

Shifting Tides: Migration in the Era of Globalization, Global Conflict, and Environmental Collapse

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Abstract

The global movement of populations is going through an increasingly tumultuous and conflicted period. While the processes of globalization have in some ways made a smaller world, they have also increased the awareness of global inequality. The push and pull factors of migration have become complex and shifting as global economic streams shift, political conflict increases, and competition over shrinking resources intensifies. These changes raise the question of whether people are "immigrants" or "refugees." As climate chaos expands, so does the number of "climate refugees." This paper explores the economic, political and environmental sources of contemporary migration patterns; the ways immigrants are perceived and received, and poses suggestions for addressing the problems and possibilities.

Introduction

When examining the issue of migration in the context of globalization and environment, it is difficult not to lean towards catastrophic scenarios. Globalization is aimed at placing the world under a unitary economic framework of free market capitalism. The globalized system is based upon certain principles which require certain constants. Those constants include a monetized system based on import and export dependency and/or interdependency, and demands increasing levels of consumption for continued growth. On a planet where resources are finite, and the impacts of output processes (non-recycled garbage, toxic waste, environmental destruction, and climate changing gases) are creating increasingly restrictive environments, globalization in its current form is disastrous.

In this paper, I will be largely excluding so-called voluntary migration - people changing their country of residence because of personal choices. Instead, my focus is on populations displaced or under threat of displacement due to circumstances beyond their control. These populations can be considered refugees in the classic sense of someone fleeing danger. The United Nations has developed a more explicit definition under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees;¹ however, the restrictions of that definition are being increasingly recognized.²

¹ "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." (UNHCHR Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees)

The forces at play creating these “refugees” may displace large portions or even entire populations. Since populations rather than individuals are impacted, the cultures they share are also at risk. In other words, mass migration may result in cultural extinction. This in turn raises a whole different set of issues.

I am working from the following five basic premises:

- Globalization forms the overarching framework in which all issues and response to them now occur.
- To some degree, resource issues are all subject to the forces of globalization.
- Resource issues are most likely to result in conflict - either direct over control of resources (e.g. Iraq and Sudan), or indirect due to unequal distribution of benefits of resource exploitation (e. g. Nigeria).
- The wealth of rich nations is founded and maintained on the control and exploitation of the resources and labor of poor nations.
- The current trend is for increasing hostility and conflict.

The Situation on the Ground

Our actions now may either seal our fate in a downward spiraling trend of poverty and war, or offer us the opportunity to change course to a better future.

We are in a time of increasingly large movements of populations, and this is likely to accelerate rather than mitigate. At the same time, receiving nations are becoming increasingly hostile to these refugees – at least in terms of policies and the rhetoric that drives policies. However, there is very little discussion of driving forces, or mechanisms to address the coming challenges.

² The United Nations University sponsored a conference in May 2007 entitled “Environmental Refugees: The Forgotten Migrants.” The conference focused on the issue of those forced to migrate due to environmental changes. (United Nations University, 2007)

There are currently approximately 163 million forcibly displaced people globally. It is estimated that there will be a billion forcibly displaced by 2050. Another 3.2 billion people will be facing scarce water supplies by 2080 (Christian Aid). The United Nations estimates that there are up to 200 million people currently impacted by desertification, and that another 50 million will be added to that number within the next ten years (Adeel et al 2006). The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group is less optimistic. They project that by 2020 seventy-five to two hundred and fifty million people could be impacted by water shortages in Africa **alone**, and by 2050 one billion people in Asia **alone** (Adger 2007).

Categorization of Refugees

Within the context explained above, I am making three broad categories of refugees – economic, resource, and environment. Both of the latter might be merged into the Environment Refugees group, but for the framework of this paper I am not discussing broadened environmental destruction (i.e. toxic waste). Dr. Bogardi, Director of the UN University for Environment and Human Security, distinguishes three categories of environmental refugees: those migrating from a deteriorating (though potentially habitable) environment; those forced to migrate due to loss of livelihood; those fleeing a collapsing resource ecosystem (Bogardi 2007). Of course, these “push” factors may overlap. For example, small farmers may become workers for corporate run plantation agriculture, but agriculture may fail due to extended drought, which would further displace them. These various types of refugees may be displaced to one of three areas – internally, regionally, or internationally.

