Global human impact on the environment is creating a new kind of casualty – the environmental refugee. Floods, storms, drought and other "man-made" disasters are already a bigger cause of population displacement than war and persecution. By 2050, it's estimated, up to 150 million people may have been forced from their homes because of global warming and climate change. Rising seas will drown several small island states, leaving vast areas of the developing world uninhabitable.

What happens when you try to relocate a nation? Displacement for environmental reasons is not recognised as a basis for refugee status in international law – so poorer states shoulder the burden. Yet it is the rich countries' profligate use of fossil fuels to power consumption-intensive lifestyles that is the ultimate cause of rising sea levels and weather-related disasters. In this new nef pocketbook, Andrew Simms and Molly Conisbee argue that international law should recognise the concept of "environmental persecution" – actions by states that lead to the oppression of individuals – and grant refugee status to people driven from their homes by a lost or ruined environment. Without international recognition and management, they add, the environmental refugee crisis could turn into a major source of global instability.

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The **new economics foundation** is the leading independent think-tank involved in the development of a fairer and more sustainable economy. It won the Prospect magazine Think Tank of the Year award in 2002.

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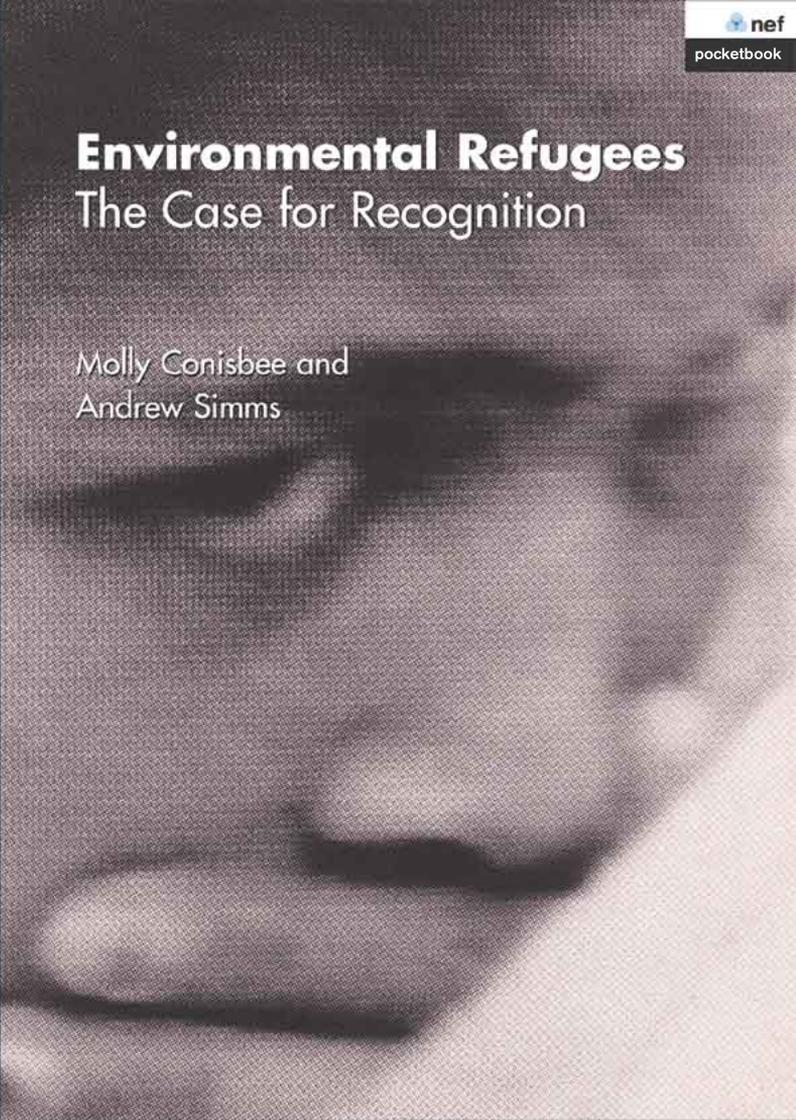
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Environmental Refugees

Molly Conisbee & Andrew Simms

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Environmental Refugees
The Case for Recognition

Molly Conisbee and
Andrew Simms

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Environmental Refugees
The Case for Recognition

Molly Conisbee and
Andrew Simms

Contents

Introduction

Hysteria walks in the footsteps of refugees and immigrants. In Britain barely a day passes without scare stories of crime, fraud and intolerable burdens placed on public services. They are depicted as people out for themselves and "on the make". They are "benefits tourists" or "economic" refugees – not real ones. In August 2003 the Conservative Party suggested that all asylum seekers should undergo compulsory health tests, adding suspect personal hygiene to the list of migrants' implied crimes. Those found with an infectious disease could have their asylum claim rejected – an ironic footnote to the history of genocide over the last 500 years caused by Europeans exporting disease to the rest of the world.

The reality is that immigrants have always made, and continue to make, an important contribution to the British economy and cultural life – although this does little to dampen the moral outrage and indignation.

Amidst the fear and loathing, however, there is now a deeper irony. In the near future, and as a direct result of the kind of lives we lead, refugee numbers are set to increase dramatically. More than any war or political upheaval, global warming stands to displace millions of people. And global warming is being driven by the fossil fuel-intensive lifestyles the West enjoys.

