



# **BORDERS IN GLOBALIZATION**





## Borders in Globalization Research Project 30

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# Environmental Refugees: Truth or Myth?

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*'Environmental refugees' is a term used by academics, journalists and activists to refer to those individuals who were forced to relocate or migrate due to the damage that the environment has caused on their livelihoods. However, there are important international actors, such as the UNHCR, that disagree with the use of the term environmental refugee insofar as going to initially deny their existence. If a prominent organization such as the UNHCR has refused to accept this term, is it because it is justified in believing that such a phenomenon doesn't exist? How do other international actors, such as the EU, a global leader in promoting environmental protection react to this issue? This paper will analyze the issue of environmental degradation and how it drives migration, as well as how it plays into the context of security, a very important issue in today's global political field. Finally, it will explore the global response to environmentally displaced individuals, especially the response of International Organizations and States.*

## **Introduction**

The worsening state of the environment has brought on concern for people displaced by the effects of climate change. Essam El-Hinnawi penned the seminal report *Environmental Refugees* for United Nations' Environmental Programme in 1985. The report raised the possibility of millions of people being displaced by environmental catastrophes throughout the 21st century. Furthermore, this report brought on the first definition of what constitutes an environmental refugee: a person who has been forced "to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affect the quality of their life." (El-Hinnawi, 1985) Following *Environmental Refugees*, other reports followed that estimated anywhere from 200 million environmental refugees by 2030 to 1 billion by 2050 (Gemenne, 2011). Further literature has proven that these numbers were not entirely accurate, and while useful in sensibilization campaigns, they are not representative of the situation. The gradual degradation of the environment through the increased frequency in droughts, storms and the rise of sea levels, has made certain areas of the world precarious to human inhabitation. Individuals are looking to migrate in order to survive and improve their economic conditions as well. Environmentally displaced people are a special category of migrants as they do not fit into the frameworks established by the international community for refugees and internally displaced people. This paper will strive to address to what extent environmental refugees are recognized in the global migration context, taking into account the issue of security, as perceived by different actors.

## **Environmental Context**

The increase of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, has increased the frequency of normal, or rather expected natural phenomena. "Traditional environmental hazards" such as droughts, desertification, soil and coast erosion, increased strength in storm activity and rising sea level, occur naturally and cyclically, however their frequency, as well as strength has been affected by global warming (Bush, 2013).

Out of the “traditional environmental hazards”, two stand out as the hazards with the most impact on human displacement: the rise in sea levels and droughts. The rise in sea levels, especially in the Pacific leads to soil and coast erosion, and can also have an impact on storm activity. Rising sea levels pose the highest threat not only to highly populated coastal areas, but but most importantly, to small islands, as well as low-lying coastal zones, catchment areas and deltas are especially vulnerable to the rise of sea levels (Nagabhatla et al., 2015). Coastal erosion of small pacific islands, such as the Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea and Kiribati, is forcing inhabitants to relocate. They are facing imminent threat as sea levels continue to rise at an alarming pace, endangering the lives of their inhabitants. Around half a million people are expected to be displaced from the small Pacific islands 2050 as a result of an escalation in environmental degradation (Edwards, 2013).

South Asia is facing a similar situation to that of the Pacific Islands. In 2010, the rise in sea levels has displaced 40 million people in SE Asia (Gemenne, 2010). Recent research has demonstrated that Bangladesh is under severe stress from multiple factors such as a disruption in ecological services and rising population levels. These stressors are increasing the vulnerability so much so, that one third of Bangladesh’s population is considered climatically vulnerable (Nagabhatla et al., 2015). This type of environmental degradation does not happen from one day to the next, but rather over several years. However, the erosion of the coastline, as well as the rise in sea levels, are becoming increasingly obvious to local populations, prompting them to search for relocation opportunities.