Refugee/Migrant classification	Definition
Economic Refugees	Populations displaced by economic forces largely from processes of globalization, or infrastructure changes of same.
Resource Refugees	Populations displaced either by resource scarcity or by conflict over those

Forum on Public Policy

	resources.
Climate Refugees	Populations displaced by impacts of climate change – flooding, inundation, drought, failed water supply, disease related to temperature changes.

The classification of the status of persons and populations has significant ramifications, and the rapidly changing political environment only complicates this. Those people(s) displaced within their own nations are not refugees under the legal definition. Instead, they are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). These people may move from rural to urban areas –which adds to another set of problems – or they may be forced into another territory or even aid camps.

Likewise, there is generally a downward spiraling process of becoming a migrant. There is a broad and emerging literature examining this process. One way to examine this is through the framework of food security and declining livelihood (Companion 2007). Populations under stress enact a selection of coping strategies. Some of the strategies are short term and offer the possibility of repair. Other strategies move people beyond the possibility of recovery.

The concept of food security may be applied to any of the above refugee classifications at some level. Food is a basic necessity. It may become inaccessible or unavailable for a variety of reasons whether economic, or the actual absence of a food supply. Let's briefly examine this concept and how repeated shortfalls erode people's possibility of recovery to the point where migration becomes the final survival strategy.

During an initial food security crisis, families will sacrifice surplus, or less necessary items to attain necessary food supplies. When the emergency passes, they may or may not be able to replace those things sacrificed. For example, families might kill or sell surplus animals, or consume or sell part of the seeds for the next season's crop. However, if the shortfall is severe enough, people may be left without the ability to rebuild a surplus. This leaves them in a

vulnerable situation for the next shock to livelihood or food supply (Companion 2007; Webb and Harinarayan 1999).

If the crisis causing the original insecurity is repeated or continues (say several years of drought) then each successive event forces families to cut deeper and deeper into their resources. Families may have to sell or slaughter productive or breeding stock, or sell remaining real property, or even sell their children. These coping strategies are difficult if not impossible from which to recover (Companion 2007). The crises as play in the context of migration do not affect only a family here or there. They affect entire villages, regions, or portions of the population. This magnifies the effect for families and individuals, but also undermines some coping strategies. For example, many people selling off assets may flood the market decreasing the return on assets (Companion 2007); or movement of adults to urban areas in search for work may decrease the pay of workers.

It is important to recognize that food security can be an issue driven by macro-economic forces, and not simply poverty or environmental failure. An excellent example of this was the situation that arose in Niger in 2005 (Wolf 2005). Niger was being hit by a food crisis in the midst of plenty. Malnutrition and starvation were reaching epidemic proportions. However, the problem was not food availability, but the cost of the food available. People were starving for two reasons. First, they could not afford the food that was highly available. Second, neither the United Nations nor individual nations (such as the United States) would distribute food aid, because they did not want to disrupt the new capitalism emerging in Niger (Vasagar 2005; Timberg 2005).

Incredibly important to recognize is that these refugees are not simply individuals trying to survive. It is not merely individuals who are being impacted by these various issues. Populations, and increasingly, entire cultures are being swept apart by the economic changes from globalization, and the environmental forces of resources and climate.

Economic refugees make up much of the current “undesirable” migration to rich nations. People are being driven by the inequality of the current process of globalization. Repeatedly in the

literature and in discussions, globalization is the primary factor in current migration patterns (IMP 2003). Loss of jobs, displacement from agriculture, and poverty drive people from their home countries to countries of historic or contemporary economic ties.

These refugees (many of whom are undocumented) are seen as a cheap and exploitable labor force. They are vulnerable due to their undocumented status. They end up part of an invisible population, often living in substandard conditions on the fringe of the society. Frequently they join the marginalized ranks of others from their home nations or regions. Their marginalization may lead to increasing levels of conflict.