We have written this pocketbook because nothing has been done at official level in the international community to prepare for what is now a sad inevitability. Governments are in denial; the specialised United Nations agencies wash their hands of the problem. The only people in officialdom facing up to the challenge are those who cannot escape it – the governments of small, low-lying island nations such as Tuvalu. Along with four other small island states, Tuvalu is facing the prospect of extinction – making it possibly the first nation to be obliterated as a result of climate change. Many other states – Bangladesh, for example – have large, heavily populated areas also under threat.

The spectre of wholesale relocation of populations raises fundamental questions about citizenhood and nationality. Once land has been lost, will a residual nationality be able to persist, or does there need to be a new category of "world citizen"? Could such a status be created in acknowledgement of the fact that climate change is a collective problem and requires a collective solution? In the event of full-scale national evacuation, what happens to an abandoned country's exclusive economic zone, its territorial waters and nationhood? As the example of Israel and Palestine shows only too well, few things could be more sensitive than carving out new territory to create space for a nation.

Environmental refugees are already with us. Problems such as climate change mean they will grow in number. The choice is now between proper international management –

providing protection to people forced to flee through no
fault of their own – or growing international chaos. This is
a plea to avoid the latter.

1 Borders and Boundaries

On July 7 2003, three young men were killed in a van crushed by the 7.03 train travelling from Hereford to London, at Evesham. Variously reported as Kurds, Iraqis or Arabs, they were part of Britain's burgeoning army of migrant labourers – picking onions in the west Midlands in the midst of a heatwave.

Migrant labour in the UK has increased 44 per cent in the last seven years. Some of it is "managed" through seasonal agricultural schemes, enabling workers to find jobs in labour-intensive low-wage sectors such as agriculture, meat and fish packing. Much of it is illegal or informal. The reasons people come to countries such as the UK to live a twilight existence in often appalling conditions are complex and many – the search for a better life, the hope of being able to send money home. Much of this migrant experience is beyond the remit of this pocketbook. There is one key figure that barely registers in the media, however – the "environmental refugee".

The demand of the global economy for cheap mobile labour is not the only factor pushing the movement of people across borders. Its waste products – chiefly in the form of carbon dioxide, the gas mainly responsible for global warming – play a critical role. For wealthy countries, the uncomfortable truth is that the forces driving the global

growth in refugees lie very close to home – in their own energy-rich lifestyles.

Estimates suggest that at present approximately 170 million people have left the country of their birth. Within Europe alone migrants make up around 20 million of the population. Some of these are part of "managed" migration flows – skilled workers moving from job to job. But many more have had no choice but to escape to save their lives.

Migration in history

People have been on the move since history began – seeking better resources, driven by curiosity or adventure, fleeing from persecution or environmental disaster. Many have made homes thousands of miles away from their place of birth. Go far enough back and we are nearly all migrants, spreading out around the planet from a few valleys in Africa. But with the exception of the Biblical exodus, the idea of mass-migration or "refugees" did not really come into play until the development of the nation state. Without borders there can be no transgressing of geographical boundaries.

Benedict Anderson wrote convincingly about the birth of the nation state and the consequent notion of "national identity". In his book *Imagined Communities*, he "propose[s] the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined both as

inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion."

As nations were forged, states sought to control the mobility of their populations. Increasingly this was part of a move to develop a notion of "national identity." There were many reasons behind these moves – in some instances repressive, in others protective. In Western Europe, and later much of the rest of the world, the growth of the nation state and industrial capitalism led to increasing needs for population control.

Initial migrations tended to be internal – from rural to urban areas in search of employment, as enclosure of common lands and the increasing mechanisation of agriculture threw huge numbers of farm workers and their families out of work. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams says that even by 1690 there were five landless labourers to every three occupiers in England – and that the growth of those without rural subsistence was only intensified by the boom in population between the 17th and 19th centuries. The development of factory-based production meant that large, urban centres rapidly filled up with displaced rural migrants, desperate for work

In earlier phases of economic development, individuals and families had been identified with a particular settlement or parish. This was a product of feudal relationships of

bonded labour, where communities were directly responsible for each other, under the beady eye of a feudal lord and his estates. After the Black Death labour shortages effectively fractured the feudal order. Waged labour became a feature of the local community, as men and women were able to hire themselves out for pay.

Internal migration posed a challenge both to public services and to perceptions of social order. The church provided relief for poorer or vulnerable members of the parish, later formalised by the infamous Poor Law of 1601, which was not properly reformed until 1834. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century rural migrants to the cities often faced a hostile reception. They were plunged into the inhumane working conditions of mass production or left to the dubious charity of the state workhouse.

As with today's Oakington barracks, buried deep in rural Cambridgeshire, which serves as a reception centre for incoming asylum seekers, it was hoped that workhouse conditions would have a deterrent effect, so that people would do virtually anything to avoid them. The workhouses were designed to counter what was perceived as the inherently slothful nature of the poor, who would not be encouraged to better their situation if they were too kindly treated by the state.

