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Rethinking the Relationship of Migration, Environment, and Peace and Security

PISCANO, Marie Frances[†]

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the changing realities of environmental migration in the light of climate change and severe environmental shifts. In particular, it examines the international policy implications of environmental migration that is expected to touch on issues related to national and human security.

KEYWORDS: *climate change, environment, migration, displacement, disaster*

[†] Rieya Piscano is an alumna of UNU-IAS and has previously sat in the editorial board of UNU Peace and Progress Graduate School Journal. She is currently based in Burma/Myanmar and Thailand doing capacity-building and advocacy work on the democratization process and humanitarian issues of Burma/Myanmar.

Changing Perspectives of the Environment and Migration Nexus

Although environmental migration has been a long-running phenomenon, renewed interest in the topic gained ground in the 1980s, brought about by the heightened focus on environmental degradation and its connection to industrial development during that decade. Wide array of researches attempted to understand the impact of environmental changes to population movements. By 1994, a pattern was noticed by Suhrke, who categorized researches on environmental migration into two contradicting groups: the minimalist view and the maximalist view (Lonergan, 1998).

The minimalist view argues that environmental stresses have very limited impact to human mobility. Scholars supporting this view assert that migration is a complex and multilayered phenomenon that cannot be induced by environmental factors alone. In contrast, the maximalist view claims that environmental stresses have direct impacts to population movements and may even trigger displacement of significant numbers if no preventive measures are instituted. A well-known maximalist, El Hinnawi, coined the term environmental refugees to refer to individuals who “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” (El-Hinnawi, 1985 p. 4).

Most recent researches on the topic continue to be influenced by the two opposing lenses. However, it was noted by Lonergan (1998) that the perspectives taken on previously by most environmental migration researches are highly influenced by realism and geopolitics. Concerns on the possible increase of refugees were overly stressed that in 1993, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) identified environmental degradation as one of the root causes of refugee flows (Castles, 2002) - an irony given that environmental factors are not included in the criteria to apply for refugee status, making these potential victims unprotected.

It is relatively recent that environmental and humanitarian aspects of environmental migration are given focus especially in the light of climate change. Although it was as early as 1990 that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) made a claim that massive human migration and displacement will be climate change’s most severe impact (Lonergan, 1998), the delay in its translation to clear national and international policy interventions have greatly affected our response to the phenomenon which is becoming more complex than what was assumed.

The affected individuals of environmental migration is referred to by the International Organization on Migration (IOM) as environmentally-induced migrants, which is defined as “persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either

temporarily or permanently, and who move whether within their country or abroad” (IOM, 2007, p. 1). The sudden and progressive environmental changes have been previously expanded by Lonergan, who enumerated five broad categories of environmental factors that influence human migration: natural disasters, slow onset changes, industrial accidents, development projects, and conflicts and warfare (Lonergan, 1998).

The distinction between rapid onset and slow onset environmental changes is important as it also creates different mobility patterns. It helps in clarifying the role of migration which is oftentimes fluid and unfixed and more importantly, it helps us make timely and well-executed interventions for the affected individuals and groups of people.

Renaud et al. (2011) differentiated the different forms of migration resulting from rapid onset hazards and slow onset hazards. Rapid onset hazards often result to environmental emergency migrants which can be seen as either a preventive measure of the government to avert casualties or an immediate survival strategy employed by affected individuals themselves. This initial wave of migration branches out into two types of environmental migrants with the recovery of affected communities serving as the crucial factor that distinguishes the two. The first are the individuals and groups who voluntarily leave their communities due to personal decisions despite the recovery of the affected area, who are considered environmentally motivated migrants. The other type are referred to as environmentally forced migrants given that they have no option but to relocate due to the inefficiency of recovery initiatives of the affected community that results to permanent displacement.

Conversely, slow onset hazards have more complex criteria to determine the types of environmentally-induced migrants. Gradual and accelerated deterioration of ecosystems may impact livelihood of communities and affected individuals may choose to leave their area of origin. Renaud et al. asserts, however, that the environmental factor of the decision should be dominant in order to be considered an environmentally-induced migrant. Similar to the rapid onset hazard, the environmentally-induced migrant can further be categorized as environmentally motivated migrant if alternative livelihoods still exists in the affected area. They will be considered environmentally forced migrants if alternative livelihood will take time to be productive, if alternative livelihood is impossible, and if the affected area no longer exists.

