

## ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES

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### ABSTRACT

*In the past years, natural disasters and climate change have become a growing concern. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimations 19.2 million people were displaced by climate or weather-related events only in 2015. As reported by the UN's science advisory board - the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - an increase in the number of displaced people is projected over the course of this century. Due to climate change people will be forced into increasing poverty and displacement, a fact that will exacerbate the factors that lead to conflict, rendering both the humanitarian needs and responses even more complex in such situations. Environmental refugees are not a phenomenon of our century. Since the beginning of civilization, people were forced time after time to change living places due to the climate. But what makes this topic so special nowadays is that human beings did not have such a strong influence on the environment earlier, so a migration process was unexpected previously. Unfortunately, this situation has changed now. Population growth and big disparities make this process more complicated. However, with new technology and progress in IT sphere we can predict possible changes, but at the same time we are one of the main causes of these climate and environmental changes. In fact, a lot of researchers has been working on this topic. In worldwide practice, there are conventions, policy documents etc., yet environmental refugees still stay in a non-place, taking part in frameworks for refugees or economic migrants.*

Keywords: environment, refugees, climate change, policy.

### INTRODUCION

In the past years, natural disasters and climate change have become a growing concern. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimations 19.2 million people were displaced by climate or weather-related events (IDMC, n.d.) only in 2015. As reported by the UN's science advisory board - the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - an increase in the number of displaced people is projected over the course of this century. Due to climate change people will be forced into increasing poverty and displacement, a fact that will exacerbate the factors that lead to conflict, rendering both the humanitarian needs and responses even more complex (UNHCR, n.d.) in such situations.

Weather patterns have been partly forcing humans since prehistoric times to move around the earth (Gupta, 2006; McLeman, 2011). During the nineteenth and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this topic was being discussed quite frequently, however it somehow disappeared in the twentieth century, from the scope of conventional research (Piquet, 2011). Suggested reasons for this gap are (1) the phenomenon of environmental migration was treated as “primitive”, and was considered that it would

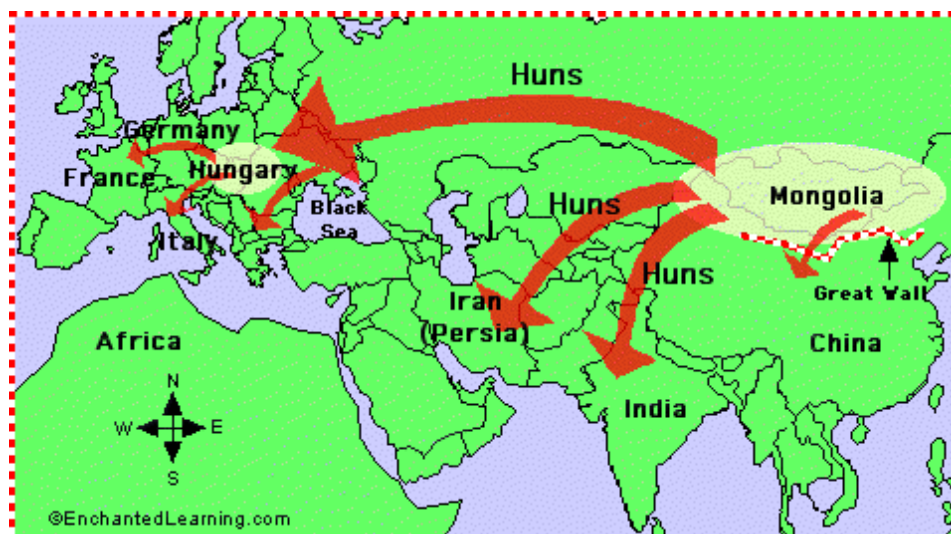
surely decline as human beings would progressively increase their control over the environment, (2) the topic was abandoned and altered to socio-cultural approaches, (3) the theory of migration became dominated by the economic paradigm – either neoclassical or Marxist – and (4) the main focus of forced-migration studies was on the role of the State causing the phenomena (Piguet, 2011). According to Gasper “It is important to observe that the background of this academic detour is a new step in the consolidation of the Westphalian model of nation-states, which in the late twentieth century came to associate security with the control of people’s movements across boundaries” (Gasper and Truong, 2013).

Environmental refugees are not a phenomenon of our century. Since the beginning of civilization, people have been forced time after time to change living places, due to the climate.

One of the reasons why Huns tribes changed their place of inhabitation apart from war between nomads at that time was climate change on that territory (Figure 1). That is one of the evidences which let us assume that environmental refugees have been existing since human beings appeared on this planet.

