

'CLIMATE REFUGEE' TO 'CLIMATE MIGRANTS': WHAT STATUS ENSURES THE RIGHTS OF THE CLIMATE-INDUCED PEOPLE?

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Abstract

The popular media, researchers, and world leaders warn that the increasing climate change events will displace more people in future. Thus, the affected countries and civil society organisations are demanding to protect the human rights of the climate displaced people. However, some scholars and even some international organisations, such as UNHCR are sceptical about the impacts of the climate change on population displacement. The researchers and UNHCR have also given contested opinion for labelling the climate-displaced people, e.g., 'climate refugees' or 'climate migrants'. This article considers it as a debating issue and proposes to recognise the climate displaced people under the 'climate justice' theory. The climate justice theory argues that individual state and the international community are equally liable to protect the human rights and dignity of the climate displaced people without any distinction. This article acknowledges the argument and proposes to give the climate-displaced people as "refugee" status for protecting the rights and dignity even after their displacement and settlement in a new destination. In order to advance the argument, the article first analyses the literature and legal documents and present the development of the concept of 'climate refugees' and 'climate migrants'. Then, the article highlights the major debates on 'climate refugee' and 'climate migrant'. Assessing the current debates, this article recommends that climate change is a global issue, and the most affected countries are less responsible for their plight. It means that there is a 'protection gap' of the climate-displaced people across the world. As a result, individual state and the international community need to treat the displaced people as 'refugee' for ensuring the rights and dignity of the climate change-induced people.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is one of the most significant challenges in the current world¹, and it has already been considered as an important source of national and international security concern. Some authors acknowledge that climate

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¹ D. C. Roy, "Vulnerability and Population Displacements Due to Climate-Induced Disasters in Coastal Bangladesh," in *Climate Change and Migration: Rethinking Policies for Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction*, edited by M. Leighton, X. Shen, and K. Warner, Germany: United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS), 2010.

change is a ‘high politics issue’ while others consider it as a ‘low politics issue’.² Indeed, low politics issue of climate change is more concerning for the humanity than the high politics in order its detrimental effects on life, livelihood, habitat, and well-being of millions of poor people in the world. In fact, the gradual and sudden climate changes events have complicated the livelihood, environment, and overall eco-system in many parts of the world, which eventually have displaced millions of people. The already published literature presents the multi-level information about the climate displaced people, such as 200 million people to be displaced by the climate change events by 2050³; 24 million people would be refugee due to environmental disasters and climate change⁴; 250 million people would be displaced from their land for the adverse effects of climate change.⁵ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) also claims that around 200 million ‘environmental migrants’ would be by 2050.⁶ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) publishes that while there are around 200 million of international migrations, there are approximately 740 million internal migrations.⁷

The above predictions on human displacement and migration due to the climate change events have, thus, originated two-fold of discussions, one is “recognition”, and another is “protection”. One school argues that climate change is the biggest threat to the security of the human being. Therefore, the human rights and human dignity of the displaced people must be protected under the legal ground. On the other hand, some researchers question the scientific evidence on the population displacement and the responsibility of the

² Climate change as a ‘high politics refers to an issue of international security concern. The United Nations Security Council meeting in 2007 has, thus, included climate change as an agenda of discussion and debate. On the other hand, climate change as a ‘low politics refers to people oriented security issue. The effects of climate change is increasingly complicating and threatening the livelihood and life supporting systems of the millions of poor and marginal people in the world. For more details: S. Castles, “Concluding Remarks on the Climate Change-Migration Nexus, Migration and climate change,” in *Migration and Climate Change*, edited by É. Piguet, A. Pécout, and P. D. Guchteneire, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

³ N. Myers, *Environmental Refugees: An Emergent Security Issue*, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2005.

⁴ UNHCR, “Environmental migrants and refugees,” *Refugees*, No. 127, 2002.

⁵ Christian Aid, “Human Tide: The Real Migration Crisis: A Christian Aid Report,” 2007, available at: <<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-08/human-tide-the-real-migration-crisis-may-2007.pdf>> (accessed on 1 December 2017).

⁶ Brown, *Migration and Climate Change*, IOM Migration Research Series 31, Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2008.

⁷ UNDP, “Overcoming Barriers, Human Mobility and Development,” *Human Development Report*, 2009, available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/269/hdr_2009_en_complete.pdf> (accessed on 1 December 2017).

climate change as single cause to displace people.⁸ Another school is reluctant to give the legal status to the displaced people in the ground that the displaced people are not forced to leave their place of origin. Instead, other factors comprising social, political, and economic complicate the living place and displace people. It means that climate change impact is claimed not as a direct cause of displacement but as a “threat multiplier”.⁹ Along with the critical discussion, some researchers have proposed different names for referring to the climate displaced people, e.g., ‘environmental refugee’, ‘environmental migrants’, ‘climate change refugee’, and ‘climate migrants’.¹⁰ These terms are not distinct from each other but are used interchangeably in the literature of the social sciences. However, two questions, such as what categorisation ensures the rights and dignity, and who is legally liable to ensure the rights and dignity of the climate displaced people under the current international law? In this regard, it is to mention that the international community, especially the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) is reluctant to give the refugee status to the displaced people in the ground that the climate displaced people do not qualify the definition of the refugee status. This article defers with this definition and advances the arguments for the protection of the climate displaced people. Emphasising the ‘climate justice theory,’ this article *first* analyses the ‘climate refugee’ and ‘climate migrant’ with development and theoretical understanding. *Secondly*, the paper presents the debate on climate refugee and climate migrant. *Thirdly*, the paper defines the ‘climate justice theory’ and its ramification with the climate displaced people. *Finally*, this paper recommends protecting the rights of the displaced people through providing legal status both in the national and international context.

METHODOLOGY

This article is a review paper based on secondary source of information. In the review article, few questions are important, such as what has been done and how the findings are presented and what results are worth mentioning for concluding.¹¹ This paper has first assessed published articles in the reputed journals. For selecting the literature, the paper follows the “methodological filtering” system to accept the good articles and reduce the bad papers. For the filtering purpose, the article relies

⁸ R. A. McLeman, *Climate and Human Migration: Past Experiences, Future Challenges*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; J. McAdam, *Climate Change and Displacement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010.

⁹ G. Hugo, *Migration and climate change*, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2013.

¹⁰ C. Boano, R. Zetter, and T. Morris, *Environmentally Displaced People: Understanding the Linkages between Environmental Change, Livelihoods and Forced Migration*, Oxford Working Paper, 2007.

¹¹ O. Gulpinar, and A. G. Guclu, “How to write a review article?,” *Turkish Journal of Urology*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2013, pp. 44-48. DOI: <10.5152/tud.2013.054>