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## Climate migration: A strategy to adapt to climate change or a failure to adapt?

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## CLIMATE MIGRATION: A STRATEGY TO ADAPT TO CLIMATE CHANGE OR A FAILURE TO ADAPT?

*Global warming has many detrimental effects such as more frequent and severe natural disasters, droughts and floods, a rising sea level, and a reduction in biodiversity that particularly affects species upon which the world's poor rely for their livelihoods. Therefore, global warming will further strain the "carrying capacity" of ecosystems in large parts of the world, i.e. reduce their ability to provide food, water and shelter for the people who currently live there. As a result, many people will be forced to relocate. The most widely cited estimate puts their number at 200 million individuals by 2050 – similar to the current total number of international labor migrants, and more than five times the number of refugees and internally displaced persons accounted for by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). How reliable are these numbers? What difficulties do we face in trying to predict the impact of climate change on the movement of people? Which policy responses could reduce the need for migration or limit its scope? Do we need an institution that would provide a multilateral framework for dealing with migrants?*



Matthias Luecke

The estimate of climate migrants is highly uncertain and probably exaggerated:

1. Environmental migration is a complex phenomenon and difficult to identify. Only a small portion of overall migration can be linked directly to environmental causes, not all of which are related to global warming. Obvious examples of environmental degradation include the rapid desertification of areas in North America mainly caused by exploitative agriculture systems, the drying out of Lake Aral due to water diversion for large-scale irrigation schemes, the Chernobyl ecological disaster, or a farmer's land being submerged by the rising sea levels. Typically, local, regional, and international factors like ineffective governance of natural resource use, population growth, soil degradation, higher temperatures, and extreme weather events combine to threaten livelihoods.
2. Environmental migration is difficult to measure and even more difficult to predict. First of all, the timing and intensity of catastrophic events such as volcanic activity and other natural disasters, cannot be predicted. Secondly, there is inherent uncertainty about how individuals will respond to increasingly intolerable conditions in their regions: will the whole household leave the affected area or will only individual family members seek work

elsewhere and provide for the family members left behind?

3. Migration is a costly process and the poorest of the affected may not be able to afford it because they lack financial resources and social support. Migration is also influenced by migrants' education and skill levels, access to infrastructure, and social networks.
4. Experiences from migration directly linked to climate change, such as the drought of 1983 in Mali or the decrease in rainfall in Burkina Faso, suggest that climate-related movements of people are temporary and over short distances.

Even if the numerical estimate is uncertain, many individuals do live in places highly vulnerable to climate change, their livelihoods will be threatened in new and significant ways, and some of them will have no choice but to relocate. As long as migration away from affected areas is viewed as a problem to be controlled, rather than as a key part of the adaptation to climate change, national governments and the international community will be missing opportunities to develop policies that could reduce the need for migration or limit its scope. Such policies include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Create early warning systems to alert affected communities and countries of impending serious environmental degradation so that people can

carefully plan their response.

2. Build up infrastructure and basic services in towns near the affected areas that would serve as destination hubs for temporary migrants.
3. Promote access to non-farm jobs.
4. When whole regions become uninhabitable (such as when an island volcano erupts or large areas are flooded), move the affected population to safety. This can be achieved through ad-hoc cooperation among potential host country governments and does not require changes in international law such as a special status for "environmental refugees".
5. Recognize the role of preemptive, voluntary migration as a response to climate change and provide support to accommodate migrants in order to avoid crisis-driven movements of refugees.

Should we try to create an International Migration Organization as a multilateral framework for national migration policies, similar to the World Trade Organization for trade-related policies? Probably not. In the foreseeable future, key governments, including the US, will simply not enter into significant international obligations with respect to their immigration policies. However, most Scandinavian countries have adopted national rules that recognize environmental refugees and provide for their protection. Other countries may want to follow this example.

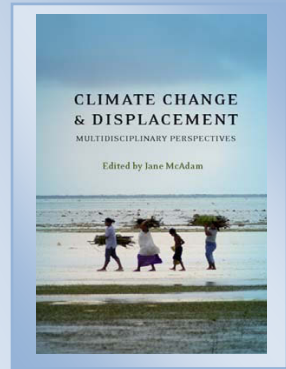
#### BACKGROUND FACTS

- Most predictions set the number for future flows of climate migrants at 200 million by 2050. It would mean that by 2050 one in every 45 people will be displaced by disruptions of monsoon systems and other rainfall regimes, by droughts of unprecedented severity and duration, and by sea-level rise and coastal flooding.
- Number of people flooded per year is expected to increase by 10 to 25 million per year by the 2050s and by 40 to 140 million per year by 2100s, depending on the future emissions

scenario.

- Poor countries are hit disproportionately: in the decade from 1994 to 2003 natural disasters in advanced countries killed an average of 44 people per event, whereas disasters in poor countries killed an average of 300 people each. A tropical cyclone Gorky in 1991 killed at least 138,000 people in Bangladesh, whereas a much stronger Hurricane Andrew caused only 64 death in the US.

CLIMATE CHANGE & DISPLACEMENT:  
MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES  
By  
Iane McAdam (Ed.)



#### CHAPTERS:

- “Climate Change-Induced Mobility and the Existing Migration Regime in Asia and the Pacific” by Graeme Hugo
- “Migration as Adaptation: Opportunities and Limits” by Jon Barnett and Michael Webber
- “Climate-Induced Community Relocation in the Pacific: The Meaning and Importance of Land” by John Campbell
- “Conceptualizing Climate-Induced Displacement” by Walter Kälin
- “‘Disappearing States’, Statelessness and the Boundaries of International Law” by Iane McAdam
- “Protecting People Displaced by Climate Change: Some Conceptual Challenges” by Roger Zetter
- “International Ethical Responsibilities to ‘Climate Change Refugees’” by Peter Penz
- “Climate Migration and Climate Migrants: What Threat, Whose Security?” by Lorraine Elliott
- “Climate-Related Displacement: Health Risks and Responses” by Anthony J McMichael, Celia E McMichael, Helen L Berry and Kathryn Bowen
- “Climate Change, Human Movement and the Promotion of Mental Health: What have we Learnt from Earlier Global Stressors?” by Maryanne Loughry
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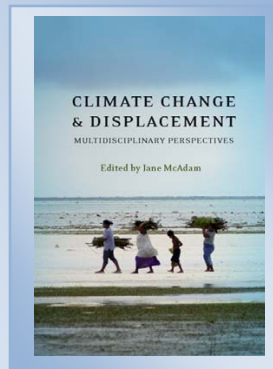
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