

CLIMATE CHANGE FUELS FORCED MIGRATION

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In 1948, in the wake of the carnage of World War II, the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) were responding to a human tragedy that had already happened. With climate change "we are... looking at a human rights tragedy in the making" (UNDP, 2007). Projections of the effects of climate change in this century differ, but in every scenario sea levels rise and the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events will increase. The "gravest effects of climate change... [will be] human migration as millions will be displaced" (IPCC, 1990). According to the UNHCR, all people ought to be able to live safely and securely in their country of origin. However, for an increasing number of people in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), living in their country of origin will not be possible when the land in question is submerged under water.

With climate change there is an obvious inverse correlation between those that are effecting the change and those that are affected by it. In Oceania this relationship is particularly dramatic. With unparalleled biological and cultural diversity, the low-lying atolls in the South Pacific Ocean serve as an exemplar of the effects of climate change. Within Oceania there are 22 island states which contain the world's highest proportion of endemic species per unit of land area and over 600 distinct languages. With a combined population of approximately 10 million people these island states contribute only minimally to global emissions, although they are recognized by the IPCC as among the most vulnerable to climate change impacts.

In 2005 the Papua New Guinean (PNG) government authorized evacuation of

the small atoll of Carteret (Kilinailau), making these islanders among the first conclusively climate-forced migrants - and harbingers of what is to come. These islanders, with few cars and no electricity, have themselves contributed little to the environmental pollution which is causing climate change. Nevertheless, current estimates suggest that by 2015 the Carteret Islands could be largely submerged and entirely uninhabitable. With a total land area of 0.6 square kilometers and a maximum elevation of 1.2 meters above sea level, it is simple to understand how profound a rise in sea-level is for these islanders and their island.

These Carteret migrants are currently in the process of relocating within PNG, an already economically and ecologically fragile region; the Economist Intelligence Unit has repeatedly designated the capital of PNG the

least livable city in the world, making it a less than ideal site for relocating forced migrants. Faced with the prospect of leaving their homes, their livelihoods and their communities, many are also concerned about the civil unrest that has plagued PNG and problems that are familiar to most migrants: inadequate sanitation and health-care, poor assimilation within

the host country, xenophobia and lack of viable job prospects. All of these factors make PNG a less than ideal site for relocating forced migrants, and this response a less than ideal solution to the effects of climate change.

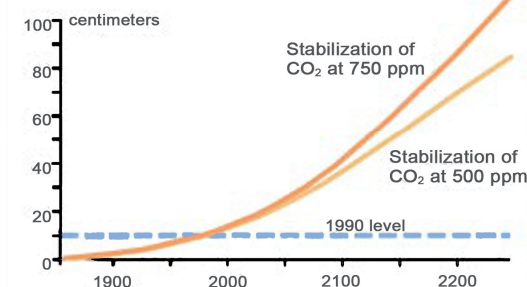
The forced migrants of the Carteret Islands are not alone; the people of Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia are also threatened, as much of their land mass is situated only meters above sea level. In direct contrast to other varieties of refugees, repatriation is not an option for climate migrants; SIDS are in danger of becoming states without nations.

Suggestions

Crucially, the division of rights and responsibilities for dealing with this crisis is unequal. At present there is an irreplaceable opportunity for policy makers to redefine priorities and put significant programs into action. Developed countries hold the burden of responsibility for the climate change problem, and concurrently possess the financial resources and technological capabilities to initiate meaningful responses to mitigate the problems. Social justice and respect for human rights demand

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Global sea-level rise, estimated and predicted



Source: AAAS

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that they do so.

To begin with, a systematic determination must be undertaken of areas where prevention, mitigation, or relocation would be most effective. Once assessed, policies and funding should reflect the most pragmatic approach to dealing with the effects of climate change. Climate change problems, and the responses to them, have the potential to exacerbate already-existing social inequities and it is therefore imperative to use a human rights-based approach which would by design address these equity issues.

Prevention, Mitigation and Adaptation

Halting climate change is a staggering task, but the root of the forced migrant issue is prevention. To deal with prevention in a more substantive way will require countries to adopt policies that deal with reducing global greenhouse gas emissions. Eventually these measures could obviate the need for relocation. Mitigation and complementary planned adaptation to protect against the impacts of climate change would also demonstrate that developed countries are taking the lead in modifying longer-term trends in anthropogenic emissions.

Relocation

Sadly, there is no denying that forced migration for many populations within the SIDS is inevitable. However, working collectively to prevent the most dire predictions from becoming actualities should not be beyond the scope of the international community. The international community needs to formally acknowledge the plight of climate migrants by either expanding the definition of refugee to encompass environmentally-driven migrants or creating a new legal framework to appropriately address their refugee status. Once assessed and legally recognized, climate migrant relocation needs to be systematic, well defined and not on an ad hoc basis. Immigration, although not the optimal choice for either the migrants or host countries, must be treated as a necessary policy option which deserves careful advance planning.

The most pressing challenge of population relocation is to find an equitable distribution of responsibilities and rights and not to al-

low these burdens to be borne by countries that are least equipped to absorb refugees. Greenhouse gas emitters should take an allocation of climate migrants in proportion to their emissions. Among Pacific states, Australia accounts for 0.03% of the world's population, but emits ~1.2% of the global greenhouse gases. If Australia were to absorb migrants on a proportional basis, as Andrew Bartlett of the Australian Democrats suggested, "it should be considered directly responsible for roughly 1.2 to 2.4 million people displaced because of climate change". At present, Tuvalu, one of the SIDS most vulnerable areas to complete submersion and forced relocation, has twice appealed to the Australian government for help in their relocation process and has twice been denied.

Conclusion

In situations where a state is aware of a threat to human rights, regardless of the cause, it has a positive obligation to act because state inaction would exacerbate the situation. This is particularly significant in the climate change context because of the strong causal connection between the activities (or lack thereof) of state and internal actors who have emitted greenhouse gases and the diminution of human rights. With over 40% of the world's population (~2.5 billion people) currently living within 150 kilometers of a coastline, we have a positive obligation to respond to the impacts of climate change. We cannot allow this tragedy to unfold. Doing so would represent "a systematic violation of the human rights of the poor and of future generations" (UNDP, 2007).

The current trajectory of global greenhouse gas emissions is dangerous and ultimately unsustainable. As we move forward our actions should be rooted in upholding the integrity of past human rights commitments, marked by meaningful international collaboration and accountability of gas-emitting nations for climate change problems. Appeals to pragmatism, compassion, and justice will show that no country will be immune to the consequences of climate change

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