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Mobilité humaine et changement environnemental: une analyse historique et textuelle de la politique des Nations Unies

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Abstract

The United Nations plays a leadership role in protecting the environment as well as people dislocated from their homes; however such roles remain mutually exclusive. At present, there is no United Nations framework for human mobility because of environmental change, even if among other factors. This article conducts a historical analysis of policy documents produced by the United Nations and subsidiary agencies. Specifically, this article unpacks different textual descriptions of people displaced by environmental change in selected United Nations documents over the last 40 years. Based on an assessment of these documents, subject categories of people displaced by environmental change have been constructed in ways that have altered the terms of debate, evaded legal response, or deflected blame away from the perpetrators of environmental change. Historical textual analysis provides one way of explaining how there has been an absence of explicit international policy to protect those dislocated by environmental change.

Keywords

textuelle, analyse, historique, nations, unies, une, des, environnemental, changement, et, politique, humaine, la, mobilité, de

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Human Mobility and Environmental Change: A Historical Analysis of United Nations' Policy Texts

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Abstract

The United Nations plays a leadership role in protecting the environment as well as people dislocated from their homes; however such roles remain mutually exclusive in a structural sense. At present, there is no United Nations framework for human mobility caused by environmental change, even if among other factors. This article conducts a historical analysis of policy documents produced by the United Nations and subsidiary agencies. Specifically, it unpacks different textual descriptions of people displaced by environmental change in selected United Nations documents over the last 40 years. Based on an assessment of these documents, subject categories of people displaced by environmental change have been constructed in ways that have altered the terms of debate, evaded legal response, or deflected blame away from the perpetrators of environmental change. Historical textual analysis provides one way of explaining how there has been an absence of explicit international policy to protect those dislocated by environmental change.

Keywords

Historical geography; environmental change; human mobility; policy; United Nations

Introduction to the issue

Following the horrors of the Great Depression and World War II, the United Nations was given a wide mandate to improve future peace and human well-being. Notwithstanding the United Nations' extensive work in social and economic spheres over the last 60 years, worsening poverty, injustice and human rights abuses have been coupled with escalating global environmental degradation. Taken together, these problems highlight the challenges of ensuring both global environmental sustainability and the security of future human life on earth.

One area of pressing concern is the international protection of people who leave their homes because of environmental change. There are no formal, institutionalised mechanisms to protect such people who leave primarily because of environmental change. International laws do not recognise environmental change as a core driver for forced mobility, although there are cases of some national laws recognising environmental displacements (see Kälin 2010). Over the last 40 years, various categories have been used in relation to population movements resulting from desertification, earthquakes, cyclones, chemical accidents, large dam buildings, and more recently, climate change, sea level rise and the loss of coastal habitats. Terms such as 'environmental refugees' and 'environmental migrants' populate both formal United Nations reports, as outlined in this article, and popular media coverage, particularly surrounding natural disasters and climate change (e.g. Branigan 2004; Buerk 2004; Kirby 2000a; 2000b; 2003; McGirk 2000).

In more recent years, much debate has occurred within academic circles on the legal identification of 'environmental refugees'. The question is if legitimising the term 'environmental refugees' will result in international protection for people forced to flee because of extreme environmental change, and whether this the only way adequate protection could be forthcoming (Bates 2002; Renaud et al. 2011; Stal and Warner 2009). For instance, Biermann and Boas (2008), specifically with regard to climate change, advocate for a new legal framework for climate refugees under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). On the other hand, McAdam (2011) is sceptical that a multilateral instrument or treaty will solve the issue of climate-induced displacement, given the many challenges with widespread adoption and implementation, the needs of communities affected, and the likely nature of movements.