Figure 1

### Migration flow of Huns folks



Source: <https://aratta.wordpress.com/2013/10/30/haplogroup-q-and-the-huns/>

But what makes this such a special topic nowadays is that human beings did not have so strong influence on the environment before, so a migration process was unexpected previously. Unfortunately, this situation has changed now. Population growth and big disparities make this process more complicated. However, with new technology and progress in IT sphere we can predict possible changes, but at the same time we are one of the main causes of these climate and environmental changes.

I truly believe that these problems can be solved if we base our decisions on previous experiences.

As mentioned above, this process is called a phenomenon but what are the reasons for this? First of all, let us go through the definition of the term ‘refugee’.

Any person may be recognized as refugee who *has suffered from or has a well-founded fear of persecution in his/her country of origin based on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion*; and who currently stays in the territory of Hungary and has applied for a refugee status (*Immigration and Asylum Office*, 2016). Hence, people that are suffering and forced to leave their home because of environmental disasters cannot be characterized as refugees.

According to legislation, these people are called economic migrants. An *economic migrant* is someone who emigrates from one region to another to seek an improvement in living standards because the living conditions or job opportunities in the migrant's own region are not good (*Macmillan Dictionary*, n.d.; *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, n.d.). The United Nations uses the term migrant worker (*United Nations*, 1990). The term economic migrant is often confused with the term refugee, but economic migrants leave their country due to bad economic conditions, not due to fear of persecution on the basis of race, religion, or ethnicity (*Settlement Services International*, n.d.).

In my opinion, we cannot include “environmental refugees” in the definition of economic migrants. The minority of migrants moves and after they find a job they stay in the host country/region. However, most of them want to come back to their countries when the situation there has improved.

But of course, this is just the tip of the iceberg when we are speaking about environmental refugees. If we look deeper into this matter, we can be overwhelmed by the amount of people that will never be able to return back to their home. It means that the new area/country in which they reside will have to become their new home. But home means a lot of things, such as language, culture, religion which most of the time are not the same. So, the question is how we can help them to start over because our planet is our common home.

Nevertheless, when it comes to migration, all processes are quite complicated. Environmental problems affect mostly developing countries and the affected people migrate to developed countries. Thus, certain number of barriers of integration arises due to differences in:

- Economic development
- Languages
- Culture
- Education systems
- Job opportunities
- Lifestyles, etc.

A lot of research has been conducted on this topic, but there are still too many questions which have not been addressed yet. For example, environmental refugees who want to stay permanently in the host country fall into two categories, (i) the ones who want to benefit themselves but also the country too and (ii) the ones that want to take advantage of assets provided.

## METHODS AND DATA RESOURCES

The most significant methods which were used during the research are network modelling, qualitative research of legal and policy documentations and quantitative analysis of data.

Qualitative analysis was used for analyses of Official documents and legislation forms. It was the best way to determine the difference between definitions and policies which are used for refugees and migrants nowadays.

Definitions of the migration process which are used in the current work can be separated in subdivisions, to understand the differences between them a graph below includes all main definitions of relocation.

### **Migration terminology**

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) suggests the following definition for migration related situations and people in 2004.

*Forced migration* is the non-voluntary movement of persons in order to escape armed conflict, situation of violence, violation of his their rights, a natural disaster or a man-made disaster. This term applies to refugee movements and forced exchanges of population between states.

*Return migration* is the movement of a person returning to his or her country of origin, or habitual residence, after spending at least one year in another country.

*Trafficking in persons* is defined in the Protocol to the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, f abduction, of fraud, of deception, the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation includes, at the minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery, or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

*Internally displaced* person is defined in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement to mean a person forced leave his or her habitual residence spontaneously, in order to flee an armed conflict, situations of widespread violence or systematic human rights violations, or to escape natural or man-made disasters or their effects. This term also covers persons displaced within the borders of their country of origin, who are not covered be the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees because they did not cross an internationally recognized border.

*Refugee* is a person who, pursuant to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country.

By the reason of the non-existence of an official definition for “environmental refugee” results and outcomes which follow these debates are reflected in the main body of the thesis.

Through all my work I used different types of data, like:

Maps (migration flow, critical areas to clarify the situation more and also separate environmental refugees from political refugees and economic migrants)

Population (amount of people who are migrating due to climate changes and environmental problems)

Secondary admissible data which was used in my work was taken from official websites of worldwide organizations:

- IOM International Organization for Migration,
- UNHCR The UN refugees agency,
- European Union Migration Policy,
- Convention of Refugees (UN),
- Hungarian Migration Policy,
- Internal Displacement Organization.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

There are numerous historical examples of out-migration post-disaster, such as population movements caused by drought in East Africa in the 1980s and 90s, following Hurricane Mitch in Central America in the late 1990s, and due to perennial flooding in South Asia (*Naik et al., 2007*).

