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Afterword: What Now? Climate-Induced Displacement after Copenhagen

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I Introduction

The contributions to this book were mainly written during the period of cautious hope in the run-up to the UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen. But by 19 December 2009, any expectations that the world's political leaders would work together to find solutions to the pressing problems of anthropogenic (human-induced) climate change were dashed. The key hope was that leaders would unite to introduce measures to keep global warming at or below an average of 2°C—still a level that would provoke massive changes, but that might give opportunities and time for protective measures. In fact, no binding agreement was reached, and the voluntary commitments which formed the basis of a last-minute face-saving deal seem unlikely to have much effect on global warming. The failure of international action on climate change provides a new and grim context for assessing the complex issues of climate change and displacement addressed in differing ways in this book.

The debate on climate-induced displacement has been a relatively small—if sometimes heated—part of the wider debate on how states, civil society and affected communities should respond to global warming. Advocacy groups sought in vain to include displacement issues in the final agreement of the Copenhagen summit (which never materialised).¹ The wider debate on global warming since the 1990s has revolved around two response paradigms: mitigation and adaptation. *Mitigation* means addressing the causes of global warming—especially the carbon-based economies which produce vast quantities of greenhouse gases. Limiting production of such gases requires major shifts in industrial technologies and lifestyles—not only for existing industrial nations, but also for emerging ones.

¹ C Lawton, 'What about Climate Refugees? Efforts to Help the Displaced Bog Down in Copenhagen', *Spiegel Online* (17 December 2009), www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,druck-667256,00.html.



By 2009, it was already too late to prevent massive climatic changes, but the process could have been slowed. That possibility now appears to be closed off—at least for a period which may well prove decisive.

Adaptation means designing and implementing measures to help communities affected by climatic change to modify the ways they work and live to be able to cope with new environmental conditions. For a long time, adaptation was a strategy treated with suspicion by environmentalists, because it meant conceding that global warming could not be halted. The tension between mitigation and adaptation was also a major factor in the debate between environmentalists, on the one hand, and scholars and advocacy groups concerned with refugees and migration, on the other. The environmentalists tended to portray migration as an inevitable but undesirable form of adaptation for people affected by sea-level rise and other effects of global warming; the migration specialists saw migration as one possible form of adaptation among others, and as a strategy that could often bring considerable benefits.

The failure of Copenhagen was admittedly not an unexpected result, and the authors of this book provide in-depth analyses from a range of perspectives that go beyond the day-to-day politics of international agreements (or rather, disagreements). Nonetheless, the context for assessing climate-induced displacement is different in 2010 than it was in 2009: adaptation is now the only game in town. Mitigation is off the agenda, and if it ever does come back, it may well be too late. This changes the terms of the debate on climate-induced displacement. The aim of this Afterword is, first, to discuss how the politics of climate change displacement have evolved over the last 20 years, and how the frame of reference for this debate has been changed by the Copenhagen debacle. Secondly, it seeks to sum up some key aspects of the current state of knowledge about the causes and consequences of climate-induced displacement. This will allow me to draw attention to some of the important ideas emerging from the various chapters of this book.

II The Politics of Climate Change Displacement

The old debate between environmentalists and migration specialists about the existence of ‘environmental refugees’ and the extent of climate change-induced displacement does not seem worth warming up yet again. It has been analysed repeatedly in the literature, and is covered in some of the contributions to this book.² But the key elements of the politicisation of the issue do need to be mentioned briefly before we can move on.

² Possibly the best account of the politicisation of climate change migration is to be found in F Gemenne, ‘Environmental Changes and Migration Flows: Normative Frameworks and Policy Responses’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris and University of Liège, 2009).



The controversy about the characteristics and the likely extent of climate-induced displacement goes back at least to the mid-1980s. A much-cited paper published by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) argued that large numbers of people, especially in poor countries, would be displaced by environmental change. The author coined (or at least popularised) a term which was to become a core theme of contention: 'environmental refugees'.³ There were two reasons why this concept was so controversial.

The main one was the use of the label 'refugees' for people who moved because of environmental factors. As refugee scholars pointed out, this was a misnomer: in international law, the term 'refugee' refers only to people who have crossed an international border to seek protection from persecution based on a range of factors that are clearly defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention.⁴ Environmental or climate change was not included in the 1951 Convention. This was not hair-splitting: since the 1990s, refugee lawyers and non-governmental organisations have been struggling to ward off restrictions to the right to international protection, especially on the part of European states. Any watering down of the 1951 Convention was seen as a potential threat, since states might use it to reinforce their efforts to keep out asylum seekers. In any case, most people affected by environmental factors such as drought or floods were likely to move internally, not internationally. If they were forced to move, they should be seen as internally displaced persons (IDPs), not refugees.

