

What do we do about environmental migrants?

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Migration is a phenomenon as old as humanity itself. Indeed, mobility has become a general characteristic of humankind, with around five per cent of the global population being migrants living outside their country of origin. History is full of migration movements caused by political or economic reasons. There were also forced migrations, such as the slave trade. However, forced migration linked to environmental problems is a critical issue today.

My own awareness was sparked in 1981 when I worked as a lay missionary in Northern Nigeria. Migrants from Niger to the North were prominent working around the city of Kaduna and I was told it was linked to the Sahara moving southwards at a rate of about seven miles a year. Many of the men were farmers but their land was no longer able to yield crops because of desertification. Then, working for CAFOD at the time of the Ethiopian famine of 1984/85 it was impossible not to notice famine migration linked with drought and the deforestation of the land over the previous eight decades, all exacerbated by conflict. The images of dust-coloured people in dust-coloured camps in a landscape of dust shocked the world. This famine resulted in the death or displacement of hundreds of thousands of people within Ethiopia and forced about 100,000 into Somalia, 10,000 into Djibouti, and more than 300,000 into Sudan.

Christian Aid has estimated that by 2020 up to three-quarters of the world's population, most of them living in poor countries, could be at risk of the severe weather conditions of drought or flooding linked to climate change. Take Bangladesh for instance - more than 10 million people live on land less than a metre above sea level, and that level is set to rise due to global warming. Or what about southern China, where 25 million people would be displaced by a sea level rise of one metre. The president of the Pacific island of Kiribati issued an appeal in 2008 for the international community to help relocate its population as the nation's 33 atolls have begun to succumb to the sea. The island of Tuvalu has already secured New Zealand's agreement to accept an annual quota of its citizens as refugees.

Scientists warn that an 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gas production is necessary to slow down the greenhouse effect but even in countries that have agreed to this, action has been slow. The UK government, for instance, has agreed to reduce carbon emissions by 80 per cent by 2050, but aviation expansion and the building of coal-fired power stations are going ahead as planned. Meanwhile, the numbers of environmental migrants increase.

The Columban Missionary Society is a member of NJPN and has focused on climate change for some years, after Columban Father and creation theologian Sean McDonagh flagged up concerns about it in the mid-1980s with his first book, *To Care for the Earth*. Columban JPIC representatives gathered in the Philippines in September 2007, from the 16 countries where Columbans work, to study the issue and its links to migration. From Latin America it was reported that Peru is experiencing more severe winds and landslides which are uprooting communities. Indeed, the number of emergencies related to 'natural' disasters has increased six fold over the past two decades. An area of rainforest the size of 43 soccer pitches disappears in the Peruvian Amazon every 90 minutes. Perhaps most worrying of all, 22 percent of Peru's tropical glaciers have melted away in the past 25 years. The meltwater from these glaciers provides water for major urban conurbations, such as Lima, and, if the supply dries up, then whole communities will be on the move, particularly those who cannot afford to buy in water. Chile has seen 87 percent of its glaciers shrink and desertification increase. Big mining projects have gone ahead there, despite local opposition, and taken a heavy toll on fresh water, glaciers and indigenous peoples.

In Asia, the Gobi Desert is expanding. It is eating up productive agricultural land and people have to move elsewhere to seek a sustainable livelihood. From Pakistan it was reported that flash floods in June 2007 displaced two million people after unusually heavy rain. During the conference week, the Columban delegates joined local Filipinos attending a global warming meeting organised by the

Archdiocese of Manila. It has become the first diocese in the Philippines to launch a programme of study and action to address climate change, with more than half its parishes at risk of flooding and parishioner dislocation. Sean McDonagh was one of the keynote speakers and he warned that, “a one-metre rise in sea level in the Philippines will affect 64 out of the country’s 81 provinces”. He added that, “already the Philippines is coping with more frequent and severe typhoons, and farmers are having to deal with increasingly unstable climate patterns”. Specific commitments, such as the setting up of an eco-desk in every parish in the Manila Archdiocese, were made during the final mass.

Australian delegates at the Columban conference, who noted that their country’s carbon footprint is the highest in the world, reported that lack of rainfall is causing great concern in Southern Australia. This, along with increased soil temperature, is disrupting agriculture, fuelling forest fires, and farmers are going bust and moving on. According to Sydney-based Fr Charles Rue, “we’re mucking up the Earth’s temperature control system and need to be very systematic in responding to it”. He reported that the setting up of Catholic Earthcare Australia seven years ago has been a serious attempt by the Catholic Church there to engage with environmental issues and the human distress caused by it, including migration. While the Columbans were meeting in Manila, tropical depression ‘Hanna’ hit the Northern Philippines, leaving nine people dead and thousands affected by flooding. There is a global trend for hurricanes to increase in frequency and intensity, displacing thousands of communities especially in countries that have been largely deforested, such as the Philippines and Haiti

From Britain, Fr Peter Hughes reported that in July 2007 there was a flooding crisis in central and western England with thousands of homes losing water and electricity supplies. Around 350,000 people in Gloucestershire were left without running water for a week after the River Severn burst its banks following exceptionally heavy rain. Thousands of people moved from the area, some of them permanently. The British population has been told by the government to prepare for similar disruption in the future.

In Africa, people may also be uprooted by diseases such as malaria, as it becomes prevalent in areas previously free of it. In Africa, Zambia’s Catholic bishops issued a pastoral letter in 2004 deploring that “we have not taken the best care for this environment upon which we depend for our survival”. The letter identified “massive deforestation” as a key problem and blamed it on the ever increasing need for wood by poor people who had no other options available for meeting their fuel needs. The bishops feared increasing hardship and the breaking up of communities due to environmental degradation.

Indian ecologist Vandana Shiva suggests that unless economic systems are lined up with the ecological system the problems, including forced migration, will only get worse. She feels industrial agriculture wages war on the environment and is linked in with the climate change crisis. “Industrial farming” she says “driven by agribusiness in order to sell more chemicals, pesticides, and costly genetically-modified seeds to farmers, is heavily responsible for emissions of greenhouse gases such as methane from factory farms, nitrogen oxide from chemically fertilized soil, and fossil fuels from mechanised farming systems”. She suggests that more than 25 percent of climate instability is being caused by unsustainable farming that displaces small peasants, creates poverty and bad food, and depletes water resources. She also deplores the dispossession of small farmers the world over. In India, millions of them have migrated to cities, ending up in vast and squalid slums.

So, environmental degradation – caused by global human impact - is a major driver of migration. It is already a bigger cause of population displacement than war and persecution. Yet, displacement for environmental reasons is not recognised as a basis for refugee status in international law. There are increasing calls for this to change, and further, that international law should recognise the concept of “environmental persecution” – where actions by some states ruin the environment of others and create a refugee crises. Without international recognition and management, the environmental migrant reality could turn into a major source of global instability. What are we going to do about it?

