



Critical review

Climate change and forced migrations: An effort towards recognizing climate refugees



Issa Ibrahim Berchin, Isabela Blasi Valduga, Jéssica Garcia,
José Baltazar Salgueirinho Osório de Andrade Guerra*

University of Southern Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, 219 Trajano St, SC, Brazil

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Climate change
Refugees
Forced migrations
Natural disasters

ABSTRACT

The scientific community has long urged for the broadening of the refugee term, which remains identical since the 1951 Refugee Convention, despite strong evidence showing connections between forced migration and climate change. Even though the concept of climate and environmental refugees is not legally recognized, the discussion concerning these definitions is increasing. Furthermore, with the intensification of global climate change, a more specific subcategory of refugees began to be popularized: climate change refugees. A climate change refugee is any person who has been forced to leave their home, or their country, due to the effects of severe climate events, being forced to rebuild their lives in other places, despite the conditions to which they are subjected.

1. Introduction

Rapid population and economic growth demands high use of natural resources, stressing the environment and challenging the sustainable management of countries (Headey and Jayne, 2014). Climate change poses various threats to humanity, especially regarding global vulnerable communities, which already suffer from severe droughts and famine, instigating population displacement (Comenetz and Caviedes, 2002).

Climate change increases the intensity of extreme weather events, provoking migrations and displacements; thus, climate refugees are subject of increasing attention worldwide (Reuveny, 2007; Bettini, 2013). However, recognizing this category of migrants is not straightforward. This article analyzes how the international community is dealing with the concept of climate change refugees, an emergent and undeniable reality.

2. Refugees and internally displaced people: from persecution to legal protection

In the twentieth century, after the end of World War II, governments and institutions worldwide had the urge to set guidance around the status and definition of migration and refugees (Newman and van Selm, 2003). In 1948, the United Nations proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For the first time, an international legal

document stated that “everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution” (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Article 14).

In 1951, the United Nations assembled a Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as a result of the massive forced migration flows caused by the war. There was a necessity to provide these refugees a definition and status, hence, the Convention defined a refugee as

any person who 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 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.

United Nations, 1951, Article 1

The 1951 Refugee Convention is still a central feature on the international refugee regime (United Nations, 2008; McFadyen, 2012). Yet, the concept is now under discussion, considering that the last events on the international scenario may have created different types of refugees, signaling the narrowness of the prior definition.

In addition to the international framework, some countries often formulate their own refugee definition to create subsidiary protection to its citizens. Domestically, countries may also expand some aspects

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: issaberchim@gmail.com (I.I. Berchin), bebelavalduga@gmail.com (I.B. Valduga), jessica.sgarcia@outlook.com (J. Garcia), baltazar.guerra@unisul.br (J.B.S.O. de Andrade Guerra).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.06.022>

Received 24 March 2017; Received in revised form 9 June 2017; Accepted 25 June 2017

Available online 29 June 2017

0016-7185/ © 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

within the scope of the refugees' status, since the 1951 Convention fails to recognize: risk of torture, capital punishment, state of armed conflict, environmental disasters, lack of natural resources, family ties, illness and gender related persecutions (Worster, 2012). These adaptations allow broadening the legal definition, leaving space to address people who should receive subsidiary protection, expanding the possibility of recognizing different migrants' categories, such as economic, humanitarian refugees, and environmental and climate refugees. The last two categories will be further discussed in this paper.

3. Refugees and global environmental changes

Lester Brown popularized the term “environmental refugees” in 1970; nonetheless the discussion concerning the category started in 1985, when El-Hinnawi (1985) published a paper on the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). He claimed that environmental refugees are “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 jeopardize their existence and/or seriously affects the quality of their life” (El-Hinnawi, 1985, p. 4–5). Myers (1997) considers environmental refugees as the people who feel extremely unsafe on their own territory because of climatic hazards, e.g. droughts, deforestation, and have no other option but to flee to somewhere secure, with few expectations to go back to their homelands.

Environmental disruption caused by natural disasters or human intervention, normally renders human life unbearable and consequently leaves no option to its victims but to flee from their homeland. Other categorizations of environmental refugees are: those displaced temporarily due to local disruptions, such as avalanche, earthquakes; those who migrate because environmental degradation poses threat to their livelihood and/or health; those who resettle because of land degradation, resulting in desertification and/or permanent changes in their habitat; those victims of “environmental conflict”, e.g. disputes for land and water resources; and those displaced by sea level rise (Jacobson, 1988; Black, 2001).

Myers (1993) also noted that deforestation, desertification, food and agriculture, unemployment, poverty, global warming and population rise is likely to force migration due to environmental issues, and forecasts 150 million environmental refugees by 2050. Myers concludes that environmental displacement is not only an environmental issue but an economic, political and social issue, and its exponential growth promises to be one of the most disastrous human crises society will face on the 21st century.

