phenomenon: under-registration and invisibility in host countries of many forcibly displaced persons, situations of prolonged forced mobility that make it difficult to track them, and the different protection statuses granted to displaced persons, migrants and asylum seekers, among many other factors. In addition, official statistics often lack stable mechanisms for integrating this entire population into their census records.

The main causes of forced displacement are multiple and, in many cases, cumulative: protracted armed conflicts—such as in Syria, Afghanistan, or Ukraine—widespread violence, ethnic or political persecution, massive human rights violations, and natural disasters exacerbated by climate change. These crises cause both flows of refugees—people who cross international borders seeking asylum—and internally displaced persons—those who flee but remain within their country without crossing any international borders.

In the following pages, I will provide a comprehensive overview of the demographics of forced displacement: I will analyse the demographic characteristics of forcibly displaced persons, identify the main host countries, study the obstacles they face in accessing rights and durable solutions, and examine the regional trends that explain the current distribution of this phenomenon.

Demographic data on the forcibly displaced population worldwide

As already mentioned, forced displacement has reached historic levels, profoundly altering global demographic dynamics. By the end of 2024, more than 120 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced, equivalent to approximately one in every 69 people on the planet. This figure represents an increase of 19 million over the previous year, the highest annual increase ever recorded, driven by acute crises such as the conflict in Sudan and the ongoing war in Ukraine. In proportional terms, 1.5% of the world's population is now living in a situation of forced displacement, illustrating the enormous scale and severity of this phenomenon (UNHCR, 2024a).

The forcibly displaced population: the great forgotten ones of demography

Despite their magnitude, forcibly displaced persons remain largely overlooked in demographic studies. Traditionally, demography has focused its attention on phenomena such as birth rates, mortality and population growth, relegating migration and, in particular, forced displacement to the background. This omission has profound consequences: displaced persons are often not counted in national censuses or regular population surveys, making it impossible to know their actual number, socio-demographic characteristics and specific needs (World Bank, 2023a).

This demographic invisibility has major practical consequences: by not being fully included in population projections or national development plans, displaced persons also risk being marginalised from public policies that determine access to education, healthcare, employment, or housing. The lack of demographic integration thus reinforces their vulnerability and perpetuates their exclusion. In addition, the statistical management of forced displacement faces significant technical challenges, such as under-reporting due to insecure contexts, multiple and prolonged mobility, the existence of fluid legal categories, and changes in national and international legal frameworks.

Demographic characterisation of the forcibly displaced population

According to the traditional categorisation used by UNHCR, the generic term 'forced displacement' encompasses several categories (UNHCR, 2024c):

- 1) Refugees: includes those recognised under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees; its 1967 Protocol; the 1969 Convention of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which regulates specific aspects of refugee issues in Africa; the definition of refugee contained in the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, incorporated into national legislation; persons recognised in accordance with the UNHCR Statute; persons who have been granted complementary forms of protection; and those who enjoy temporary protection. The refugee population also includes persons in situations similar to that of refugees.
- 2) Persons in situations similar to that of refugees: groups who are outside their country or territory of origin and face protection risks similar to those of refugees, but for whom, for practical or other reasons, refugee status has not been determined.
- 3) Asylum seekers: persons who have requested international protection and whose applications for refugee status have not yet been determined.
- 4) Other persons in need of international protection: persons who are outside their country or territory of origin, usually because they have been forcibly displaced across international borders, who have not been included in other categories (asylum seekers, refugees, persons in a refugee-like situation), but who are likely to be in need of international protection, including protection against forced return, as well as access to basic services on a temporary or long-term basis.
- 5) Internally displaced persons: persons or groups of persons who have been forced or compelled to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or man-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised state border.
- 6) Persons in a situation similar to that of internally displaced persons: groups within their country of nationality or habitual residence who face protection risks similar to those of internally displaced persons but who, for practical or other reasons, have not been able to be declared as such.

Refugees or persons with needs similar to those of refugees

According to UNHCR data, at the end of 2023, there were 31.6 million refugees under its mandate, along with 5.8 million persons in a situation similar to that of refugees. In addition, there are some 6 million Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA, mainly in the Middle East. In total, nearly 44 million people were outside their country of origin in need of international protection, an unprecedented number in contemporary history (UNHCR, 2024a).

This population comes mainly from a few countries: Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan. For example, more than 6.4 million Syrians remain refugees in other countries, the Venezuelan diaspora exceeds 6.1 million, and Ukraine has generated nearly 6 million refugees in Europe following the Russian invasion. Afghanistan has around 6.4 million refugees and asylum seekers, mainly in Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR, 2024a).

