

**Workshop 2**

**Environmental Change, Population Displacement and Acute Conflict**

**Survey Paper**

***Population Displacement and Acute Conflict***  
**(outline; full draft available June 17)**

**by**

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**OUTLINE of overview paper**

**Population Displacement and Acute Conflict**

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**I. PURPOSE**

1.1 This paper will examine the relationship between environmental degradation, population displacement and acute conflict as hypothesized in Homer-Dixon (1990, 1991): i.e. that environmental degradation creates population displacement which in turn is a cause of acute conflict (as defined).

1.2. Central in this respect is the concept of environmental refugees, as formulated by UNEP (1985) and Jacobson (1988); i.e. a group of especially vulnerable people who are compelled to leave their area/livelihood due to massive environmental degradation.

1.3. The problematique relates to environmental change in the developing world.

**II. CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS**

2.1. Conventional concepts of migrant vs. refugee in the literature: Migrants move voluntarily as a result of choice (rational-choice models) vs. refugees who move involuntarily due to externally imposed compulsions. Weakness of dichotomies. Towards a reinterpretation -- refugees defined with reference to need rather than cause (Zolberg, Suhrke, Aguayo, 1989).

2.2. Policy implications of the refugee concept: (international) refugees require and are entitled to (international) support because they move in an unprepared and involuntarily fashion and cannot turn to their own government for support; unless aided will lead to great suffering and/or social conflict in host area.

3.2.1 Note the and/or quality of the relationship between quiet suffering and acute conflict. From a policy perspective acute conflict should not be the only concern. Those quietly suffering do not cause a conflict.

2.3. Towards a concept of environmental refugee, redefined in light of classic definition of (political) refugee: person or social group displaced due to sudden and absolute

environmental degradation that is irreversible (except for policy intervention) and affects the basic condition of existence of a given group. The combination denotes sharp impact, but reduced time and ability to respond; the situation entails little choice, great vulnerability, and commensurate need for aid to avoid suffering and/or social conflict.

2.4. A prototype of the environmental refugee would be a social group displaced by dam building (sudden, absolute and irreversible flooding of habitat and livelihood). Governments typically have aid schemes to assist affected people in such situations, although in practice all kinds of things happen, or not (ex. Narmada, M.Cernea, 1990).

2.5. Considering that most forms of environmental degradation are gradual and have a cumulative impact, does this produce refugee situations of the dam-displacement kind, or rather migrant situations of the rational-choice type?

2.6. While some estimates of environmental refugees run as high as ten million and above, the analysis employed here suggests a much lower figure. Uncritical definitions and inflated numbers lead to inappropriate solutions and "compassion fatigue".

### III. ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND MIGRATION

3.1. Migrations typically result from complex causes. Can the environmental factor be distilled? identified? Which, if any, migrations are driven by environmental degradation? Are environmentally driven migrations different from other types of migrations?

3.2. Existing literature on migration does not treat environment as a separate or significant variable. "Old" theories emphasized non-economic factors and included environmental change in the form of natural disasters under category of "physical" factors. Now-classic theories emphasize economic pull-push factors and rational-choice analysis (Todaro 1976, Stark 1991). Theories adopting international economic system-perspective, in the tradition of political economy, do not separate out environmental aspects (Portes 1987).

3.3. A recent state-of-the-arts survey notes environmental factors are of increasing interest to students of migration (Hamilton & Kimberly 1991), but result of interest amounts to anecdotal knowledge only. A major forthcoming World Bank Study on the environment (World Development Report 1991) treats migration as an independent variable; hence will not shed light on ways in which environmental change causes migration/displacement of people.

### 3.4. Working hypotheses:

- a) Most forms of environmental degradations have long-term and cumulative impact, these interact with and resembling long-term economic changes which affect agricultural populations and influence contemporary migrations in the developing world, especially rural-to-urban migrations. The result is environmental migrants (or environmentally related migrants).
- b) At the margin, migrants become refugees: i.e. the cumulative effect of environmentally related degradations produce absolute, life-threatening deprivations, a no-choice situation equivalent to dam-displacement.
- c) Some forms of environmental degradation are throughout a refugee-type, no-choice situation of the dam-displacement kind.

#### Examples:

##### 3.4.1. Deforestation:

- a) Uphill deforestation causing soil erosion and more frequent downstream flooding: affected farmers along riverbank will over time experience greater emiseration (more frequent loss of harvest, less investment in land, less productivity, less output); typical response would be for one or more members of the family to migrate on seasonal or permanent basis (e.g. North-India, Gulati, 1991) This adds to general and long-established rural-urban migration, or migrant labour force.
- b) Displacement of the original inhabitants of the forest, typically tribal peoples who are politically and economically vulnerable (e.g. peoples of rainforest in Central America and Amazon basin, UNRISD, 1990, #16) Result is a no-choice situation, forced migration and refugee-like movements.