The migration from rural to urban areas generated much anxiety. Artists and writers from Constable, Hogarth and Gainsborough to Dickens, Mrs Gaskell and William Morris

sentimentalised the death of the pastoral, with its supposedly contented peasantry, and were much exercised by the corruptions of the Victorian city. The poor were frequently portrayed as a terrifying, faceless horde – threatening a mass usurpation of power should they cohere into a political movement. Thomas Malthus' *Principles of Population*, published in 1798, reflected these anxieties, arguing that uncontrolled "breeding" by the poor would lead to starvation. With an exploding birthrate and migration on a large scale across the country, many theorists feared they were about to be overwhelmed by an anarchic and unbiddable "mass".

Wars and migration

In the last two centuries, diaspora – the forced relocation of entire peoples – has become more common. The Irish Potato Famine of 1845–46, which appeared to bear out the predictions of Malthus, led to thousands migrating abroad to escape near-certain starvation. During the 20th century the biggest concentrations of population movement have been concerned with wars and, to a lesser extent, labour migration.

Major waves have included: displacement by the First World War and the subsequent break-up of the Ottoman Empire; refugees from Nazi Europe in the 1930s and 1940s; and immigration in the 1960s from former colonies such as the West Indies, Jamaica, India, Pakistan, when many immigrants were invited to take up jobs not being filled by

the UK population. In the 1990s the increased freedom of movement in the post-Communist period added to migrations caused by wars and civil strife in places such as the Middle East, Yugoslavia and Africa.

Lessons of history

Certain recurrent themes emerge clearly from an examination of migration in history. Much of the Victorian debate about the new urban masses and funding the "feckless poor" bears striking similarities to the current row over asylum-seekers – even to the marginalisation and containment of poverty in special detention centres. Similarly, internal displacement of rural communities, the Irish situation and the Highland clearances are all early examples of migrancy with both an economic and an environmental motif – and where it is often difficult to disentangle the two. Thrown off the land – or left to contend with disease-ridden crops – people had no choice but to seek new life elsewhere. In doing so, as the next chapter demonstrates, they encountered an increasing array of controls.

2 A Brief History of Control

Passports are not a new invention. The ancient Egyptians had a passport system linked to the movement of labour. The Romans required documents for those travelling across the empire on official business. In the time of William the Conqueror's "Norman Yoke", no one was allowed to leave England without the King's express permission. This evolved into the so-called King's Licence, which had to be obtained by any potential traveller before leaving the country.

But the development of the modern passport occurred much more recently, with the huge increase of leisure travel in the 19th century, and the emergence of the nation state from under imperial umbrellas. Prior to this period, foreign travel had been so limited – either to those engaged in trade or diplomatic work – that passports could be personally overseen and signed by monarchs themselves, or by a senior political figure. By the mid-19th century this was no longer practical. It led to the widespread practice of replacing hitherto handwritten documents with an early pre-printed booklet-style precursor to today's passports.

The word "passport" was first mentioned in England in 1548 and referred specifically to soldiers in the act of warfare. It determined that no captain would be able to give a soldier freedom, or "passport", to leave military

service. During the 18th and 19th centuries governments across Europe tended to be *laissez-faire* about passport or other paper identification controls. The Grand Tour may have been an essential facet of a young gentleman's education but it was not widespread enough to warrant a bureaucracy of its own. Population movement was straightforward and in some instances actively encouraged; in any event, mass travel was not really a possibility for the vast majority.

As John Torpey, author of *The Invention of the Passport*, notes, however, the "generally liberal" attitude toward freedom of movement that carried the day in Europe during the late 19th century did not prevent governments becoming "increasingly oriented to making distinctions between their own citizens / subjects and others, a distinction that could be made only on the basis of documents." This solidified as a policy after the First World War, as increasingly nationalistic sentiment was drummed up to mobilise popular opinion in favour of the war, and controls on population flows became more rigorous. According to Torpey, "many of the migrants forced to leave their homes by the often violent processes of nation-state building faced substantial constraints on their movements as a result of the general antipathies toward foreigners and the documentary requirements that had been imposed on travellers throughout Europe during and after the war."

The First World War allowed many governments to introduce restrictive measures for passport controls. In the

UK the National Registration Act of 1915 obliged the carrying of a national identity card. In the postwar period, the League of Nations called an international conference on passports and customs formalities, which led to the production and development of international standards on passport production.

Many of those displaced from their farms and livelihoods in Belgium, France and the Balkans, not to mention those rendered effectively stateless by the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, were only spared by the League of Nations' Nansen Passport – papers issued to refugees so that they could seek settlement and work in any League member state that would accept them.

Increased controls came to a head during and after the Second World War. This was an unprecedented period of population movement, as people across Europe fled the Nazis. Indeed the Geneva Convention of 1951 was designed simply to cope with Europe's refugee crisis during and after the war period. It was not until some time later that the Convention was expanded to incorporate refugees from outside Europe.

But confining people by national identity has always been controversial. Some saw the Second World War as the ultimate failure of nation states. In what became a cause celèbre in May 1948, the campaigner Garry Davis renounced his US citizenship. He declared himself to be "World Citizen Number One" and later that year

interrupted the proceedings of a still young United Nations with a declaration denouncing "warring sovereign states" and calling for a World Constituent Assembly. Mr Davis took his world citizenship very seriously and started issuing his own passports, inventing "The World Service Authority." He generated a huge following and was supported by European intellectual stars including Albert Camus.