From a demographic point of view, the refugee population has a unique structure. Approximately 40% are under the age of 18. In contrast, people over the age of 60 make up only 5% of the refugee population (UNHCR, 2024a).

In terms of gender distribution, it is estimated that women and children make up about 70% of the global refugee population. This composition is due, among other factors, to patterns of forced recruitment of adult men in armed conflicts and the disproportionate impact of violence and persecution on women and children (UNHCR, 2024a).

Internally displaced persons

Internally displaced persons represent the largest group within forced displacement. According to combined data from UNHCR and IDMC, at the end of 2023, there were some 68.3 million internally displaced persons (UNHCR, 2024a).

Unlike refugees, internally displaced persons remain under the jurisdiction of their own state, which often limits their visibility and the international protection available to them. Many contemporary conflicts generate more internally displaced persons than refugees. In Syria, an estimated 7.2 million people remain internally displaced after more than a decade of war (UNHCR, 2024a). In Colombia, more than 5 million people have been

internally displaced due to a protracted armed conflict, constituting one of the world's longest-running situations of internal displacement (IDMC, 2024).

In addition, natural disasters and extreme weather events cause millions of internally displacements each year. In 2023, more than 26.4 million new internally displacements associated with disasters were recorded, mainly floods, tropical storms and droughts (IDMC, 2024).

Demographically, internally displaced persons share many characteristics with refugees: a high proportion of minors, a significant presence of women and a relatively low representation of older persons. However, their legal situation is more fragile, as they lack a specific international protection framework comparable to the refugee protection regime. Furthermore, the lack of formal registration in many contexts makes it impossible to accurately quantify the true extent of the phenomenon and hinders the planning of appropriate responses. Despite this, at the end of 2023, women and girls accounted for 51% of the total internally displaced population and around 49% were children (UNHCR, 2024a).

Main host countries for forcibly displaced persons

Most refugees are hosted by countries neighbouring their country of origin, which are often low- or middle-income countries. In 2023, 75% of refugees worldwide were hosted by developing countries (low or middle income) (UNHCR, 2024a). Similarly, around 69% of refugees were in countries bordering their country of origin (UNHCR, 2024a). This reality highlights the disproportionate burden borne by countries that are least equipped to meet complex humanitarian needs, in contrast to the limited reception by those with greater resources.

Notable examples include Iran, which hosts 3.8 million refugees; Turkey, which hosts 3.3 million; and Colombia, which hosts 2.9 million. In Europe, Germany stands out, hosting 2.6 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024a). In relation to the national population, it is worth noting the case of Aruba, where one in five people are refugees, and Lebanon, where one in six people are refugees (UNHCR, 2024a).

In terms of reception, there are several issues that require special attention: the registration of forcibly displaced persons as a first step towards accessing their rights;

pending asylum applications, which increase the limbo in which they often find themselves; the increase in protracted crises, which also keeps entire populations in limbo; and the situation in refugee camps.

Registration: the first step towards recognition and access to rights

When a refugee crosses an international border into a host country or when a person is internally displaced, registering their situation is a key step in accessing protection (UNHCR, 2023c). Registration refers to the documentation of their identity, family unit, and needs. Registration is carried out by the authorities of the receiving country or UNHCR, and provides formal recognition and protection against forced returns, as well as facilitating access to humanitarian aid to which they are entitled. It also makes it easier to identify vulnerable cases, such as unaccompanied minors, victims of trafficking, people with special medical needs, etc. (UNHCR, 2023c).

In the main refugee-hosting countries, registration is usually carried out jointly by the governments and UNHCR. In contexts of large population movements, such as the Syrian crisis, the mass biometric registration implemented in countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan made it possible to document millions of people and better organise the humanitarian response. Despite this, it is worth noting the case of Lebanon, where registration was suspended by the national authorities in 2015, with the result that thousands of people remain invisible to the authorities, hindering their access to basic services and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

On the other hand, in contexts of internal displacement or in countries with fragile institutions, there are often greater obstacles to registration. In countries such as Syria and Yemen, difficulties in accessing certain areas make it impossible to comprehensively register all displaced persons, leading to the use of indirect estimation methods.

In addition to enabling access to the most basic rights and, therefore, to certain levels of protection, registration data is used internationally to complete global statistics, which in turn improves cooperation and shared responsibility among all States in this area.