Another environmental hazard driving individuals to migrate, are droughts. They are caused by water shortages and lead to desertification of large areas of previously arable (and liveable) land. Droughts are a cyclical and natural occurring phenomenon around the world. Some densely populated areas such as California, and Australia, experience droughts every year but they are not yet affected by significant population displacement. The region most affected by desertification and droughts, is the Sahel region in Sub Saharan Africa, and it faces significant displacement of populations as a result of this issue. Desertification brings very potent dust storms which cause soil erosion, rendering large areas of

land in unlivable conditions. The country of Sudan, one of the hardest hit by desertification, has 29% of its surface area labelled as “true desert.” (UNEP, 2007)

Aside from the so-called “traditional environmental hazards”, natural disasters have also increased in number, and they have a profound effect on population displacement. Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, monsoons and flash floods are some examples of natural disasters that occur suddenly and have an almost immediate impact on the human populations inhabiting the affected areas. This paper, however will mostly examine migration and displacement due to “traditional hazards” rather than natural disasters, as displacement caused by natural disaster is perceived as immediate and fairly temporary.

### **Climate migration**

The available literature agrees that it is difficult to establish a direct link between climate change and migration as it is a multifaceted and multi-causal issue (Black et al., 2011; Warner, 2011; White, 2011). This is mainly due to other factors that come into play when looking at climate change migration, such as economic and political motivations. There is difficulty in establishing a link due to the perceived agency that migrants have over their situation. (White, 2011) As opposed to a refugee fleeing persecution or catastrophic environmental disaster, it is perceived that an environmental migrant can choose to remain in their community and adapt, or they can migrate (of their own volition).

What the research has found is that climate change and gradual (but no less severe) environmental degradation is a catalyst for other issues which lead an individual to migrate in search for improved living conditions (Black et al., 2011). The most common issue is the increased exposure to environmental hazards<sup>1</sup> as a result of environmental degradation or sudden natural catastrophe.

Environmental degradation also leads to a reduction in ecosystem services<sup>2</sup> (Black et al., 2011), which is

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<sup>1</sup> Environmental hazards could be anything from water contamination due to flash flooding or landslides due to increased soil erosion.

<sup>2</sup> “Ecosystem services are those parts of the environment and ecosystems that are utilised to produce human well-being through the functions of provisioning (providing food and water), regulating (erosion protection) and cultural services (having an emotional or spiritual value)” (Black et al., 2011, p.S7)

related to a population's exposure to environmental hazards. A reduction in ecosystem services could happen as a result of environmental degradation, but specific environmental hazards could either escalate the speed at which ecosystem services are reduced, or could be one of the leading causes of ecosystem service reduction themselves. Populations affected by environmental degradation rely almost exclusively on the ecosystem for their livelihoods and therefore are very likely to migrate to other areas in order to find necessary resources. Individuals who are able to afford a move would now be qualified as economic migrants, or simply displaced people, because they are moving to improve their economic situation (Black et al., 2011).

There is another caveat that lies in climate migration: most migrants are internally displaced people. They do not cross international borders, but rather move to areas of their country which have better access to services and resources (White, 2011). Migrating in order to have access to better resources becomes migration for socio-economic purposes, and so can be considered as migration by choice not by necessity. Individuals most heavily affected by the loss of ecosystem services are the least likely to migrate because they lack the financial resources to do so. Only those with a moderately higher income have the opportunity to be on the move. The higher income is related to their access to ecosystem services, and so individuals from less affected areas could migrate for access to more ecosystem services in other areas or countries. These migrants will no longer be categorized as climate/environmental migrant, since they made the voluntary decision to migrate (Black et al., 2011). Gregory White (2011) provides a continuum of volition for environmental migrants, showing the difference between voluntary, compelled and forced migration. Compelled and forced migrants are those who are being displaced due to heavy environmental degradation, however an argument can be made that they still had the choice to leave or stay.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, not all climate migrants, or individuals whose migration has been catalyzed by environmental degradation, migrate on a voluntary basis.

Climate change is not only a driver linked to economic migration but also to political migration. The migration of populations to "safer" or "richer" areas can eventually lead to conflict

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<sup>3</sup> As opposed to an individual who is forced to flee his home country due to political unrest.

over resources between the native populations and the migrants. The Sahel region is a prime example of involuntary migration due to a lack of resources which includes lack of water, lack of graze land and lack of food, all which lead to starvation and malnutrition of populations.

