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Climate refugees: in the too-hard basket?

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Climate change will force people to flood from poorer regions to Western countries in the coming decades. As many as a billion people will end up on the move as floods, droughts, rising seas and climate-related conflicts spread across the globe, sparking political crises in the countries they head to.

This is one of the narratives we hear about climate-related migration. But a panel of experts has told the Paris summit it is wrong-headed. They called for a fresh way of thinking about an issue they concede is so major that it may be beyond the scope of these COP21 climate negotiations.

The panel of seven academics from European universities, who have been studying climate change-related migration, spoke at a packed side event at the conference centre on Tuesday. They agreed that climate-related migration is happening and will increase; people move for safety (in response to climate-related disasters), and because they've lost their livelihoods (such as farming).

One study found there could be 180 million climate refugees by 2040; others have estimated one billion people could be affected. Climate change caused higher food prices which contributed to the Arab Spring uprisings, while major droughts in Syria probably contributed to the devastating civil war (although the panellists emphasised that this was not the major cause of the conflict). Climate-related migration is also an important issue for Australia because vulnerable areas of the Pacific and South Asia are in this region.

But rather than treating climate refugees as a threat, as something to be feared and perhaps excluded, the panellists suggested different approaches.

Debunking myths

First, they pointed out that migration is complex and climate change is just one factor that prompts people to move.

Second, Dr Angela Oels from Sweden's [Lund University](#) cited research from the Pacific (their islands are vulnerable to sea-level rise) that found most people don't want to relocate. [Dr Koko Warner](#) from the United Nations University countered by saying that her research on three Pacific nations, Vanuatu, Kiribati and Nauru, found that 40-70% of residents thought that migration would be needed because of climate change. Almost 100% thought climate change would impact their country. But Warner pointed out that only about a quarter of people could actually afford to migrate, even if they wanted to. Oels' research

Author



Cathy Alexander
Research Fellow, Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, University of Melbourne

Disclosure statement

Cathy Alexander worked for current Australian Environment Minister Greg Hunt MP for six months in 2011, when he was in opposition.

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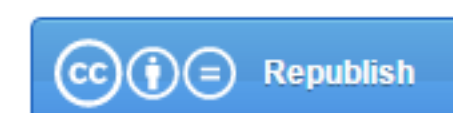
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also found that many people are trapped by a lack of resources and could not migrate.

Third, the experts suggested that climate refugees be seen as rational people adapting to climate change, not as victims.

Should 'climate refugees' be recognised?

There is technically no such thing; the UN classifies refugees as fleeing political persecution (this is [controversial](#) and has been [tested legally](#)). Dr Francois Gemenne from [Sciences Po University](#) in France strongly criticised the idea of defining refugees on political, rather than climate or economic, grounds.

“Who are we to distinguish between the good and the bad refugees?” he asked. “Climate impacts are just another form of violence that we inflict on people.”

Gemenne said the Syrian asylum-seeker crisis in Europe, which hung heavily over this panel session, showed how nonsensical it was to treat economic and political refugees differently.

But Oels raised issues with the idea of “climate refugees”, saying many people did not want to become refugees; they wanted heavily polluting nations to cut their greenhouse gas emissions, so they could stay in their homes.

Can the UN climate summit handle this issue?

Climate-related migration is not a big part of these Paris talks. Some panellists called for a greater focus on the issue, and pointed to areas of the draft Paris text which could focus on human mobility. They said rapid action was needed and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (the UNFCCC, which is running the Paris summit) should lift its game. An audience member from Bangladesh, which is particularly vulnerable to climate change, said the UNFCCC should deal with the issue. (His comments were welcome given that all seven panellists were from wealthy Western nations; there was no voice representing those at risk of migration due to climate change.)

But [Dr Giovanni Bettini](#) from the UK's Lancaster University said climate migration was such a difficult issue that it was probably beyond the UNFCCC. “Migration is all too political,” he said. “Is migration too controversial for this stage of climate diplomacy?”

Next steps

All the panellists agreed climate migration was going to become a very big issue over time, and the world was simply not prepared to deal with it. The Syrian asylum-seeker crisis showed how unprepared many countries were for these kinds of events, they said.

In terms of a broad principle to apply to climate-related migration, Warner summed it up like this: “We can no longer afford to wait for crises. People should be able to move in safety and dignity ... we have a lot of work ahead of us.”

This post was originally published on the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute's [COP21 blog](#).



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Keith Lethbridge Snr

G'day Cathy.

Thanks for your article. In my humble opinion, people shift camp for the same reasons as other creatures. If they out-breed the resources in one area, some of them go off & look for another area.

When our leaders get together & talk about Climate Change, they don't like to include Population as part of the equation. Perhaps it's too difficult or too

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