

Humanitarian silos: climate change-induced displacement

Panel contribution to the Population-Environment Research Network Cyberseminar,
“Preparing for Population Displacement and Resettlement Associated with Climate Change and
Large Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Projects” (November 2011),
<http://www.populationenvironmentresearch.org/seminars.jsp>

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Abstract: *This short paper offers some personal reflections, from a humanitarian perspective, on the challenges of working across disciplines in approaching the issue of human mobility and climate change. In my work on climate change and displacement, I have found myself reading research reports by demographers, geographers, natural scientists, economists, sociologists and environmentalists and I often have the sense that a) they approach this from different starting points than those working on displacement, b) they speak a different language, and c) they're directing their remarks at a different constituency. All of this impedes communication and makes learning from other disciplines difficult. I believe that humanitarian actors have much to contribute to these discussions because of their commitment to and experience with working with refugees and displaced people. But sometimes humanitarians have little patience with abstract theoretical research written primarily for other academics. They are less interested in the contributions of a particular case study to theoretical developments in academic disciplines than to studies which can help them in their work.*

Almost from the beginning of the modern international humanitarian system, key humanitarian actors have focused on displacement, beginning with those forced to leave their countries as refugees because of persecution, conflict or other forms of human rights violations¹ and much later on those displaced internally by conflict, human rights violations, natural and man-made disasters and development projects, known as internally displaced people (IDPs).² Humanitarian actors have thus developed considerable expertise in identifying the needs of displaced populations and of developing mechanisms to respond to them -- mechanisms which function more or less well. The systems which developed for responding to migration, to those displaced by development projects and to a lesser extent, those displaced by natural disasters, were certainly influenced by the discourse on forced displacement, but by and large developed on separate tracks.

While the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change from its very first report in 1990 raised the specter of large-scale population movements, most humanitarians saw this as fairly speculative and reacted strongly (and negatively) to terms such as ‘climate or environmental refugees.’ The term ‘refugee’ is well-established in law – indeed there is a 60-year old convention, a UN agency (UNHCR) mandated to protect and assist refugees, and decades of jurisprudence, national legislation, and policies developed in support of precise definitions of refugee. The humanitarian agencies were thus not very interested in working seriously on issues of climate change and displacement when the discourse ran counter to well-established legal principles. Many of them saw this speculation as a type of scare tactic to drum up support for climate change mitigation efforts³. Moreover the humanitarian issues of the 1990s – Somalia,

¹ UNHCR, “The 1951 Refugee Convention,” <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html>

² UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2, 1998, www.brookings.edu/projects/idp/gp_page.aspx

³ Susan Martin, *Climate Change and International Migration*, Background Paper WMR 2010, IOM, http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=37&products_id=634

Rwanda, Afghanistan, Bosnia – were so all-encompassing that there was little time or inclination to engage comprehensively with the possibility of large-scale movements of people, that might or might not happen and, if they did, would probably fall into the conceptually sticky category of environmental factors influencing migration, rather than the conceptually clear and legally precise definition of refugees.

That began to change with the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami when many humanitarian actors experienced in responding to conflict situations found themselves responding to those affected by and displaced by the tsunami. Since then, the issue of sudden-onset natural disasters has received much more public attention and, in confronting the possibility that disasters are expected to increase in severity in the future as a result of climate change, have begun to take climate change more seriously. However, they have done so from different entry points, motivated by a desire to:

- Prepare for and reduce the risk of both sudden and slow-onset natural disasters
- Consider the possibility that climate change will increase conflict in certain parts of the world and thus lead to the need to prepare for more traditional refugee/IDP flows or, in another variation, consider climate change as a force multiplier of other global trends which will together affect humanitarian work in the future
- Look at the environmental impacts of their own actions in the context of climate change adaptation
- Begin to consider whether their expertise would be needed in related areas of either managing migration or planning relocations of populations because of the effects of climate change.

Like most people, humanitarians tend to approach the issues primarily from the perspective of their mandates, experience, and expertise. Thus UNHCR looks at the possibility that the effects of climate change might lead to cross-border movements in the context of the potential need for new normative frameworks beyond the 1951 Refugee Convention. The UN Special Representative on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Person and his successor have sought to assess the potential effects of climate change on internal displacement and particularly on the human rights of those displaced.⁴ The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has stressed the likelihood that the effects of climate change will be felt most acutely by the most vulnerable groups within societies⁵. The International Organization for Migration (IOM)⁶ has carried out considerable research on potential migration flows resulting from the effects of climate change. Those working on natural disasters, such as the International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies, tend to naturally concentrate on improving the system for responding to disasters. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) which is charged by the UN with coordinating humanitarian response increasingly focuses on enhancing preparedness for disasters. This is not to be confused with disaster risk reduction which is firmly embedded in the development community (and it should be noted that the humanitarian and development silos are particularly well-entrenched). Thus the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR)⁷, the World Bank's Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR)⁸, UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery's work on disaster risk reduction⁹, are all efforts to reduce the effects of future natural hazards on human populations. Meanwhile another part of the World Bank looks

⁴ Full disclosure: the Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement, of which I am a co-director, is a joint initiative with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs.

