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Environmental Refugees

The Geneva Convention recognises asylum rights to all individuals fleeing their countries due to 'a well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion'. However, no rights are recognised to the millions of people being displaced due to natural disasters, development processes such as the construction of dams, deforestation or any of the vast consequences of climate change.

At current rates, the number of people forced to leave their homes due to environmental degradation reaches 10 million per year, while it is feared that increasing environmental pressures due to climate change will lead to as many as 200 million forced migrants by the end of the century. As with all refugees, the burden of environmental refugees is borne disproportionately by the poorest sectors of the international community, mainly Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent, China and Central America.

The growing numbers of individuals whose lives are put to risk due to environmental strain are increasingly viewed in the context of security by the research community followed by international bodies and governments. The link between environmental degradation and conflict is continuously being stressed, while the consequences of increased environmental burden to the countries receiving those refugees are abundant in international literature. In comparison, studies addressing the plight of these people and measures for their protection are very limited. Professor Norman Myers, a leading figure in environmental security issues states that the only solution to the growing crisis is to 'export the wherewithal for sustainable development for communities at risk - or import growing numbers of environmental refugees'. Governments of the developed world, however, have chosen to address the issue by further tightening border security. It is argued that people fleeing their countries in the face of environmental degradation do so to escape poverty and are viewed as 'volunteer migrants' who move to the developed world in the hope of abusing the asylum system. Environmental refugees throughout the world have no rights to protection, whether their homeland is consumed by rising sea levels (as in the case of Tuvalu, an island of the Pacific Ocean) or whether they are forcibly displaced by 'development' work (as in the case of the two million people being forced from their homes to make way for the construction of the three Gorges dam).

The vast majority of environmental refugees are created by the effects of climate change, and rising sea levels and expanding desertification will see millions more displaced individuals in the near future. The developed world is and has been almost entirely responsible for green gas emissions, that are the primary cause of climate change. However, it is the developing world that suffers the greatest consequences of climate change, while not having benefited from the technology that induced it. The time has come to address the ecological debt of the developed North to the rest of the international community. It is also the time to revisit the Geneva Convention and redefine the concept of refugees in order to recognise rights to asylum to those that will increasingly need it in the future: environmental refugees.