In order to adequately include the refugee population in the demographic data of a given country, UNHCR can be used as a source of data collection, although certain limitations should be mentioned, as UNHCR often depends on different States to provide such data

and, in many cases, they do not. It is also important to remember that, in contexts of mass arrivals, there may be delays or limited capacity to register all persons as quickly as possible, leaving some persons temporarily undocumented. This occurred, for example, during the Syrian exodus to Lebanon and Jordan in 2013-2014, when registration offices were overwhelmed.

Pending asylum applications

At the end of 2023, there were nearly 6.9 million asylum applications still pending (UNHCR, 2024a). Delays by the various administrations of different States in processing applications for international protection result in uncertainty about the future of asylum seekers, who are once again left in limbo, with their plans for the future paralysed. These are people who have already fled their countries of origin and are waiting to obtain formal recognition as refugees from the host country.

Often, they are unable to work regularly at the outset or face limited access to certain services, which hinders their integration. At the same time, host countries bear the administrative and reception burden while processing cases. Integration is made even more difficult when, after lengthy periods of examination, applications are rejected, leaving the applicant in a situation of administrative irregularity.

The increase in protracted crises

A protracted crisis is one in which 25,000 people of the same nationality have been in exile for at least five consecutive years (UNHCR, 2004). These situations are becoming increasingly common, tend to become chronic and, once again, leave forcibly displaced persons in limbo. According to UNHCR data, in mid-2022, there were 59 protracted crisis situations affecting nearly 23.8 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024b).

The lack of conflict resolution in contexts such as Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo has meant that entire generations of people are born, grow up and grow old in displacement, often in camps or informal settlements. The absence of political solutions to the crises of origin, combined with limited access to durable solutions, perpetuates the marginalisation of these populations and tests the resilience of host communities.

However, without the political will to resolve the underlying conflicts, these populations will remain in limbo. In short, the increase in protracted crises reflects the difficulty of resolving current conflicts and the inadequacy of the durable solutions available. Reversing this trend requires not only greater diplomatic efforts towards peace, but also a stronger commitment to sharing long-term hosting responsibilities, preventing the burden from falling indefinitely on the same countries neighbouring war zones.

Refugee camps

The establishment of refugee camps has been the traditional solution provided by host countries to situations of forced displacement. Today, although many refugees are settled in urban centres, millions of forcibly displaced people still reside in refugee camps. Life in refugee camps also has certain limitations, such as freedom of movement and the fact that many camps lack basic services for all the people they house, often resulting in overcrowding.

However, it should also be noted that the majority of refugees today do not live in refugee camps but in urban or peri-urban areas. In fact, it is estimated that around 78% of refugees worldwide live outside camps, often in urban or peri-urban areas of host countries (UNHCR, 2013).

Some of the world's largest refugee camps are home to populations equivalent to entire cities. For example, in Kenya, the Dadaab camp, which was created in 1991 and is now home to nearly 200,000 people (RTVE, 2021), stands out. In this camp, after more than 30 years of existence, younger generations of Somali refugees face restrictions on leaving the camp or working formally, which leads to dependency and frustration. Many of these people only know life in the refugee camp. These situations are also difficult for host countries to manage, as over time they receive less and less attention from the international community and therefore less aid. Prolonged dependence on the camps can lead to exclusion, a lack of opportunities for a dignified life and frustration among the new generations born in exile. Faced with these challenges, UNHCR has for years promoted a policy of "alternatives to camps", encouraging States to allow refugees to integrate into the host society rather than remain segregated for long periods (UNHCR, 2017).

Access to durable solutions

The ultimate goal of international protection for forcibly displaced persons is to enable them to reach a durable solution that allows them to rebuild their lives in safety, dignity and stability. The term durable solutions refers to situations in which displacement is ended and forcibly displaced persons are given the opportunity to resume their lives in a safe and stable environment. There are three durable solutions established by UNHCR: local integration in the host country, voluntary return and resettlement in a third country¹. In recent years, so-called complementary pathways have also gained importance as additional tools to facilitate access to protection and integration.

However, the current reality shows that durable solutions are progressing at a clearly insufficient pace compared to the continuous growth in displacement figures. Most displaced persons remain trapped in prolonged situations of vulnerability, with no clear prospects for a sustainable solution in the near future.

Local integration

The term local integration refers to a refugee being able to settle permanently in the host country and gradually obtain an administrative status similar to that of other residents, i.e. access to the right to work, public services and even nationality. According to UNHCR, effective integration means ensuring access to livelihoods, public services such as education and health, inclusion in the labour market and the possibility of social and political participation.