Hunter provides a synthesis on migration and environmental hazards and notes that classical theoretical perspectives acknowledge that environmental conditions influence migration but they rarely emphasize it.

Where migrants do go abroad, they tend to travel along pre-existing paths where they have family ties or old colonial relationships (for example, Bangladeshis go to India, Indonesians to Sumatra etc.) (*Hernandez-Coss et al., 2008*).

The term “environmental refugees” was popularized for the first time by Lester Brown from the Worldwatch Institute in the 1970s, but the first people who drew attention to this subject were Essam El-Hinnawi and Jodi Jacobson (*Black, 2001*). El-Hinnawi defined the concept of environmental refugees in 1985 in the report for the United Nations Environment Program and called these refugees as people “who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life”. By ‘environmental disruption’ is meant any physical, chemical and/or biological changes in the ecosystem (or the resources base) that render it temporarily or permanently, unsuitable to support human life (*Wijnberg and Leiderman, 2004*).

According to Norman Myers (2002) environmental refugees are people who can no longer gain a secure livelihood in their homelands because of drought, soil erosion, desertification and other environmental problems, together with the associated problems of population pressures and profound poverty. In their desperation, these people feel they have no alternative but to seek sanctuary elsewhere, however hazardous the attempt is. Not all of them have fled their countries, many being ‘internally displaced’. But all have abandoned their homelands with little hope of foreseeable return.

Luxembourg Institute of Socio-economic research (LiSER) Foundation, which is specialized on this issue, simply defines environmental refugees on its website as “people getting in trouble because their livelihoods have been damaged due to natural or human causes” (*www.liser.lu*, n.d.).

Stuart M. *Leiderman* (2002). claims that an environmental refugee is “someone fleeing or who has fled from a natural disaster or chain of events that includes severe environmental deterioration; depending on combination of causes, they may be both environmental refugees, even refugees from economic disaster”.

Terms, such as “climate change refugee” or “environmental refugee” are widely used in the media but these terms are a misnomer under international law and risk undermining the very precise legal definition of a refugee and the protection regime which exists (*Martin*, 2009).

According to *IOM* (2007) in the absence of an internationally agreed definition, a working definition was developed in 2007 which defines “environmental migrants” as follows: “Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.”

“People who are displaced from or who feel obliged to leave their usual place of residence, because their lives, livelihoods and welfare have been placed at serious risk as a result of adverse environmental, ecological or climatic processes and events.” (*Gorlick*, 2007).

The impact of environmental change on global society is a matter of increasing concern for policy makers and the wider public as awareness of human-induced climate change increases. Rising sea levels, deforestation and dryland degradation, as well as natural disasters, pose challenges in terms of their effect on development and livelihoods, settlement options, food production and health. These environmental events and processes have been predicted to lead to the large-scale displacement of people – both internally and internationally – with estimates of some 200 million to 1 billion migrants resulting from climate change alone, by 2050 (*Jacobson*, 1988; *Myers*, 1997, 2002; *Stern et al.*, 2006).

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights provided a comprehensive framework to promote and protect human and civil rights. But, since that time, intergovernmental organizations and national governments have found it increasingly necessary to extend and reinforce this framework for specific groups or categories of people. Thus, the protection of displaced people, particularly where migration appears to be forced rather than voluntary, is well established both as a concept and through norms and legal instruments in domestic and international law (*Zetter*, 2008).

Several human rights conventions and norms are dealing with forced displacement due to oppression, conflict and disasters – noticeably in the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol and, more recently, the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The main principles distributing through un-biding norms, similar legislation stipulations for the protection of internally displaced people to those existing for the much smaller number of refugees are covered by the refugee Convention and Protocol.

The provisions mentioned above elaborate in regional and especially national instruments where the main principles of protection lie. Unfortunately, rights protection for refugees and IDPs is becoming increasingly disputed and fragile. For these reasons, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) agenda of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) is a newly emerging phase of the protection policy discourse.

The main question is whether any of these policies pay attention to the migration problem of environmental refugees. If there are any forms of protection for environmentally displaced people currently existing, one of the responses was given by intergovernmental agencies and NGOs: IASC, IOM, EC, NRC, UNHCR and The Hague Debates.

