

Definitions and concepts

Abstract

Many terms have recently been coined, and many definitions developed, to refer essentially to individuals displaced by environmental factors. Through a review of this definitional debate, this chapter reveals underlying conceptual issues with the attribution of individual migrants to environmental factors in isolation from other factors. It retraces attempts that have been made to develop other approaches and concepts that would offer greater consistency, in particular scenario-based protection (e.g. disaster-induced migration, development-induced displacement and resettlement) and need-based protection (e.g. survival migration).

Keywords

Definition, causality, attribution, climate migration, survival migration

1. Introduction

Many terms have been used to refer to individuals who are displaced in connection with environmental factors. Alternative qualificatives – “environmental,” “ecological,” “climate,” etc. – have been combined with several substantives – “migrants,” “refugees,” “displaced persons,” etc. – to form a myriad of ill-defined terms. Such terminological hesitancy is far from uncommon in a new field where many voices attempt to say similar things without necessarily using the same words. Yet, in relation to environmental migration, these terminological difficulties have continued for several decades and remain particularly intractable. Debates on the terminology to use when referring to individuals displaced in connection with environmental factors reflect deeper conceptual questions that this chapter seeks to explore, in particular the difficulty of attributing an individual decision to migration to one single cause in isolation from others.

There are important questions at stake in terminological choices. Although there is no unique understanding of these terminological choices, “refugee” (from the French past participle “réfugié,” literally a “refuged” person) and “displaced persons” have a passive connotation suggesting that the person was *forced* to migrate, whereas “migrant” uses the active voice of the present participle so does not exclude that the person could have freely *decided* to migrate. While “migrant” can thus be used as a generic term, “refugee” is often taken to indicate a forced journey across an international border, and “displaced person” generally alludes to “internationally displaced persons,” a term coined in the 1990s to refer essentially to people who could qualify as refugees if they were to cross an international border or to other individuals forcibly displaced within their own State. Adjoining “climate” as a qualificative to any such substantive, as in “climate migrants” or “climate refugees,” suggests a narrower attribution of migration to environmental impacts of climate change, such as sea-level rise or perhaps some hydro-meteorological natural disasters whose occurrence becomes more likely because of climate change. Attribution to climate change raises additional difficulties relating to evidence as well as to the probabilistic (rather than determinative) nature of climate change.

This chapter uses “environmental migrants” as a generic term to relate to populations displaced because of environmental factors. Defining environmental migrants is an essential preliminary step before assessing the scope of the phenomenon (e.g. put figures on “environmental migration”) and proposing possible legal responses (e.g. a status of “environmental migrants”). However, any attempt at a specific definition of an environmental migrant faces many conceptual issues. It is rarely possible to attribute an individual migration to environmental factors in a convincing way.

The second section reviews the definitions proposed (or implied) in the literature. A third section discusses underlying conceptual issues that have impeded any attempt to define environmental migrants. A fourth section finally turns to alternative approaches to defining populations of concern on the basis of scenarios or protection needs.

2. The elusive definition of environmental migrants

At the most basic and almost tautological level, “environmental migrant” refers to people who migrate because of environmental factors. Many authors have sought to develop a more specific definition of environmental migrants – one which could actually help identify individuals as environmental migrants. An exhaustive list of such attempts is obviously beyond the scope of this chapter, but five representative illustrations can be mentioned.

1. In one of the first publications on the impact of environmental factors on migration, Hassam El-Hinnawi (1985, at 4) suggested the term “environmental refugees” to refer to 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 jeopardised their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life.”
2. Two decades later, a discussion note of the International Organization for Migration proposed a working definition that has largely been cited in subsequent publications. “Environmental migrants” were accordingly to refer to:
“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 either within their country or abroad.” (IOM 2007, para. 6)
3. In 2008, Michel Prieur led a group of jurists to develop a proposal for a “Convention on the International Status of Environmentally-Displaced Persons.” The latter were defined as “individuals, families and populations confronted with a sudden or gradual environment disaster that inexorably impacts their living conditions, resulting in their forced displacement, at the outset or throughout, from their habitual residence” (CRIDEAU 2008, article 2).
4. Two years thereafter, an influential article by Frank Biermann and Ingrid Boas called for working “towards a global governance system to protect climate refugees.” “Climate refugees” were defined as:
“people who have to leave their habitats, immediately or in the near future, because of sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment related to at least one of three impacts of climate change: sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity” (2010 at 67).
5. A more recent article by Eike Albrecht and Malte Paul Plewa defines a “climate-change refugee” as:

“an individual who is forced to flee his or her home and to relocate prospectively permanently in a different country, as the result of sudden or gradual environmental disruption which has made his or her homeland uninhabitable and which has, more likely than not, resulted from anthropogenic climate change, where that individual is either unable or unwilling to avail him- or herself of the protection of his or her home country” (2015 at 80).

