



## ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND MIGRATION: THE MAXIMALISTS AND MINIMALISTS

Dr. Mothi George, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Government College, Ambalapuzha, Kerala, India.

[mothig@gmail.com](mailto:mothig@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*It is argued that Environmental degradation will produce thousands of environmental refugees moving across borders destabilizing domestic order and international stability. Two separate and opposing views have emerged concerning environmental change and population movements. From a long-term perspective, attention must be paid to the root causes and remedies for environmental degradation.*

Key Words: Environmental degradation, environmental refugees, Maximalists, Minimalists

### Introduction

There is a credible fear that environmental degradation will produce thousands of environmental refugees moving across borders destabilizing domestic order and international stability (Homer-Dixon 1991:77). Africa is often cited as the most vulnerable area, as desertification displaces millions of people and results in long-term brutal and vicious social conflict and violence. (Bennett 1991). Desertification, land degradation, rise in sea levels caused by global warming, and deforestation are the common forms of environmental degradation causing complex consequences. Four fragile eco-systems of the world identified by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED 1992) are regions with acute deforestation, desertification, low-lying coastal areas, and disappearing islands. It is a fact that the consequences of environmental change or degradation are mainly felt by poor, agricultural communities whose livelihoods depend mainly on nature. This paper attempts to systematize the links between environmental degradation and migration and tries to check whether there are environmentally displaced migrants.

Two separate and opposing views have emerged concerning environmental change and population movements. One is the minimalist and the other is the maximalist views. The former sees environmental change as a contextual variable that can contribute to migration, but sufficient knowledge is required for drawing definite conclusions while the latter argues that environmental degradation has already displaced millions of people, and more displacement can happen. While environmental factors are of increasing interest little substantial research has been produced on the environmental change as a cause of migration (Kimberly & Kimberly 1991). More is known about the environmental impact of migration. Neo-classical theories deal with economic factors and rational-choice analysis ignoring environmental variables (Todaro 1969, Stark 1991). The same is the case about migration theories of neo-Marxist international political economy (Adler 1977, Portes and Walton 1981). Demographer Graeme Hugo is of the view that Employment-related motives determine how many people move, who moves, where they move from and where they move to (Hugo 1991:28.) Bilsborrow, on the other hand, is of the view that treating the environment as a contextual

factor affects the decision-making process of a would-be migrant. Land degradation can reduce income, frequent flooding brought about by upstream deforestation will make the lives of the people living upstream riskier. He proceeds to give three gives three categories of manifestations. Firstly, environmental change may induce outmigration via income effects, secondly, by risk effects, or by making the environment unpleasant. (Bilsborrow 1991:9-10). So, it is clear that environmental degradation affects the economic, risk, and social setup of the migrant, and the effect may be felt at all levels starting from the individual, the community, and the national. With the emergence of climate change, the discussion has shifted to climate change causing migration as examined in a series of contemporary case studies from the developing world Kritz (1990). She observes it is difficult to demonstrate and conclude that climate change is a primary reason for migration. The rural population uses migration as one of the several coping strategies to deal with poverty which is caused by a combination of social, economic, and political conditions. The Dust Bowl in the United States is a good example of the effect of climate on migration. There is a view that is emerging the effect of climate on population movements has been reduced over time due to government or policy intervention. Since the ability to reduce the climate impact depends mainly on wealth distribution, poor countries are more vulnerable than the rich. (NAS 1991).

### **Minimalist View**

The minimalists mainly focus on the impact of particular issues like land degradation, deforestation, or changing climate on migration. Since the migration, like all other social processes, is not a universal phenomenon, the minimalist side takes the analysis towards a different perspective meaning environmental degradation by itself is not an important cause of migration and adds further that quantification and is very difficult. The maximalists, on the other hand, single out the environmental variable from a group of causes and determine the associated out-migration as a direct result of environmental degradation. The writings of environmental analysts like El-

Hinnawi (1985), Jacobson (1988), Tuchman Mathews (1989), Myers (1991), give weight to such an analysis. the concept of Environmental Refugees was a contribution of the maximalists. In a study for United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1985, El-Hinnawi argues that "all displaced people can be described as environmental refugees, having been forced to leave their original habitat or having left voluntarily, to protect themselves from harm and or to seek a better quality of life". He gave three subcategories of environmental refugees: 1) those who temporarily have to leave their traditional habitat due to a natural disaster or similar event 2) those who have been permanently displaced and resettled in a new area and 3) those who migrate on their own. The idea captured the imagination of the general public and achieved wide popularity with the arrival of Jodi Jacobson's paper on environmental refugees by the World watch Institute in 1988. her analysis on a very general idea of refugees as people fleeing from environmental decline and making no distinction between internally and internationally displaced persons the analysis further moved the debate forward by identifying major types of unnatural disasters and the resultant displacement of people, in the case of floods, droughts, toxification, deforestation, and rising sea levels.