The most poignant example is that of Darfur, an area which currently has over 2 million displaced peoples (UNEP, 2007). Desertification has played an important role in driving conflict in this already fragile area. Access to water and graze land is important for these predominantly agrarian communities. Conflicts have been erupting between pastoralists, sedentary communities and agriculturalists (nomadic communities) over who has control over water resources and land. Displaced groups have been settling next to established townships in better irrigated areas, however this has added significantly to the environmental burden of the region. Such intense competition over ecosystem services has also led to soil erosion and exhaustion, thereby reducing grazing land to almost 0.1% in certain regions (UNEP, 2007). Pastoralists are losing their livelihood due to the increase of migrants in transit and of course the conflict that arises from these tensions. Climate change is driving individuals to migrate, which drives tension and social and political conflict between these two groups. Due to the increase in political tension, individuals fleeing become refugees, as they are fleeing political unrest. However, as was evidenced in this section, while environmental degradation plays a very important role in the conflict determining their migration, it is not considered as the main factor from which they are seeking refuge.

## **Security**

Environmental displacement and climate migration fit into the discourse of security, as with the rise of globalization, the world is increasingly being portrayed as a single place. This place is “characterized by complex mobilities and interconnections” (O’Reilly, 2012, p.60), as well as increasingly porous national borders and boundaries. Nation states now have to share the international stage with international and intergovernmental organizations, as well as supranational entities, such as the European Union. Migration is seen as a globalized issue, a multidirectional movement of people that is

developed from social, cultural, political or economic factors (O'Reilly, 2012). What O'Reilly fails to acknowledge is that the migration of people can also be caused by environmental factors.

Migration is seen as the norm in an increasingly globalized world. However, national governments and international organizations are starting to frame climate-induced migration as a possible threat to global security. States continue to frame migration as a threat to national security first. As evidenced by White (2011), the securitization of borders against real and perceived threats emphasizes the need for "harsh, vigorous border control measures" (p.57). White is referring mostly to North America, where tough border control and stringent security receive most support. A militarized, zero-tolerance approach, gives citizens a sense of security (White, 2011). Mitigation efforts are seen as costly, while military efforts are seen as efficient in maintain stability. "climate refugees' are an easily invoked specter that ties into a citizenry's deepest fears about climate change" (White, 2011, p.59). By securitizing borders against climate migrants, a State can at least give to its citizens, a sense of security and protection from climate change and environmental degradation.

A more tangible example to the securitization process against the possible threat of climate-induced migrants, is the example of India's "separation barrier" (White, 2011, p.71). The project started in 2003 for a 2,100-mile long razor wire fence to be built at the Indian-Bangladeshi border. Indian authorities have defended their project, as an ostensible measure against the possible influx of climate migrants, fleeing Bangladesh due to increased pressures on the environment. Indian officials were particularly concerned about flooding in Bangladesh. However, the closing of the border with India would mean that Myanmar, Bangladesh's neighbour to the east would have to shoulder the possible burden of a large influx of climate migrants. This has not stopped the construction of the fence, as it continues to cause tension among these two South Asian countries.

Similarly, the gradual flooding of Small Pacific Islands has prompted relocations of entire populations. Another example of securitization, is the imposition of migration quotas by New Zealand's government in 2001. The decision was seen as a way of limiting the influx of islanders into New Zealand, even though the government defended its decision, as a quota imposed on individuals choosing to work



and/or study in New Zealand (White, 2011). While such regulations towards immigration are not new and they can be found in many countries, this was seen as a deliberate move towards an attempt to securitize New Zealand's borders against climate migrants.