It is not an easy topic, especially in case if we have to separate climate change impacts and environmental disaster impacts that cause migration, but where climate change is not a factor. In my point of view, climate change is responsible for long term changes on a global level, which the human race is not able to stop, but can slow it down and stop being one of the push factors. So, in case of this, treatments and policy should be narrowed to environmental disasters. Hence, if we are not able to fight the reasons of environmental disasters, and as their consequence, climate change, still there are many ways against natural hazards, to prevent them or at least be ready for extreme changes.

Expanding the definition to include the so-called 'environmental refugees' is deeply problematic. It is erroneous to consider environmental change as a persecutory agent in the Convention sense, much less a state-sponsored process. Moreover, only in extreme cases, where competition for depleting resources might lead to conflict, would people be forced to flee (*Rueveny, 2007*). Thus, the term 'refugee' should not be used to describe those who are displaced, either in part or entirely, by environmental factors (*Renaud et al., 2007; Keane, 2004*).

However, it is not appropriate to call them just "internal displacement". Because there are too many occasions in which they do not fit in. For example, if they leave their houses but later on they could be back I can agree, but in situation like Kiribati, where the government bought some place in Fiji to have place where they could replace people, because the island will disappear completely. It is not just a temporary displacement. At worst that whole nation can just vanish from the planet. And this is one of the scariest ends in these circumstances.

This displacement can create a new interracial problem, refugees will not have rights as original citizens. And no one will be able to protect them. To prevent this, I think it is logical to give them framework of "refugees". With the help of this and specific policy the process of adaptation is going to be simplified.

Renegotiating the Convention to incorporate 'environmental refugees' would, inevitably, introduce greater complexity and confusion into status-determination procedures. Moreover, in the current political climate, distorting the definition in this way would risk reducing still further the states' responsibility for, and standards of, protection and assistance for refugees (*Castles, 2002; Kibreab, 1997; Lopez, 2007; McGregor, 1993; Subrke, 1994*).

Furthermore, except for border regions where traditional patterns of migration often ignore national boundaries, the majority of people displaced by the environmental impacts of climate change are unlikely to cross international borders – the defining characteristic of a refugee, in international law. They will remain in their own countries, moving to urban or rural areas where environmental resource depletion is less intense. Again, it is critical to avoid referring to them as refugees. Given that the majority remains internally displaced, they will thus fall within the rubric of national norms and legal instruments to protect their human rights. In these circumstances, the case for extending or adapting the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement is much more compelling.

The line of reasoning, which shifts the focus of debate from protection to mitigation and compensatory remedies (such as carbon trading), is reinforced by those invoking security concerns. The scale of potential migration is thought to be so large that countries less affected by climate change will find it impossible to secure their borders so as to prevent the entry of migrants fleeing such change. In addition, even migrations that occur within developing countries represent a potential source of local conflicts and wider threats to global security (*Rueveny, 2007; Baechler, 1999*).

Finally, the concept of refugees is often predicated on the contention that those who are forcibly displaced will ‘go home’ – the ideal solution among three possible ‘durable’ solutions to refugee displacement – resettlement or third country settlement being the other two. Although people displaced by rapid-onset disasters precipitated by climate change, such as floods and hurricanes, may well return home, those who are displaced by slow-onset and permanent environmental change will not return home and the term refugee will, once again, be misleading.

During the analyses of the documents and policies, a lot of graphs and tables were found which include the links between natural disasters and migration processes. However, they were not specifying which type of migration followed gradual or extreme disasters. In order to simplify and clarify the situation between those to procedures, I created a framework (*Figure 2*), which contains the most common and general types of natural disasters and types of migration. In my belief, this can be used for policy making and for differentiation between sub-groups in natural disasters and relocation as well.