The problem is that many major host countries do not consider long-term solutions that facilitate the local integration of refugees, and there are numerous legal and social obstacles to this, such as limiting access to employment or not allowing access to permanent residence (World Bank, 2023b). One example of this is Lebanon, which does not consider the permanent integration of Palestinian or Syrian refugees on the pretext of not altering its religious demographic distribution or preserving the right of return.

The Global Compact on Refugees, approved by the UN General Assembly in 2018 (UNHCR, 2018), recognises the importance of promoting local integration as a key tool

¹ See: <https://eacnur.org/es/actualidad/noticias/desplazados/soluciones-duraderas-refugiados>

for providing long-term stability and fostering the resilience of refugees and host communities. Although it is a non-binding instrument, reaching this agreement shows, at least, a willingness to try to achieve greater social integration of the refugee population in host countries, which, in the long term, also has consequences for the demographics of the host population.

Return

Return to the country of origin is the preferred durable solution. With regard to returns, under international refugee law, it is essential that they are carried out voluntarily, safely and with dignity. Voluntariness means that refugees can decide to return in complete freedom, based on objective and reliable information. This decision must be personal and free from any form of coercion, whether physical, psychological or economic. Furthermore, safe return requires the absence of discrimination, the existence of legal guarantees (such as the implementation of amnesties), as well as conditions of physical safety (without risk of attack) and material security (including access to assets such as land or housing). Dignified return means that returnees have access to basic services and can exercise their fundamental rights, such as access to education or healthcare, without this leading to family separation, and that they are treated with respect and recognised by the authorities of their country of origin (UNHCR, 1996).

In practice, voluntary return faces enormous challenges. Many countries of origin continue to be scenes of violence, insecurity or lack of guarantees for the exercise of fundamental rights. As a result, spontaneous or assisted returns have declined significantly. According to UNHCR data, in 2023, nearly 1.1 million refugees returned to their countries of origin, a figure representing less than 1% of the total displaced population (UNHCR, 2024a).

Currently, following the end of the war in Syria, we have seen an increase in calls for refugees to return to their country of origin, but it is clear that the absence of war does not mean that the above-mentioned conditions for returns to take place in accordance with international law are being respected. Furthermore, many Syrians fled as a result of being victims of very specific individualised persecution, the causes of which still persist today. Therefore, it can be said that, although return is the most desirable solution in theory, it is the least achievable in practice.

Resettlement and complementary pathways

Resettlement involves transferring a refugee from the first country where they initially sought asylum (e.g. a Syrian refugee in Lebanon) to a third country that agrees to admit them permanently as a refugee (e.g. Canada, Australia, France) (UNHCR, 2024a). Unlike local integration or return, resettlement depends entirely on the willingness of third countries to offer places to receive refugees. It is a fundamental practice that involves implementing the principle of shared responsibility among the entire international community, also enshrined in international refugee law.

However, resettlement is available only to a small fraction of those who need it. In 2023, UNHCR estimated that more than two million refugees required access to resettlement, but only just under 100,000 people were actually able to benefit from this route (UNHCR, 2025a). The limited availability of places reflects the lack of commitment by many States and the need to strengthen mechanisms for shared responsibility at the international level.

On the other hand, in recent years, in addition to resettlement, so-called "complementary pathways" of access have been promoted. These are legal pathways that allow refugees to access a third country through tools such as humanitarian visas, family reunification, study grants, access to work programmes, humanitarian corridors managed by religious entities, etc. These pathways should be additional to the right to asylum and resettlement, and not replace them. Although they still represent a small percentage of the total, complementary pathways offer legal and safe alternatives that help to expand protection opportunities and reduce dependence on dangerous and irregular routes (UNHCR, 2023b).

Strengthening resettlement and developing complementary pathways are essential elements of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, which states that an effective response to forced displacement must be based on international cooperation and expanding opportunities for durable solutions.

The current situation of forced displacement: regional perspectives

Forced displacement is a global phenomenon, but its manifestation and specific characteristics vary significantly between regions. The nature of conflicts, state

responses, reception capacity and demographic trends shape different realities in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America. Analysing these regional perspectives allows for a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon and the design of more appropriate responses to its specific dynamics.