Framing environmental migration and displacement as an issue of human security, shifts the conversation from a militarized perspective, to adaptation measures. Nicholson (2014), sees the turn in framing the problem of environmental migration, from an international security threat to a human security threat (p.156), and Bettini (2014) reinforces this idea by pointing to a "softening of tones" (p. 181) where governed migration is an adaptation strategy for the sake of human security. Identifying a threat as something that transcends politics, in this case environmental migration, brings about a common cause that everyone (States and International Organizations alike) can fight against. European Union Member States have been at the forefront of promoting adaptation. Adaptation to climate change and degradation is seen as a possible solution to the "problem" of climate change. According to Nicholson, this mentality of "global change" is the normative framework used by environmental lobbyists to bring a relatable angle to the question of climate change. While I do not agree with Nicholson's statement, there is an increased awareness towards climate migration, not as a security issue requiring military intervention, but rather an issue requiring intervention at the policy level. This intervention may take the form of governing migration through promoting adaptation methods. Adaptation includes the resilience of populations in their changing environment, but it also includes migration itself, whether it means crossing international borders or relocating within the borders of one's own country.

### **Global Response**

It has been very difficult for displaced people to find protection from other governments, because of the lack of recognition of climate change affecting displacement of human populations, in the same way that armed conflict does. In order to be granted protection, they apply as economic migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees due to these provisions being considered more "valid." (Warner, 2011)

The status of environmental migrants has been precarious in regards to being recognized under international law. According to Epiney (2011), there is no official legal definition of environmental

refugees under international law (p.388). It is very difficult to apply the principle of international responsibility to environmental refugees, as referred to by Epiney, because there is no “specific instrument regulating states’ obligations towards environmental refugees.” (p.395) In case of an environmental disaster, states are obligated to take protective measures towards their citizens, but this is not always the case. Environmental degradation is gradual, and not always noticeable in the early stages, when adaptive measures can protect the environment and the populations inhabiting it from further damage. Furthermore, the states that are most affected by climatic disruptions are underdeveloped states, and they might not always be able to provide sufficient (if any) aid at all, to promote adaptiveness and resilience.

Another concern surrounding legal obligations of the international community in regards to environmentally displaced peoples, is that third states (most often from the Global North) contribute to the environmental degradation, of various degrees, found in countries of the Global South. However, it is very difficult to establish a clear link between the third country and the affected country. This link has to demonstrate that the third country has intentionally cause environmental harm and has refused to take responsibility for the damage it has caused. However, it is difficult to determine the responsibility of a state in causing environmental degradation and therefore migration (Epiney, 2011, p.400). Environmental degradation is usually caused by a multitude of factors, and just as it is difficult to establish a direct causal link between migration and climate change, it is difficult to establish a direct link between a state and environmental degradation (Epiney, 2011, p.408). As a result, it is not only difficult to confer status to environmental migrants (refugees), it is also difficult to establish who should be responsible for the welfare of this group of individuals.

The Nansen Initiative, started in 2011 by the Swiss and Norwegian Ministries of Foreign Aid, aims to bring important stakeholders together to discuss extending protection to a broader category of displaced peoples (Nansen Initiative, 2014). The goals of the Initiative are not only to bring consensus among key actors (States, International Organizations, Supranational Organizations) in the context of people displaced by natural disaster induced by climate change, but also to establish standards of

treatment such as status in host country and operational frameworks that would establish international responsibility (Nansen Initiative, 2014). The Initiative could be an important step towards a global protection agenda of all displaced people, considering that the UNHCR does not recognize “environmental refugees” because they do not fit the rigid framework set out by the Refugee Convention<sup>4</sup> in 1951 (McNamara, 2007). Environmentally displaced people are mistakenly referred to as refugees because they do, in a sense fit into the definition set out by the UNHCR, in that they are fleeing their country of nationality and are unable to return home (Bush, 2013). However, the most important part of the Refugee Convention, states that a refugee must have a well-founded fear of persecution. In the case of environmental migrants, the environment itself cannot persecute an individual. Another reason for the UNHCR’s unwillingness to extend the Refugee Convention to other displaced people, is that it fears it will become open to interpretation as to whom can or cannot be granted refugee status (McNamara, 2007). Furthermore, many migrants choose to migrate rather than stay behind or adapt. This brings back White’s continuum of volition, which places migrants outside of the traditional definition of a refugee, as they continue to have the grim choice of staying or leaving.

