



Briefing Paper 319

April 2013

Environmental Migration

"It is projected that climate change will over time trigger larger and more complex movements of population, both within and across borders, and has the potential to render some people stateless. Since climate change is certain to have a major impact on future patterns of human mobility, approaches which address environmental issues in isolation from other variables and processes will not be sufficient to solve the problem."¹

1. Introduction

The emergence of climate change and the effects thereof have triggered droughts, floods and countless sorts of natural disasters resulting in the displacement of people in their multitudes. These individuals, who at times are forced to cross international borders, find themselves excluded from being legally defined as refugees even though they are compelled to migrate as a survival strategy. Terms and concepts such as 'environmental migration', 'climate change-induced migration', 'ecological or environmental refugees', 'climate change migrants' and 'environmentally-induced forced migrants' are found scattered throughout literature. This paper aims to take an introductory look at this new phenomenon; the controversy surrounding it; environmental migration in the African continent; and the views expressed at our recent roundtable discussion on the topic.

2. Controversy

2.1. Definition

The main reason for the lack of definition relating to migration caused by environmental degradation or change is linked to the difficulty of isolating environmental factors from other drivers of migration. Migrants and displaced persons falling within the definition are not clearly recognisable and may thus not receive appropriate assistance. In this sense, while much of the scholarly debate and policy

recommendations to date have rightly cautioned against mixing those displaced by environmental causes with those defined as refugees by the 1951 Refugee Convention, there are many helpful elements of the process of defining someone under the 1951 Convention that can contribute to defining people displaced by environmental change. The term 'environmental refugee' was first formally used in the 1970s, flowing from the assumption that population growth would lead to migration and conflict caused by resource scarcity. Such views were not supported by evidence, and environmental pressure as a fundamental cause of migration has generally been downplayed until recently, when increased attention to the impacts of climate change has refuelled the debate.

2.2. Voluntary versus Forced Migration

Another major source of disagreement lies in the confusion of 'forced' versus 'voluntary' migration. The question as to whether environmental migration is inherently a form of forced displacement, or whether it should be categorised under voluntary relocation, fuels much debate. To a large extent, the focus on this topic to date has been on somehow proving that environmental factors can be a single major cause for displacement and migration. However, it is fascinating to note that in determining whether or not someone is a 'Convention refugee' it is not necessary to determine whether or not the reason leading to persecution (political affiliation, race, nationality, religious beliefs, etc.) is the main reason for displacement but, rather, whether

displacement has actually taken place. Once this is confirmed, the decision-maker grants the person refugee status without considering whether or not the reason was the main cause leading to the persecution. This has often led to the question as to why the same is not done for people displaced by environmental factors, and whether the causal relationship between environment and displacement should result in a certain degree of hardship or breach of human rights before there can be some form of long-term international protection.²

3. Environmental Migration in Africa

There are estimated to be between 20 and 50 million migrants in Africa, although statistical data on migration flows are incomplete and often outdated, and there are significant undocumented flows. There are various countries that have already felt the effects and/or threats of changing climatic behaviour. These include Contonou, Benin, where the continued advance of the sea, coastal erosion and the rise in sea-level, exacerbated by human activity on the coast, have medium and long-term consequences that are already threatening vulnerable communities and disrupting the least-protected, sensitive ecosystems; Banjul, Gambia, where most of the city is less than one metre above sea level and flooding is common after heavy rain in the city. It is said that problems with flooding are likely to increase under a warmer climate with an increase in the strength and frequency of tropical storms; and Mombasa, Kenya, which already has a history of disasters related to climate extremes, including floods that cause serious damage and often loss of life nearly every year.³ Taking this into consideration, one cannot help but wonder how much of the abovementioned migratory flow can be attributed to the inability to further endure living conditions that have been altered by changing weather patterns.

The mass exodus of people from Somalia to Kenya and Ethiopia in late 2010 and throughout 2011, spurred by the interconnected impacts of severe drought and continuing civil war, led the United Nations University to conduct an investigative study to understand the extent to which refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been touched by climate change. The study examined the perceptions and experiences of, and responses to, climatic variability and long-term negative climatic change in the East and

Horn of Africa. Refugees that were interviewed, many of whom had perceived discernible shifts in weather in their home countries over the past 10–15 years were able to distinguish between the occasional bout of bad weather (e.g. a flash-flood or heat-wave) and what they described as more 'permanent' shifts in weather patterns. These shifts were described variously as prolonged drought, disrupted rainfall patterns or intense flooding. For those who relied on agricultural and pastoral activities for a living, this had a direct and negative impact on their livelihoods and food security. Others were indirectly affected by declining turnover and profit amongst traders, and by rising food prices as a consequence of diminished agricultural output.

Resource scarcity – aggravated by worsening weather conditions was often described as a multiplier or magnifier of pre-existing conflicts in refugees' countries of origin, even though none of the refugees interviewed described the impacts of climatic variability as a direct stimulus for violent conflict. All refugees interviewed, whose livelihoods had been severely disturbed by climate inconsistency in their homelands, described a wide range of traditional and innovative adaptation strategies to enable them to remain in their areas of origin. Methods ranged from adopting new cultivation techniques and reorganizing cropping cycles to abandoning farming altogether to take up alternative non-agriculture-based occupations. Where movement away from homelands was undertaken in response to worsening impacts of climatic variability, such movement was a measure of last resort, and happened only after all efforts to adapt to the changing conditions had been exhausted. In most cases such movement was internal, circular and temporary in nature, rather than cross-border and permanent.