Africa

The African continent faces multiple sources of forced displacement, resulting from armed conflict, ethnic violence, struggles over natural resources, revolutions and climate disasters. Almost a third of the global displaced population is located on the African continent (UNHCR, 2024a). In this region, the situation of the internally displaced population is particularly noteworthy. Africa is home to 35 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), almost half of the global total. 32.5 million of these IDPs were displaced by conflict and violence, and 80% are concentrated in just five countries. Displacement due to disasters has increased almost sixfold, mainly due to floods and droughts (IDMC, 2024).

There are many conflicts that could be mentioned on this continent, such as those in Sudan, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In addition, many areas of the continent are significantly affected by the effects of climate change, such as the entire Sahel region. Although there are many situations worthy of detailed analysis, which unfortunately receive very little attention, we will focus on the case of Sudan.

Featured case: Sudan

The conflict that broke out in Sudan in April 2023 has caused one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent times. The violence, which spread rapidly from Khartoum to other regions, forced more than six million people to flee internally and 1.2 million to flee to neighbouring countries. The violence between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has led to mass displacement to neighbouring countries such as Chad, South Sudan and Egypt. By the end of 2024, more than 10.8 million Sudanese remained displaced and displacement continued on a large scale. From April 2023 to May 2024, there were more than 7.1 million internally displaced persons and 1.9 million

refugees abroad. Before the current conflict, Sudan was already facing a serious humanitarian crisis, with 3.6 million internally displaced persons, a figure that rose to a record 9.1 million by the end of 2023. Food insecurity is also critical: 42% of the population suffers from acute hunger, especially in conflict areas that are difficult to access (UNHCR, 2024a).

Unfortunately, this crisis is not receiving the attention it needs, making the prospects for peace increasingly remote. The scale of the numbers of people affected is of particular concern.

Asia, Pacific and Oceania

The vast Asia-Pacific region is also home to large-scale forced displacement. The main conflicts in Asia over the last few decades have been in Afghanistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, among others, while countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Bangladesh, India and Australia have been prominent host countries.

In 2023, the two main displacement situations in this region became more challenging and attracted less funding: Afghanistan and Myanmar. On the other hand, 2023 was the deadliest year for maritime movements in the region since 2015, with nearly 4,500 Rohingya undertaking dangerous sea journeys and 569 dead or missing. It should be noted that this region is also affected by climate change, which exacerbates the vulnerability of displaced persons and their host communities UNHCR (2023a). In this case, we will focus on the situation in Afghanistan.

Featured case: Afghanistan

During more than four decades of war (from the Soviet invasion in 1979, through the civil wars and the Taliban regime in the 1990s, to the conflict of the last twenty years), millions of Afghans have sought refuge outside their country. At the end of 2023, nearly 10.9 million Afghans remained displaced worldwide, most of them within Afghanistan or in neighbouring countries. During 2023, the number of Afghan refugees registered globally grew by 741,400, reaching a total of 6.4 million, mainly due to new population figures provided by the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. The prospects for a durable return

remain slim, as nearly half of Afghanistan's more than 40 million inhabitants face severe food insecurity, and millions remain displaced within the country (UNHCR, 2024a).

Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in August 2021, there was another wave of people trying to flee Afghanistan. While there was no immediate mass exodus as some feared, more than 1.6 million Afghans have arrived in neighbouring countries since 2021, adding to the existing numbers. In addition, within Afghanistan, there is still significant internal displacement: approximately 3.25 million Afghans are internally displaced by recent conflicts, in addition to displacement caused by natural disasters (Afghanistan suffers from earthquakes, droughts and floods that also force population movements) (UNHCR, 2025c).

Europe

At the end of 2023, Europe was home to a population of 13 million refugees (UNHCR, 2022). In this region, perhaps the most important thing to note is that, between 2022 and 2023, Europe experienced the largest forced movement of people on its territory since the Second World War, as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is the prominent case that we will focus on in this section.

In addition, since 2015, the continent has received significant flows of asylum seekers and migrants from the Middle East, Africa and Asia, posing significant political challenges for the European Union.

Featured case: Ukraine

By the end of 2023, nearly 3.7 million Ukrainians had fled their country as a result of the Russian invasion and another 1.3 million were internally displaced within Ukraine (UNHCR, 2024a). Today (April 2025), 6.3 million Ukrainian refugees remain in Europe, mainly in Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic (UNHCR, 2024d).

Contrary to what has happened in other cases, on this occasion, the European Union's response was united and swift, activating the application of the Temporary Protection Directive, which had never been used before and was designed to be used in cases of mass population displacement, such as this one. As a result, Ukrainians arriving in

European Union Member States were automatically granted residence and work permits. These measures have greatly facilitated the social integration of the Ukrainian population in the host countries.