The concept of “environmentally displaced persons (EDPs)” arose as an attempt to avoid the term refugee, which has emotional appeal, characterizing them as the people who are endangered by environmental and ecological disruptions. The upshot is that they end up being forcedly displaced from their territory (Gorlick, 2007). Currently what mostly concerns advocacy groups, social scientists and researchers regarding environmental refugees is not a lack of a precise definition, but a lack of legal status and normative protection. This lacuna impacts on their ability to address the forced displacement due to environmental distress as well as promote measures to improve the lot of groups exposed to displacement risk (IOM, 2009).

Even though the definitions created by El-Hinnawi (1985) and Jacobson (1988) are broad and simplistic, both authors designed three different categories of environmental refugees and identifies triggering mechanisms. The first concerns people who were “temporarily displaced due to temporary environmental stress but who return to their habitat once the area has been rehabilitated, such as following a natural hazard or environmental accident” (Williams, 2008, p. 506). The second category includes refugees who had to leave their territory permanently due to anthropogenic disturbance on their environment and climate. Finally, the third category of environmental refugees concerns people who decide to migrate seeking a better livelihood,

because of environmental disruption. This often represents a more subjective classification, since it regards a decision made mostly by the refugees themselves, who will have to learn how to adapt to the new reality (El-Hinnawi, 1985).

4. Climate change and livelihoods

The 2007/2008 Human Development Report on fighting climate change, analyzed deeply the implications and projections of climate change and forced migrations, suggesting that climate change has an enormous anthropogenic interconnection, exacerbating the existing environmental, economic and social vulnerabilities (Brown, 2007). The concept of climate refugees is considerably new and it is still emerging; consequently, the discussion surrounding this term emerges as climate changes intensifies. Therefore, new perspectives regarding the definition appear, such as the idea of “Climate Change Displaced People” – defined as people whose habitat is threatened or is already at risk of being extinguished due to climatic change (Hodgkinson et al., 2009).

Displacement occasioned by climate change is a form of coerced migration, meaning that these people and their land are both affected by the damaging and irreversible effects of climate change. Therefore, they have to involuntarily flee from their homeland, receiving the status of climate refugees (Hodgkinson et al., 2009). There is also a discussion whether this category should be labeled as “climate refugees” or “forced climate migrants”. According to Brown (2007), the word refugee provides an emotional sensitivity and openness to the public, whereas the word “migrant” has an adverse implication, suggesting these people move spontaneously seeking for a considerably better quality of life.

Even though the “climate refugees” category may sound more amicable, people who stand under the protection of the definition do not fulfill its legal requirements and cannot have their rights protected under the 1951 Refugee Convention. According to the Convention, the main requirement to classify a person as a refugee is his urge of fleeing political persecution (Eckersley, 2015), which is not the case for “climate refugees” since they arise as an eminent natural cause. In other words, the “forced climate migrant” is the increasing phenomena of non-voluntary population displacement (McNamara and Gibson, 2009).

According to the Citizen's Guide to Climate Refugees (Friends of the Earth, 2007), extreme weather events' (e.g. droughts, sea-level rise) intensification will lead to an augmentation of climate change refugees. These conclusions reinforce Myers' (1993) predictions regarding the exponential growth of environmental refugees until 2050.

One of the main stressors threatening the earth's ecosystem and impelling entire communities to migrate is climate change (Williams, 2008; IOM, 2009). In recent years, a severe economic crisis and one of the worst droughts the Horn of Africa region has ever faced characterized this grave scenario and consequently, increased forced migration flows (Đurková et al., 2012; Tierney et al., 2015). However, the environmental issues surpass droughts, not only in the Horn of Africa but also in the East, where desertification, flash floods and land degradation are likely to be intensified by climate change (UNHCR, 2008). These environmental changes led to a problematic food crisis at the beginning of the 21st century (Myers and Kent, 2001). Migration occasioned by climate change may occur both temporarily (e.g. when people flee a severe storms or droughts), or permanently (e.g. when the territory – a community, a city, or even a country – became uninhabitable), as it may happen in small island states (Docherty and Giannini, 2009).

On a global scale, the extreme weather event that has been motivating more people to migrate nowadays is sea level rise (Williams, 2008). The most vulnerable and affected areas by this condition concern the “Small island developing states (SIDS)” in the Pacific due to their topography, low elevations as well as coastal erosion, increased incidence of drought, coral bleaching, and storm surges (IPCC, 2007). These pacific islands are threatened to complete submersion, becoming

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5073286>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5073286>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)