Very few of the refugees interviewed in the study had decided to move away from their homelands permanently because of the impacts of climatic variability. Permanent relocation, though described in very few cases, was not only limited to those who were better off. In fact, the very poorest, once they had made a decision to move, would be more likely to relocate permanently, though internally. Cross-border movement, as a direct response to climatic variability, was rarely mentioned. For most, cross-border migration was typically a second migration, the first often being internal (and often induced by environmental considerations) and the second caused by

violence, drought or a combination of both.⁴

With great expectancy, the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention) was ratified in December 2012. This agreement defines internally displaced persons as persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to 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 human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised state border. The Convention mandates member states of the African Union (AU) to designate an authority to be responsible for co-ordinating the protection and assistance of internally displaced persons and for co-operating with relevant international and civil society organisations. Furthermore, according to the treaty, state parties agree that, except where expressly stated in the Convention, its provisions will apply to all situations of internal displacement regardless of their cause.⁵

4. Roundtable Discussion

On 18 March 2013, the CPLO hosted a roundtable discussion on environmental migration in collaboration with the Goedgedacht Forum and Jesuit Refugee Services. The main speakers at the event were Professor Loren Landau, Director of the African Centre for Migration and Movement at Wits University, and Mr Patrick Kawuma Male, who heads up the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) field office in Cape Town. The discussion that ensued explored this global phenomenon and engaged organisations and individuals dealing with climate change and refugee related matters on the concept of environmental migration.

In his address, Prof Landau stated that we should prepare, and not panic, because migration is inevitable, essential and potentially productive. Climate change will intensify and slowly transform current mobility, and the challenges will be institutional and political. The issue should not be looked at as only a humanitarian or refugee matter because that would lead to its side-lining; we should rather collaborate with migrant worker associations and the likes of poverty alleviation organisations. According to

Prof Landau, international migrants flourished more than domestic migrants. On the negative side, he noted that local government is failing to plan for future population growth, and is providing only for current population levels. Unless the issue of migration is addressed, core populations are going to be afflicted.

Patrick Kawuma Male proposed that environmental migration be viewed as normal, and merely the result of people moving out of harms way. He addressed the matter of definition in relation to environmental migrants and the way in which they exist in a legal vacuum of sorts. He explored the reasons why environmental migrants cannot as yet be defined as refugees under the 1951 UN Convention, due to the risks which a renegotiation of the agreement would pose for people who desperately need to be protected under the Convention. Renegotiation would allow countries which would like to object to certain Convention provisions to do so (South Africa is apparently one such country) and the renegotiated agreement would result in a less water-tight convention than the original. Matters are rather precarious at present, for there have been instances of conflict in recent years arising from the scarcity of natural resources such as land, oil and water stemming from climate change. Mr Kawuma Male suggested that an approach of international solidarity and role-sharing be adopted with regard to migration matters.

It was suggested during the discussion that the definition environmental migration be considered a humanitarian, as opposed to a refugee, issue due to the increasingly unresponsive nature of countries towards refugees. The subject of environmental migration, indeed migration as a whole, ought to be viewed in terms of integration and development, with better housing and health care, for instance, being considered, and hopefully leading to proactive planning and engagement by local government. It was also noted that host communities should be acknowledged and assisted when refugees are being helped so as to avoid xenophobia.

5. Conclusion

The need for a definition is a crucial step in the conceptualisation of environmental migration, and in the development of policy responses to

address these flows. Instead of establishing environmental migration as a specific field within migration studies, it would seem that more would be gained by trying to integrate environmental factors into existing migration studies. In the quest to make their research policy-relevant, journalists and policy-makers feel compelled to provide some estimation of the number of those who are or may become 'environmentally displaced'. In so doing, caution must be taken to prevent environmental migration being defined too widely, to the extent that it would be damaging for those in need of the most protection⁶. While most of the focus in relation to climate change has to do with the scientific

aspects, the humanitarian challenges that accompany this occurrence should no longer be disregarded. In this field, as in many others, there is a tendency for wonderful pieces of legislation to be drafted, only to be under or incorrectly utilised. It is to be hoped that the Kampala Convention will not turn out to be such an agreement, but rather that it will be properly implemented, thus gainfully assisting the African internally-displaced persons whom it was intended to serve.

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¹Climate Change, Natural Disasters and Human Displacement: A UNHCR Perspective, 2009.

² Dun, O. & Gemenne, F. Defining 'environmental migration'. *Forced Migration Review*, 2008.

³ McGranahan, G., Mitlin, D., Satterthwaite, D., Tacoli, C. & Turok, I. Africa's Urban Transition and the Role of Regional Collaboration, Paper by *African Centre for Cities and International Institute for Environment and Development*, 2008.

⁴Afifi, T., Govil, R., Sakdapolrak, P., & Warner, K. Climate Change, Vulnerability and Human Mobility: Perspectives of Refugees From The East And Horn of Africa *United Nations University Institute For Environment And Human Security (UNU-EHS) Report No. 1* - June 2012.

⁵ African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) – October 2009.

⁶Dun, O & Gemenne, F. Defining 'environmental migration'. *Forced Migration Review*, 2008.

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