

Migration

Numbers of refugees could be about to increase dramatically over coming years as a direct result of the way that the rich global elite lead their lives. Global warming, more than war or political upheaval, stands to displace many millions of people. And climate change is being driven by the fossil-fuel-intensive lifestyles that we enjoy so much.

Environmental refugees are already with us. They are people who have been forced to flee their homes and even cross borders primarily because of environmental factors such as extreme weather events, drought, and desertification. There are probably more of them already than their 'political' counterparts – 25 million environmental refugees in the mid-1990s, according to Oxford academic Norman Myers, compared to around 22 million conventional refugees at the same time. By 2050, mostly due to the likely effects of global warming, there could be over 150 million.

The effects of this scale of population movements will be highly destabilising to the global community unless they are carefully managed. Without action, the countries least responsible for creating the problem – poor developing nations who already are the major recipients of refugee flows – stand to carry the largest share of additional costs associated with environmental refugees. For example, as a consequence of global warming, Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, expects to have around 20 million such environmental refugees in the coming years.

People can claim refugee status where persecutory action by states leads to the oppression of individuals. And the environment can be used as a tool to harm, as is the case when communities are the victims of deliberately flooded valleys, of relocation to marginal unproductive land or of the destruction of livelihoods through deforestation. Policies that either fail to abate, or worsen, global warming could fall into the category of 'environmental persecution'. It might, therefore, be possible to protect environmental refugees under a reinterpretation of existing international law.

Although they do not confer any legal status, the UN's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are a widely used tool that consolidates existing principles of human rights and international humanitarian and refugee law. It then applies these principles to the needs of people forced to leave their homes but remaining within their countries of origin – including as a result of natural or human-made disasters such as climate change. But, in certain circumstances, however, the suggestion that the solution must lie purely at the national level could be absurd,

for example, when the national level is under water. At least five small island states are at risk of ceasing to exist due to predicted sea level rises. In Africa it is the impact on farming that could force people to leave their homelands. Although Africa's farmers have proved skilled at adapting to changing rainfall patterns over decades, global warming threatens to stretch coping mechanisms beyond breaking point. Large-scale population movements already occur due to droughts and floods; as these worsen more people are set to become both internally displaced and to flee across borders.

Sea-level rise in the range expected by the IPCC would devastate the Maldives. Up to 10 million people could be displaced in the Philippines, millions more in Cambodia, Thailand, Egypt, China, and across Latin America. If the flow of the Nile reduces (and sea levels rise), the most densely populated part of Africa will be hugely disrupted – affecting an estimated 66 million people (2002) projected to rise to nearly 90 million by 2015, nearly all living along the banks of the Nile.

Creating new legal obligations for states to accept environmental refugees would be one way to ensure that industrialised countries accept the unintended consequences of their fossil-fuel-intensive lifestyle choices.

Just as the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention provides protection for people fleeing persecution, a new international treaty could address the current gap in the international legal system by conferring special status and rights on environmental refugees, forced to flee their country where it cannot meet their needs due to the scale of climate change impacts.

Numerous poor countries already cannot afford to meet the basic needs of their people. Without status, environmental refugees could be condemned by a global problem to a national economic and geographical lottery, and to the patchwork availability of resources and the application of immigration policies. There is a wide acceptance that current national policies would not be remotely capable of handling the scale of the problem. Environmental refugees need recognising, and the problem needs managing before it manages us.



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