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Fr. Sean McDonagh: Worldwide climate migration

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Columban Fr. Sean McDonagh is an ecologist, theologian and author. He writes and lectures on the relationship between faith, justice and ecology. He became involved in tackling global poverty and environmental degradation during his missionary years in the Philippines.

Even though the displacement of people, often on a permanent basis, always appears on any list of the consequences of climate change, little has been done to address their plight. The first assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC AR1), stated that the single greatest impact of climate change may well be the mass migration of humans, a phenomenon which is now being called ??climigration.?

That report went on to suggest that by 2050, 150 million people would be displaced by climate change phenomena such as desertification, droughts and water scarcity, rising sea-levels, disappearance of arable land and severe weather events. In other words, people will be forced to leave environments which are no long hospitable for human beings. The iconic examples which have received such media attention are those people living on low lying islands in the Southern Pacific and Indian Ocean. However, the devastation to New Orleans caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 is a reminder that climate-induced migration may not be confined to poorer countries. Of course rich countries, such as the U.S., have the ability to protect such areas unless the severe weather event which only appear once in a hundred years, now happens every few years.

Numbers involved?
The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change published in 2006, estimates that the figure could be as high as 250 million people. Despite these enormous numbers (and others would even project a figure of 500 million climate-induced migrants), these people have yet to receive significant attention at any of the COPs to date. Even if one accepts the 200 million figure, this is ten times the entire population of documented refugees and internally displaced people today.

No adequate legal or policy framework
And as yet, there are no policy measures to address ?climigration?, in fact, there isn?t an agreed term for these displaced people. Many object to the term environmental or climate change ?refugees,? because of the meaning of the term ?refugee? is enshrined in international agreements such as the 1951 Refugee Covenant. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IMO) have advised against using terms such ?climate refugees? or ?environmental refugees? because they have no legal basis in international refugee law. They advise that the terms be avoided so as not to undermine the international legal regime for the protection of refugees.

Under the present rules for climate-induced migrants to be considered as refugees there would have to be evidence that their governments were intentionally destroying the environment and livelihoods of these people, which is very seldom the case.

One thing that must be kept in mind in all this discussion is that the people who are forced to migrate because of the massive changes which climate change has brought about in their tradition habitat, did little to cause these

problemin the first instance.. Rather, the impact has occurred because of the actions of other people in other parts of the globe who have burned and continue to burn fossil fuel.

These people whether, from the coastline of Bangladesh or the Maldives, have a right to be resettled somewhere. In view of the causes of mass climate-induced migration, the potential numbers involved and the fact that the possibilities of returning to their original homes are virtually nil, these issues need to be drawn into migration management policies and practices debate.

Disappearing states

One real lacuna is that in international law there is no legal framework for dealing with states or territories which simply disappear as a consequence of a rise in sea-levels. This means that there is no legal framework at the moment for dealing with the status and rights of people whose state disappeared. Some precedence, such as the African Union Convention for the Protections and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa which was signed in Kampala in October 2009, might be helpful. The Economist stated that the ?most significant bit of the convention is the recognition accorded to climate change migrants.?

Any legal terminology to cover climate-induced migration must incorporate a sense of global responsibility and accountability for what has happened to these people. In particular, the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Climate Change must include obligations and responsibilities to respond to climate-induce migration for Annex 1 countries (rich countries). This would lay out the obligations of rich countries, which have benefited greatly from the use of fossil fuels over the past 100 years, have towards poor countries which are now experiencing the negative impacts of climate change and do not have the resources to tackle the problem effectively.

The historical records show that the United States is responsible for 29 percent of greenhouse gas emissions, the countries comprising the EU for 26 percent and Russia for 8 percent. Developing countries and emerging economies are responsible for 24 percent, though, of course, that percentage is rising as their economies expand.

In the light of these statistics, the responsibility of developed countries for the current problems which are forcing people to leave their homes permanently because of climate change, needs to be acknowledged and acted upon. At first glance, there would seem to be the possibility of applying the ?polluter pays principle? which is enshrined as Internationalization of Environmental Costs in Principle 16 of the Rio Declaration (UNCED 1992. This environmental principle is derived for the moral demand that a person must make restitution to another human being for the damages which one?s behaviour has caused. In the case of climate change, the damage is not merely to an individual but to groups of people who must leave their homes because they have disappeared, in the case of small low-lying islands, or can now longer be farmed because of prolonged climate-induced drought.

Need for new institutions and structures

There is also an urgent need to recognize in international law the unique situation of climate-induce migrants, seeing that none of the traditional categories or legal frameworks appears to be of much help to them. It is time to develop a new category before the problem becomes overwhelming. The Stern Review constantly states that the cost of inaction on climate change will be far higher the longer we put off doing something concrete about it. The same logic applied directly to the situation of climate-induced migration.

There have been a number of efforts to date. In the run up to the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, the Ad-Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was considering including climate-induced migration and displacement in a post-Kyoto agreement. It was envisaged as part of the Action Plan on Adaptation. This seems to be no longer on the cards.

Furthermore, the UNFCCC should include strong human rights language as a guiding principle in any post

Kyoto agreement, because a rights-based approach establishes procedural standards for government policies and international agencies. There would seem to be a need for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UNFCCC to cooperate more closely in developing guidelines for designing appropriate adaptation polices.
Since climate-induced migration, will often involve groups of people, rather than individuals, there is also a need for an international dedicated agency to deal effectively with what will be a recurring problem. Otherwise the ad hoc response to each disaster as it occurs will probably be chaotic.

I have written this article, not because I have any great expertise in working with migrants, but because I am aware that many regions and mission units in the Columban Society are addressing the current needs of migrants and refugees. As is obvious from this article, this is a new area and, there are many more questions than answers. But, I believe a start must be made because there is no doubt in my mind but that this will become a major issue in the not too distant future.

In writing this article I found two publications helpful:
1. ?Climate Change Induced Forced Migrants: in need of dignified recognition under a new Protocol.? Equity and Justice Working Group Bangladesh, (December 2009). www.equitydg.org

2. ?Climate Refugees? beyond Copenhagen: legal concept, political implications, normative considerations, published by Diakonisches Werk der EKD e.V, for ?Brot fur die Weit, D-70184 Stuttgart. www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de

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