This article presents a historical review of policy documents over the last 40 years to illustrate shifting categorisations of mobile subjects. It is not the contention of this article to outright suggest that the best way forward is to protect such people under international law as a solution to a problem, nor that this is the only way in which this issue could be addressed. Instead, this article attempts to historically examine the different textual descriptions of those individuals displaced by environmental change, through the usage and deployment of categorical descriptions by various United Nations agencies or those writing at their behest. This is particularly pertinent given a growing literature that demonstrates the importance of vulnerable populations' perspectives in understanding their own particular subjectivities (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012). This body of work shows for instance that the 'environmental refugee' category can be disempowering and insulting, and is frequently resisted by those it seeks to typologise (see Kelman 2010; Masquelier 2006; McAdam and Loughry 2009; McNamara and Gibson 2009). As such, this article does not wish to advocate any particular form of protection for vulnerable populations, nor does it necessarily believe that legal protection will simply solve this issue (see McAdam 2011). Rather, we are interested in the specific absence of legal protection for environmentally-triggered displacement within the United Nations legal structures. We contend that one explanation for this absence is historical and semantic – that is, the manner in which knowledge domains pertaining to refugees and environmental change have been kept apart through the very language used in debates and policy documents.

This article accordingly traces the ways in which United Nations agencies and subsidiary agencies have since 1970 used various categories to describe those who leave their homes due to environmental stresses. Through extensive archival analysis of documents held in New York and other key cities host to United Nations agencies, this article unpacks these different textual descriptions through six key 'moments' when certain categories were developed, changed or challenged. These 'moments' included symposia, such as major United Nations conferences, the release of key policy texts or research reports by various United Nations agencies, or the funding (full or in-part) of these initiatives. These 'moments' and associated texts were not chosen because they themselves had some extraordinary causal power over the debate but because they spotlight main trends, and provide evidence to track how particular subject categories were created in various ways to induce certain types of policy outcomes.

The conceptual background we adopt here is drawn from poststructuralist perspectives on environmental problems. From this viewpoint, particular subject categories have been created in relation to perceptions of 'society' and 'nature', and acute and gradual triggers of population displacements. Textual descriptions of human mobility due to environmental change inevitably draws on, and in turn shapes, perceptions of natural processes, events and disasters (see Castree 2005). In each of the six 'moments' below, interpretations are made by institutions and individuals of the agency and causality of environmental processes and events, in relation to human populations. 'Nature talk' (Castree 2005) about environmental catastrophes heavily influences resulting subjectifications of these human populations, and thus the wider policy landscape. In this way, this study connects to the growing literatures on human-nonhuman relations (Castree 2005; Castree and Nash 2006; Demerit 2001; Head and Muir 2006) and the social construction of natural disasters (Pelling 2001).

Research framework

In order to access United Nations' archives, one of the authors took up a post as an intern with the Global Policy Forum, based in New York – a non-government organisation (NGO) that assesses policy-making decisions and accountability at the United Nations. This internship enabled the researcher access to the United Nations building, and the ability to approach diplomats and ambassadors for interview (analysis of this latter source of information is beyond the scope of this article, and is discussed elsewhere – see McNamara 2007; McNamara and Gibson 2009). Over a six-month period, United Nations archives, including publications and proceedings, were consulted in New York, as well as in Washington, London, Geneva and Bangkok. From over a thousand public and restricted documents found in the archival search, this article focuses on six key 'moments' where shifts in categories of human mobility as a result of environmental stresses were most clearly observable.

The time-span for intensive archival searching was 1970 through to 2010. 1970 provided an appropriate choice for starting the detailed analysis of this genealogy, because it coincided with the first wave of contemporary mainstream environmentalism (Young 1991). During this time, environmental groups flourished and there was an increased public awareness of the potential for a global ecological crisis (Beder 1996). This growing environmental movement prompted the first United Nations Conference on the Environment, held in

Stockholm in 1972. The conference resulted in an action plan consisting of 109 recommendations, as well as the establishment of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) (Aplin et al. 1995).

‘Moment’ 1: Early writings on ‘ecological refugees’

In 1974 Lester Brown founded the Worldwatch Institute, a Washington-based NGO. UNEP was involved with and sponsored one of the Worldwatch Institute’s initial projects in 1975, which examined the impact of intensive food production systems on the environment, such as overfishing, intensive crop and firewood production and overgrazing. Publications stemming from this project included an assessment of the links between increased migration (internal and international) and environmental problems (deforestation, desert encroachment, and soil depletion and erosion; see Brown 1975; Brown et al. 1976; Eckholm 1975; 1976).