In terms of demographic distribution, the profile of Ukrainian refugees is unusual, as the vast majority are women and children, since men between the ages of 18 and 60 were prohibited from leaving Ukraine due to the imposition of forced conscription.

Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East has been experiencing various types of forced displacement crises for decades. Currently, the two most worrying situations are in Syria (although the war may be over, this does not mean that it is possible to live in peace in this country) and Palestine, which also has certain specificities that only apply to this nationality. There are other situations, including the various conflicts in Iraq, which have generated millions of internally displaced persons and refugees (some returned after 2017, but many Iraqis still live in Jordan, Turkey, etc.), and the war in Yemen, which has displaced 4.5 million people internally. In total, across the region, by mid-2024, there were 16.6 million forcibly displaced persons (UNHCR, 2025d).

The countries in the region itself have been heavily impacted: Turkey and Lebanon now have the highest per capita refugee densities in the world, while Jordan and Egypt are also hosting hundreds of thousands.

Notable cases: Syria and Palestine

The war in Syria, which began in 2011, triggered the largest human displacement in recent decades. This amounts to more than 13 million refugees at the end of 2023, out of a pre-war population of 22 million. As for internally displaced persons, they totalled 7.2 million (UNHCR, 2024a). Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees (about 3.2 million), followed by Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. The situation of Syrian refugees illustrates the chronic nature of forced displacement in contexts of unresolved conflict.

Demographically, the Syrian diaspora is predominantly young (many school-age children, which has overwhelmed schools in Lebanon and Jordan) and has a strong presence of

women and single mothers, as many men have stayed behind, died or been forcibly recruited.

The situation of Palestinian refugees is unique in terms of its duration, dating back to 1948. These original refugees and their descendants are recognised under the mandate of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East). Today, more than 5.9 million Palestinians are registered as refugees by UNRWA in the occupied Palestinian territories (Gaza and the West Bank) and neighbouring countries (mainly Jordan, Lebanon and Syria). This makes them one of the largest refugee populations in the world (UNRWA, 2019).

The situation of Palestinian refugees is intergenerational: there are great-grandchildren of the original refugees who still have refugee status. They are generally a young population who have grown up with limited access to certain rights depending on the country (in Lebanon, for example, they face restrictions on certain professions and property ownership, and most still live in refugee camps). Jordan is the country that hosts the most Palestinians (more than two million, many of whom have obtained Jordanian citizenship). The absence of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict means that this group remains in limbo.

Latin America and the Caribbean

The Latin American region has experienced significant forced displacement in recent years, although of a somewhat different nature than that of conventional wars. Two main phenomena stand out: the mass exodus of Venezuelans to neighbouring countries due to the severe political, economic and social crisis in Venezuela, and internal displacement and forced migration due to criminal violence and disasters in countries in Central America, Mexico and Colombia. As a result, by mid-2024, this region was home to 20.3 million forcibly displaced people. In the first eight months of 2024, 240,000 refugees and migrants crossed the Darien jungle, a significant decrease from the record 520,000 who made the dangerous journey in 2023 (UNHCR, 2025b).

Although Latin America has not historically been a major source of refugees (except in specific cases, such as refugees from dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, or the forced displacement of Colombians), today the Venezuelan diaspora is one of the largest in the

world, transforming the region's migration landscape. On the other hand, Central America and Mexico have seen an increase in the exodus of people fleeing gang violence, persecution or economic collapse in countries such as Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Haiti, fuelling flows of asylum seekers to North America. It is also worth noting situations of internal displacement, such as in Colombia, among others.

Although I will focus on the case of Venezuela, it is worth briefly highlighting the situation in Colombia. This is one of the longest-running situations of internal displacement in the world. We are talking about nearly eight million Colombians who have been forcibly displaced internally as a result of the armed conflict that has been going on for decades (IDMC, 2024).

Featured case: Venezuela

For years, the situation in Venezuela has rapidly become one of the world's largest displacement crises, comparable to Syria. Since 2015, Venezuela has experienced a mass exodus due to the acute political, economic and social crisis that the country has been experiencing for some time. Currently, more than 5.8 million people have left Venezuela in search of protection and a better life. The vast majority are being hosted in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. This means that it is the region itself that has taken in almost all of this influx (UNHCR, 2024a).