But the rigorously enforced linkage between passport and nation-state, established only recently in historical terms, may have already passed its high-water mark. In the European Union old national passports have been replaced by a standard member state format. Passports designed for travel within trading blocks may become the model for border control. In a world of globalising economies, blurring boundaries and collective planetary threats, passports are evolving, towards an increasingly uncertain future.

3 Hostile Planet – The Forces Driving Displacement

The Pacific Island nation of Tuvalu is a string of nine coral atolls, no more than a few metres above sea level at their highest point. People who have become adept at living in a fragile and changeable environment have inhabited the islands for about 2,000 years. But recent changes to the global climate have seriously undermined their way of life.

In 2000 the floods that Tuvalu has every year lasted, unusually, for five consecutive months. This tiny nation faces huge threats from a range of impacts caused by global warming, from storms and drought to rising sea levels. As a result, its population is faced with the prospect of a phased relocation to neighbouring countries. In March 2002 Tuvalu's Prime Minister, Koloa Talake, announced that he was considering legal action against the world's worst polluters – the nations most responsible for carbon dioxide emissions – at the International Court of Justice

Climate change affects both the frequency and the predictability of storms and cyclones. Since the 1970s warmer conditions have resulted in greater incidence of cyclones, especially over the western tropical Pacific. As levels of carbon dioxide increase in the atmosphere it is also

anticipated that the intensity of cyclones will increase – with wind speeds potentially 10–20 per cent higher than previously.

Weather-related disasters are making life impossible for many communities. But they are not the only culprit. "Natural" disasters, together with the effects of resource stripping, have displaced millions. The Oxford University analyst Norman Myers estimates that 25 million people worldwide have been uprooted for environmental reasons – more than the 22 million refugees who have fled from war and other persecutions.

Globally, the problems exemplified by Tuvalu are expected to get worse. According to the World Meteorological Organization, 2001 was the second warmest year on record. Since 1976, the global average temperature has risen at a rate approximately three times faster than the century's average. In 2001, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the group of scientists that advises international climate negotiations, produced their Third Assessment Report (TAR). It projects that over the period 1990-2100 global average surface temperature will climb at a rate without precedent in the last 10,000 years. The result would be a rise in sea levels of between 9 and 88 cms – a huge threat to island and coastal living across the globe.

Coastal flooding not only erodes landmass. It soaks farmland with salty water, making it impossible to grow

crops. It can also affect fresh drinking water supplies. Cities such as Manila, Bangkok, Shanghai, Dhaka and Jakarta are already vulnerable to subsidence. On the Carteret atolls off the coast of Papua New Guinea, rising seas have cut one island in half and increased salt levels in the soil to such an extent that fruit and vegetable crops have been killed off. The atoll has about 1,500 residents – who have been surviving on basic rations of sweet potatoes and rice for the last two years. The Papuan government cannot afford to relocate these communities – and, in any case, where would they relocate them to?

The rise in sea levels is only one of the environmental effects of climate change. The change in sea temperature also damages fragile marine environments such as coral reefs. This has a knock-on effect on marine life, crucial to local ecosystems and livelihoods based on fishing. During the last El Niño of 1997–98, some 90 per cent of live reefs were affected. Drought is another consequence of global warming, potentially affecting millions more. During 1997–98 drought destroyed Fiji's sugar cane crop, costing the government US$18 million.

Overall, according to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent's World Disasters Report 2002, in the Oceania region the numbers of those killed by weather-related disasters rose 21 per cent from the 1970s to the 1990s. The numbers of those whose lives were affected rose from 275,000 in the 1970s to 1.2 million in the 1980s to 18 million in the 1990s – a 65-fold increase. These statistics

incorporate those affected by events such as cyclones, floods, landslides, droughts and extremes of temperature.

Climate refugees

Despite the predictions, no global assessment of the numbers likely to be displaced by a one-metre rise in sea levels, or even a half-metre rise, has been made. Yet they are likely to prove enormous. Of the world's 19 megacities, 16 are situated on coastlines. All but four are in the developing world. The *World Disasters Report* points out both the human and economic costs involved: "The most vulnerable areas are found in the tropics, especially the west coast of Africa, south Asia and south-east Asia, and low-lying coral atolls in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The nations hardest hit will be those least able to afford coastal protection measures and where inhabitants have nowhere else to go."

A 1998 report by the IPCC summed up some of the regional impacts of climate change. A one-metre rise in sea level would inundate 3 million hectares in Bangladesh, displacing 15–20 million people, it found. Vietnam could lose 500,000 hectares of land in the Red River Delta and another 2 million hectares in the Mekong Delta, displacing roughly 10 million people. About 85 per cent of the Maldives' main island, which contains the capital Male, would be swamped. Most of the Maldives would be turned into sandbars, forcing 300,000 people to flee to India or Sri

Lanka. The Maldives, in the words of its president, "would cease to exist as a nation."