The key argument in such publications was that during the early 1970s agricultural industries could not support the growth in population nor sustain the subsequent growth in the labour force. These arguments were based around Malthusian concerns that the labour force would not keep pace of population growth, largely due to unequal systems of land tenure and human-induced environmental degradation (see Malthus 1798). The consequence was argued to be large-scale migration, predominantly in Asia and Africa, into urban areas, rainforests, hillsides, rangelands, areas at risk of natural disasters, and neighbouring countries. Such publications made links between environmental degradation and population displacements, using terminology as follows:

As human and livestock populations retreat before the expanding desert, these ecological refugees create even greater pressure on new fringe areas, exacerbate the processes of land degradation, and trigger a self-reinforcing negative cycle of overcrowding and overgrazing in successive areas (Brown et al. 1976: 39).

Brown et al. (1976) drew on examples including the southward expansion of the Sahel in Africa and the Dust Bowl in the United States. When discussing such places, ‘ecological refugees’ were constructed as *perpetrators* of environmental degradation through practices such as overgrazing, overfishing and intensive crop production. Consequently, these publications, and in particular Brown (the organisations’ founder), were among the first to popularise the link between environmental degradation and population displacements, and to use the term ‘ecological refugees’ to describe such a phenomenon. These constructs and

concepts further matured in studies conducted or funded by United Nations agencies in the decades to follow, as discussed below.

‘Moment’ 2: Emergence of the ‘environmental refugee’ category at the United Nations

Ten years on from the Worldwatch Institute’s key publications, UNEP published a report on ‘environmental refugees’. While it is unclear why a ten-year gap occurred between these two ‘moments’ of policy discourse, the reasons why UNEP commissioned Professor El-Hinnawi to research the ‘environmental refugee’ phenomenon were more obvious: the influence of the second wave of mainstream environmentalism (see Young 1991), and officially-observed increases in numbers of people dislocated as a result of environmental change (see also the work of Homer-Dixon around the same time). According to Tolba (1985: *i*), UNEP’s Executive Director at the time, ‘environmental refugees’ included the ‘millions fleeing the droughts of northern Africa, the victims of Bhopal and the thousands made homeless by the Mexico earthquake’. El-Hinnawi sat on a number of United Nations panels throughout the 1990s, but remains most well known at the United Nations for his 1985 paper, where he described three categories of ‘environmental refugees’.

The first category was of those ‘temporarily displaced because of an environmental stress’ such as floods, tropical cyclones, drought and earthquakes (El-Hinnawi 1985: 4). Usually poorer countries with severe processes of land degradation were hardest hit by natural disasters: ‘people can alter their environment to make it more prone to certain disaster triggers, such as flood and drought’ (El-Hinnawi 1985: 10). El-Hinnawi (1985) depicted those affected as victims of natural disturbances, but also as aggravators of the severity of disasters, resulting in the construct of ‘environmental refugees’ as *temporary victims and aggravators*.

El-Hinnawi’s (1985: 5) second category of ‘environmental refugees’ were those ‘permanently displaced and re-settled in a new area’ by human-induced influences such as large-scale dam building. Here, people were forced to ‘abandon their houses, fields and property’, largely within their homelands (El-Hinnawi 1985: 34). With poor planning, and insufficient budgets and technology transfers, El-Hinnawi (1985: 34) argued that the ‘direct beneficiaries of the projects were often the educated elites, who were in power, while the direct social costs fell

to the rural poor'. El-Hinnawi (1985) constructed these 'environmental refugees' as *internally resettled victims* because they were not responsible for initiating environmental change.

The third and final category was of those affected by deteriorated resource bases that no longer supported human populations through processes of deforestation and desertification. El-Hinnawi (1985: 25) argued that:

Much of the blame for tropical forest destruction is laid on the shoulders of shifting cultivators – those who slash and burn a clearing in the forest, grow crops for a few years until soil fertility has dissipated, and then move on to clear a new patch.