It should be noted that not all Venezuelans who have fled their country are formally recognised as refugees, as their situation does not fall within the traditional definition of a refugee under the 1951 Geneva Convention. However, due to the scale and repercussions of this situation, many States have chosen to grant Venezuelans some form of temporary or humanitarian protection, thanks to which they have been able to regularise their situation in many places and integrate better while awaiting the possibility of a voluntary, safe and dignified return. It is also worth mentioning that UNHCR considers them to be " r refugees or persons with refugee-like needs", given that they fled from conditions that compromise their rights.

Demographically, many Venezuelan migrants are of working age, including professionals, which has had a double effect: for Venezuela, a huge "brain drain" and a decline in its population; for host countries, an unexpected population increase that has disrupted labour markets and demanded integration policies.

In short, the Venezuelan crisis has transformed the demographic map of the region: Latin America has gone from being mainly an area of moderate economic emigration to being the scene of one of the largest forced displacements in the contemporary world.

North America

In North America, the dynamics of forced displacement are mainly evident in the reception of people fleeing from other regions. The United States and Canada are among the developed countries that receive the most requests for protection worldwide. Unlike other regions, North America does not generate large flows of refugees of its own (its migratory movements are mainly economic), but it does face the arrival of forcibly displaced persons from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia.

The United States has been the largest recipient of asylum seekers in the Americas and one of the main countries of resettlement for refugees worldwide. Canada, for its part, has stood out for its innovative resettlement policies and is a notable example of commitment to durable solutions for refugees.

Featured case: Canada

Despite Canada's geographical distance from many conflict zones (which limits spontaneous mass arrivals), Canada has used resettlement as the primary means of providing protection to thousands of forcibly displaced persons.

As of 2025, Canada has welcomed approximately 50,000 resettled refugees per year, maintaining its position as one of the world's leading refugee resettlement countries. This figure reflects Canada's ongoing response to global crises, including conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine and climate-induced displacement in vulnerable regions. Refugees are resettled in all provinces and territories, with Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta receiving the largest numbers due to established support networks and economic opportunities. Demographically, most refugees arriving in Canada are families, a significant proportion of whom are women and children. Increasingly, LGBTQ+ refugees and persons with disabilities are being resettled, recognising their greater vulnerability (Refugee Centre, 2025).

In addition, since the 1970s, Canada has been running a pioneering private (or community) sponsorship programme for refugees, in which groups of local citizens, churches or various organisations take responsibility for supporting resettled refugees who arrive (in addition to government quotas). This is one of the complementary pathways that have also been encouraged since the adoption of the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees.

In demographic terms, Canadian immigration policy (which includes refugees) seeks to address the country's low population growth and ageing population, while also meeting humanitarian objectives. In this way, the reception of refugees is aligned with national development interests in certain rural regions that need population, for example (Papademetriou and Benson, 2025).

In conclusion, Canada is an example of how a high-income country can take an active and innovative role in providing solutions to the various refugee crises occurring elsewhere in the world through means such as large-scale resettlement and the implementation of various effective integration policies (its programmes include language classes, employment guidance, etc. for newcomers). Nevertheless, there are major challenges related to the cultural and economic integration of refugees who come from very different backgrounds, which requires investment and follow-up.

Conclusions

Forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, establishing itself as a global demographic phenomenon. At the end of 2024, around 120 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced, representing not only an ongoing humanitarian emergency but also a substantial transformation of contemporary population dynamics, especially in host countries. This rapid growth, which has doubled the figures in just a decade, highlights both the severity and special nature of current conflicts and crises and the profound shortcomings in the international response to prevent, manage and resolve the causes of forced displacement. Given the current nature of conflicts and the lack of real access to lasting solutions, we can say that the phenomenon of forced displacement will continue to increase.

From a demographic perspective, the impact of forced displacement is very significant. It alters age and gender structures both in countries of origin, which see large segments of their population decline, and in host countries, which face unexpected increases in vulnerable populations in contexts that were often already strained due to other specific factors. However, despite their relevance, forcibly displaced persons remain the great "forgotten" group in demographics, which ultimately hinders their inclusion in the design of various public policies and development plans. Closer collaboration between specialised agencies such as UNHCR and national statistical authorities is essential to remedy these shortcomings and ensure that the needs of forcibly displaced populations are fully integrated into development agendas and international commitments².

