

# Taking Lessons from Refugees in Europe to Prepare for Climate Migrants and Exiles

Sujatha Byravan and Sudhir Chella Rajan

## ABSTRACT

With millions of refugees pouring into countries in Europe, renewed attention is being paid to those who are displaced. This article combines some of the current lessons learned from Europe with previous studies on migration related to climate change and provides recommendations to be included in policy. Preparation in advance, regional agreements, and mechanisms for better integration of those who are displaced are highlighted.

**Keywords:** refugees, climate exiles, climate change, migration

## INTRODUCTION

**M**ORE THAN A MILLION REFUGEES from various countries reached the European shores outside of legal immigration processes in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Often referred to as irregular migrants, their numbers represented a fourfold increase over that in the previous year. Civil war, internal conflict, and repression were the main reasons generally reported by those who came from Syria, Turkey, Afghanistan, Jordan, Somalia, and other countries in the Near East. According to the International Organization on Migration, people are mostly crossing the Mediterranean and then entering Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, or Spain. Despite this increase in refugees and the media reports, it is important to note that the top hosts for refugees worldwide are outside Europe, namely, Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Islamic Republic of Iran, Ethiopia, and Jordan.

War, political and economic instability, and repression are the main motivations for individuals and families to migrate. When people migrate across national borders and seek protection from persecution, they are referred to as refugees. Sometimes natural disasters such as severe

drought or floods also result in human displacement. People sometimes move in anticipation of a severe threat to their well-being and forms of livelihood, or they may be forced by events to move within their own country or across borders. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates the number of people forcibly displaced at the end of 2014 to be close to 60 million compared to 51.2 million the year before.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, the number of such migrants increased to 65.3 million.<sup>3</sup> Among the tens of millions displaced in 2015, 21.3 million were refugees, 40.8 million were internally displaced, and 3.2 million were asylum seekers. Based on the UN Refugee agency's report, 10 million people were stateless by the end of 2015.

This context of contemporary refugee movements is useful in considering policy options under global climate change. Estimates vary as to how in-country and cross-border migration might increase as a result of the impacts of global warming, but there is general consensus that at least tens of millions living on small islands and in delta regions could be forced to leave their homes permanently as a result of sea-level rise (SLR) around the middle of the century, if not sooner. These people do not currently have protection under international law, except perhaps loosely under the Human Rights covenants.

Under the Refugee Convention, which came into force in 1954, a refugee is someone who is "unable [or

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<sup>1</sup><<https://www.iom.int/news/irregular-migrant-refugee-arrivals-europe-top-one-million-2015-iom>> (Last accessed on July 21, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>"Global Trends, Forced Displacement in 2014" (UNHCR, 2015).

<sup>3</sup>"Global Trends, Forced Displacement in 2015" (UNHCR, 2016).

unwilling to avail himself of the protection” of his or her country of nationality and is outside that country “owing to well-grounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.” This definition is exclusive to persecution and is therefore not designed to protect those who are displaced as a result of environmental and climate-related disasters such as floods, droughts, or SLR. The victims of environmental or climate change cannot therefore be referred to as “refugees” since the term is reserved for those protected under the Convention.

In this article, we hope to highlight these concerns as problems of environmental justice that arise not just from the inequitable distribution of environmental ills and benefits but also primarily from institutional gaps that fail to address the profound social exclusion experienced by large groups of people as a result of global environmental phenomena to which they have barely contributed.<sup>4</sup> In the discussion that follows, we propose some general strategies for mitigating these forms of harm, which have hitherto taken a backseat in global climate change negotiations.

## DISCUSSION

When people decide to move, or are forced to do so, their motivations may be quite varied. According to some scholars, these could be a composite of environmental, social, economic, political, and demographic factors.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, whether members of families or whole communities migrate or flee for their lives, their reasons for doing so do not typically fall into neat categories. Sometimes, a combination of “push” and “pull” conditions, involving social networks and opportunities for employment elsewhere, may unleash the desire to move either temporarily or permanently. Climate change may be related to these reasons, but often not directly. For example, climate change in one country may lead to food shortages, causing famine, which may then generate conflict, resulting in migration. Elsewhere, climate change impacts along with poor development strategies may lead to loss in local ecosystem services leading to an increase in poverty and loss of livelihoods, which may then cause migration. In yet another part of the world, the same changes may not result in migration because of government support programs or better disaster preparedness by the local community. Or perhaps early warning systems are better in yet another place and extreme events do not have the harsh effects they otherwise might, implying less pressure to move.