These definitions address several questions often, although not always, in similar fashion.

- i. Environmental migrants are generally approached as individuals, but also, sometimes, as groups, or even as families or “populations” (CRIDEAU 2008), which could suggest some collective rights (e.g. possibly some rights to self-governance) or some individual rights to ensure belonging to a collective entity (e.g. a specific protection of cultural rights).
- ii. Environmental migrants have migrated, or possibly have to migrate “immediately or in the near future” (Biermann and Boas 2010 at 67). It is slightly counter-intuitive to qualify a person who has not yet migrated as a migrant (or “refugee”), but this suggests that a status of environmental migrants could include the right to migrate. In practice, identifying individuals who will have to migrate in the near future is however particularly problematic.
- iii. Their migration may be either temporary or permanent. Environmental migrants include, therefore, people in very different situations on a continuum between very short-term displacements (a few days) and people for whom permanent arrangements need to be made.
- iv. Their migration is forced as a matter of survival or in order to avoid serious loss of life quality, or could possibly follow from a choice (IOM 2007). These differences in the definitions cited above are of tremendous significance. Forced migration can be defined very narrowly if it is limited to matters of immediate and certain life or death. But all migrants, whether forced or not, have rights; many of them are exposed to human rights abuses as they enter unknown places.
- v. Their migration is caused by a “marked environmental disruption” (El-Hinnawi 1985), whether happening suddenly or gradually. Gradual environmental impacts such as sea-level rise, happening at a very slow pace, may be particularly difficult to isolate from other factors. They may not cause migration as suddenly as a natural disaster, but rather through economic proxy factors.

Some definitions also require that environmental “refugees” cross the border of their State of origin (Albrecht and Plewa 2015), or that, to qualify as “climate refugees,” the environmental factor could be related to climate change (Biermann & Boas 2010, Albrecht & Plewa 2015). We leave these particularities aside in the following, focusing on environmental migrants in their generality.

3. Underlying conceptual issues

Such definitions are overly general and abstract, and they would be of little assistance in trying to identify an individual environmental migrant. Distinguishing individuals likely to migrate in the immediate future, for instance, would be quite problematic. Asserting whether an individual’s migration is necessary for survival or to ensure minimal living quality, on the other hand, could also be particularly difficult. The distinction between voluntary and forced migration is not a dichotomy based on clear criteria, but rather a continuum (for instance Hugo 1996). Whether migration is voluntary and forced cannot in practice be based on the

individual's own feeling that there is no other option but to migration, as this would require an impossible guess in an individual's thoughts. Instead, an objective test would need to be used, based on an idea of what constitutes an acceptable threshold to prevail over other considerations. This would require the difficult definition of a threshold of harm (how much harm is likely to be suffered?) and a threshold of risk (how likely is this harm?).

However, by far the most problematic dimensions in implementing any definition of an environmental migrant would be to determine whether an individual's migration can be attributed to an environmental factor, and whether *that* particular factor "forces" this individual to migrate. We migrate, or do not migrate, at any given time in our life, by taking into account as many elements as we take into account in any important decision, including possibly expected economic opportunities or health care, options for education or leisure at different places, as well as the quality of the natural or socio-cultural environment and our readiness, or fears, to see different horizons. None of these factors operates in total isolation from the others.

Environmental factors may however lead to compelling considerations. Natural disasters most obviously force people to flee suddenly when their life is at risk. Slow-onset environmental changes affect individuals more gradually, most often through economic considerations. A gradual degradation of a grassland could make it more difficult to rear cattle, for instance, leading new generations to seek other sources of income elsewhere. By contrast, a sudden drought, or a flood, could force entire populations to leave at once.

Yet, even the strongest physical event only becomes a natural disaster in a given context. Exposure, vulnerability and resilience define whether and how individuals and societies are affected by any given environmental phenomenon. Thus, Olivia Dun and François Gemenne noted that "[t]he main reason for the lack of definition relating to migration caused by environmental degradation or change is linked to the difficulty of isolating environmental factors from other drivers of migration" (2007, at 10). Likewise, a report on *Migration and Global Environmental Change* delivered to the British Foresight agency in 2011 concluded that, although environmental change will continue to affect migration, interactions between economic, social, political and environmental factors "means that it will rarely be possible to distinguish individuals for whom environmental factors are the sole driver ('environmental migrants')" (Foresight 2011, at 9).