The human population is becoming more concentrated in urban areas. More than half of us now live in cities, and by 2030 over 60% will – with many concentrated in mega-cities. Most of these urban dwellers will live in poverty (UNFPA 2006). This rural to urban population shift is in part due to Internally Displaced Persons and coping strategies which are sometimes encouraged by aid organizations. IDPs in distress may move to, or be directed to, larger population centers where the possibility of work or assistance is seen as more available. These populations may end up joining the ranks of a growing urban poor population. In many regions of the world, there is not the physical or social infrastructure to meet the needs of this rapidly expanding population. This is complicated in poor and developing nations by development aid which focuses on the infrastructure needs of industry rather than the infrastructure needs of populations. Given the economic, resource, and climate challenges the world is currently facing, we can be fairly certain that the number of urban poor will continue to swell and be increasingly at risk.

Globalization has made inequality and the creation of economic refugees profitable. The economic factors pushing people away from their native lands and homes, while generating increasing levels of poverty, also provide a lucrative stream of remittances back. In fact, last year immigrants sent home \$300 billion dollars -3 times the combined amount of global foreign aid (NY Times 2007) .

On the other hand, international refugees and immigrants form a lucrative work force for industries and corporations. This workforce fills both low level jobs and mid-level technical jobs.

Forum on Public Policy

They are “efficient” for employers as they are generally paid less – even below standard wages – and are more controllable because of their status vulnerability than a domestic labor force. They also have the effect of increasing the competition for jobs – further driving down wages and benefits - which is particularly obvious in the United States.

In discussing workers entering the United States under the H-2 visa guestworker program, the Southern Poverty Law Center (2007) investigation “Close to Slavery: Guestworker Programs in the United States” stated:

“These workers, though, are not treated like “guests.” Rather, they are systematically exploited and abused. Unlike U.S. citizens, guestworkers do not enjoy the most fundamental protection of a competitive labor market — the ability to change jobs if they are mistreated. Instead, they are bound to the employers who “import” them. If guestworkers complain about abuses, they face deportation, blacklisting or other retaliation.”

What is very troubling is that these are “legal” workers. If legal workers are being exploited and locked to employers, then undocumented workers are even more vulnerable to exploitation. The undocumented are under threat of detention and deportation. If they have families with them, they may be deported away from them leaving domestically born children behind. These types of risks make them less likely to protest working or even living conditions (Mehta et al 2002).

The pressures driving these refugees to the United States are largely economic. Nearly 40% of small farmers in Mexico have been displaced by the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA).³ Inflation, decreased wages, and concentrated hiring (factories hiring young women for very low wages in so-called maquiladoras⁴) provide economic stressors for migration. The maquiladoras primarily hire young women, which often leaves husbands unemployed and unable to support their families. Maquiladoras also divert the natural resources of the region. These conditions create a huge push force into the United States. At the same time, there are entire industries that see this migration as desirable for a variety of reasons.

³ NAFTA was signed in 1992 under the presidencies of George H.W. Bush (United States), Salinas (Mexico) and PM Mulroney (Canada) – (Office of the U.S. Trade Representative)

⁴ “Maquiladora” literally means “the place where the miller gets his cut.” However, the contemporary meaning is “factory for export goods,” or “to assemble for export” (Alpha Dictionary).

Even with mid-level employment, it benefits corporations to hire immigrant laborers. This was embarrassingly demonstrated in the video by the law offices of Cohen and Grigsby telling employers how to legally disqualify U.S. workers so they can hire migrants with green cards (Programmers Guild 2007). The industries covered by the law firm run the spectrum of manual to high tech.

Meanwhile outsourcing is providing another “efficient” mechanism for employers. While this phenomenon benefits some workforces in some nations – such as phone and web help lines by skilled workers in India – it also reduces the number of available jobs in the “rich” nations. These practices are not “cost” measures on the part of corporations and even governments. They are largely profit margin measures.