Overall, these scenarios indicate that climate change may not always manifest itself as an immediate driver of migration. Therefore, local communities and policymakers may not identify climate change specifically as the reason for either voluntary movement or forced displacement.

<sup>4</sup>David Schlosberg, “Reconceiving Environmental Justice: Global Movements and Political Theories,” *Environmental Politics* 13 (2004): 517–540.

<sup>5</sup>“Foresight: Migration and Global Environmental Change,” Project Report, The Government Office for Science, London; 2011.

Thus, the specific roles of local and global environmental change in migration may not always be easy to determine and many studies continue to emphasize this aspect.<sup>6</sup> A second set of problems has to do with attributing particular weather phenomena such as severe storms, heat waves, or drought with climate change. Although it is becoming easier to see a climate change “signature” in some of these events, there are sometimes conflicting interpretations relating to natural climate variability.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, there are certain situations that are far clearer as drivers of forced displacement from climate change. SLR has the potential to exceed 1 m by the end of the century and will undoubtedly force tens of millions to leave small islands and coastal deltas around the world.<sup>8</sup> Since numerous megacities of the world are located near the coast, one could in fact anticipate hundreds of millions being displaced from SLR alone. It is equally plausible that extensive and prolonged drought in certain regions of the world (especially east and southern Africa) will lead to substantial loss in livelihoods for many and force<sup>9</sup> large numbers to move out.

It would therefore be morally indefensible, if not impractical, to ignore climate-related victims, until or unless they become victims of conflict, war, or become destitute, a scenario that is not unimaginable given the range of disasters that may be unleashed from extreme events related to climate change. Since the Refugee Convention does not provide for their protection, the authors of this article have reserved the terms “climate migrants” and “climate exiles” to refer to victims of displacements that are due to climate change. Climate migrants are those who are displaced because of the effects of climate change, seen, for example, in parts of Africa and Asia when there is a drought or severe flooding. On the contrary, climate exiles are a special class of climate migrants who will have lost their ability to remain well-functioning members of political societies in their countries, often through no fault of their own. Examples include people from the Pacific islands, many of whom have been forced to evacuate their island nations, as their lives are no longer viable due to rising seas. Furthermore, while most climate migrants will be internally displaced people, or have the opportunity of returning, climate exiles will be exiled from their nation state and will not be able to return since their nations may no longer be viable.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup>“Addressing Climate Change and Migration in Asia and the Pacific,” Report published by Asian Development Bank; 2012.

<sup>7</sup>Kevin E. Trenberth, John T. Fasullo, and Theodore G. Shepherd, “Attribution of climate extreme events,” *Nature Climate Change* 5 (2015): 725–730.

<sup>8</sup>Benjamin P. Horton, *et al.*, “Expert assessment of sea-level rise by AD 2100 and AD 2300,” *Quaternary Science Reviews* 84 (2014): 1–6.

<sup>9</sup>Kevin E. Trenberth, Aiguo Dai, Gerard van der Schrier, Philip D. Jones, Jonathan Barichivich, Keith R. Briffa, and Justin Sheffield, “Global warming and changes in drought,” *Nature Climate Change* 4 (2014): 17–22.

<sup>10</sup>Sujatha Byravan and Sudhir Chella Rajan, “The Ethical Implications of Sea-Level Rise Due to Climate Change,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 24 (2010): 239–260.