The latter quote, if taken seriously, suggests that the difficulty faced in adopting a meaningful definition of environmental migrants is actually a conceptual issue – the impossibility of recognizing environmental factors in individuals' experience of migration. Because migration scholars overwhelmingly suggest that environmental factors are only part of a cluster of causes, it is conceptually misleading to discuss something called "environmental migration" as if it was a distinct phenomenon. The difficulty is not in putting a name to it, but in trying to identify the "it" at the first place when environmental change does not create a distinct sort of migration. Definitions of environmental migrants will remain overly abstract, figures will remain inconsistent, and policy proposals will remain irrelevant as long as we fail to understand that the influence of environmental factors on migration does not give rise to a distinct population of migrants.

4. Alternative approaches to defining populations of concern

Rather than seeking to define environmental migrants as a particular population of concern, recent developments have considered alternative perspectives. Some have relaxed the causal

requirement and explored on multiple scenarios whereby a particular trigger (rather than an abstract cause) results in specific forms of migration (e.g. Kälin 2010). Other approaches have done completely away with causal attribution, focusing on the protection needs rather than on what induces them (e.g. Nansen Initiative 2015).

An influential list of scenarios was developed by Walter Kälin, the former Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons. In relation to “climate-induced displacement,” Kälin distinguishes the five following scenarios:

1. “Sudden-onset disasters ... trigger[ing] large-scale displacement;”
2. “Slow-onset environmental degradation” which may first “prompt people to consider ‘voluntary’ displacement,” then increasingly force permanent migration;
3. “So-called ‘sinking’ small island states,” a “special case of slow-onset disasters”;
4. The designation of certain areas as high-risk zones too dangerous for human habitation, forcing the evacuation or prohibiting the return of certain populations;
5. “Unrest seriously disturbing public order, violence or even armed conflict” triggered by environmental changes. (Kälin 2010, at 81)

These scenarios are archetypical but they do not constitute an exhaustive typology of the multiple migration scenarios that climate change effects. Like the concentric circles that an impact produces on a water surface, extending *ad infinitum* and *at absurdum* in time and space, environmental phenomena may translate in innumerable scenarios of migration. Measures adopted in response to environmental phenomena consist not only in designating zones as too dangerous for human habitation, but also in diverse infrastructural projects that involve the displacement and resettlement of populations, or in policies (e.g. towards climate change mitigation) translating in economic incentives that modify labour migration patterns.

Although it would be vain to try and identify each and every migration scenario, the main scenarios can be the object of specific research and, possibly, particular policy responses. Thus, nineteen scholars from climate change, migration and development studies co-authored an article calling for a renewed attention to protection challenges and opportunities related to “resettlement associated with climate change” (de Sherbinin et al. 2011). Likewise, the Nansen Initiative, first closely focused on the impact of climate change on transboundary migration, has gradually abandoned any causal attribution to climate change and explored protection issues related to cross-border displacement triggered by natural disasters (Nansen Initiative 2015).

This focus on migration scenarios diverted attention from causal attribution. Some authors argued that causal attribution should be set aside entirely (Nicholson 2014). The cause of migration is not a direct determinant of the protection needs at the place of destination, and giving priority to migrants related to a particular driver (whether persecution, climate change, or environmental factors) hinders the quest for an optimal distribution of concerns and protection resources towards all populations in need (Mayer 2016). Bertrand Russell (1912, at 1)’s stark critique of causation as “a relic of a bygone age, surviving ... only because it is erroneously supposed to do no harm” resonate here.

Alexander Betts, in particular, argued that a debate focusing on particular drivers of migration “risks missing the point” (2011 at 15). Beside the difficulty of attributing migration to a single driver such as environmental change, Betts notes that, “if the aim is to identify who should be entitled to asylum, then isolating a particular cause of movement is unimportant” (16). Doing away with causality entirely, Betts develops the concept of survival migration to relate to

“persons who are outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or resolution” (23). Somewhat analogous arguments were made with regard to internal displacement through the concept of “crisis migration” developed by Susan Martin and her co-authors (2014).

Conclusions

In the debate on environmental migrations, definitions are not just of a conventional nature. Elusive attempts to provide a specific definition of “environmental migrants” reveal conceptual issues – the difficulty of attributing migration to one factor in abstraction of others. One may certainly identify migration scenarios that are triggered or exacerbated by environmental drivers. Yet, there is a need to think carefully about what is gained and what is lost in putting emphasis on environmental rather than other factors (e.g. political, economic). The politics of causal attribution are politics of blame and exoneration. But while debating whether those millions risking their lives to cross international borders are “environmentally-displaced persons,” “ecological migrants” or perhaps “economic refugees,” one needs to keep in mind what really matters: that migrants, notwithstanding what drives them, are human beings.

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