In West Africa, up to 70 per cent of the Nigerian coast would be inundated by a one-metre rise, affecting more than 2.7 million hectares and pushing some beaches three kilometres inland. Gambia's capital, Banjul, would be entirely submerged. In the Mediterranean, Egypt would lose at least 2 million hectares of land in the fertile Nile Delta, displacing 8–10 million people, including nearly the entire population of Alexandria. The demise of this historic city would cost the country over $32 billion, close to a third of its annual gross national product (GNP) in 1999.

South American cities would suffer some of the worst economic effects. In Guyana 600,000 people would be displaced – 80 per cent of the population. The cost would be $4 billion, or 1,000 per cent of Guyana's tiny GNP.

While the seas rise, much coastal land is sinking, often because of water extraction. Subsidence affects Manila, Bangkok, Shanghai, Dhaka and Jakarta. In Bangkok, rising sea levels would cost an additional $20 million per year in pumping costs alone. Costs for relocating displaced squatter communities would be astronomical. In Shanghai, up to a third of the city's 17 million inhabitants would be flooded, displacing up to 6 million people. Most cities have scarcely begun to think about the implications – even Singapore, a city with a comprehensive planning culture, has nothing in its latest 50-year master plan to deal with a one-metre sea-

level rise. One of Manila's water managers quoted in the *World Disasters Report* says the city is already overwhelmed, adding: "I can't even imagine what would happen if the sea rises by a metre. Hundreds would drown during the rainy season and we would be faced with massive capital investments in new, bigger pumping stations and storm-drain systems."

States themselves may not only make a bad situation worse; sometimes they actually cause it. The Kobe earthquake in Japan in 1997 killed nearly 6,000 people and left 300,000 homeless. Four years later, because of Japanese bureaucracy and lack of state aid – and despite its wealth – 5,000 were still living in temporary shelters.

Uprooting communities

Dam-building projects are a special case of state culpability. In India, dams have displaced between 20 and 50 million people. Most of these have been from tribal groups – the Karjan and Sukhi reservoirs in the state of Gujarat solely displaced tribal communities. In Orissa, tribal people made up 98 per cent of those moved from their homes for the Balimela Hydro project; for the Upper Kolar dam they constituted 96 per cent. Such forced moves have proved deeply traumatic for the communities involved. Many have lived in a place for generations. Resettlement in new areas, among peoples sometimes hostile to their presence, has torn the heart out of many formerly self-reliant and independent cultures.

Dam-building programmes are commonplace across the developing world, but particularly in South East Asia and Latin America. In most cases they involve state-enforced removal of communities. Like India, many governments have a poor record in their treatment of tribal or indigenous peoples and displaced communities have received little or no compensation for the loss of their lands and way of life. There are many examples of communities being deliberately defrauded and exploited by governments and legal systems.

All the events and incidents quoted in this chapter have created, and will continue to create, refugees, and on an unprecedented and alarming scale. Two questions then arise – who is to blame and what is being done to help them? As the next chapter shows, answering these questions takes us into some new and controversial territory.

4 On the Move

In contemporary political language, describing someone as an "economic" migrant or refugee is at best a dismissive term, at worst an abusive one. Yet much of the wealth of today's richest nations was built by a wave of economic migrants, flowing out of 18th and 19th century Europe to what we now think of as the developing world.

Second sons of aristocratic families with few prospects at home were sent out into the emerging empire to make their fortunes. Employees of the British East India Company found that they could enjoy a quality of life far greater abroad than at home. Even today the employees of multinational companies stationed in offices in Asia, Latin America and Africa can afford lifestyles they could not dream of in the West. A spurious distinction has emerged, a variant of "us and them". "Our" economic migrants are sent round the world, justifiably, even commendably, in search of wealth and luxury. "Their" economic migrants, coming to do the work we don't want to do, in order to raise their standard of living above subsistence, are scorned as freeloading chancers.

This is one ingredient of contemporary asylum mythology. Another is the notion that Britain is a "soft touch" for asylum-seekers. The Refugee Council points out that even within the EU, in 2001 the UK ranked 10th in terms of

asylum applications in relation to the overall population. The world's poorest countries not only generate the bulk of refugees; they look after them too. During 1992–2001, according to the UN, 86 per cent of the world's estimated 12 million refugees originated from developing countries, whilst such countries provided asylum to 72 per cent of the global population. When host countries' size, population and wealth are taken into account, the UK ranks 32nd in the league table of countries accepting asylum-seekers. The table is topped by Iran, Burundi and Guinea.

According to the Refugee Council, tougher controls being introduced by many EU members mean that it is now "extremely difficult" to gain entry to Europe – and that the UK, in particular, is "far from being a 'soft touch'". In 2001, for example, Canada granted protection to 97 per cent of Afghan asylum applicants; the UK figure was 19 per cent. Somali applicants had a 92 per cent success rate in Canada; in the UK it was 34 per cent. Of Colombian applicants in Canada 85 per cent were granted protection, against 3 per cent in the UK.

Another myth involves numbers. The public vastly overestimates the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in Britain. According to a recent MORI poll, people think that 23 per cent of the world's refugees and asylum seekers are in the UK; the reality is less than 2 per cent.

Such misconceptions have nevertheless contributed to a perceptible harshening of the terms in which the asylum

debate is being conducted. The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act of 2002 was the fourth piece of major asylum legislation in the UK in a decade and focused largely on the control and removal of unsuccessful asylum applicants, and the exclusion of all asylum applications from countries considered "safe". The countries currently on this list are the ten EU accession countries. And this in turn has important repercussions for the position of environmental refugees.