The fact that refugees and guestworkers are profitable for business --and increasingly an economic necessity for nations of origin-- points to the questionable nature of the increasing hostility seemingly being promoted in rich nations. The hostility seems to be intentionally or unintentionally shaping a public perception of immigrants as “threats” in a variety of forms. This in turn leads to public support for a variety of crackdowns and additional controls being placed on both documented and undocumented internationals. These crackdowns and controls then serve to place these populations in an even more vulnerable and exploitable position.

Resource Refugees

These populations of refugees are displaced by resource scarcity or by conflicts over resources. While often attributed to internal conflicts, resource wars are flaring across the world funded by other nations and large economic players. The two main resources under conflict are oil and water. These are not necessarily separate issues, as limited water supplies may be utilized to extract oil.

Conflicts erupt over both the control of these resources (as in Darfur) and the distribution of the benefits of these resources (as in the Niger Delta). Sometimes those desiring control indirectly intervene in the conflict (such as China in Sudan) or directly, as with the wars of the United

States and the UK in Afghanistan and Iraq. Regardless, millions are becoming refugees both internally and externally. It is estimated that over 5 million Iraqis are currently displaced – about half in country and half out country (Weaver 2006; Damon 2007; Palast 2005; Paul 2002). Largely, those leaving the country are going to neighboring nations as immigration to either the U.S. or the UK is being blocked. As of the writing of this paper, only 50 Iraqi immigrants have been allowed into the United States.

Environment Refugees

Environment Refugees are populations displaced by environmental destruction and the impacts of climate change – flooding; inundation; drought; failed water supply; failed crops or food supply; failed infrastructure; or disease related to temperature changes.

Increasingly, we see the emergence of the climate refugee. People are forced from their homes by climatic changes – primarily drought or flooding. Sometimes these refugees are internally displaced, or displaced to neighboring nations. Other times, they begin a longer migration to richer nations.

As discussed earlier, people may go through a series of setbacks before their capacity to recover forces them into a permanent displacement or refugee situation. However, particularly with climatic changes, populations may be displaced relatively permanently. For example, rising oceans remove the land on which they lived, or changing rain zones leads to perpetual droughts. Either of these scenarios may rapidly displace a population. In these cases, other factors may determine the actual resources available to displaced people.

Types of Displacement

People may be displaced internally, regionally, or internationally. Each type of displacement presents its own set of issues. Refugees who are internally displaced are under the control of their governments and may have little international legal international standing. Given the types of displacement under discussion here, internally displaced populations may be of a specific ethnic or religious group. As such, they may ill treated (or even outright persecuted) by their own governments. These conflicts may be aggravated or even targeted through historical processes

such as colonization, or shaped by current international or corporate interests utilizing (or manipulating) existing national divides.⁵

Refugees who are regionally displaced may not find a friendly welcome. Neighboring nations may be unable to either assist, or protect, them. These refugees may also bring additional pressures on resources, space, and jobs, or may undercut existing workers. They do, however, have international standing, but there may not be an international intervention to support or protect them (or the receiving nation).⁶

Internationally displaced refugees may or may not be recognized as such. Frequently they follow current or historic economic ties to rich nations. They may also be recruited to serve as international contract workers. Such is the case of much of the labor recruited by contractors in Iraq. The G8⁷ and OECD⁸ nations may respond to these refugees as invaders or interlopers rather than refugees, as most only recognize political refugees for asylum. Therefore, these populations may also have no international standing or protection.

Challenging Times

We **are** facing challenging times. They will be complicated by the fact that rich nations will be impacted by climate change as well. Changes in agricultural ranges are likely to reduce some food availability, or the growing range will move to areas that have been converted to urban or industrial use. Disease vectors are likely to invade as well.⁹ Further, rich nations are likely to face both the loss of coastal areas as well as instability of fresh water supplies.

⁵ A case in point would be the involvement of Chiquita in hiring Colombian paramilitaries to protect their plantations. The paramilitaries hired (and illegally supplied) by Chiquita are on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations. The paramilitary is implicated in the deaths of over 173 people – primarily indigenous people and peasant farmers (Evans 2007).

⁶ An example would be the almost 700,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan. These refugees are straining Jordan's ability to absorb them. Housing costs have risen, but more importantly, water supplies are stretched beyond limits. Jordan is partially dependent on Syria for water resources which further complicates the issue (IRIN 2007).