The second problem with the term 'environmental refugee' related to the environmental part. Migration scholars pointed out that people have migrated for environmental reasons throughout history, and that environmental changes, or livelihood opportunities resulting from environmental differences, could be both negative and positive. In many cases, migration related to environmental change should not be equated with forced displacement. The issue therefore was not migration caused by the very broad range of environmental changes, but much more specifically, migration related to current climate change processes. As migration scholars pointed out, climate change should not be seen in isolation: in the great majority of cases, people's decisions to migrate or not to migrate are based on a wide range of economic, social, political and cultural factors. Climatic changes which affect the environmental conditions for work and life should be seen as a factor in migration, but hardly ever the only or even the predominant cause. Migration scholars emphasised the *multi-causality* of migration decisions, and accused environmentalists of postulating environmental *mono-causality* for political reasons.

This critique was well-placed, but environmentalists could counter it by arguing that their emphasis on climate change had a very good purpose: namely that of awakening the world to the dangers of global warming by making politicians and

³ E El-Hinnawi, *Environmental Refugees* (Nairobi, UNEP, 1985).

⁴ Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954) 189 UNTS 137, read in conjunction with the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 31 January 1967, entered into force 4 October 1967) 606 UNTS 267.

the public think about the consequences of large-scale human displacement. Leading proponents of this approach warned of tens or even hundreds of millions of displaced persons in the future, and put forward apocalyptic visions of third world poverty and disease sweeping over the rich parts of the world.⁵ Others put forward scenarios of mass displacement as a cause of future global insecurity,⁶ while certain non-governmental relief agencies (sometimes as part of their fundraising efforts) were happy to escalate forecasts of vast population movements, up to one billion by 2050.⁷

But, however well-intentioned, these shock tactics were risky. Not only did they present questionable data, which might undermine public trust in environmental predictions, but more seriously they tended to reinforce existing negative images of refugees as a threat to the security, prosperity and public health of rich countries in the global North. Headlines like ‘millions will flee degradation’, coupled with the assertion that ‘there will be as many as 50 million environmental refugees in the world in five years’ time⁸ were likely to fuel widespread fears of uncontrollable migration flows.⁹ Migration was constructed as intrinsically bad and as something to be stopped: part of the ‘sedentary bias’ which has become so dominant in discourses on migration.¹⁰ Thus the doomsday prophecies of environmentalists may have done more to stigmatise refugees and migrants, and to support repressive state measures against them, than to raise environmental awareness.

In response, refugee and migration scholars argued that such neo-Malthusian visions were based on dubious assumptions and that it was virtually impossible to identify individuals or groups forced to move by environmental factors alone.¹¹ Part of this critique was methodological: it was argued that some environmentalists were simply mapping forecasts of climatic changes, such as sea-level rise or drought, on to existing global population patterns, and assuming that everyone in the affected regions would have to leave. By contrast, migration scholars argued that mobility was just one of a range of possible strategies, and called for micro-level studies to find out how individuals and communities affected by climate change actually reacted.

⁵ N Myers, ‘Environmental Refugees’ (1997) 19 *Population and Environment* 167; N Myers and J Kent, *Environmental Exodus: An Emergent Crisis in the Global Arena* (Washington DC, Climate Institute, 1995).

⁶ T Homer-Dixon and V Percival, *Environmental Scarcity and Violent Conflict: Briefing Book* (Toronto, University of Toronto and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1996).

⁷ Christian Aid, *Human Tide: The Real Migration Crisis* (May 2007) 5–6.

⁸ ‘Millions “Will Flee Degradation”’, BBC News (11 October 2005), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4326666.stm>.

⁹ A web search for the term ‘climate refugees’ brings up over 700,000 items, many of which seek to outbid each other with claims on the many millions of expected displacees.

¹⁰ O Bakewell, ‘Keeping Them in Their Place: The Ambivalent Relationship between Development and Migration in Africa’ (2008) 29 *Third World Quarterly* 1341.

¹¹ See, eg R Black, *Refugees, Environment and Development* (Harlow, Longman, 1998); R Black, ‘Environmental Refugees: Myth or Reality?’, *New Issues in Refugee Research*, Working Paper No 34 (Geneva, UNHCR, 2001); WB Wood, ‘Ecomigration: Linkages between Environmental Change and Migration’ in AR Zolberg and P Benda (eds), *Global Migrants, Global Refugees: Problems and Solutions* (New York, Berghahn Books, 2001).