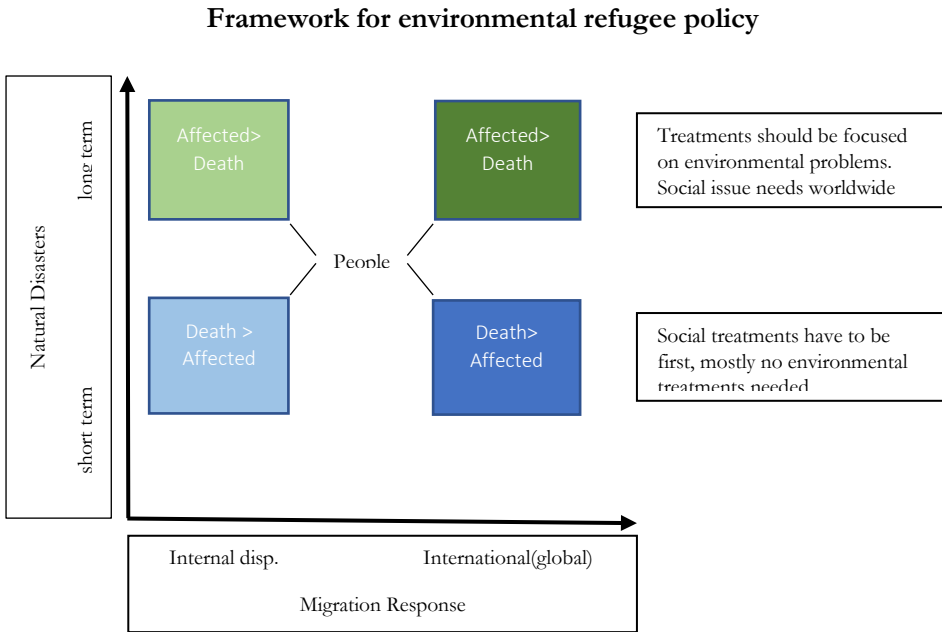
This Framework was based on the most important information due to natural disasters and migration processes, with the aim to simplify categories.

Here on the left vertical line we can find two types of natural hazards in case of time scale.

Short term disasters such hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunami etc. are concerned here. The next level consisted of gradual problems such as soil erosion, desertification, rising of sea level etc. Migration Respond takes place on the bottom horizontal line, which can be present in two different categories as well. First is Internal displacement, which means movements happening within the borders of one country, however the next group is called International or (Global), which presumes cross border migration. What was taking my attention, and why this framework was made in this way, is the fact that these subgroups need to have different types of policies. According to this the main field of treatment changes from one situation to another one.



Figure 2



Hence there are 4 different situations which can happen, but there are two ways of solving them. In case of short term natural disasters in my point of view, the main subjects are supposed to be so far, I call it “social treatments”, which mean resource and forces should be focused on fast relocation of inhabitants in certain places because the death rate during these hazards is higher than the level of affected people (only in terms of survival).

On the other hand, when it comes to gradual problems the amount of people affected mostly takes the first place compared to death rate. It means that policies should be narrowed on preventing this type of situations, forced and all potential must be focused on environmental treatments for the region, where the problem takes place.

According to this we have 2 ways of policies:

1. Social, where the question is to rescue people of the affected area, and later rebuild and bring habitual lifestyle;
2. Environmental, here financing and technological supports need to be focused on solving environmental (natural) problems, like soil erosion etc. And the migration process cannot be done without the support of international organizations, neighbouring countries.

To be more precise, none of the international (global) migration processes can be done without the coordination of international organizations, because they act as guarantor of the fulfillment of all conditions which are based on Human Rights Law. Also they can prevent interracial conflicts. In case of legislation and official documents work would be present in an appropriate way. Financial donations can be under their monitoring. First Aid, which is one of the most important issues, will be

delivered and distributed according to the rules. Psychological help, which is going to be necessary in both cases as well, can be provided by worldwide organizations.

## CONCLUSION

Climate change itself does not cause a migration process, but environmental problems which are “push” factors for relocation. The UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) says disasters – storms, floods and droughts – have increased threefold over the past 30 years. It is also generally accepted that global warming will cause a rise in sea levels that will, in turn, displace people; according to a 2007 World Bank study, sea levels rising a single meter would displace 56 million people in 84 developing countries (*Ferris, 2008*).

It is very important to use data and examine the past disasters for making a prediction for the nearest future. Hence, there is a problem that experts are struggling with the lack of data and establishing evidence-based linkages between migration and climate events continue.

Furthermore, there are some questions to which until now we do not have the answers, for example:

The potential answer for natural disasters is relocation a typical response? How many inhabitants try to adapt to new environment? In which cases is it possible to adapt, which treatments and policies should be used for these situations?

The return of refugees to post-disasters areas. How often can they be back to habitual places, how many of them are coming back? Do we have new people in these areas, for example workers which was due to the replacement of the regions, scientists, social workers? Because sometimes people can just replace each other. In case if agriculture it does not mean to establish it again in the same place, but the profile of the region can be shifted to industrial, we have original people who keep on working in agriculture in a new region or even a new country, while other workers prefer to start their lives in a post-disaster area. How can we track the flow of people and what is more important can we predict which countries will receive migrants? So far there have been too many research fields in this area.

I believe that this problem depends not only on people living in risky areas, it depends on human beings in general. Unfortunately, the results can be very dramatic, we can simply lose some nationalities and lands. Searching for a possible solution, it does not depend only on International organizations, but taking responsibilities on a state government level as well.

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