### **The Maximalist View**

The maximalists take out the environmental variable from a cluster of causes and give the related out-migration as a direct result of environmental degradation. Policy perspective, the categorizations were so broad institutions and relief measures relevant to industrial pollution in the developed countries were hardly applicable to peasants displaced by floods in developing countries or driven by famine across international borders in Africa. Unable to gather social scientific interest, the scholarly discourse on environmental refugees nearly lost its way. So, it is essential to transcend the dichotomy between minimalists and maximalists by anchoring the analysis of causes in the broader development process, and also restoring the distinction between migrants and refugees, thus

infusing some realism in determining the future flows. The two questions to be considered are do environmental degradation cause population displacement, and under what conditions does this lead to acute social conflict. There is a need for more research on how environmental degradation is related to the development process, and how it figures in the causes of migration and the patterns of social conflict which may result. The most relevant forms of environmental degradation can be categorized as air and water pollution, land degradation, deforestation, degradation of specific ecological areas, and impacts of specific development projects. There is a need for more research and study on how environmental degradation is related to the development process, and how it figures in the causes of migration and the patterns of social conflict which may result.

Particular constellations of economic growth with poverty, and demographic growth, created pressures on the environment which translated into a gradation of various kinds. From an analytical as well as a policy perspective, the significance of these underlying factors must be recognized. Environmental degradation affects patterns of resource use and can have the effect of taking poverty into a downward spiral. It may be most useful analytically to consider environmental degradation as one factor in a complex of causes that leads to outmigration. The pull factor will affect the magnitude and direction of outflows, especially in the period before conditions become so bad as to resemble a refugee situation. A distinction between types of outflows is evident. Some environmentally-related migrations are similar to economically motivated migrations in a pull-push model. In other cases, the individuals did not move until the situation reached a point of no return as immediate migration was necessary to survive. The typical cases entailed flight from flood or famine that essentially resembled refugee flows. The common distinction between migrants and refugees which appears in the literature is also relevant in environmentally-related situations. The population flows, those related to environmental change can be divided into reversible and irreversible movements. So far, then, it is difficult to argue that environmental degradation produces

particular forms of outmigration except in one respect, the appearance of distress migrations occasioned by sudden or extreme environmental degradation.

Affected by flood, famine, or the loss of traditional conditions for economic survival, these individuals became in effect environmental refugees. They depend on national or international relief. It may be most useful analytically to consider environmental degradation as one factor in a complex of causes that leads to outmigration. The amount of environmentally related migrations are difficult to estimate or even impossible. When displacement is closely related to a strong environmental change, the numbers can be assessed like displacement due to dam-building or rising sea levels. Where environmental degradation appears as one among several prominent causes of poverty and related migration, the environmental factor is viewed as having a magnifying effect. To characterize general poverty migration as environmental migration seems misleading. It is possible to identify particularly vulnerable ecological and geographic areas where environmental degradation indeed is a prominent and proximate cause of migration. These include areas prone to desertification, the threatened islands, the low-lying coastal areas, and forests with indigenous populations. These become in effect environmental pressure points. Unless remedial measures are taken, outmigration becomes necessary. Several of these pressure points also have very small populations. The low-lying South Pacific islands are inhabited by a small number of people, the indigenous tribes of receding forests have long since been sharply reduced, and large parts of the Sahel are quite thinly populated. The number of people displaced from these areas will therefore be fairly low. Another factor that serves to limit the number of environmental refugees is the gradual nature of the environmental change which gives the relatively more resourceful individuals in the affected populations time to move out and merge in established migration streams. The truly problematic areas are those where fragile environments are inhabited by large and poor populations which engage in civil unrest. By comparison, a single-phenomenon development such as rising sea levels is manageable. It will certainly create problems for the coastal

