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Climate Refugees: Do Not Hype Up The Problem

Environment

Social affairs





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As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has begun publishing its new series of reports, and as COP-26 meets in Glasgow from November 1, a World Bank [publication](#) suggests that there could be over 200 million climate refugees by 2050. Are we going to see a great climate migration that could affect up to one billion people worldwide, a figure that is regularly reported? It is very unlikely. In fact, caution is in order with regard to the scale of the problem to come but also to the very notion of "climate refugees".

A questionable concept

This notion can be traced to a [UN report](#) published in 1985. But it is problematic. The IPCC, which conducted a review of published studies on the subject, [concludes](#) that "It is difficult to categorize any individual as a climate migrant" and that "there is widespread agreement in the scientific and legal literature that the use of the term climate refugee is scientifically and legally problematic". Thus, for the IPCC, there is simply no such thing as a "climate refugee".

Hurricanes, floods and droughts can create massive displacements. But these disasters have always existed. How then can one discern a particular category of people displaced "because of climate change"? So-called attribution studies can at most give a retrospective indication of how likely an event would have been to occur "with" or "without" climate change.

Numbers found in the media referring to the "effects of climate change" should be taken with a grain of salt. They often add up all the victims of natural disasters. This is the case with the [figures](#) produced by the Norwegian Refugee Council, which are widely used by commentators - and which, by the way, only count internally displaced persons (IDPs), which are not, legally speaking, "refugees". There have been 30.7 million new IDPs in 2020.

Absent the shock of a disaster, long-term displacements (those that are not part of classic circular migration, such as in the Sahel depending on rainfall) mainly related to environmental causes are generally internal to the country itself. In other words, climate refugees are generally "environmentally displaced persons". The aforementioned studies recently conducted by the World Bank deal exclusively with IDPs.

The decision to migrate is almost always multi-causal. It depends on political and economic factors, both on the *push* side [...] and the pull side.

Environmental migration or displacement often have little connection to climate change. When Bolivian rural populations move to cities because of the progressive destruction, due to floods, of the cultivated plots initially created by Jesuit missionaries, climate change is not necessarily to blame: man-made deforestation is a more important factor. When tens of thousands of Central Americans head for Mexico and the United States because of the destruction of coffee plantations, it is due to the epidemic of coffee rust and the drought caused by a cyclical natural phenomenon (*El Niño*), in a context of state dysfunction and collective violence.

When migrants from the coastal areas of Bangladesh seek a better future in the depths of the territory, or try to cross the Indian border, it is often because of the overexploitation of their environment (the destruction of mangrove forests, itself the cause of an increase in the salinity of the delta waters).

The decision to migrate is almost always multi-causal. It depends on political and economic factors, both on the *push* side - not everyone can afford to leave - and the pull side - opportunities elsewhere. As the UN University [reminds us](#), "*Oftentimes places that experience climate stressors are also affected by conflict situations, political instability, low levels of economic development and human rights abuses. This makes it difficult to establish a direct causal link between the movement of people and the environment. The environment, including climate change impacts, is usually one of multiple factors involved in a person's decision to leave their home*". The IPCC [makes it clear](#) that "*most migration and climate studies point to the environment as triggers and not causes for migration decisions*".

Let us [listen](#) to the official in charge at the International Organization for Migration: "*The image of 'climate refugees' resonates metaphorically to all as it mirrors the current images we see of those escaping wars and conflicts. With the threat of climate change we imagine millions becoming refugees in the future. Yet reducing the issue of migration in the context of climate change to the status of 'climate refugees' fails to recognize a number of key aspects that define human mobility in the context of climate change and environmental degradation*".

Because it confuses displaced persons and migrants; abandoning one's home in a hurry and deciding to settle elsewhere; temporary refuge and long-term exile; the notion of climate refugee makes little sense. This is why giving it a legal translation, as some NGOs are clamoring for in the name of the "right to life" of Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, would have even less meaning.

A problem to be put into perspective

The main question remains: will environmental disasters, whether linked to climate change or not, cause significant population displacement? The answer is certainly yes - but to what extent?

Let us first discuss the impact of disasters. The IPCC [reminds us](#) that "*extreme weather events are not necessarily associated with displacement*", which remains a "*policy of last resort*". And one which is generally reversible: following a disaster, most of the displaced seek to return to their homes and rebuild their habitats. This is reflected in the Norwegian Refugee Council's figures: in 2020, the "flow" was 30.7 million but the "stock" at the end of the year was only 7 million. The same goes for cross-border migration: "*Our results suggest little evidence that natural hazards affect medium to long-run international migration*", [concludes](#) a landmark study.