And so, while the UNHCR has rejected the term “environmental refugee” to refer to individuals displaced by climate change and environmental factors, it has shown willingness to collaborate towards a broader protection agenda for displaced people, without changing the original Refugee Convention. The Nansen Initiative is an opportunity to develop a framework of protection for these migrants who are often left without any international protection due to their precarious situation.

In a Working Document (2013) published by the European Commission, the need to move from research to establishing policies regarding climate migration is identified. Various research reports commissioned by the EU have come to the conclusion that climate change and environmental degradation can increase current threats to human populations. The document identified the Horn of Africa/Sahel

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<sup>4</sup> “The 1951 Refugee Convention spells out that a refugee is someone who "owing to a 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 to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." (UNHCR, 2016)

region, as well as low lying coastal areas, as areas of primary concern for the EU. The EU does not currently offer protection to individuals citing that the reasons they are unable to return to their homeland is due to environmental degradation, however Sweden and Finland offer asylum and temporary protection respectively (EC Working Document, 2013, p.18-19). The current policy in the EU is to encourage adaptation and mitigation measures in regions affected by environmental degradation. This would allow individuals to remain in their homelands if they wish to do so. The EU is looking at initiatives taken up by other countries to use migration as a coping strategy for affected communities, such as temporary working permits to environmental migrants. These work permits would enable them to gain skills, as well as an income that they can use to support the community back home. Furthermore, the Commission aims to promote its “best-practices” in terms of migrant integration in countries of destination. Finally, the Commission promotes the involvement of multiple stakeholders in addressing the challenges that environmental degradation poses to migration. The Nansen Initiative is one such forum in which multiple stakeholders (States, IOs, supranational organizations, NGOs and local authorities) participate in the conversation surrounding climate change migration.

## **Conclusion**

Human displacement as a result of climate change is gaining more and more attention on the international stage as the status of individuals affected by environmental degradation is often uncertain. While the initial intention of NGOs and humanitarian aid organizations was to raise awareness of the severity of the situation by using the term “environmental refugees”, it is inappropriate to do so as it invokes certain legal implications, most notably the Refugee Convention, which cannot be applied to cases of displacement due to environmental destruction. Environmentally displaced persons is the most appropriate term as it includes Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) which constitute a large part of environmentally displaced people. Confusion still exists in the literature, as terms vary from environmental refugees, climate change migrants, environmental migrants, and finally environmentally displaced peoples. Authors refer to the same category of displaced individuals even though they did not

use the 'correct' terminology. This is due to the fact that there is no international body regulating rules and regulations regarding environmentally displaced peoples. The Nansen Initiative and the goals of the EU are promising steps to including environmentally displaced peoples into a comprehensive framework of international protection. The Initiative plays well into the concept of human security, rather than international security, as it seeks to foster conversation among important stakeholders. The aim is for this initiative to be fruitful not only in extending protection to environmentally displaced individuals, but also to promote adaptation methods.

So, while "environmental refugees" do not exist, since seeking refuge does not equate to being a Convention refugee, individuals and entire communities being forced into relocation due to severe environmental degradation, currently grapple with this reality. Displacement as a result of severe environmental degradation continues to take place around the world, at times at an alarming rate. While climate migration may not have been taken as a serious 'threat' in years past, it has gained more attention as an issue of security, especially since the events of 9/11. Various states have attempted to protect their borders from possible influxes of populations, through various methods. In the case of environmentally displaced people, policies to mitigate migration and promote adaptation, not only serve governments from a security point of view, but they also aim to improve the environmental conditions that have initially caused displacement. The EU, a global leader in mitigating climate change has acknowledged the existence of environmentally displaced people and the need for an established framework for these displaced individuals. The question remains, how will these individuals be governed by States and International Organizations in the future, as the state of the environment continues to degrade, and human populations will continue to migrate in the search for a better livelihood?

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