Recently, more and more literature (Tacoli 2009, Reuveny 2007, Barnett and Adger 2007, Naude 2008) on environmental migration are focusing on the impacts of slow onset changes particularly that of climate change. Although this shift is very timely and relevant, it is apparent that migration brought about by rapid onset hazards has been neglected. Moreover, discussions on migration and climate change are again becoming heavily geopoliticized with the resurfacing of issues on cross-border migration, asylum seekers and immigration system reforms. The focus on the future implications of

environmental migration on national security slowly veers away from issues that are at present being dealt with by the millions that are displaced by natural disasters and other rapid onset hazards. In consideration, the succeeding analysis of policy implications on environmental migration will focus on both rapid onset hazards and slow onset hazards particularly, climate change.

Existing Policies on Environmental Migration

The different migration patterns and timeline brought about by rapid and slow onset hazards require different policy interventions.

Perhaps, the significant difference between rapid onset and slow onset disasters is how the former immediately triggers displacement which is conceptually different from migration. UNESCO (n.d.) defines displacement as “the forced movement of people from their locality or environment and occupational activities”. In contrast, migration refers to “the movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State” (IOM, n.d.). The element of disempowerment given that relocation is not a choice is the main difference between displaced persons and migrants.

Currently, rapid onset hazards such as natural disasters induce the bulk of environmental migration and displacement. In 2012, the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimated that 98% of recorded displacement resulted from environmental factors. This percentage translates to around 32.4 million displaced people worldwide (IDMC, 2013). Policy implications of migration and displacement brought about by rapid onset hazards should therefore focus on protecting and empowering immediately displaced persons and other affected individuals while preventing natural hazards to turn into catastrophic disasters.

In practice, these policies fall under the disaster risk reduction and management cycle: prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Pre-disaster activities usually revolve around preventive measures to reduce human casualties and property damages. In the international level, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction passed in 2015, serves as the guiding framework of action for reducing vulnerability and enhancing resilience in disasters. It enumerates four priority actions for governments to undertake to reduce disaster risks:

- Priority 1: Understanding disaster risk.
- Priority 2: Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk.
- Priority 3: Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience.

- Priority 4: Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to “Build Back Better” in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction (UNISDR, 2015).

As a preventive measure, migration in the form of encouraged or mandatory evacuation can be a preventive strategy to reduce casualties during an impending disaster, but it is usually during the response and recovery phase where migration and temporary displacement are of common occurrence. Displacement’s temporary characteristic has placed emphasis on the need to protect individuals and groups within transitional settlements. In the principles of transitional settlement and reconstruction developed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), it is stipulated that relocation and resettlement should be avoided and that recovery initiatives should focus on the speedy return of displaced groups to their original communities unless it has been proven that returning would make them more vulnerable to future disasters (UNOCHA, 2008). The organization stresses that displacement can further worsen the plight of displaced individuals by breaking their ties with their accustomed community and their known livelihood.

Within the framework of the United Nations, it is the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) that coordinates the disaster risk reduction activities of the UN and other regional organizations. However, it is development and humanitarian agencies and offices of the UN such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that assist governments in response and recovery phases of disaster management.

Although there are mechanisms in place and respective UN bodies tasked to assist in varying phases of disaster management, migration in this context continues to be a complex phenomenon that one-size-fits-all procedures of response and recovery cannot address varying concerns of displaced individuals and groups. A key issue UNOCHA has identified is the different forms of transitional settlement which displaced populations opt for that cannot be monitored thoroughly by governments and international organizations.

A great concern seen in the analysis of international policies on environmental migration is the highly compartmentalized approach institutions have on dealing with issues they have been tasked to work on. For instance, disaster risk reduction and management, and internal displacement are tackled distinctively that some provisions of the UN Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement released in 1998 may not apply to environmentally induced migrants. These principles stipulate that human rights and freedoms of displaced individuals should be upheld with national governments accountable for the protection and promotion of their rights. It also underlined that internally displaced persons have the

right to migrate and seek safety in another part of the country, leave the country, seek asylum in another country and be protected against forcible return to their settlement (UNOCHA, 1998). These rights of internally displaced individuals appears to have been written with conflict and traditional security issues in mind that can potentially leave out environmentally displaced individuals and their dislocation context. The same problem is also faced by displaced individuals who cross international borders. Although UNHCR is tasked to assist in issues of dislocation, the nature of displacement is not considered grave enough for receiving States to be obliged to protect the displaced given the limited criteria of obtaining Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

