

Environmental Migrants: A Term and Global Challenge to Learn?

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1. Introduction and the Context

Environmental migrants, climate change refugees, environmentally displaced persons, victims of environmental abuse...¹ These are brand new terms and phrases of the last decade that we should learn and put these words into the centre of attention of global migration and movement studies. As of 2015, however, the migration cannot directly and exclusively be interlinked to environmental changes, but experts say that today's migration situation has partially taken place due to climate changes with subsequent desertification, water and food shortage and their (political, economic, etc.) consequences in some certain regions.

The researches forecast that this problem is going to reach a higher level of global importance within the next decades; however, there are two approaches within the leading literature to pose this issue as a myth or reality.² Nevertheless, the former myth-side does not deny the severity of environmental changes and the phenomenon itself, but tends to interlink it to other more apparent migration-forcing causes (primarily political ones, wars, etc.) and the representatives cannot prove convincingly that solely and exclusively environmental changes lead to migration without other forcing negative effects. Astri Suhrke distinguishes two clear approaches; therefore, with his wording, a 'minimalist' and a 'maximalist' approach can be apprehended: the „*minimalist view – sees environmental change as a contextual variable that can contribute to migration, but warns that we lack sufficient knowledge about the process to draw firm conclusions. The other perspective sets out a maximalist view, arguing that environmental degradation has already displaced millions of people, and more displacement is on the way.*”³ This Janus-faced inherent reality is apparently mirrored in the studies of environmental migration.

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¹ Although the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' do not have the same meaning, the environmental-based migration studies mostly use these terms interchangeably within the special terminology.

² See e.g. Black, Richard: *Environmental Refugees: Myth or Reality?* UNHCR Working Papers, 2001. No. 34, 1-19.

³ Suhrke, Astri: *Pressure Points: Environmental Degradation, Migration and Conflict*. Cambridge, American Academy of Art and Science, 1993. 4.

This article deals with the phenomenon itself by setting the problem and analyzing its appearance in the relevant literature by highlighting the most prominent scholar views and basic key findings of the given field.

2. Environmental Migration and its Current Legal Status

First and foremost, it is worth mentioning that the global treaties on migration do not contain any rules on the „wellfounded fear” of environmental changes; the definition of refugees exclusively focuses on life-threatening fears due to mostly political motivations. The socio-economic as well as environmental vulnerability of the individual goes beyond the domain of such treaties.

The milestone treaty, namely the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol define the term of „refugee” as an individual who has a „...*wellfounded 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 nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.*”⁴

Upon this definition, solely the climatic and other environmental detrimental effects do not provide basis for guaranteeing refugee status to those people who voluntarily leave their countries as refugees. The causes are simple: first, in 1951 the negative effects of environmental changes could not be proven in such a way as we got to know them in the last two decades; secondly, the historical and political context of adopting these instruments rather favoured the settlement of the post-World War II refugees’ status (who were, of course, not environmentally displaced persons).

Hence, the legal answer is unequivocally negative concerning the recognition of the environmentally displaced person’s refugee status; however, the social reality of environmental migration is clear and palpable and it is getting increasing importance.

3. Working Definitions of the Relevant Term

⁴ 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Article 1, A. (2).

Essam El-Hinnawi, one of the forerunners of the analyzed field made an attempt (first-ever) to define the term 'environmental refugee', which reads as follows: „*those 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' in this definition is meant any physical, chemical, and/or biological changes in the ecosystem (or resource base) that render it, temporarily or permanently, unsuitable to support human life.*”⁵

However, in 2008 Dun and Gemenne pointed out that „there is currently no consensus on definitions in this field of study” and „the main reason for the lack of definition relating to migration caused by environmental degradation or change is linked to the difficulty of isolating environmental factors from other drivers of migration.”⁶

But afterwards, the field of analysis has a relatively wide-scale and all-inclusive definition on 'environmentally displaced person' adopted by the research report of 2009 International Organisation for Migration, which reads as follows: „*persons or groups of persons who, for 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.*”⁷

The similar term of 'environmental migrants' has also been defined by the Organization in its 2007 working report, thereupon these individuals „*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.*”⁸

Due to the well-known post-2009 events (economic crisis, wars in ecologically vulnerable territories, signs of climate changes, accelerating environmental damages), the number of studies and reports dealing with such issues are expected to rise significantly, which could provide grounds to create a definition within the text of obligatory documents (e.g. treaties). In reality, the political interest and will of negotiating a draft treaty text on environmental refugees (or distinct environmental migration-related issues) cannot be detected due to the

⁵ El-Hinnawi, Essam: *Environmental Refugees*. Nairobi, United Nations Environment Programme, 1985. 4.

⁶ Dun, Olivia – Gemenne, François: Defining 'Environmental Migration'. *Forced Migration Review*, Vol. 31, October 2008, 10.

⁷ The State of Current Knowledge and Gaps: A Summary of Key Findings. In: Laczko, Frank – Aghazarm, Christine (eds.): *Migration Environment and Climate Change: Assessing the Evidence*. Geneva, International Organisation for Migration, 2009. 17-27.