⁷ Group of Eight (G8) includes: Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Russia (new) United Kingdom and the United States.

⁸ OECD is the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. It is an organization of "developed" countries which promotes democracy and free market capitalism.

⁹ From microorganisms (CEISIN), to insects (Reiter 2001) to mammals (Hunter, 2003), disease vectors may change radically under climate change – particularly in those areas experiencing increased warming or increased precipitation or flooding.

Forum on Public Policy

All of these impacts are going to require a greater dispersion of resources domestically – reducing both foreign aid and the availability of economic resources for internally vulnerable populations. Rich nations will be impacted by resource scarcity as well as poor nations. On one hand this will increase costs in rich nations for those resources – as well as the direct and indirect funding of conflicts over those resources. These are global challenges and will have global impacts – though not the same impacts – across nations and regions.

The growing hostility in rich nations towards migrant populations does not bode well within a world where migration is only likely to increase. The planning that nations are doing seems to frame the world into a conflict zone where national security becomes paramount.

Here is an example from the U.S. Space Command Vision 2020 report:

“Although unlikely to be challenged by a global peer competitor, the United States will continue to be challenged regionally. The globalization of the world economy will also continue, with a widening between “haves” and “have-nots.” Accelerating rates of technological development will be increasingly driven by the commercial sector -- not the military. Increased weapons lethality and precision will lead to new operational doctrine. Information-intensive military force structures will lead to a highly dynamic operations tempo.”

The latest Global Strategic Trends Programme report from the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence (MoD) forecasts the state of the world over the next 30 years. Released earlier this year by the MoD's Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre a military think-tank, the report outlines past examples of rapid climate change and speaks in no-nonsense terms about the possible extreme consequences of current climate chaos.

"The Earth's population has grown exponentially in the last century and any future event of this type would have more dramatic human consequences, resulting in societal collapse, mega-migration, intensifying competition for much-diminished resources and widespread conflict." (Christian Aid 5/14/07)

This scenario has not escaped the attention of military planners. In December 2006 Sir Jock Stirrup, as the Chief of the Defence Staff and Britain's most senior serviceman, used his annual lecture at the Royal United Services Institute to highlight these concerns.

"Climate change and growing competition for scarce resources are together likely to increase the incidence of humanitarian crises. The spread of desert regions, a scarcity of water, coastal erosion, declining arable land, damage to infrastructure from extreme weather: all this could undermine security."

Which makes it not at all surprising that in planning for climate change, the Pentagon is preparing for a "fortress America" scenario (Stipp 2004), or that many other nations are preparing for the same scenario:

"The U.S. effectively seeks to build a fortress around itself to preserve resources. Borders are strengthened to hold back starving immigrants from Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean islands - waves of boat people pose especially grim problems. Tension between the U.S. and Mexico rises as the U.S. reneges on a 1944 treaty that guarantees water flow from the Colorado River into Mexico. America is forced to meet its rising energy demand with options that are costly both economically and politically, including nuclear power and onerous Middle Eastern contracts. Yet it survives without catastrophic losses."

Policy Considerations

The exploitation of natural and human resources, and the redirection of these resources to the globalized economy have left poor nations without the adaptive capacity to address the resource, environmental, and climate challenges they are facing. The ability of many of these nations and peoples (in Africa, parts of Asia, South America, and the indigenous populations of the far North) have suffered repeated assaults and their capacity to respond is eroded or already exhausted (Companion 2007). These various sources are displacing growing numbers of people – internally, regionally, and internationally. It also seems that these populations have less to

build on and are frequently straining the resources – governmental and non-governmental-- to respond as well. We see this primarily with Internally Displaced Populations (for example Niger and Somalia), and regionally displaced refugees (for example Iraq and Darfur).