Many of El-Hinnawi's (1985) examples were from rural communities in poor countries, where it was likely that short-term gains and concerns of simple survival reigned over those for sustainability and long-term environmental preservation. In El-Hinnawi's (1985: 26) discussion of desertification in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia: 'desertification is caused almost entirely by human misuse of the environment'. El-Hinnawi (1985) argued that unsustainable farming and clearing practices of 'environmental refugees' themselves triggered and exacerbated processes such as water-logging, soil depletion and erosion, and salinisation. In this way, 'environmental refugees' were constructed as *perpetrators* of environmental change – enacting their agency through ecological damage, which ultimately led to their permanent displacement.

'Moment' 3: Early 1990s produces a string of United Nations conferences and heightened interest in the issue

The International Conference on Migration and the Environment was held in 1992, months prior to the UNCED. This conference was not considered a separate moment of policy discourse because it predominantly focused around producing recommendations for the UNCED (considered a key moment in the 1990s) to address this issue. Two recommendations came out of the International Conference on Migration and the Environment: that the UNCED process must address the root causes of environmental displacement, and the needs of those affected. In achieving this, UNCED was urged to develop a framework for assigning responsibilities within and among states, regional organisations and international agencies. Largely a factor of the sheer scope and breadth of UNCED's program, it fell short of achieving this, with only marginal references made to

human mobility as a result of environmental change, largely in relation to desertification, as outlined below.

The UNCED, with an aim to formulate realistic mechanisms for the implementation of ecologically sustainable development, was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. To achieve this, the UNCED endorsed and adopted two key documents. The first was the Rio Declaration, based on 27 principles to govern the economic and environmental behaviour of nations and individuals (United Nations 1992b), and the second was Agenda 21, a global blue-print of action on sustainable development for governments and NGOs (United Nations 1992a).

Agenda 21 recognised that the state of the natural environment was interconnected to human activities in a variety of ways. Agenda 21 (United Nations 1992a) only provided a few references to the concept of ‘environmental refugees’, largely in the context of discussions on drought and desertification. Agenda 21 stated that ‘desertification results from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities’ (United Nations 1992a: 12.E). Tackling desertification was one of six key recommendations included in Agenda 21, where a call was made for the development of ‘comprehensive drought preparedness and drought-relief schemes, including self-help arrangements, for drought-prone areas’ (United Nations 1992a: 12.E). What is pertinent to observe here is the notion of self-help. While there is a positive recognition that those affected have internal coping capacities, it can also be interpreted that those leaving their homes must adapt and bear the burden of change in situations of drought and desertification. This was the introduction of a new and important thread of identity construction for human mobility due to environmental change – as *adaptable subjects*. Self-help was recommended regardless of whether the causation for such change was nature, human activities, the people leaving themselves or poverty, all of which had informed previous constructs.

The Population Institute (1992) also tailored an agenda for the United Nations Conference on Population and Development, held in September 1994 in Cairo. None of the recommendations of the Population Institute (1992) were included in the Programme of Action from the Conference, and only a meagre acknowledgement followed that: ‘international economic imbalances, poverty and environmental degradation... are all factors affecting international migration’ (United Nations 1994: Section 10.1). Here, the Programme

of Action dismissed environmental problems as merely part of a suite of reasons influencing one's choice to migrate.