Defining an environmental refugee

As previous chapters noted, history is full of examples of people driven from their homes by a hostile environment – and it's increasingly hard to distinguish these factors from economic ones. Throughout much of the world, particularly the less developed rural countries, there's probably no meaningful difference – the environment is the direct source of people's livelihoods. But as the last chapter showed, the scale and speed at which humans are altering the global environment has over the last two decades altered perceptions in two ways. First. there is a new awareness of environmental factors as the triggers for major population movements. Second, it's recognised that humans are pulling the trigger – that what were once considered "natural" disasters are increasingly man-made.

The United Nations summed up this change in perceptions in 1985. A report by Essam El Hinnawi for the UN's

Environment Programme suggested there was a category of persons "who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat" because of a marked environmental disruption "that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life." The definitions he produced, with its categories of "temporarily displaced" – by an earthquake or volcano, for example – and "permanently displaced", either by changes to habitat such as dam building or through permanent environmental degradation, have become central to the debate. According to more recent estimates by Dr Norman Myers of Oxford University, by 2050 up to 150 million people may be displaced by the impacts of global warming, such as sea level rise – equivalent to over 1.5 per cent of 2050's predicted global population of around 9 billion.

Global warming is, of course, a man-made phenomenon. Indeed, one of the ironies of the debate is the link between travel, climate change and migration. The improved access to trains, planes and other travel options – both commercially and for leisure purposes – is one of the main factors driving Western economies' insatiable consumption of fossil fuels. That, in turn, fuels climate change, which ends up displacing people and causing more population movement. But it's also important to remember that while international travel may be cheaper and more accessible than at any time in history, the cost of a plane or train ticket is still well beyond the reach of the majority of the world's population.

It's the central contention of this pocketbook that the international community has a duty to help environmental refugees. Western Europe and the US cannot continue to consume with impunity, without regard to their impact on the global environment. This means an historic act of facing up to the real cost of our lifestyle. It also means revising how we define, and what we mean by, the term "refugee".

Geneva Convention

Refugees are currently defined and protected under the Geneva Convention. This was first adopted to deal with the vast numbers of people displaced after the Second World War and was approved by a special UN conference in July 1951.

The convention had its roots in earlier attempts by the League of Nations to secure international legal protection for people displaced by war. It clearly spells out what a refugee is, and the sorts of protection they should receive – legal or social welfare, for example. It also defines those who cannot gain refugee status, such as war criminals.

According to the convention, a refugee is someone who holds a "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.'

The first draft was mainly aimed at protecting Europeans; it
was extended in 1967 to include peoples from around the
world. Regional variations were also adopted, such as the
1969 Africa Refugee Convention and the 1984 Latin
American Cartagena Declaration. In December 1952
Denmark was the first country to ratify it. Since then 143
states have signed up. However, as patterns of global
movement have changed, the convention has come under
increasing threat, even from those governments signed up to
it. Many Western European governments have argued that
"economic" and other migrants take advantage of the
convention to make better lives for themselves outside their
country of birth.

This pocketbook argues that the Geneva Convention should
be expanded to incorporate a category of "environmental
persecution", discussed more fully in the next chapter. This
is a controversial issue within the migration and refugee
debate. Environmental reasons for granting refugee status
are not currently listed in the convention, and there is
resistance to categorising refugees on these grounds. The
United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)
has consistently rejected the case for categorising the
environment as a basis for refugee status, arguing that it

must concentrate its limited resources on those fleeing political, religious or ideological persecution.

It's also claimed that populations displaced internally should be able to appeal to their own government. Only if government fails in its duty of care to citizens should an international agency intervene. The UNHCR argues that people displaced through environmental degradation will be able to move within their home country.

Limits to state protection

There are a number of problems with these arguments. No one seriously doubts that unlike "pure " economic migrants – but like genuine asylum seekers – the movements of environmental refugees are enforced. Given a reasonably free choice, they would stay where they were. But to claim that they can be accommodated within their own countries ignores two facts. First, the governments of those countries, as in the case of dam projects, may be the direct cause of displacement – and a poor source of protection.

Second, and more important, the countries, or large parts of them, may disappear or become uninhabitable. Or their governments may lack the resources to cope. As we saw in the last chapter, there is a strong possibility that the government of small island states like Tuvalu may end up under water. The Maldives could be devastated, with all 300,000 inhabitants forced to leave. According to one

authoritative study, at least five small island states are at risk of ceasing to exist, raising complex political and legal questions to do with citizenship and economic rights. And while relatively few people live on island states, many millions more, in Bangladesh, the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, Egypt, China, Latin America, face a dangerous and potentially unsurvivable future.

Even more seriously, the arguments against proper recognition of environmental refugees ignore the international causes – and solutions – of the crises they face. To burden national governments, often of the world's poorest states, with the costs of their displacement fails to acknowledge the responsibility of polluters.