In retrospect, it seems clear that the politicisation and polarisation of the debate on migration and the environment had quite negative consequences. Environmentalists may have been misguided in using misleading and threatening images of mass displacement to raise public awareness of climate change, but the defensive postures adopted by refugee and migration scholars also held back scientific analysis and thus probably the development of appropriate strategies to respond to the challenges of climate-induced displacement.

The failure of the Copenhagen talks means that affected communities and states are largely going to be left alone with climate-induced migration and its consequences. At least for the foreseeable future, there will be no concerted international response, and no large-scale programmes by powerful states to provide support for adaptive responses in the poor and vulnerable regions most affected by anthropogenic climate change. We are entering a dangerous new phase, in which polarised positions on the causes and consequences of migration have become distinctly unhelpful. Migration scholars must recognise the potential of climate change to bring about fundamental changes in the nature of human mobility, just as environmentalists need to recognise the complex factors that lead some people to adopt migration as a part of their survival strategies. This situation makes many parts of the book even more relevant, especially those that deal directly with strategies of groups affected by climate change, and the legal and institutional responses of states and intergovernmental organisations.

III The State of Knowledge

After more than 20 years of debate on climate-induced displacement, we still lack a body of agreed knowledge on the topic. In view of the complex characteristics of the phenomenon, such knowledge would have to be based on the contributions of natural and social scientists working in a range of disciplines—in other words, broad interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial, and old barriers must be broken down. As Jane McAdam points out in her Introduction to this volume, we are still far from true *interdisciplinary* approaches, so that the *multidisciplinarity* aimed for in this book represents a step forward, but one that needs to be taken further.

Despite a great growth in interest by both environmental and social scientists, especially since about 2005, there is a surprising lack of sound empirical evidence. The most ambitious effort so far has been the Environmental Change and Forced Migration Scenarios (EACH-FOR) Programme funded by the European Union under its Sixth Framework Research mechanism. Twenty-three research projects were carried out all over the world from 2007 to 2009.¹² I have not had an opportunity to review the findings of these projects in detail, but some concern has been

¹² See Environmental Change and Forced Migration Scenarios (EACH-FOR) project, which concluded in May 2009: www.each-for.eu/index.php?module=main.

expressed over the rather short-term nature of the research and about the rather narrow focus of some projects on perceived environmental push factors, as opposed to long-term analyses of a much wider range of factors and responses.¹³ For a full understanding, such long-term multifactorial analyses are crucial, but have been rather neglected so far.¹⁴ This makes the debate on definitions and methodology for research in this field all the more important.¹⁵

The current state of debate does represent a considerable advance in knowledge compared with, say, 10 years ago, but still only represents a half-way house. A great deal needs still to be done by researchers (and indeed by the governments and foundations that commission and fund research), before we can speak of an adequate knowledge base for policy formation and civil society action. It is probably too early to speak of any meaningful scientific consensus at present, but it appears that the following ideas are gaining increasing recognition as pointers for further research and intervention.

First, there is very little evidence that climate change has caused much migration so far. Despite worrying prognoses put forward in the past, it is virtually impossible to identify groups of people already displaced by climate change alone. There are certainly groups which have been affected by climatic (or broader environmental) factors, but economic, political, social and cultural factors are also at work.

Secondly, this should not be taken as a reason to ignore the issue. It seems probable that the predicted acceleration of climate change over the next few decades will have major effects on production, livelihoods and human security. The predictions of 'submerging islands', discussed in this volume by McAdam and Loughry (among others), are the most obvious form, although the affected numbers will be relatively small.¹⁶ As Hugo's chapter shows, it is already possible to identify the 'hot spots'. This does not mean that we should adopt a mono-causal approach: the complex interlinkages with other factors will remain operative, but the climate change component is likely to become increasingly significant.

Thirdly, as the contribution by Barnett and Webber shows so clearly, migration is not an inevitable result of climate change, but one possible adaptation strategy out of many. It is crucial to understand the factors that lead to differing strategies

¹³ For a discussion of EACH-FOR's African research, and of other research findings on environmental factors in African migration dynamics, see G Jonsson, *The Environmental Factor in Migration Dynamics: A Review of African Case Studies* (Oxford, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford, Working Paper 21, 2010).

¹⁴ For an example of such a study using comprehensive data and sophisticated methods of analysis, see P Bohra and DS Massey, 'Processes of Internal and International Migration from Chitwan, Nepal' (2009) 43 *International Migration Review* 621.

¹⁵ See D Kniveton, K Schmidt-Verkerk, C Smith and R Black, *Climate Change and Migration: Improving Methodologies to Estimate Flows* (Geneva, IOM Migration Research Series No 33, 2008).