Specific features of climate science are important in considerations of justice. These are (1) disproportionate accumulation, (2) delayed effects, and (3) asymmetrical impacts. The first refers to the fact that rich countries are responsible for the bulk of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the atmosphere. Delayed effects are because the earth's systems respond slowly to increasing emissions and manifest their effects slowly, over hundreds of years or longer. Thus, we are committed to a certain degree of warming because of emissions that have already been released into the atmosphere. "Asymmetrical impacts" refer to the fact that the poor, especially those in developing countries and the least developed countries, will experience very severe consequences from climate change. One reason for this is their geographical location—their location in the tropics where the effects of warming are expected to be severe. Other reasons are their lack of capacity, poverty, weak institutions, and social and economic structures to protect themselves from the effects of warming. For example, Bangladesh is a country experiencing severe effects of SLR along with economic and institutional challenges.

Climate exiles displaced from small islands belong to a category that we believe deserves special attention and support. While the IPCC's Assessment Report-5 indicates that we need to prepare for about 0.8–1.2m of SLR, studies by glaciologists suggest that the world should anticipate higher levels of SLR. Climate scientist Jim Hansen and his colleagues using climate simulations, paleoclimate data, and modern observations suggest that the world should be prepared for several meters of SLR between the next 50–150 years.<sup>11</sup> Over 2 million people live on small islands in the Indian, Pacific, and Caribbean oceans and are at risk from SLR. Many of these islands such as Tuvalu, Fiji, Samoa, and the Maldives are just a few feet above sea level. They are already experiencing salt-water intrusion, severe storms, erosion, flooding, and related hardships from rising seas. People living on such small islands will therefore become climate exiles.

Hundreds of millions of people across the world live along the coast and in the delta regions of major rivers such as the Ganges and the Irrawaddy. They too are vulnerable to the effects of rising seas, even though subsidence of land from human activity also contributes to the problem. Those living in large countries such as India could move inland. In the case of a few countries, such as Bangladesh, a large proportion (more than a third) of the country lies in the low-elevation coastal zone, an area contiguous with the ocean and at less than 10 m elevation. In such cases, a large number of people may be expected to move inland and also to neighboring countries.

The absence of a mechanism under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process to comprehensively address forced displacement

from human-induced climate change for the world's most vulnerable developing countries has been a gaping hole in the international climate change regime. At the Conference of Parties (COP) in Cancun in 2010, the concept of loss and damage was first introduced. The term has been defined as "the actual and/or potential manifestation of impacts associated with climate change in developing countries that negatively affect human and natural systems." This was further strengthened in COP-19 in 2013 as the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) for Loss and Damage, which was intended to improve understanding, strengthen dialogue, and build capacity for addressing loss and damage from extreme events, as well as slow-onset events associated with climate change. In the Paris Agreement in 2015, the WIM was reaffirmed, with the creation of a special task force on displacement.<sup>12</sup>

While this may present new opportunities in the future for small islands and other developing countries that will experience severe destruction as a result of warming, it is not clear exactly how this policy will lead to changes regarding migration related to climate change and whether it will provide the much needed legal protection to people forcibly displaced by climate change. Poor countries and those already suffering or expected to suffer loss and damage have been pushing for interpretation of the principles of this concept and a better understanding of their implications along with the notion of compensation, which is considered an important aspect of Loss and Damage.

## CONCLUSIONS

A number of helpful lessons have emerged from studying processes that work in the integration of refugees in the recent European refugee crisis.<sup>13</sup> We reviewed some of the recent positive experiences from Portugal and Sweden. Combining them with lessons and insights from previous studies on issues related to climate change and migration, one could develop a number of processes by which countries and regions could prepare for displacement due to environmental change that includes climate change. These could be applied to challenges in various parts of the world where displacement from climate change is projected to be severe. These areas would include low-lying delta regions of the world that are vulnerable to SLR; areas subject to severe droughts as patterns of precipitation and heat waves intensify; and riverine and coastal areas that would be subject to the effects of erosion, flooding, and severe storms. Potential policy considerations and a few recommendations are discussed below:

<sup>11</sup>James Hansen *et al.*, "Ice melt, sea level rise and superstorms: evidence from paleoclimate data, climate modeling, and modern observations that 2°C global warming is highly dangerous," *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics* 16 (2016): 3761–3812.