⁸ *International Organisation for Migration Discussion Note: Migration and the Environment*, MC/INF/288, 1 November 2007.

divergent *raison d'État* and the subsequent multi-faced political aims of the states, clearly shown in contemporary (as of 2015) refugee crisis.

4. The Relevant Studies and Scientific Literature on Environmental Migration

The phenomenon of environment-related migration is coeval with mankind, whether these migration flows took place in the ancient times (when states, and thus, state borders did not exist) or they were and are attached to inter-state migrations across state borders (from the antiquity to the contemporary period). Nevertheless, the search and pursuit of natural resources (and to leave the exploited and run-down areas) was always the motive of human migration and settlement throughout the history of mankind. Still, the studies of the analyzed field only emerged in the late 1980s. First and foremost, Essam El-Hinnawi's work (*Environmental Refugees*. United Nations Environment Programme, Nairobi, 1985.) was the first scholar contribution to put this issue into the limelight in order to raise the attention of the global actors as well as the public.

The general migration studies overwhelmingly agreed on the fact – firstly published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 1993⁹ – that refugee flows have four main reasons, namely: i) political instability; ii) economic tensions; iii) ethnic conflicts and iv) environmental degradation.¹⁰

Suhrke divided the category of environmental refugees into six groups upon six vulnerabilities and the six most dangerous detrimental changes in our environment. Suhrke pointed out that environmental migrants are forced to leave their homes, regions (internal migration) and countries (international cross-border migration) due to the threats of i) deforestation; ii) rising sea level; iii) desertification and drought; iv) land degradation; v) water and air degradation and vi) pressure points.¹¹

Nowadays, Norman Myers estimated that 'environmental refugees' are driven by three major sources: i) population growth, ii) sea-level rise and iii) an increase in extreme weather

⁹ *The State of the World's Refugees 1993: The Challenge of Protection*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Geneva, Switzerland, 1993.

¹⁰ On the environmental degradation and its impacts on migration, see Lonergan, Steve. The role of environmental degradation in population displacement. *Environmental Change and Security Program Report*. Washington, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1998. Issue 4, 5-15.

¹¹ Suhrke: *op. cit.* 11-15.

events.¹² Furthermore, he carried out a case-study and within this work Myers surveys the Haitian experience on the migration of the people due to weather changes.¹³ Besides, the most graphic and shocking examples primarily come from the African and South-Asian overpopulated and ecologically vulnerable regions.¹⁴

However, the most elaborated and complex system for the classification is carried out by Diane Bates, who identified three 'refugee terms' for three 'forcing levels' to three 'types of threats and disruptions'. She set out the system of i) involuntary migration of environmental refugees due to disasters; ii) the compelled migration of environmental emigrants due to expropriation of environment and iii) voluntary migration of migrants due to deterioration of environment.¹⁵ Such kind of triple division aptly explains the three different migration motivations as well as it makes the basically sociological analysis more focused and problem-based on the root causes and causality, as well.

Gaim Kibreab is most noted for his critical approach of the issue and the encroaching literature by emphasizing that the term 'environmental refugee' was „invented at least in part to depoliticise the causes of displacement, so enabling states to derogate their obligation to provide asylum. The rationale is that states have no obligation to provide asylum to those who flee their homes because of environmental deterioration rather than political persecution.”¹⁶ Kibreab further stated that „environmental change and population displacement are the consequences of war and insecurity rather than their causes.”¹⁷ These thoughts articulated by

¹² Myers, Norman: Environmental Refugees: A Growing Phenomenon of the 21st Century. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society: Biological Sciences*, 2002, 609-613.

¹³ *Ibid.* 609-610.

¹⁴ See e.g. Otunnu, Ogenga: Environmental Refugees in Sub-Saharan Africa. Causes and Effects. *Refuge*, Vol. 12 (June 1992) No. 1, 11-14. Babu, Suresh Chandra – Rashid, Hassan: International Migration and Environmental Degradation – The Case of Mozambican Refugees and Forest Resources in Malawi. *Journal of Environmental Management*, March 1995, 233-247., Swain, Ashok: Displacing the Conflict: Environmental Destruction in Bangladesh and Ethnic Conflict in India. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 33 (1996) No. 2, 189-204. From the Hungarian language literature, see Erdő, Mariann: A környezeti menekült jelensége [The Phenomenon of Environmental Refugee]. In: Smuk Péter (ed.): *Az állam és jog alapvető értékei II.* [Fundamental Values of State and Law, Volume II.]. Győr, SZE Állam- és Jogtudományi Doktori Iskola, 2010. 150-166. On the political and ecological aspects of African migration flows from the Hungarian literature, see Glied Viktor: Klímaváltozás, klímamigráció és globális NGO-k Afrikában [Climate Change, Climate Migration and Global NGOs in Africa]. *Afrika Tanulmányok* [Studies on Africa], Vol. 5 (2011) No. 3, 4-32. There is also a well-articulated view that the case of the Oceanic state of Tuvalu provided the best examples for environmental refugees. See Farbotko, Carol – Lazrus, Heather (2012). The First Climate Refugees? Contesting Global Narratives of Climate Change in Tuvalu. *Global Environmental Change*, Vol. 22 (2012) No. 2, 382-390.