'Moment' 4: Mid-1990s sees the largest study on the issue and response from the United Nations

A year after the United Nations Conference on Population and Development was held, the Climate Institute, a Washington-based NGO, commissioned ecologist Norman Myers to assess the issue of 'environmental refugees'. This project produced a comprehensive 214-page report on 'environmental refugees'¹, which included a series of figures on the number and scale of the issue. Myers has since revised these figures many times. Most recently, Stern (2006) drew on Myers' estimates that there will be 200 million people permanently displaced by 2050. Myers' report identified four major triggers for displacement, assigned responsibility for the onset of such flows, and relied on two main identity constructs of 'environmental refugees' – *victims* and *internally resettled victims*. The first trigger was gradual environmental change including land degradation and climate change. Myers (1995: 37) attributed land degradation processes causing landlessness directly to faulty agricultural practices, lack of rural infrastructure for agriculture, population growth and poverty, collectively impacting on the 'livelihoods of large numbers of people, especially tribal and other indigenous people'. This was the first time in these 'moments' that 'environmental refugees' from land degradation processes were subjectified as *victims*. In the case of climate change, Myers (1995) argued that the impacts of climate change and subsequent exodus of people from their homelands was a direct result of increased greenhouse gas emissions by richer countries. Myers (1995) constructed the actions of such governments as aggressors and subsequent 'environmental refugees' as external, helpless *victims*, arguing that the processes of change were induced through no fault of those affected, but rather the fault of others' dependency on the use of fossil fuels.

Myers (1995) identified acute-onset natural disasters as a second major trigger for population displacement. These events were often exacerbated by population pressures and poverty, which left many communities at risk and without the means to avoid disaster. Myers (1995)

¹ This project was financially supported by UNFPA, UNEP, the United Kingdom Overseas Development Administration, the Moriah Fund, the United States Government, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Swedish International Development Authority.

was sympathetic to those in such a predicament; that is, despite the human component of the otherwise natural disaster, those affected were not constructed as the aggravators or contributors to such change (as was the case in previous ‘moments’). In contrast, Myers (1995) highlighted that these ‘environmental refugees’ were *victims* of natural disasters, pervasive poverty and population pressures. As Myers (1995: 25) asserted, it is ‘often the poorest people who are most exposed to risk – and they are the ones who, by virtue of their impoverished plight, can do least to safeguard themselves’, reasoning his case for the above identity construction of ‘environmental refugees’. The remaining two triggers were major environmental accidents and disruptions to the environment by infrastructural developments, and as in previous ‘moments’, constructed those affected as *internally resettled victims* because of the direct or indirect involvement of the governments of these countries in causing such environmental change.

In 1996, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) convened an international symposium entitled *Environmentally-Induced Population Displacements and Environmental Impacts Resulting from Mass Migrations*² in Geneva. UNHCR et al. (1996: 10) refused to use the term ‘environmental refugees’ so as ‘to avoid confusion with the legal definition of refugees’ (based on the definition included in the 1951 Refugee Convention), preferring instead the term ‘environmentally displaced persons’. In this instance, ‘environmental refugees’ were differentiated from legal refugees. Further, UNHCR et al. (1996) made reference to ‘environmentally displaced persons’ as ‘migrants’. UNHCR et al. (1996: 15) argued that the mass movement of people – ‘migrants’ – because of environmental degradation caused ‘problems for receiving countries’ because they were ‘competitors for resources and employment by local populations in the receiving countries’. UNHCR et al. (1996: 15) stated that ‘in some cases the migrants may strain the social and economic fabric of the areas to which they relocate’. Here, emphasis was placed on the ensuing problems brought to places in which people resettled, rather than on their original suffering and plight.

UNHCR et al. (1996) described five major categories of human mobility as a consequence of environmental change. Causes for the first category of acute onset situations were natural disasters; yet UNHCR et al. (1996: 16) stated that ‘the distinction between natural and man-made [sic] causes may be unclear’, influencing the construct of those exiled as *temporary*

² The Symposium also received additional funding from UNFPA, and the Governments of Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.

victims and aggravators. Hazardous toxic waste contamination was also recognised as a trigger for acute onset population displacements. UNHCR et al. (1996) portrayed those displaced from chemical contamination as victims of external environmental change who are contained within the affected country's borders – *internally resettled victims*. Both of these constructs have thus persisted, and have changed very little throughout various 'moments' of policy discourse.