Furthermore, as explained above, analysis of current responses reveals a profound inequality in the distribution of responsibilities at the international level. While low- and middle-income countries host nearly 75% of refugees, more developed countries, despite their economic capacity, maintain proportionally lower levels of reception. This asymmetry underscores the urgency of strengthening mechanisms of solidarity and shared responsibility, promoting a more just and equitable distribution of protection. In this regard, the promotion of legal and safe pathways and real access to durable solutions established by the legal framework of international refugee law, such as resettlement or complementary pathways, is a legal, ethical and practical imperative to prevent people

² As proposed in Hugo *et al.* (2018).

from risking their lives on dangerous routes and also to reduce pressure on countries bordering conflict zones, as well as to ensure that those affected can rebuild their lives in dignity by integrating properly into their host countries.

Thus, with regard to durable solutions, the data show that progress is clearly insufficient, given the pace of new displacement. Voluntary return, traditionally considered the most desirable solution, faces enormous obstacles due to persistent insecurity, the destruction of basic infrastructure and the lack of protection guarantees in countries of origin. Syria is an example of this. Local integration, while a viable option in many contexts, requires a firm commitment on the part of host States to ensure effective access to fundamental rights and to promote the social and economic inclusion of refugees. Resettlement in third countries, meanwhile, continues to fall far short of actual global needs, limited to a tiny fraction of the forcibly displaced population in need of international protection. However, there are examples of success, such as Canada.

Given the scale of the challenges, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive international vision that combines actions at multiple levels. It is essential to strengthen conflict prevention efforts by addressing the root causes of conflict through the promotion of peace, justice and respect for human rights. At the same time, international protection systems must be strengthened, ensuring respect for the principle of non-refoulement and access to asylum.

On the other hand, regional analysis of forced displacement reveals large disparities. In Africa, forced displacement continues to be driven by protracted armed conflicts, ethnic violence, climate crises and territorial disputes, with emblematic cases such as Sudan. Africa is home to almost a third of the world's displaced population and represents one of the greatest challenges for international protection and resettlement in terms of volume, duration of displacement and precariousness of solutions. Kenya is an example of a chronic reception crisis, where generation after generation of refugees are condemned to live in refugee camps, with all that this implies in terms of the protection of their human rights.

In Asia, the case of Afghanistan symbolises the persistence of long-term crises, where entire generations have also lived between exile and internal displacement, and where neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan and Iran, continue to bear a disproportionate

burden of reception compared to other countries with greater economic and logistical resources.

In Europe, forced displacement took on a new dimension following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which triggered the largest movement of refugees on the continent since the Second World War. The European response, with the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, demonstrated that coordinated and supportive reception is possible when there is political will, but it also highlighted the disparity in treatment compared to other displacement crises.

The Middle East remains the epicentre of some of the most protracted and complex situations, such as the crises in Syria and Palestine, where displacement has become intergenerational and where millions of people remain trapped in situations of insecurity, humanitarian dependence and no prospects for safe return, as well as a total lack of access to dignified local integration in their host countries.

Latin America and the Caribbean, historically a region of economic migration, has undergone a radical shift in recent years with the Venezuelan exodus, which has become one of the largest contemporary displacements, profoundly affecting the social, economic and demographic structure of several host countries. In addition, organised violence and natural disasters have intensified the flows of forcibly displaced persons in this region, as has been the case in Colombia.

North America, for its part, continues to receive a significant number of asylum seekers and refugees, mainly from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, with Canada standing out as an example of active commitment in terms of resettlement and community sponsorship. This shows, once again, that if the political will exists, durable solutions can be used in a way that benefits all actors involved in this phenomenon of forced displacement.

A review of the situation in all these regions shows that, despite the specific contexts, one constant remains: forced displacement is becoming increasingly prolonged, more urban, more complex and requires responses that go beyond emergency humanitarian approaches to anchor themselves in long-term development strategies. Durable solutions remain insufficient: voluntary return is limited by the persistence of conflict and the lack of security conditions; local integration faces legal, economic and social barriers that

hinder effective inclusion; and resettlement in third countries, although essential for the most vulnerable cases, remains a scarce tool reserved for a minority.

The management of forced displacement therefore requires a paradigm shift. Displacement must be recognised not as a one-off crisis, but as a structural feature of the 21ST century, requiring inclusive reception policies, effective mechanisms for shared responsibility and sustained efforts to prevent conflicts and promote stable political solutions. It is also essential to fully integrate displaced persons into the demographic and development frameworks of states, including their inclusion in censuses, their access to basic rights and their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

In conclusion, forced displacement is shaping a new global demographic landscape, to which the international community must adapt with foresight, shared responsibility and ethical commitment. The protection of displaced persons cannot be considered an option, but rather a universal legal and moral obligation.

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