

One good reason to speak of 'climate refugees'

François Gemenne

The concept of 'environmental refugees', or 'climate refugees', has been progressively abandoned, as having no legal basis. I want to argue that there are good reasons to use the term.

The difficulty of isolating environmental factors from other drivers of migration¹ still exists but no-one now seems to deny their importance as a driving force of displacement. The concept of 'environmental migration' is now a common feature in migration studies, and the number of research projects, workshops and conferences on this topic has vastly expanded in recent years.

Some geologists advocate the use of the term 'Anthropocene' to signal a new geological era, the Age of Humans, where we have become the major force of transformation of the Earth. This is a formidable political statement. And it is also a statement for the social sciences: that the world – the social and political organisation of the Earth – can no longer be thought of separately from the Earth. Both the world and the Earth need to be conceived of as one global system; geopolitics is no longer about power over territories, about land and sea, but about the Earth as a whole. Geopolitics is transformed into the politics of the Earth.

But there's another way to see this. We also need to be aware of the de-politicisation of subjects that this can imply. Even if humans have indeed replaced natural drivers of changes as the principal agents of changes on this planet, most humans are actually the victims of these changes, and not their agents.

Migration as a commodity

As the concept of 'environmental migration' gained currency, migration was less perceived as a decision of last resort that people take when they have exhausted all possible options for adaptation in their place of origin. Many scholars, including myself, had insisted that this depiction of migrants did not match reality, and that migration was often a resource used by migrants to deal

with environmental changes. We insisted that migrants should not be perceived as resourceless victims, paying the price of climate change, but rather as resourceful agents of their own adaptation. We argued that migration could indeed prove to be a powerful adaptation strategy whereby migrants could diversify their incomes, alleviate environmental pressures in the region of origin, send remittances, or simply put themselves and their families out of harm's way. And this view was soon embraced by many institutions and organisations. It even made its way into the international negotiations on climate change. In 2010, the Cancun Adaptation Framework spoke of "measures to enhance understanding, coordination and cooperation with regard to climate change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation (...)".²

That was a paradigm shift: that migration in the context of climate change was no longer a disaster to avoid at all costs but a strategy that ought to be encouraged and facilitated. The movement of people was no longer a matter of migration policy but rather of environmental policy – an adaptation strategy.

What about those who were forced to flee as a result of environmental disruptions, those who would have liked to stay but had no other choice? These displacements were now considered as a sort of a collateral damage that could be addressed through the Loss and Damage mechanism designed in the climate negotiations.

Migration related to climate change had become something that we could enable, facilitate and manage. And this is something that we, as a research community, had pushed forward and wished for.

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Why we let migrants down

Upon further thought, however, I am forced to realise that there is something that we had missed out in this process of 'de-victimisation' of migrants. We had used environmental change to de-politicise migration and, in our quest to make research policy-relevant, we had let policies take over politics. In our attempt to stress the agency of the migrants, we had forgotten the responsibility that we had towards them, because we humans have become the main agents of transformation of the Earth. And the result of this transformation has been to make their places on the Earth increasingly uninhabitable for a growing number of people.

A fundamental difficulty in the collective action against climate change is that those who need to undertake most of the effort to cut greenhouse gas emissions – the industrialised countries – are also those that will be comparatively less affected by the impacts of global warming. Industrialised nations have thus little incentive to act; our agency is undone by our self-interest.

Climate change, indeed, is rooted in the inequalities between rich and poor; and migration is the mode through which these inequalities materialise. Early theories on migration assumed that migration could be an adjustment between inequalities, yet it is the symptom rather than the cure.

De-politicising migration

In the press and in public debates, those uprooted by climate change were once often called 'climate refugees'. Legal scholars and international organisations, however, have been very keen to dismiss the term as having no legal basis. Most scholars – logically – agreed not to use the term and to use more clinical terms such as 'climate-induced migrants', 'mobility in the context of climate change', etc. I was one of them, and I think I was wrong.

By forgoing the term 'climate refugee' we had also de-politicised the reality of these migrations. A central element in the concept

of 'refugee' is persecution: in order to qualify as a refugee, you need to be fleeing persecution, or to fear persecution. Forgoing the term 'climate refugee' is also, in a way, forgoing the idea that climate change is a form of persecution against the most vulnerable and that climate-induced migration is a very political matter, rather than an environmental one.³ For this reason, and contrary to what I might have thought (and written) in the past, and despite the legal difficulties, I think this is a very strong reason to use the term again: because it recognises that these migrations are first and foremost the result of a persecution that we are inflicting on the most vulnerable.

In April 2013 in Bangladesh the Rana Plaza garment factory collapsed with the death of more than 1,000 workers. At that time, I was struck by the international reaction to the disaster: not only was there a wide-ranging outcry at the working conditions in these factories but many people held the clothing companies responsible for the disaster. Some stopped buying clothes from high-street retail chains and called for a boycott, or demanded better working conditions for the garment workers in Bangladesh. It was as if people had suddenly realised that their buying clothes had consequences for people on the other side of the planet.

But Bangladesh is also a country at the forefront of climate impacts, where displacements are already a common feature. Yet the connection between the action of some and the suffering of others, which was made on the occasion of the Rana Plaza tragedy, does not seem to be made for climate change. And this is why there is at least one very good reason to speak of 'climate refugees'.

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1. See Dun O & Gemenne F, 'Defining "environmental migration"', *Forced Migration Review* issue 31 www.fmreview.org/en/FMRpdfs/FMR31/10-11.pdf
2. Article 14 (f)
3. Conisbee M & Simms A (2003) *Environmental Refugees. The case for Recognition*. London, New Economics Foundation.