Further, the pressure for additional energy resources is undermining the livelihood of people across the globe. Already the rainforests in Malaysia, and the communities dependent on their production (rubber trees for example), are being destroyed to make way for palm plantations that can produce bio-fuel (Painter 2007). Oil and gas exploitation is running in competition with environmental destruction in Ecuador, where they are reevaluating whether energy or global warming is the biggest issue (Reuters 2007). Sugar cane plantations in Venezuela for bio-fuel are being seized by displaced farmers and burned (Romero 2007). Across the globe these conflicts and displacements are occurring.

The benefactors of this exploitation and redirection have primarily been the rich nations, and even more so a global elite that is pulling away from the rest of the planet. Lant Pritchett (1997:3) summarized the disparity as follows:

“Divergence in relative productivity levels and living standards is the dominant feature of modern economic history. In the last century, incomes in the “less developed” (or euphemistically, the “developing”) countries have fallen far behind this in the “developed” countries, both proportionately and absolutely. I estimate that from 1870 to 1990 the ratio of per capita incomes between the richest and poorest countries increased by roughly a factor of five and the difference in income between the richest country and all others has increased by an order of magnitude.”

We are facing a massive displacement and potential die off of the vulnerable populations of the planet --hitting most heavily in poor nations (Pfeiffer 2006; Heinberg 2004). Do we face increasing levels of domestic and international conflict with the destruction and expenses those bring? Or do we face the challenges squarely and as fairly as possible? While the first two scenarios seem the most likely at this point, there is the possibility of taking the third course. What does that mean in terms of real action that must be taken?

Shifting Course

There must be a dramatic and immediate reduction in the use of resources – particularly petroleum resources. This will dramatically force an economic transition from high consumption and planned obsolescence to durable and lower impact consumption. It also means a relocalization of economies.

Rapidly developing regions (such as India and China) must be encouraged to utilize their current economic prosperity to take a different development path than the West has. If they continue in the direction and at the pace that they are going then nothing the West does will offset catastrophe. In 2006, China replaced the United States as the largest emitter of CO₂ – one of the major contributors to global warming (Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency 2007). China has been averaging an 8-12 percent growth rate and that is expected to continue through 2010 (Dashan 2005). This growth rate is requiring comparable increases in fossil fuels, and in increasing global warming gas emissions.

Resources must be made available to improve the adaptive capacity of poor nations. Increasingly both Africa and South America are becoming of high interest for resource exploitation (Griffin 2007; Harman 2007). As that “interest” has intensified, so have the levels of conflict (Klare 2002).

There is an ethical and moral aspect of this as well as a practical one. Since the wealth, and corresponding adaptive capacity of rich nations has been built upon the exploitation of the natural and human wealth of the global south, we owe them. We owe them more than we are ever likely going to be able to repay. Sacrificing “quality of life” and reorganizing rich nations so that exploited nations have the possibility to address the challenges facing them is the ethically appropriate course to take.

Efforts need to be made to protect cultures from default extinction, while at the same time helping cultural groups integrate into receiving societies. This requires a significant change in the importance of “diversity.” Diversity is not only something which is culturally enriching. On a

societal and global level, it provides different ways of seeing and being in the world. Cultural diversity offers different lenses and strategies for addressing global challenges, as well as for living peacefully with each other.

Corporations look at the world as a global resource and marketplace. They push for a “borderless” world for the free movement of capital and goods. However, the success of this strategy in part depends on maintaining certain levels of global competition – primarily in labor forces and markets. This does not serve the needs of the world we currently live in. We need to find ways of working together at a higher level of collaboration and cooperation than we ever have before. However, this is not the most likely direction – nor the one rich nations’ seem to be bracing for. Instead, they are bracing for global conflict which is aimed at both controlling resources and controlling populations who might resist or flee. It will take leadership, and an involved public, to follow the third path.

Conclusion

We stand at the vortex of globalization, resources scarcity, and environmental upheaval. This will dramatically drive increasing human migration with as much as half of the population being displaced to varying degrees. Little is being done to avert the disasters we are facing. Rich nations are not changing course, and poor nations do not have the resources to prepare. What is happening is that rich nations are preparing to respond militarily to the challenges. This makes the likelihood of conflict high, with the accompanying squandering of resources in destruction. We do have the opportunity to change this future if we have the will to do so.

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Forum on Public Policy

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