<sup>12</sup>Huq Saleemul and Roger-Mark De Souza, "Climate Compensation: How Loss and Damage Fared in the Paris Agreement," *New Security Beat* (Jan 2016). <<https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2016/01/loss-damage-fared-paris-agreement/>>. (Last accessed on August 24, 2016).

<sup>13</sup>International Organization for Migration, "Migration Policy and Practice" (Vol. VI), (April–May 2016).

1. Regional treaties, including joint labor policies, and phased migration on a temporary and permanent basis when it becomes necessary, in advance of actual adverse effects of climate, would contribute to allaying fears of a sudden and large refugee influx. This would also help countries that are part of the treaty to build labor-related agreements, for industry and their programs in the area. Labor market dimensions should be part of the considerations for the regional agreements. For example, we know that hundreds of millions of people are vulnerable to SLR in Bangladesh. Instead of treating the situation simply as a security threat, India and Bangladesh could be part of an agreement in which the parties begin to prepare for migration in the region. Planning by both countries in advance may be an advantage to both of them in light of the predicted SLR and given that people are already experiencing changes. Portugal went so far as to outline the role of each relevant ministry in its strategic plan for migration. Such detailed planning for the medium term could be very useful in regions especially vulnerable to climate change.
2. Integration of those who migrate needs to be viewed as a long-term and slow process that requires different integration measures, including social, cultural, and livelihood security for those who are displaced, so they feel secure and can contribute to societies they move into. These measures should begin early, even before a family or person is displaced. Social networks, local support, and skill training in advance of displacement would all result in contributing to easier integration in the long term. Successful approaches and models need to be identified and scaled up. Strengthening intercultural awareness and bonds is useful as is coordination among the various government and public actors involved in the integration processes.
3. The Nansen Initiative of Climate Change and Displacement was set up by Norway and Switzerland to develop a coherent approach to protecting people displaced across borders as a result of disasters and climate change. It is a bottom-up, state-led consultative process, which includes multiple stakeholders. There have been regional meetings and workshops with government and other agencies on the need for legislation, policies, and institutions that can address displacement. Such initiatives need to be supported by governments and civil society organizations.
4. Given that the Refugee Convention does not provide legal standing to those affected by climate change, there have been discussions among different groups on the requirement for a legal resolution to this question. Some scholars have called for a protocol under the UNFCCC that would specifically address the issue of migration due to climate change. If

present commitments in the Paris Agreement to addressing forced displacement under the WIM are followed through, then a difficult political negotiation will have to begin, with the goal of providing climate exiles, especially those from small islands, the legal option of moving to a country of their choice, particularly in Annex-1 countries. The tens of millions of people living on small islands could be absorbed within the existing quota of legal immigrants in the United States and European Union.<sup>14</sup>

5. There are already some regional agreements that address migration; for example, the Cartagena Declaration in Latin America and the Kampala Convention for Africa. Parts of Asia, including South East and South Asia, are very vulnerable to the effects of warming and these countries need to begin considering systematic ways in which they could work together on climate change, including the issue of migration. Moreover, these frameworks should allow for the most vulnerable populations to move to safer areas in advance of an actual disaster. It is likely that such regional policies to manage migration may be the most useful ways to plan in advance and even change a perceived security threat into an opportunity.

Such agreements and treaties among neighbors and within the international community will surely be challenging to initiate and implement. Accepting responsibility and absorbing refugees into societies pose numerous challenges related to limited resources and jobs, cultural challenges integrating new migrants, and the difficulty of collaboration among nations that may have been at war for long periods of time.

Nevertheless, the alternative of ignoring the problem is no longer an option, given the current and predicted levels of GHGs. This means that we have to prepare in advance to live in a world that is 2°C–3°C warmer with accompanying effects on ecosystems, biodiversity, and human migration.

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No competing financial interests exist.

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<sup>14</sup>Sujatha Byravan, and Sudhir Chella Rajan, "Providing new homes for climate change exiles." *Climate Policy* 6 (2006): 247–252.