The following three categories of population movements developed by UNHCR et al. (1996) were defined in response to slow onset environmental decline (large dams, land degradation and climate change). UNHCR et al. (1996) argued that those displaced by the construction of large dams were the victims of external environmental damage. UNHCR et al. (1996) made no mention to transboundary displacement as a result of such developments, and thus it can be assumed that those displaced were made so internally, mirroring previous constructions as *internally resettled victims*. Land degradation and climate change were considered by UNHCR et al. (1996) as irreversible problems, yet made no direct mention of the causes of this change other than broad-brush assertions of the role of both human activities and natural processes. However, the recommendations provided by UNHCR et al. (1996) shaped the constructions of those affected. UNHCR et al. (1996) recommended that populations affected by slow-onset environmental change must work towards adapting to such change through education campaigns about the sustainable use of resources and increasing technical capacities. Those affected by land degradation and climate change were portrayed as *adaptable*.

What is evident from the 'moments' discussed thus far is that debates on this issue were particularly widespread during the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, they largely disappeared following the above Symposium held by UNHCR and IOM in 1996. Despite extensive archival searching at the United Nations in five major world cities, no significant texts on human mobility and environmental change were found following the 1996 Symposium until UNHCR published a research paper on 'environmental refugees' in 2001 (discussed below). The Symposium by UNHCR et al. (2006) came shortly after Myers' 214-page study on 'environmental refugees' in 1995. Myers' extensive report, published by the Climate Institute, recommended that there needed to be an expanded approach to the international refugee regime to encompass 'environmental refugees'. Myers (1995) argued that a United Nations international conference would be the most effective way of handling

this question of official acceptance for ‘environmental refugees’, and presented such findings to the United Nations Secretariat in 1995. The 1996 Symposium provided an opportunity to develop international mechanisms to officially recognise and protect those displaced from their homes due to environmental stresses. Yet this policy moment came and went, and a five-year lull in action on this issue followed.

‘Moment’ 5: Turn of the century sees contestation over the issue

In 2001, after an interregnum of five years, a UNHCR working paper by academic geographer Richard Black surfaced, entitled ‘Environmental refugees: myth or reality?’. Richard Black had long written on the links between refugees, the environment and development issues (see Black 1994; 1998; 2001; Black and Robinson 1993). In 1998, Black debated the use of the term ‘environmental refugees’, asserting that it was incorrect and misleading. Black (1998: 23) argued that following a review of the existing empirical evidence, there was ‘surprisingly little scientific evidence’ to suggest that the world is ‘filling-up with environmental refugees’. In cases where research projects provided evidence of ‘environmental refugees’, Black (1998: 23) argued that they were ‘methodologically flawed’, in that the evidence provided was often divorced from the economic, political and social contexts, which might also be meaningful causalities for flight. Further, Black (1998) questioned the accuracy and, in some cases, the lack of statistics in the literature on ‘environmental refugees’, such as estimations made by Myers (1987; 1993a; 1994; 1995; 1997) and Westing (1992). According to Black (1998), this inaccuracy resulted from statistics being critically dependent on a formal definition of ‘environmental refugees’. As Black (1998) argued, the process of developing a definition for ‘environmental refugees’ would be impossible and unhelpful, given the multiple and overlapping causes that trigger population displacements. Although Black’s (2001) publication did not represent the official views of UNHCR, its existence did highlight how expert knowledges can be created, applied and influence policy directions of United Nations agencies such as UNHCR on particular issues.

Black (2001) made the case that the concept of ‘environmental refugees’ was a myth, especially given that refugee flight was often multi-faceted. Hence, to single out environmental factors as the causes for refugee flows was to oversimplify the issue as it was not encompassing the complex interactions that cause population displacement:

Although environmental degradation and catastrophe may be important factors in the decision to migrate, and issues of concern in their own right, their conceptualization as a primary cause of forced displacement is unhelpful and unsound intellectually, and unnecessary in practical terms (Black 2001: 1).