##### 3.4.2. Rising sea-levels:

- a) Will affect coastal populations especially in Bangladesh, Egypt, South Pacific Islands and Maldives. A long-term process, which gives affected coastal people more time -- generational time -- to adjust through internal migration (to the extent macro-economic changes in the economy will absorb more labor from primary sector) and through international migration (long-established routes are: South Pacific Islanders going to Australia and New Zealand, Egyptians to the Gulf-states, and Bangladeshis to surrounding states of India). In the short-run, worsening environmental situation manifests itself in more frequent and more destructive tropical storms/floods; displaced people turn to national and international relief until water subsides, then return.
- b) At the margin, a no-choice situation. The char has disappeared (islet in the rivers and sea, cultivated by marginal Bengali peasants). Displaced farmers become equivalent to refugees.

3.4.3. Desertification/drought: a) Impact of drought cumulative, typically combines with other environmental degradations, overgrazing, overuse of common land, deforestation, etc. Affected peasants or pastoralists have a range of coping



strategies, including migration. Massive pastoralist migrations in the Sahel a result of cumulative effect of drought/desertification (Timberlake 1985).

b) At the margin, herds killed, seeds consumed, the populations migrate to relief camps. A refugee-type situation. Contemporary famine in Ethiopia and the Sudan result of complex forces including desertification/drought, prior migrations to progressively marginal land, disruptive agricultural policies and war. Environmental degradation clearly aggravated by latter two factors, but relative weight difficult to assess.

3.4.4. Land degradation: A very gradual impact on agricultural productivity (ex: Ethiopia, UNRISD, 1990, #13). A range of coping strategies becomes relevant, including migration when permitted. In much of Latin America, population pressure and overuse of ecologically vulnerable land in hill areas feeds a permanent rural to urban migration (WDR 1990). A similar process leads to seasonal and bonded labour migration in many parts of India (EPW 1988); and, in Ecuador, to spontaneous and illegal resettlement from the altiplano to the rainforest. (Bilsborrow 1991). That is, land degradation feeds an established patterns of migration -- rural-to-urban, labour migrations, and rural-to-rural.

3.4.5 Water and air pollution: Appears as marginal or sporadic cause of migration (Jacobson 1988; IBRD 1990).

3.5. In all of the above situations, remedial policies can reduce the incentives to migrate and increase the range of coping strategies; e.g. flood control through building of embankment and improved draining (ex, Bangladesh, IBRD 1990); soil erosion control through terracing, closing areas for regeneration, tree planting and water harvesting (ex, northern highlands of Ethiopia, UNRISD 1990, #13); regenerating an entire ecological system (ex: Loess plateau of China, WDR 1990), and drought relief through work-for-food programs (ex Botswana, WDR 1990).

3.6. These examples suggest that -- except at the margin --- environmentally-related population movements do not differ from economically-driven migrations where those with certain resources (skills, networks, education) migrate first, in response to rational calculations concerning expected income over a period of time.

3.7. Are environmentally-related migrations prone to cause acute conflict? A priori, seems contextually determined.

#### 4. MIGRATION AND SOCIAL CONFLICT

4.1. Migrations have historically caused a great deal of social conflict, some of which has been violent. Major types of violent conflict associated with migration have been

- i) ancient migrations involving conquest of territory/people;
- ii) ethnic conflict in plural societies created by spontaneous or colonially induced migrations (occurring in both the developing and industrialized societies;
- iii) social conflict associated with contemporary international labour migrations (legal and unauthorized);
- iv) violent clashes arising from spontaneous resettlement in rural-to-rural migrations within a country, typically where natives people are being displaced by new land users;
- v) violent clashes among old and new urban groups who compete for scarce resources in rapidly growing urban centers.

4.2. But the history of migration is on balance a history of new forms of integration or assimilation, of interdependence or non-violent dependency. Migration has historically brought valuable new labour and skills to the host area, and is generally considered as a safety-valve and a positive force (remittances etc) for the sending area.

4.3. If this is true for economically induced migrations generally, there seems to be no reason why environmentally induced migrations should be - on balance - more conflictual.

4.4. Once a people has become refugees, historically they have been powerless; they tend to suffer and die passively rather than be an active party to acute conflict. Their presence, when unaided, nevertheless has caused both social tension. When aided, the result often is the same. Cases of environmental refugees would seem to differ in some respects: a) ability to resist (ex: native peoples against encroaching powers), b) likelihood of acute exploitation, rather than acute conflict (see below for elaboration).

## 5. CASES OF ENVIRONMENTALLY-RELATED MIGRATIONS

5.1. To sort out some of the variations in environmentally-related migrations and associated social conflict, we shall briefly review five case studies.