It is fairly recent that the concept of human security the United Nations is championing is being applied to natural disasters. Under this framework, governments that are unable to protect their citizens to security threats to their personhood, may it be environmentally-related, should be held accountable. Hobson et al. (2014) adds that a human security approach will look into how people are not only affected by natural disasters but how they also influence the phenomenon. It also examines the opportunities and resilience gained by people after the catastrophe. A case commonly brought up in relation to this is the Myanmar government's response during Cyclone Nargis' disaster of 2008 which incurred an estimate of 138,000 casualties and caused displacement to thousands more. Myanmar's military government has been accused of blocking aid efforts of other actors and had also persecuted people criticizing the response. It is believed that death tolls could have exceeded a million casualties if deaths within poorly managed transitional settlements are considered (Hobson et al., 2014). In this case, the Myanmar government failed to protect its citizens from natural disasters and further aggravated the situation by censoring news and persecuting citizens speaking up against it.

The problem seen in approaching disaster management from a human security perspective is the way we are conditioned to think about certain issues. Dealing with natural disasters, for instance, would make us focus on preventive mechanisms to avert disasters. The challenge on tackling human rights, however, is the way they are more visible and valued when they are violated. Calls for comprehensive human rights protection will only happen in times of heightened insecurity. A possible way of reconciling this is shifting the focus on internal displacement in the context of natural disasters where human rights concerns are more highlighted. Not only does internal displacement and transitional settlement conditions brought about by environmental factors surface human rights violations, but it also helps us understand how preventive mechanisms for human security and human rights promotion matter and should be prioritized.

Population movements brought about by slow onset environmental changes are also a complex phenomenon and probably have a more complicated positioning in international relations and international law than migration resulting from disasters and other rapid onset environmental hazards. Since the establishment of United Nations, it was never predicted that environmental stresses would in

time disrupt not only processes that shape human well-being but also the functions and even existence of States and consequently, international structures. The current and impending effects of climate change are slowly becoming the priorities of the international community while it also calls for the rethinking of the foundations of international relations and international law.

One of the complex situations climate change may bring about in relation to population movements is statelessness. Sea-level rise is threatening the existence of a growing number of small-island developing states (SIDS) in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean regions. Governments of affected States are not only at the risk of not being able to protect their citizens but they are also facing the problem of losing their statehood given that occupation of a definite territory is one of the criteria for being a state under the Montevideo Convention.

In this scenario, governments are considering two options: to adapt and implement measures to avoid statelessness or to migrate and address needs of stateless individuals and groups (Maas and Carius, 2011). Scholars and politicians argue that migration in this context should be the last resort of affected States and priority should be given to adaptation strategies (Ibid.). UNFCCC elaborated adaptation strategies of SIDS to address human security threats arising from climate change, and they vary from institutional reforms, policy-making and community projects geared toward enhancing people's resilience to environmental changes (UNFCCC, 2001). Water availability and food security are often the primary concerns of governments while they also tackle land zoning and new building codes for the safety of the people.

However, some adaptation measures undertaken by SIDS are experiencing some legality issues with policies instituted by the UN. For instance, development of artificial islands is being seen as a way to maintain the State's statehood and maritime zones. In the case of Maldives that developed an island called Hulhumale, the island not only serves the immediate need of supporting its fishing and tourism industry but it also can be a relocation site for its citizens when other islands are deemed unlivable. However, artificial islands are not considered legal islands and legal form of territory under the Laws of the Sea and cannot comprise defined territory as required to be a State (Gagain, 2009).

In worst case scenarios where migration is necessary, Maas and Carius (2011) expounded three possible approaches to migration by the affected SIDS: the acquisition approach, the treaty approach and the pull-factor approach.

The acquisition approach refers to the buying and renting of new territory from other States. This move can be considered legitimate as there is no existing international law that prevents the reestablishment of a State within another State (Gagain, 2009). An example of this is the initiative of the Kiribati government to purchase 6,000 acres of land in Fiji ensuring food security of its people and to also have

an option when the need to relocate becomes apparent (Kiribati Government, 2011). Conversely, the treaty approach focuses on creating agreements with other countries that can absorb citizens of vulnerable states while also strengthening their governments' sovereign character and international legitimacy given that a defined territory isn't a crucial factor in carrying out government functions. Lastly, the pull-factor approach discusses how concerned governments can build the capacity of their citizens to enable them to migrate to other countries on their own will while reducing prejudice and stigma from receiving countries. For its adaptation strategy, the government of Kiribati launched a migration with dignity campaign with their ongoing initiative focused on setting expatriate communities in other countries such as Australia and New Zealand that can help not only by absorbing future migrants but also by increasing remittances aiding in Kiribati's present development (Ibid.).