In this conceptualisation, environmental factors did not occur in isolation but rather they are intertwined with various other economic, cultural and political factors as causes for 'migration' or 'displacement'. Black (2001) reviewed eleven of the major refugee-producing incidences during the 1990s, many of them about the control of scarce resources, particularly oil reserves in Sudan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Although environmental factors contributed to refugee flows in these cases, according to Black (2001) such factors were far less important root causes of displacement than political power struggles, civil war and ethnic conflicts, especially in the Great Lakes Region, Somalia and Sierra Leone. Black (2001) concluded that given the lack of empirical evidence, strong linkages between environmental change and human mobility remained to be proven. The resulting social construction was of environmentally-displaced people as *not legitimate refugees*.

Black's proposition was that environmental triggers were not a sole cause for people to seek refuge elsewhere. While it might be that people were displaced for a complex mixture of reasons, ambiguity did not itself deny the possibility that environmental change was a key factor among them. Rather, the net effect of the above argument about identifying clear-cut triggers for displacement was that any further action within the international legal policy arena was unlikely at that time.

'Moment' 6: The lead-up to the United Nations Conference of the Parties meeting in Copenhagen

There was a flurry of activity in relation to the issue of human mobility and environmental change in the lead up to the annual meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP; to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) in December 2009 in Copenhagen³. Focussing on the reports and conferences specifically in relation to COP 15 was that this meeting was considered a critical watershed 'moment' for the international community to agree on the right way forward in terms of dealing with climate change. This way forward

³ Given that the archival search largely happened in 2005, the following conferences and reports have been identified from an Internet search (using Google).

was considered to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to safe levels, avoid committing future generations to a precarious world, and lessen the number of people forced to leave their homes.

During this period, the debate over the issue of displacement due to environmental change shifted in focus to that of climate-related displacement (see Brown 2007; Piguet 2008). An exception to this was the EACH-FOR (2008) project, which examined all types of environmental processes and change as a trigger, whether core or contributing, for population displacement (see Dun and Gemenne 2008; Renaud et al. 2007; Renaud et al. 2011). While funded by the European Union, the EACH-FOR project was developed and implemented by the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS). This first-time global survey of environmental migration in 23 countries developed a series of ‘forced migration’ scenarios, identified direct and indirect contributing factors to forced migration, and developed case studies on links between environmental degradation and migration. Renaud et al. (2011) made the case that there were social, political and economic factors that could influence human mobility, along with environmental change. Building further on this complexity, Renaud et al. (2011) also argued that environmental degradation was a result of deteriorating social, economic and political structures. In response to these complexities, Renaud et al. (2011) developed a decision-making framework for categorising those displaced because of environmental change.

During the same time, UNU-EHS, along with CARE, also released a new report on climate change and displacement (CARE et al. 2009). This report was released prior to a meeting of government officials and other stakeholders in Germany in June 2009 to decide what issues to include in the world’s next climate change agreement, which was hoped to occur at the COP 15 meeting. Funded by UNHCR and the World Bank, this report was released to assist policy makers better understand the issues surrounding ‘climate-related migration and displacement’ as a function of adaptation. Throughout this report, both migration and displacement were used to describe those who will seek shelter in their own countries and cross borders in response to environmental shocks, stresses and change. While this report emphasised the need for people displaced by climate change to be recognised, it interchangeably used the words ‘migration’ and ‘displacement’. This is a key tension. As discussed earlier, migration infers choice whereas displacement infers an element of coercion.

This report and subsequent meeting provides a recent example of policy interventions that promote a range of approaches to governance, yet still beyond an international legal instrument to protect those ‘displaced’ by environmental change. The first approach involved enhancing people’s resilience to the impacts of climate change, especially among vulnerable populations. The goal of such an approach is to reduce the risk of humanitarian disasters and the number of people forced to leave their homes. Two other approaches raised in the report included incorporating ‘migration’ into climate change adaptation, and enhancing legal measures, which incorporate legal issues such as disappearing states and rights for migrants. IOM (2007; 2008a; 2008b) also played a central role in this definitional shift whereby climate-induced displacement is portrayed as an adaptation strategy to climate change.