¹⁶ As Professor Richard Bedford of the University of Waikato, New Zealand, has pointed out, 68 per cent of the population of the Pacific region lives in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Most of PNG's population lives inland and will be affected not by sea-level rise, but by changes in temperature, rainfall and wind patterns. The possible severe impacts on livelihoods are not likely to lead to significant international migration.

and varying degrees of vulnerability and resilience in individuals and communities. Moreover, migration should not generally be seen as negative: people have always moved in search of better livelihoods, and this can bring benefits both for origin and destination areas. As Zetter points out in his contribution, migrants have some degree of agency, even under the most difficult conditions. Strategies that treat them as passive victims are counterproductive, and protection of rights should also be about giving people the chance to deploy their agency. The objective of public policy should not be to prevent migration, but rather to ensure that it can take place in appropriate ways and under conditions of safety, security and legality.

Fourthly, this makes it all the more urgent to carry out in-depth micro-level empirical research to understand the changes that are taking place, how they affect various groups, and what response strategies these groups adopt. Such empirical studies are now being done, and their findings are beginning to become available. However, short-term studies focusing only on displacement as a problem may be misleading. It is important to link newer research with the findings of existing studies on environmental and developmental issues in various regions, and to build on the considerable existing expertise of development sociologists, human geographers, anthropologists and area studies specialists.

Fifthly, climate change is experienced at the local level, but it has global causes. The ability of individuals, communities and states to respond to such changes is very strongly linked to political and economic factors. The causes of climate change lie in the production systems and the consumer-oriented lifestyles of rich countries of the global North—although newly industrialising economies of the South are also beginning to play a major part. It is people in the poorest parts of the world who are most affected by climate change, yet who lack the resources for effective coping and adaptation strategies. Weak states are not a fact of nature, but a result of inequality based historically on colonialism and, today, on neo-liberal globalisation. Decrying potential climate change migration as a threat to the security of developed countries misses the point—analysed so well in Elliott's chapter—that climate-induced displacement is a result of the human insecurity imposed on the South in the current global order.

Sixthly, this understanding of the inequality that underpins climate-induced migration can be an important starting point for normative debates concerned with the responsibility of rich nations and the 'international community'. These are addressed in detail by Zetter and Penz in their contributions. Zetter, in particular, makes the important point that not only the rights of migrants, but also those of the much larger numbers of people who do *not* move in response to climate change, need protection. Penz concludes with the hope that a just climate regime will not be seen as just an 'ethical fantasy'. However, after the Copenhagen debacle, it seems doubtful whether moral arguments carry much weight with powerful states. Strategies based on hoping that those in control will do the right thing give little cause for optimism. That is why it is so crucial to explore what action is possible now.

Seventhly, a key locus of practical action is to be found at the macro-level of international and national law. It is of utmost importance to determine the legal

status of people induced to migrate by changes in their living conditions linked to climate change (generally along with other factors). Clearly, there is a broad spectrum of migration motivations, ranging from forced migrants who have to leave unviable locations, through to migrants who can exercise various levels of agency. It is also crucial to find ways of using legal frameworks to protect and enhance the rights of both migrants and non-migrants. Walter Kälin presents a definitive overview of the legal instruments involved, while Jane McAdam focuses on the potential for statelessness in the case of people displaced from small Pacific island states. Debates on refugee and asylum issues over the last 20 years show the increasing unwillingness of governments and bureaucracies in developed countries to enhance protection of displaced people, but law can be a potent instrument to make states face up to their responsibilities.

Eighthly, practical interventions to support people affected by climate change are needed in many areas of social action: employment, housing, welfare and education all spring to mind. Health is clearly a crucial area. The contribution by McMichael, McMichael, Berry and Bowen presents a valuable overview of the types of health risk involved, and of possible responses at the political and professional levels. Loughry, in a study enriched by fieldwork in the Pacific island of Kiribati, focuses on the consequences of displacement for mental health. Far more work of this kind is needed for all the areas of social action mentioned above as well as for health. Interestingly, in both these contributions, research findings derived from studies of people affected by war and violence are used as a basis for analogies with people affected by climate change. This procedure is necessary and productive at present, but also reveals the lack of adequate research on the newer phenomenon: we do not know for sure that people affected by climate change will follow the same patterns as soldiers or refugees affected by violence. Moreover, the slow onset of climate change processes may have substantially different effects compared with warfare, persecution or even natural disasters.

Finally, we need to listen to the cautionary tales of those who study the micro-dynamics of human behaviour in cultural groups affected by climate change. Campbell's account of the dilemmas of past attempts at relocating Pacific peoples make it clear that there will be no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of displacement. Top-down bureaucratic rationality may not achieve much when it comes up against very different ways of thinking and living. This is all the more reason why we need far more local-level research, to inform strategies for responding to climate-induced displacement.