¹⁵ Bates, Diane: Environmental Refugees? Classifying Human Migrations Caused by Environmental Change. *Population and Environment*, Vol. 23 (2002) No. 5, 468-475.

¹⁶ Kibreab, Gaim: Environmental Causes and Impacts of Refugee Movements: A Critique of the Current Debate. *Disasters*, Vol. 21 (1997) Issue 1, 21.

¹⁷ Kibreab: *op. cit.* 33. The argumentation reads as follows: „war and insecurity force people and their animals to congregate in safer areas. Over time, the safer areas get over-exploited while the unsafe areas remain un- or under-used. If the duration of the state of confinement is extended, as it is for many, flight in search of safety and livelihood then becomes the only option.” *Ibid.*

Kibreab are, however, shared by only the minority of authors of the research community studying environmental migrants.

Nowadays, irrespective of the scholarly definitions and their acceptance, some facts are very clear within our field: i) yet, the environmental changes have deep but not exclusive impacts on migration; ii) the environmental detrimental effects are closely interconnected to multiple problems (political, cultural); iii) the elements of such complex systems have a characteristic internal interaction therein (the impacts are strengthening each other); iv) the clear evidence of solely environmental change-induced refugee flows and 'climatic migration' has never been proven; but v) the climatic changes had great influence on the vulnerability of societies and state powers, which could easily lead to turmoils and even wars and then voluntary migration, as well.

5. Conclusion

The notion and relevance of migration studies on environmental changes will be gaining more and more importance due to the increasing number of migration hot-spots as well as accelerating and deteriorating ecological conditions;¹⁸ furthermore it should be surveyed within the context of social resilience, adaptation technics and other factors reducing vulnerability. This study contributes to the problem-framing and the review of literature of the given field.

However, Dun and Gemenne clearly outlined that the over-emphasizing of self-standing and 'environmentally displaced persons' as a separate term has two drawbacks. „Firstly, many scholars would like to establish environmental migration as a specific field within migration studies (...) to fence off this area and consider it apart from classical migration theories (...) Secondly, there is a widespread appetite for numbers and forecasts amongst journalists and policymakers. In order to make their research policy-relevant, many feel compelled to provide some estimation of the number of those who are or may become 'environmentally displaced'. These numbers, obviously, need to rely on a clear definition of who is an environmental migrant.”¹⁹

¹⁸ See further Keane, David: Environmental Causes and Consequences of Migration: A Search for the Meaning of "Environmental Refugees". *Georgetown International Environmental Law Review*, Vol. 16 (2004) 209-223.

¹⁹ Dun-Gemenne: *op. cit.* 10-11.

But to sum up, it seems to be certain that the decades yet to come will be echoed by the migration partially caused by detrimental effects, such as water and food shortage and worsening basic living standards of some regions due to extreme weather conditions and potentially man-made ecological decline.

To prove this fact, among the primarily European migration situation, these issues got more attention compared to the previous years. E. g. one of the leading Hungarian news portal, 'index.hu' recently published an article entitled 'Vagy víz fog folyni vagy vér' [Either the water will flow or the blood],²⁰ which deals with one of the layers of political-social-cultural conflicts, namely the scarcity of water in Syria and the relation of India and Pakistan. Besides, a leading Hungarian national security expert, Péter Tálas gave an interview, in which he stated that one of the root causes of the Arab Spring is the severe drought which perished 75% of the crops and 85% of the stock in certain regions of Syria, having forced the huge amount of farmers and village population into the cities. This internal migration *inter alia* generated heavy social turmoils leading to civil unrest, then civil war.²¹ The Hungarian press widely cited the speech of President Barack Obama too, who shared his view that climate change and its collateral effects are immediate risks to national security.²²

The above-mentioned Hungarian online website, 'index.hu' just days after the Paris attacks published a thought-provoking article on the direct relations between terrorism, vulnerable societies and the societal turmoils caused by climatic changes.²³

These signs show us and forecast that environmental refugees and primarily the phenomenon of climate change-induced migration are worth being the subject of researches and considerations of the political actors as well as scholars.

²⁰ http://index.hu/kulfold/2015/03/22/azert_a_viz_az_ur/.

²¹ <http://inforadio.hu/hir/belfold/talas-peter-az-eghajlatvaltozas-a-migracio-egyik-alapveto-oka-769200>.

²² The original news can be found on the webpage of usnews.com: <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/05/20/obama-climate-change-an-immediate-risk-to-national-security>.

²³ http://index.hu/gazdasag/2015/11/18/klimavaltozas_terror_sziria/.