5.1.1 Mexico: Environmental degradation of various kinds (desertification, land degradation, pollution) is considered an added cause for rural-to-urban migration and for unauthorized migration to the United States. Migrations have been associated with social tension, but not acute conflict (riots in Washingtons Hispanic-speaking area excepted); international migration has been considered a political safetyvalve at home and a source of economic gain. Structural change in the Mexican economy towards greater

industrialization, partly as a result of free trade area with U.S., is expected to absorb more labour, while simultaneously increasing environmental degradation. Integration with advanced, industrialized economy is expected to both generate and absorb internal migration at a greater rate than before.

5.1.2. Soccer War: Displacement of peasants in El Salvador fundamentally associated with a neocolonial political economy which, among other things, led to deforestation and commercialization of agriculture. Long-term emiseration of peasants led to rural-to-urban migration within El Salvador; at one point, also "spilled over" into neighbouring Honduras. Interstate conflict buildt up over a period of years; then burst into a short war. Key to conflict was competition for land among two equally poor states and similarly destitute peasant groups; few economic alternatives. Even so, war was not "automatic" outcome.

5.1.3. Bangladesh (see project paper by Sanjoy Hazarika): Enormous population pressure on resources in a political economy of large agricultural sector with pattern of fragmented landholdings. Non-agricultural sector much too small to absorb surplus labour. Long-standing migrations of varied social origins into neighbouring Indian states. Only part of this migration directly related to problems of flooding and low productivity on marginal lands. Unauthorized migration. Violence associated with migrations are sporadic and related to the political uses of in-migration on the Indian sides.

5.1.4. Miskito Indians in Nicaragua (see project paper by Bernard Nietschmann): Typical violent conflict between colonial-state peoples and indigenous nation peoples over control of territory. Native peoples resist violently, but steadily lose ground to "invading colonialists, nationalists, capitalists and, most recently, marxists" (Nietschmann): territory lost was largely transformed into land for cattle ranching and comemrcial agriculture. On remaining land, economic and environmental resources of native peoples are under continuous pressure from outside, both national and international. In migration terms, process has led to concentration in ever-smaller area within, rather than displacement outside(?).

5.1.5. Sahel. Massive migrations of pastoralists and sedentary farmers due to recurring droughts, desertification and consequent progressive destruction of basic conditions of existence. Migrations across state boundaries and, for some, eventually into urban areas. Social conflict in receiving areas mitigated by traditional tribal ties and international relief.

## 5.2. Tentative conclusions:

a) In two of the above cases, environmental degradation contributed to unauthorized international migration of marginal



peasants who, when settling on agricultural land across the border, sparked localized, violent conflict, and, in one case, an international war. The situation has the characteristics of a zero-sum game.

b) By far the most consistently violent conflict occurred when a native people through a colonizing process was displaced within, rather than compelled to migrate outside.

c) Violence was not immediately and obviously associated with environmentally-related migration in the Mexican case; probably because it formed part of an established pattern of labour migrations which had the quality of a non-zero-sum situation. This, in turn, related to the structural transformation of the economy and its integration with an advanced industrial economy.

## VI: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

6.1. Acute conflict is not the only, nor the most important, undesirable result of environmental degradation. Acute exploitation, social tension and suffering are more likely social outcomes. These are important dimensions of "security" as redefined for the post-cold war period, noted by observers like Ullman (1989). No less urgent than acute conflict, they require serious policy attention.

6.2. Within the range of environmentally-related migrants noted so far, some appear to be in a refugee-type situation (3.4..b). These are (i) people at the outer margins of resistance to drought, flood and land degradation; (ii) native peoples displaced without, and pressed into pockets within. Movement in these cases constitute a strategy of last resort; a result of all push and no pull; survival requires special assistance -- not so much to avoid acute conflict but to avoid acute exploitation.

Prototypical example: sugarcane cutters of Gujarat in northern Indian, mostly tribals displaced by dams and deforestation who have ended up as bonded labour, working under sub-human conditions.

6.2. Unlike international refugees, most can be helped in situ through proper aid, national and/or international.

6.3. For migrant-type situations, environmentally-related migrations add to already established migrant streams. A range of policies relevant to stem degradation and related migration.

6.4. The social case for stemming migration rests not with its linkage to acute conflict -- which seems relatively rare -- but because it contributes to a lopsided national development. The problems of enormous urban concentrations in the developing world



are increasingly stressed (WDR, 1991 forthcoming); the implications of destroying non-renewable resources are widely recognized. As for international migration, in the contemporary world it cannot play the role it did in earlier centuries, likely demands from the South on the North notwithstanding (Zolberg, 1989).

VII: RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

7.1. Need to know more about the identity and characteristics of the most vulnerable -- the environmental refugees. Who are they? Where are they? Under what conditions do they emerge? What are relevant solutions?

7.2. Need to get a clearer sense of how much of the contemporary migration the developing world is related to environmental variables. Aim for quantitative estimates based on aggregate data, and/or case studies, at least enough to suggest whether it is of major/minor significance.