
‘Environmental Refugees’? A Critical Perspective on the Normative Discourse

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Migration induced by climate change or other environmental factors has been constructed in recent years as a challenge for international governance. My paper develops a critical perspective on the governance proposals relating to environmental migration. This critique is articulated around three successive ideas. Firstly, I focus on the notion of ‘climate’ or ‘environmental refugee’. Understanding that such terms are legal misnomers, it discusses the soundness of the analogy between environmentally induced migration and refugees. While the 1951 Convention and its protocol do not intend to protect *all* refugees, the notion of refugee is essentially limited to an *international* and *forced* displacement. Yet, the ‘minimalist’ critique has shown over the last two decades that environmentally induced migrants are rarely international migrants and not necessarily forced migrants. Moreover, when migration follows a cluster of causes, distinguishing ‘environmental refugees’ from other (economic) migrants may not be practically possible.

Secondly, I identify two competing ethical justifications for a protection of environmentally induced migrants: one based on notions such as solidarity (distributive justice), the other one calling for a compensation of climate change victims by polluting states (corrective justice). Yet, I argue that none of these justifications justifies a focus on the sole environmental or climate migrants. On the one hand, solidarity-based arguments would basically call for a protection of all vulnerable individuals. At an international, subsidiary level, such arguments would justify that the international community assist all individuals not properly protected by a competent state. More specifically within the field of migration studies, solidarity-based arguments would call for a protection of all migrants, particularly forced

ones. However, such arguments would similarly extend to other forced migrants not induced by environmental factors – ‘economic refugees’, persons displaced by situations of generalized violence without individualized risk of persecution or not connected to one of the five causes of persecutions, etc. On the other hand, responsibility-based arguments would call for a protection of the persons affected by anthropogenic climate change. Such arguments do not seem to justify the specific emphasis on migrants: often, the most vulnerable (the most affected?) is not able to move. Within a corrective justice framework, the discourse on climate migration fails to address the invisibility of most affected individuals. Here, I conclude that no ethical argument appears to justify a protection of climate or environmental migrants as a specific category of individuals; rather, ethical arguments call for a protection of either *all* (forced) migrants, or (*all*) victims of climate change.

Thirdly, I try to explain the current construct of ‘environmental refugees’ as a global concern. Thus, I discuss the development of an alarmist discourse by a well-intended coalition of academic advocacy and the drift toward a political utilization of this discourse to promote security policies. Throughout this discussion, I am influenced by Chimni’s postcolonial approach of refugee and forced migration studies, in particular the ‘myth of difference’. Because of the geographical gap between research (mostly carried out in the global West) and the phenomenon, I argue that ‘environmental refugees’ have come to represent the Oriental, vulnerable yet dangerous Other. Discussing what Bettini called the ‘exceptionalisation of environmental refugees’ and the notion that legal categories are also means of exclusion, I wonder whether the focus on environmentally induced migration may also contribute to conceal other causes of migration and to undermine global (e.g. economic) tensions.