There does seem to be a [causal relationship](#) between the rise in average temperature in a given country and the propensity of its inhabitants to migrate. There is also a [consensus](#) on the idea that an increase in water stress can lead to the decision of populations to move permanently. But the scientific literature remains, on the whole, measured and even circumspect on the subject. There is "*no deterministic relationship between environment and migration*" [claims](#) a 2019 meta-study. "*We find no direct effect of long-run climatic factors on international migration*", concludes a [study](#) covering the last forty years of the 20th century. In a retrospective [analysis](#) covering 157 countries and the period 2006-2015, a significant effect was found only for emigration from Middle Eastern countries and only for two years, from 2010 to 2012.

Predicting a massive increase in refugee or displaced persons flows as a result of global warming also implies that human societies will not adapt to the change in their environment, which makes little sense. This was the case for the United States in the 1930s - at that time a rural and still relatively undeveloped country. *The Dust Bowl*, a series of dust storms raging on the Great Plains of North America for a decade, caused two to three million people to migrate west. This is likely to be the case, for example, for populations that may be affected by sea-level rise. For the time being, communities living on low-lying islands have not chosen to migrate - and when they have, it is primarily for economic attraction (pull), as has long been the case for some Tuvaluans moving to New Zealand.

It is thus not surprising that a review of the scientific literature does not allow for a clear conclusion on the quantitative effect of global warming on future migration.

Some countries, in Asia in particular, would undoubtedly be profoundly affected by a significant rise in sea level because of the large proportion of the population living in low-lying coastal areas. But unless the most pessimistic warming scenarios come true, is it inconceivable to imagine that humans could simply adapt to a rise in water levels of a few millimeters per year? Also, at this rate, some countries will continue to gain as much surface area through sedimentation as they lose through erosion. The drowning of Bangladesh, one of the world's most densely populated areas, is a fragile hypothesis: it does not take into account the contribution of sediment carried by Himalayan rivers, which will more than compensate for the rise in sea level. This is caused as much by subsidence of the earth as by global warming. Subsidence can be natural (i.e. for volcanic islands, for instance) or caused by human activities such as the destruction of natural barriers, the construction of infrastructures, or the depletion of water tables. Large cities such as Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, Jakarta or Manila tend indeed to "sink".

It is thus not surprising that a review of the scientific literature does not allow for a clear conclusion on the quantitative effect of global warming on future migration.

Some of the figures put forward have no serious scientific basis. Biologist Norman Myers famously [estimated](#) in 1993 that there could be 200 million climate refugees by 2050. This projection [merely counted](#) the number of inhabitants of low-lying coastal areas. It has since been [repeated by numerous publications](#) and official speeches without any critical perspective. One even often finds reference to the figure of *more than one billion* climate refugees by the middle of the century: here again, it [comes from](#) a report that simply counts the inhabitants of the most vulnerable areas of the planet.

Some experts do see a causal relationship between global warming and the increase in asylum applications in Europe, and [predict](#) that by the end of the century these applications will increase by between 28% (+98,000 per year) and 188% (+660,000 per year). But they also [blandly acknowledge](#) that their projections on asylum applications in European countries "*assume that the relationship we uncovered between 2000 and 2014 is going to remain unchanged for the next 80 years*". Hence the relevance of scenario-based analysis. The series of World Bank studies produced [the following data](#): water scarcity and sea level rise in the developing world are likely to generate the internal displacement of 78 million people by 2050 in a positive scenario, and 170 million in a negative one.

Finally, let's listen once again to what the IPCC [says](#) at the end of its review of the scientific literature: migration, far from being systematically a tragedy, can be a good adaptation strategy that can *reduce* risks in very vulnerable places; and some local climate changes can be associated with an increase in agricultural productivity, and thus reduce migration flows.

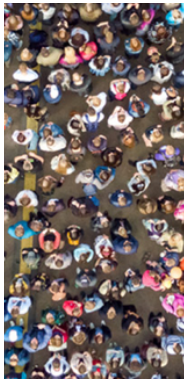
In the end, the expression "climate refugees" raises questions about both its relevance and its seriousness: about its relevance, since migration is multifactorial and this category covers disparate population movements, sometimes with no link to global warming; about its seriousness, since the displacements it seeks to describe are generally local, limited and reversible, and the gloomiest forecasts do not take account of the adaptation of human societies.

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