



Climate Refugees: Human Insecurity in a Warming World

Steve Trent

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Climate refugees – those forced from their homes due to the impacts of a warming world – are living proof of the international community’s failure to prevent climate change. International coordinated action is urgently required to forge a protective framework for increasingly vulnerable populations.

In the last six years, 140 million people – some two per cent of the Earth’s population – have been **displaced** by weather-related disasters alone. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) **highlights** that climate-induced displacement presents a global-scale, long-term threat to human security. A new report from the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) meanwhile, **argues** that current global governance on climate change and displacement fails to mitigate serious threats to human security in some of the most deprived regions of the world.

Asymmetric impacts, global concern

The degradation of the natural environment as a result of climate change undermines the social, economic and political support structures which all human communities rely on but disproportionately affects the world’s most vulnerable and marginalised populations. The worst-affected countries and populations within countries also tend to be those least responsible, historically, for the carbon-intensive global economy which fuels the climate crisis.

The threat that climate change presents to human security is not only related to the dramatic impacts accompanying and following rapid-onset disasters. Slow-

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onset processes of change such as rainfall variability can **erode** household-level resilience – the ability to absorb and respond to stressors – by degrading and reducing access to physical, financial, social, political and natural capitals. This is why, for poor and marginalised households, negative impacts which unfold over time can lead to a downward spiraling of livelihood insecurity.

Although both the sequencing and geography of climate change impacts and their effect on ecological, social, economic and political systems are critical determinants of vulnerability, their intensity is not. Even in response to steady changes in natural systems, social systems can rupture and shift dramatically. This shifting can ‘**downgrade**’ entire systems – causing changes to cascade through systems across scales and fundamentally reconfiguring both the system and its resilience to future stress. This capacity for abrupt change to transfer across scales means that the negative impacts which climate change has on human security are a global concern.

Demographic changes, particularly those resulting from overpopulation and large-scale, unplanned movements of people, can further undermine the coping capacity of social-ecological systems. In this sense, population displacement can be both a cause and result of human insecurity linked to climate change. The distinct patterns of displacement that are associated with climate change unfold over different timescales, requiring different policy and programmatic interventions, which exacerbates the challenge to decision-makers.

 Aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban, Philippines

Aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban, Philippines. Source: [Wikimedia](#)

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Looking at vulnerability by ecological zone, employing disaster risk reduction technologies and mainstreaming climate change adaptation can all assist in alleviating climate-induced displacement. But at the same time, rights-based standards and instruments are urgently required to define the obligations of states, ensure sufficient resourcing and enshrine the entitlement of affected populations to move safely, positively and with dignity. Upon examining the various legal and policy frameworks currently governing climate-induced displacement at the international level, it becomes apparent that the ‘protection gap’ is more like a series of holes. This suggests the need for a new global framework which is broad in scope and sensitive to the needs of multiple populations of concern.

One of the key gaps is the inadequate assistance provided to displaced populations in the aftermath of extreme climatic events. Absence of sufficient support leaves the worst affected unable to recover and increases their vulnerability to future threats. Six months after Typhoon Haiyan which hit southeast Asia in November 2013, two million people remained without shelter and exposed to another typhoon season. The 140.5 million people worldwide displaced by climate-related disasters since 2008 indicate the scale of this challenge. With projections pointing to increases in the frequency and magnitude of future extreme weather events, the number in need of assistance is expected to soar.

The international community also fails to safeguard those fleeing gradual changes such as rainfall variability and saltwater intrusion. Research shows that slow-onset changes are significant drivers of permanent out-migration – one recent study estimates that an additional 2°C rise in temperatures could force up to 5% of Indonesia’s population (12.4 million) to migrate by the end of

the century. When people move across borders to cope with environmental change – whether to seek employment or as an act of desperation – international governance systems fail to recognise the key climatic driver of their movement. The hundreds of thousands of Somalis who fled into Kenya in 2011 were unique in being granted *prima facie* refugee status by the UN's refugee agency – even though many were escaping from drought and not conflict or persecution. Failing to recognise the problem makes it very hard to build fair and equitable solutions.

Planned or assisted relocation and resettlement also represents a significant protection gap. Vietnam, Mozambique, the US, China, Papua New Guinea and several small island states are a few of the countries currently implementing relocation and resettlement programmes. However, these are undertaken in the absence of rights-based standards. This can make marginalised populations on the fringes of society vulnerable to a whole host of new pressures and abuses. In Vietnam and Mozambique, ill-conceived and poorly executed has destroyed livelihoods, raised unemployment, increased debt and removed access to basic infrastructure.

The starkest protection gap is for 'sinking island' states. Around 40 small island states are **considered** to be at serious risk from climate change, with the 574,000 inhabitants of the lowest-lying islands of the Maldives, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands and Kiribati facing the biggest threats. The submersion or climate-induced collapse of a state has significant implications for human rights, national security and legal sovereignty. Whole populations will be rendered 'stateless' – with no territory of their own and no right to be admitted into other countries.

 Sign on display in Philippines following Typhoon Hayan

Sign on display in 2013 following Typhoon Haiyan. Source: [Flickr](#) | [European Commission DG ECHO](#)

A new legal environment

A crucial first step for the international community is to continue to interrogate the relationship between climate change, human insecurity and population displacement. In particular, legally-worded, rights-based definitions to describe climate-induced displacement should be the starting point to seal the cracks in global governance frameworks.

Many have suggested using the 1951 Refugee Convention to extend protection to those displaced by the effects of climate change. There are a myriad of reasons why this is not practical or desirable but the strongest one is perhaps the fact that renegotiating or amending the 1951 Convention may undermine existing protections for those fleeing conflict and persecution by allowing countries to pull out of what many already consider to be a burdensome agreement. From the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement to the international laws on statelessness, there are various other legal instruments which some have thought might apply to climate-induced displacement. All however, lack the specificity to provide sufficiently strong protection to those affected by different types of climate-induced displacement.

The current preferred approach of several international organisations working under the Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility – which includes the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) among others – is to [integrate](#) population mobility into country-level climate change adaptation plans. This approach has the benefit of greater uptake from states and

bespoke support tailored to fit the specific needs of different populations in different areas, but it fails to define collective obligations which commit states to upholding rights-based standards.

A stronger approach may arise out of a global climate treaty under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Previous agreements from 2010 and 2012 already feature significant articles on climate-induced migration, displacement and resettlement. A draft negotiating text at the December 2014 Conference of Parties (COP) in Lima included a provision via the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage for a “climate change displacement coordination facility” to provide assistance and relief. A global agreement – or at the very least a series of overlapping regional agreements – is likely the only way to guarantee that climate refugees receive the protection and assistance that they deserve.

Those advocating for new global frameworks are looking ahead to 2015, when crucial climate negotiations in Paris as well as the development of a post-2015 disaster risk reduction agreement to replace the Hyogo Framework for Action, may well define future global processes to address climate-induced displacement. This year will also see the Nansen Initiative – a state-led consultative process – have its final, global consultation on the development of a protection agenda for persons displaced across borders by climate change.

A concerted international effort, beginning now, can seal the cracks in global governance frameworks, enabling people to better cope with and adapt to climate change and – where necessary – relocate safely, positively and with dignity.

Steve Trent (@steventrent) is Executive Director at Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) with over 25 years experience in human rights and environmental advocacy, investigations and project management.

Featured Image: Dwellings in Manila, Philippines face large waves produced by Typhoon Kiko in 2009. Source: Flickr | Global Water Partnership (Cropped from original)

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Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
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