population, but the country's vast territorial expanse, economic growth, and functioning political system suggest the considerable capacity to deal with the situation even in the absence of international assistance. The results of migration in terms of social or international conflict will also be most severe in these environmental pressure points. If few resources are available to deal with distress migrations, the result can be disorder and social conflict. An urban, elastic economy can accommodate immigration more easily than a resource-poor economy. Whether the flight is sparked by political violence or environmental degradation, two developments typically occur whenever a substantial group appears across the border. Relief and protection are not delivered, as a result of which the refugees die or are pushed back across the border. Or, precisely to prevent social conflict and disorder in the receiving areas, national or international relief is brought in, the condition of weakness, which is inherent in the refugee condition, makes it difficult for the refugees themselves to organize to make demands. While numbers are important here, refugees generally are too weak to be a threat, not to mention an active party to a conflict. A combination of these factors helps to explain why large-scale distress migrations generated by drought and desertification in the Sahel did not visibly destabilize the receiving areas, nor generate acute social conflict. When environmental degradation displaces populations that are politically weak and numerically small, the result is most likely to be structural conflict - silent misery, exploitation, and death. Insofar as the environmental pressure points involve areas inhabited by socially marginal and numerically few people, misery rather than conflict will be the typical result. As the case studies demonstrated, the most depressed and marginalized peoples could not even start a conflict but became the passive object of relief and exploitation. Some groups with a territorial base or strong social structure may resist forcefully. Once uprooted, however, environmental refugees like most other refugees found that displacement meant greater dependency and marginalization. At this point, the role of the state is very crucial. Displaced groups that obtained backing from the state were able to assert themselves more strongly. In all cases, violence followed. The state had several reasons

unrelated to humanitarian concerns for backing a displaced group. And while the support helped the displaced community out of its predicament, this help was typically at the expense of another community, resulting in acute conflict. When environmental degradation displaces populations that are politically weak and numerically small, the result is most likely to be structural conflict - silent misery, exploitation, and death. but only at the expense of African farmers. The Indian state facilitated the registration of illegal immigrants on the voter rolls in Assam, thereby provoking both a nativist movement and ethnic violence. The immediate policy challenge is to transform such situations into a non-zero-sum game. From a longer-term perspective, attention to root causes and remedies for environmental degradation is essential. From this vantage point, it is important to assess the long-term structural tension related to large-scale migration and the social costs of large-scale rural-to-urban migration.

### **Conclusion**

Rapid urbanization and the growth of big cities pose enormous problems all over the developing world. It is an increasingly major challenge for development in the future. It can be concluded that environmental degradation, causes displacement of people, and generate exploitation apart from conflict. Victims of environmental change are the poor and are numerically small. Helping these populations is a humanitarian obligation rather than a government-considered policy.

### **References**

- Adler, Stephen. *International Migration and Dependence*, Westmead: Saxon House, 1977
- Adulavidhaya, Kamphol and Tongroj Onchan. "Migration and Agricultural Development of Thailand: Past and Future," in Philip M. Hauser, et al. *Urbanization and Migration in ASEAN Development*. Tokyo: National Institute for Research Advancement, 1983

Birdsall, Nancy. "Population and Global Warming: Another Look," IESA\P\AC.34\4. U.N. Expert Group Meeting, New York, 20-24 January 1992.

El-Hinnawi, Essam. *Environmental Refugees*. New York: United Nations Development Program, 1985.

Hjort, Anders af Ornas and M.A. Mohamed Salih (eds.). *Ecology and Politics*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1989.

Homer-Dixon, Thomas. "On the Threshold: Environmental Changes as Causes of Acute Conflict," *International Security*, 16:2. 199 1

Girling, John L.S. *Thailand: Society and Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981

Goldstone, Jack A. *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 199 1

Harrell Bond, Barbara. *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986

Hoagland, Sara and Susan Conbere. *Environmental Stress*

and National Security. College Park, MD: Center for Global Change, 199 1

Homer-Dixon, Thomas. "On the Threshold: Environmental Changes as Causes of Acute Conflict," *International Security*, 16:2. 199 1

Kritz, Mary M. "Climate Change and Migration Adaptations," 11 90 Working Paper Series, 2.16. Ithaca: Cornell University, 1990.

National Academy of Sciences (NAS). "Policy Implications of Greenhouse Warming," Report of the Adaptation Panel, prepublication manuscript. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1991

Porter, Gareth, with Delfin J. Ganapin, Jr. *Resources, Population, and the Philippines'Future*. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 1988.

Rangasami, Amrita. "Failure of Exchange Entitlements' Theory of Famine," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XX, No. 42. 19 October 1985

.