The lead-up to the COP 15 meeting was that it was to be a pinnacle event in the international climate change negotiations. As is now widely acknowledged, the meeting was a failure in reaching a ‘meaningful agreement’, despite drawing the attention of the international media and community (Farbotko and McGregor 2010: 164). This failure was largely a result of the inability of the meeting to reach agreement on significant cuts in greenhouse gas emissions in the coming years. It would thus seem that the meeting was by default agreeing to the ‘eventual destruction’ of communities around the world, particularly small island states and low-lying areas (Bedford and Bedford 2010: 89). Given this, and following on from the work of United Nations organisations, subsidiary agencies and various NGOs (working in collaboration with the United Nations), it would seem necessary that the meeting should have more closely considered human mobility as a consequence of the increasing changes to the world’s climate.

However, there was only a brief mention and attention given to the issue of human mobility as a result of environmental stresses, especially climate change and associated sea level rise. Contained within the ad hoc working group on long-term cooperative action under the convention, it was stated that the COP:

Invites all Parties... to undertake, inter alia: measures to enhance understanding and cooperation related to national, regional and international climate change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation, where appropriate (UNFCCC COP 15 2009: 2).

Here, there was recognition that a clear link existed between climate change and ‘displacement’, as well as between ‘migration’ and ‘planned relocation’. While these three

distinct categories indicated varying subjectivities and levels of ‘choice’ for those affected vulnerable populations, it was somewhat promising that environmental change was being recognised in the COP agenda as a distinct cause of human mobility. Past international negotiations on climate change have largely focussed their (largely unsuccessful) efforts on mitigation and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Despite this belated recognition, two (of three) categories that the COP has used to describe human mobility due to climate change emphasise a sense of internal resilience. That is, to adapt affected communities must face the reality of migrating (implying a ‘choice’ in leaving one’s home) or plan their relocation (again implying choice, options and diverse livelihood assets and resources). In many ways, such portrayals mirror those from the 1992 UNCED: that those ‘displaced’ must bear the burden of change as *adaptable* subjects.

Broad trends and concluding remarks

This article has presented a selected historical review of policy documents and reports to unpack different textual descriptions of human mobility as a consequence of environmental change. This analysis was based on key ‘moments’ when United Nations agencies described those who become mobile due to environmental change, producing a particular mix of subject categories. Across these ‘moments’, certain subject categories resulted, depicting these mobile subjects and their behaviours in ways seeking to prompt particular kinds of policy responses. Textual descriptions of people displaced by environmental change draw on how natural processes, event and disasters are perceived and interpreted (Castree 2005). Interpretations of ‘nature’ and processes of environmental change, which are made in these policy texts by the United Nations and subsidiary agencies, influences how these populations are subjectified and in turn shape the policy landscape.

Perceived distinctions between acute and gradual environmental processes and catastrophes have heavily influenced the varying portrayals of human mobility due to such change. Those displaced as a result of acute environmental disruptions tended to be constructed as *temporary victims and aggravators*. Although the movement of people following such acute, short-term environmental change may call for an immediate emergency response from the United Nations and others, it has not resulted in the development of institutionalised protection framework. Those affected by these changes were seen to be so only temporarily.

Similarly, how slow-onset environmental processes and change have been interpreted in texts has determined how those affected by such change have been subjectified. The response towards such people has warranted a less reactive and immediate response, in comparison to those affected by acute environmental catastrophes. This has been a consequence of the ways in which the varying constructions of those 'displaced' by slow-onset environmental change have interplayed with each other, and cumulatively obviated the requirement for decisive multilateral action. In the 'moments' of policy discourse, those 'displaced' from gradual environmental change were at times constructed as *perpetrators*, which served to lay blame and responsibility on those 'displaced'. At other times, those 'displaced' were constructed as *adaptable* subjects, again placing the onus of responsibility onto those 'displaced' to manage their predicament; or again, as *internally resettled victims* where governments at the scale of the nation-state are charged to assist and protect those 'displaced'. Cumulatively, these textual descriptions have obfuscated any potential momentum for international policy on this issue.

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