This is both a moral and an economic case. Fossil fuels – coal, gas, oil – drive the global economy: they account for around 80 per cent of the world's economic activity. They also allow the wealthier countries to enjoy lifestyles that by any reasonable international definitions – and certainly by comparison with the developing world – are lavish. They are also, of course, responsible for global warming. Rich countries spend a minimum of $80 billion per year subsidizing their fossil fuel industries – yet at climate negotiations in Bonn in 2001 they pledged just $0.4 billion per year, from 2005, to help poor countries manage their emissions and adapt to climate change.

Is it unreasonable to expect the wealthier members of the international community to pay for their profligate

enjoyment of the earth's finite fossil fuel supply? We believe not. Only by creating new legal responsibilities towards environmental refugees will the international community – and especially industrialised countries – accept their obligations. Fundamentally, it is a very simple idea – an extension of the "polluter pays" principle. People whose environment is being damaged and destroyed, and who are losing their lives and livelihoods, should be recompensed and protected by those responsible.

Among the polluting states this is not likely to be a popular proposition. There is widespread denial of the link between current consumption patterns and global environmental crisis. We lack the structures of governance to relate those who consume to those who pay the cost of such consumption. The people most likely to be displaced by environmental crisis and degradation are amongst the world's poorest, with the least political muscle. Their voices, in effect, are being drowned out in a fog of car fumes, power stations, air miles and fast food. They need to be heard, and listened to. The next chapter shows how we might begin to do this.

5 Environmental Persecution

The case for expanding the Geneva Convention to include those displaced by environmental degradation is based on the notion that the environment can be used as an instrument of harm. This idea would cover dam-building projects that inflict serious social damage on disempowered communities, as mentioned in Chapter 3. It would also take in a global system that allows parts of the world the freedom to pollute and consume without having to pick up the tab.

Harm is intentional when a set of policies is pursued in full knowledge of its damaging consequences. The causes and consequences of climate change – who is responsible, who gets hurt – are now sufficiently understood. To disregard that knowledge, or to fail to respond adequately, must be classed as intentional behaviour.

Current US energy plans, for example, will increase American emissions of greenhouse gases – the gases responsible for global warming and climate change – by 25 per cent by 2010. Such intentional behaviour will result in environmental refugees. It's thus perfectly fair to categorise it as environmental persecution. As already noted, the Geneva Convention defines a refugee as someone forced to flee because of a well-founded fear of persecution, be it religious, political or "other". A well-

founded fear of starvation or drowning is a compelling reason to escape.

But environmental persecution is also a major global security issue – with far-reaching implications for civil strife and terrorism. What happens if entire nations become uninhabitable? Will displaced nations of the future have new lands carved out from existing sovereign states? What will happen to these people if they have no special protected status? In other words, what will happen if we *don't* do something about environmental refugees?

Burden on poorest

Current immigration policies are not remotely capable of dealing with the potential numbers involved. The burden of environmental refugees now falls most heavily on poorer countries. In many of these, governments are already failing to meet the basic needs of their people. And while nation states should always maintain the ultimate responsibility for their citizens, the world order has changed signficantly since the Geneva Convention was first agreed. Globalisation has undermined many of the powers of the nation state, even its ability to support citizens at moments of crisis. To expect impoverished states to respond to environmental calamities that are not of their own making is to fail to acknowledge the extent to which national sovereignty is constrained.

Dealing with the environmental refugee crisis thus needs to be part of a wider global settlement that shifts major new resources from North to South. This would recognise that some states bear a disproportionate responsibility for problems such as climate change, which should be reflected in their obligations to displaced people. Economic considerations – World Bank and International Monetary Fund structural adjustment plans, World Trade Oganisation rules – have already enormously extended *de facto* internationalisation, constraining states' freedom to make policy and resource decisions and giving new rights to capital and goods to move across borders. If the free flow of goods, services and money is protected by international agreements, it seems perverse to deny the same rights to people.

UN Commission

The first step in establishing such a settlement, we suggest, would be a global UN Commission. This would report to the UN Security Council and the General Assembly on the legal, economic, political and social implications of the growing number of environmental refugees. It should also examine the threat posed to nationhood by environmental problems such as global warming. Several tasks would probably follow from this:

Updating the Geneva Convention. When the Geneva Convention was created to deal with the aftermath of the Second World War, only Europeans qualified for refugee

status. In a globalised world, the language that framed the convention now looks outmoded and absurd. The UNHCR is in danger of looking equally out of date, and also at odds with much expert opinion, in its refusal to accept environmental threats as a legitimate ground for refugee status. Granting environmental refugees such status would provide them with internationally assured protection, independent of, and separate from, the actions of their own governments. Often these governments do not have the resources or the will to help; sometimes, as we have seen in relation to dam-building projects in India, they are themselves directly culpable.

Writing a new convention. If the UNHCR feels unable to manage the transition from representing those with "traditional" – political, religious and conflict-based – fears of persecution, a new and separate international convention may be needed, specifically focusing on people whose way of life is being destroyed by a lost, ruined or degraded environment.

Compensating for ecological debts. The world needs to recognise the case for ecological debt – defined as the debt accrued to the global community when citizens of one country take more than their fair share of a global environmental "common" such as the atmosphere. The people of poor "under-consuming" countries are creditors to the international community yet still suffer the burden of rich countries' carbon debts. An international measure of ecological debt could be agreed – for example, a sustainable

per capita level of fossil fuel consumption. This would help to clarify the financial and environmental obligations of "over-consuming" countries, particularly their contribution to climate-related problems and thus to the environmental refugee burden.