⁵ OHCHR, *Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the relationship between climate change and human rights*, A/HRC/10/61, 2009, <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/2763451.33781433.html>

⁶ IOM, "Migration, Climate Change and the Environment", <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/pid/2068>

⁷ <http://www.unisdr.org/>

⁸ <http://www.gfdrr.org/gfdrr/>

⁹ http://www.undp.org/cpr/we_do/integrating_risk.shtml

at resettlement of disaster-affected populations, including preventive relocations, based on their pathbreaking work on development-forced displacement and resettlement. International NGOs have increasingly taken up the issue of displacement and climate change, with different perspectives and findings.¹⁰ All of these organizations come together in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee which set up a task force to work on climate change in 2009 and has pursued discussions with the directors of the various international organizations involved in humanitarian response.¹¹

A lot of this work by humanitarian agencies has been intended for internal consumption: to prepare the organizations to respond to the possibility of increased population movements resulting from climate change. As the issue of climate change has become more prominent on the international scene, it is also likely that at least some of this debate is intended to influence external audiences, such as donors, by trying to ensure that agencies aren't left out of response to a major new trend. (A similar phenomenon is apparent after a major natural disaster where organizations of all sorts want to be seen to be actively responding.)

In some of my work on climate change and displacement, I have found myself reading research reports by demographers, geographers, natural scientists, economists, sociologists and environmentalists and I often have the sense that a) they approach this from different starting points than those working on displacement, b) they speak a different language, and c) they're directing their remarks at a different constituency. All of this impedes communication and makes learning from other disciplines difficult. For example, earlier this year I gave a presentation on possible lessons from development-forced displacement and resettlement for potential displacement resulting from climate change. The first problem in bridging the different fields was simply terminology. For anyone with a refugee background, the word 'resettlement' can only refer to the resettlement of refugees to a third country (Vietnamese refugees, for example, were resettled from the region to many countries following the Vietnamese war). To hear the word 'resettlement' used in a completely different context is jarring. In another example, while I perhaps naively assumed that community-based approaches to disaster risk reduction (DRR) were similar to community-based preparedness measures, I was roundly rebuked by a UN official, "no, these are completely different initiatives – ISDR does DRR, OCHA does preparedness." Words matter.

Interdisciplinary approaches, I'm convinced, will be needed to understand the complexity of climate change-induced displacement. There will be different types of human mobility – some voluntary, some forced and a lot in between. Planned relocations of communities may be necessary if areas become uninhabitable because of the effects of climate change, but the whole financial support for resettlement is likely to be far different from the World Bank's many years of experience with resettling populations in support of development projects. Probably most of the population movements will be internal, but some people and communities will be forced to move outside their countries of origin, raising not only questions of adaptation, but also serious legal issues.

I believe that humanitarian actors have much to contribute to these discussions because of their commitment to and experience with working with refugees and displaced people. But sometimes (to over-generalize) humanitarians have little patience with abstract theoretical research written primarily for other academics. They are less interested in the contributions of a particular case study to theoretical developments in academic disciplines than to studies which can help them in their work. They are more apt to read short research reports than long academic articles. They are apt to be put off by references to 'climate refugees' and struggle with the concept of 'resettlement.' But they are vitally interested in the

¹⁰ See for example: Norwegian Refugee Council, *Climate Changed: People Displaced*, 2009, <http://www.nrc.no/?did=9448676>, see also: Christian Aid, *Human Tide: The Real Migration Crisis*, May 2007, www.christianaid.org.uk/Images/human-tide.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.icva.ch/doc00003211.html>

issues. If those of you from different disciplines want to engage with humanitarians, check out some of the papers they have written on climate change (see for example, www.reliefweb.int). Invite them to your meetings and conferences.

How to encourage interdisciplinary approaches in general? Write a research paper with someone from another discipline and struggle through the different terminologies. Read journal articles and books from other disciplines. Offer to present a paper at a conference other than your own discipline. Invite experts from different disciplines to your meetings. Seek research funding for an interdisciplinary project. And try to get beyond the different terms and jargon of your own discipline. Interdisciplinary approaches often demand that we move beyond our comfort zones, but the issue of climate change and human mobility has already inspired important interdisciplinary efforts and much more is possible.