Situating environmental migration using the relevance of scope has also become a struggle. Is environmental migration in this context a national issue, and when will it reach the point of requiring global consensus to be addressed? Despite initiatives of individual governments to address their environmental migration concerns, it is evident that another hurdle for them to overcome is the legal inadequacy and gaps of international law in protecting environmentally induced migrants. Diasporas created overseas may encounter discrimination if establishments are not facilitated well. Moreover, existing environmentally-motivated migrants are not given ample protection or priority with the international community seemingly more pre-occupied in discussing possible worst case scenarios that involves upholding individual interests. Apart from this, they are also faced with the possibility of having their maritime zones exploited and conflicts escalating may cause disruption to international peace and security.

Conclusion and Thoughts on Resilience

Environmental migration has become a complex phenomenon that has been suffering from a framing problematique. Are environmental threats slightly or critically affecting human mobility patterns? Is migration a solution or a problem in facing impending environmental concerns brought about by climate change? Is environmental migration a domestic issue, a regional matter, or an international concern?

But perhaps the biggest challenge in situating environmental migration as a multilayered phenomenon is the lack of malleability of our current international structures in adapting to environmental changes. Environmental stresses will take time to be considered as threats to our conventional notions of international peace and security that consequently, affects the trivial manner we respond to it.

The struggle on downplaying (minimalism) or exaggerating (maximalism) the environment's influence to population movements has not exactly captured the complexity of migration as a process. On the one hand, underplaying the relationship of environmental stresses to migration diverts the attention away from the existing plight of the displaced as a result of natural disasters and other rapid onset hazards. On the other hand, highlighting the negative impacts of the environment to mobility with the apocalyptic scenarios maximalists are known to utilize may be counter-productive, especially when reaching consensus on what needs to be done in the international level. Both lenses do not entirely highlight the policy gaps that make environmentally-induced migrants and displaced individuals more vulnerable.

The way we perceive and respond to environmental migration is clearly shaped by prevailing paradigms in international relations that aren't exactly flexible and relevant to changing security contexts. Looking at migration as either the problem or solution does not recognize the fluid role of migration in both rapid and slow onset hazards. Moreover, existing highly compartmentalized "soft laws" relevant to environmental migration do not capture the multilayered process of the phenomenon that is also non-linear. The main challenge is to research, document and learn from current environmental migration and displacement trends to come up with realistic predictions and more relevant policy interventions in both national and international levels.

Conversely, environmental migration should also be tackled in both national and international levels. With the unequal impacts of climate change to various member-states of the United Nations, the international community should laud the efforts of vulnerable states in protecting and promoting the rights of their citizens while having mechanisms in place for worst case scenarios that may be their lived realities in the future. It must also be ensured that their willingness to protect their citizens and maintain their territorial integrity should be complemented by enhancing their capacity to continuously do so. In the international level, institutions should be more vigorous and realistic in their response to environmental migration as a current and escalating global phenomenon while learning from best practices of states and organizations in dealing with it. In particular, rights of environmentally-induced migrants should be defined as early as now and necessary amendments on principles of internal displacement, refugee protection, statehood and Laws of the Seas should be looked into.

Better coordination of international institutions should also be fostered. IOM currently sits outside the UN framework, but it will likely play a crucial role in understanding the role of migration in the context of climate change. More transparent and efficient information exchange and dissemination should be discussed. Other regional and international organizations must also ensure that such circumstances will not be exploited by other states so as to not trigger regional or global conflict.

Resilience is now the new development jargon thrown around in the higher levels of climate change negotiations. One can only wonder how relevant the concept is to those immediately affected by the

effects of climate change, in particular, the environmentally displaced and dislocated, and eventually to the States likely to sink and cease to exist because of environmental changes. In their experience, resilience is not a solution but the only option after going through and surviving series of disasters, destruction and deaths. In worst case scenarios, it is what will dictate their survival. Resilience, or the capacity to bounce back, doesn't necessarily discuss how we obtain such characteristic. Moreover, it doesn't identify the threshold on when it will fail. Although well-intentioned, the discussion on resilience in both national and international levels should probably emphasize what has been neglected in the understanding of displacement and migration: dignity.

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MIGRATION, ENVIRONMENT, AND PEACE AND SECURITY

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