Arguments for change

Defining refugee status – the circumstances under which people should be granted the protection of another nation – has always been controversial. People leave their homes and homelands for a variety of complex reasons. We invent categories for these reasons – economics, political and religious persecution, conflict – but real life is rarely so clear-cut. Definitions grow blurred at the edges; categories spill over into each other.

Environmental displacement has placed old definitions and categories under huge new strain. Its scope is growing every year: more people are now on the move than at any time in history. National governments are rightly regarded as the main agency for protecting citizens' rights, but the point at which governments persecute people is the point they become refugees – and the point at which they need the protection of an international agency. For those displaced by the loss or destruction of their homeland for environmental reasons, this protection does not currently exist.

The countries and cultures most responsible for global environmental degradation must acknowledge their role, and begin to think about policies to tackle population movement at its source. Placing new international obligations on them towards environmental refugees would play an important role in kick-starting this process. But unless we make these changes, and urgently, it will be too late, not only for communities clinging on to ways of life undermined fatally by global environmental change, but for those in the rich world facing up to the poor man at their gates. Globalisation does not just mean rapid capital transfers and unlimited cheap travel. Nor does it just mean treating the world as a playground, a museum or a supermarket. It means that ignoring our neighbours is no longer an option.

6 Summary: A New Status for Environmental Refugees

Human impact on the environment is creating a new kind of global casualty – the environmental refugee. Forced from their homes and lands by flood, storm, drought and other "man-made" or weather-related disasters, they are now one of the fastest- growing classes of refugee. It's estimated that 25 million people worldwide have been uprooted for environmental reasons – more than the 22 million refugees who have fled from war and other persecutions. By 2050 up to 150 million people may be displaced by the impacts of global warming, such as sea level rise – equivalent to over 1.5 per cent of 2050's predicted global population of around 9 billion.

People have been on the move since history began. But the idea of mass-migration or "refugees" did not really come into play until the development of the nation state.

Although passports were used by the Egyptians, and the word was first mentioned in England in 1548, restrictive measures of passport control have been in operation for less than a century. The global nature of environmental change – the fact that its causes and effects straddle the nation state

– suggests that we now need global migration policies that transcend national boundaries.

Although most of the symptoms of environmental crisis appear in poorer countries, most of the causes lie in the richer ones. This is particularly true of global warming and climate change, where the energy-intensive lifestyles enjoyed in the West generate high levels of carbon dioxide emissions, dramatically affecting weather patterns and sea levels. In particularly vulnerable areas like Oceania and the South Pacific the numbers of those whose lives were affected rose from 275,000 to 18 million over the same period – a 65-fold increase. Many were repeatedly affected. A sea-level rise of up to a metre, which experts predict could occur by the end of the century, will cause widespread flooding throughout the developing world, drowning several small island states and making huge areas uninhabitable.

The current system for dealing with refugees is based on the Geneva Convention of 1951. It came into being in Europe as a result of the Second World War and was designed to deal with issues of war, ideology and religion. It is in need of urgent overhaul to cope with the new refugee problems generated by environmental crisis.

The case for granting refugee status to people fleeing the destruction of their environment is both a moral and political one. The richer countries responsible should pay the costs of their own pollution: they should not expect

poor nations and people to bear the brunt of somebody else's lifestyle. Forcing rich states to face up to their responsibilities on environmental refugees could also generate greater political will for international action on the environment – particularly on issues such as climate change. But there are important economic and security issues. If entire nations become uninhabitable, or have to be relocated, current immigration policies may well collapse under the strain. As in the case of Israel and Palestine, displaced and alienated populations may become a breeding ground for terrorism.

Policies that cause harm to people but are pursued in full knowledge of their damaging consequences should be classed as environmental persecution. Current US energy plans will increase its emissions of greenhouse gases – the gases responsible for global warming and climate change – by 25 per cent by 2010. They will thus create millions more environmental refugees. The Geneva Convention defines a refugee as someone forced to flee because of a well-founded fear of persecution, be it religious, political or "other". A well-founded fear of starvation or drowning is a compelling reason to escape. The Geneva Convention should be expanded to incorporate a new category of "environmental persecution".

Steps to achieve this could begin with a global commission, sponsored by the UN, reporting to the UN Security Council and the General Assembly on the implications of the growing number of environmental refugees. This should

also examine the threat posed to nationhood by environmental problems such as global warming. Other suggested changes include:

Updating the Geneva Convention. Granting environmental refugees proper status under the convention will provide them with internationally assured protection, independent of and separate from the actions of their own governments. Often these governments do not have the resources or the will to help; sometimes they are themselves directly culpable.

Writing a new convention. An alternative to an amended Geneva Convention is a new convention specifically focusing on people whose way of life is being destroyed by a lost, ruined or degraded environment.

Compensating for ecological debts. The world needs to establish an internationally agreed measure of ecological debt, focused initially on the biggest issue, climate change, and the use of fossil fuels. This would clarify the financial and environmental obligations of "over-polluting" countries, particularly the contribution they should make to climate-related problems such as the growth in environmental refugee numbers.

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