

Environmental migration

Paper: I (Indian and world geography)

Topic, Tags: environmental degradation. UN Refugee Convention, displacement and migration of people

Relevance and use of the article in UPSC prelims and mains examination: *This article discusses and classifies the terms and tells us the broader definition of Terms and concepts such as environmental migration, climate change-induced migration, ecological or environmental refugees, climate change migrants and environmentally-induced forced migrants are found scattered throughout the literature. The 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. Another major hindrance lies in the confusion of forced versus voluntary migration. Is environmental migration inherently a form of forced displacement? Can it take the form of voluntary relocation? What about government resettlement schemes in anticipation of or following an environmental disruption? Does the distinction between forced and voluntary matter? These questions must have an answer for an upsc aspirant.*

Who are Environmental migrants :

- These are people who are forced to leave their home region due to sudden or long-term changes to their local environment which compromise their well being or secure livelihood, such changes are held to include increased droughts, desertification, sea level rise, and disruption of seasonal weather patterns such as monsoons.
- Environmental migrants may flee to or migrate to another country or they may migrate internally within their own country. However, the term "environmental migrant" is used somewhat interchangeably with a range of similar terms, such as environmental refugee or climate refugee, although the distinction between these terms is contested. Despite problems in formulating a uniform and clear-cut definition of 'environmental migration', such a concept has increased as an issue of concern in the 2000s as policy-makers, environmental and social scientists attempt to conceptualise the potential societal effects of climate change and general environmental degradation.

Now the question arises is that People migrating due to environmental disasters should be accorded 'refugee' status in international law

- An increasing number of people globally are facing displacement due to droughts, famines, rising sea levels and other natural disasters caused by climate change. This class of migrants has been labelled as 'environmental refugees' in popular literature.
- According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, an international body reviewing trends of internal displacement, an estimated 24 million people are being displaced annually by natural disasters since 2008. This crisis will make almost half a billion people worldwide "environmental refugees" by the end of the century.
- The UN Refugee Convention (1951) grants certain rights to people fleeing persecution because of race, religion, nationality, affiliation to a particular social group, or political opinion. The rights they are entitled to follow principles of non-discrimination, non-penalisation, and non-refoulement. However, people migrating due to environmental disasters have no such recognition of their 'refugee' status in international law, leaving them without any basic rights of rehabilitation and compensation. In September 2015, in the run-up to the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP 21) in Paris, New Zealand reportedly refused a man and his family asylum. since no such category is listed under the UN Refugee Convention.

The Paris let-down

- The Paris Agreement presented a unique opportunity to set the record straight by addressing the challenge of increasing environmental refugees. Before the negotiations commenced, numerous demands were made to incorporate ways to tackle climate migration in the final agreement.
- These included recognising the threat posed by climate change to livelihoods and human safety, and environmental refugees or migrants affected by climate change; providing technical and capacity building support to national and local initiatives tackling such displacement; and developing suitable policies to manage loss and damage by addressing climate change-induced displacement.
- However, the Paris Agreement falls considerably short of these expectations. While some hail this agreement for alluding to the rights of ‘migrants’ in its Preamble, it is an anaemic attempt at appreciating the gravity of this crisis. There is also little follow-up in the text of the agreement to address this problem.

The way forward

- Almost one year after the Paris Agreement, its significance in displaying collective political will to take meaningful action against climate change cannot be undermined. However, this should not excuse its deficiencies in addressing a burgeoning population of environmental refugees.
- The draft of the Paris Agreement discussed before COP 21 provided for a Climate Change Displacement Coordination Facility. This facility was intended to target organised migration and planned relocation of displaced persons, securing emergency relief, and arranging compensation for those displaced — actions more meaningful than those of the task force in the Paris Agreement. Unfortunately, this coordination facility did not make it to the final text of the agreement, but it may be worthwhile to reconsider its establishment.
- While such a coordination facility can provide short-term support to relocate migrants and rehabilitate them in safer regions, a permanent solution requires an international treaty framework that recognises ‘environmental refugees’ and the obligations of nation states in accommodating them within their territories.
- We are already witnessing a world that is reactionary towards political refugees. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are two events that testify to the underlying paranoia towards immigrants. Ignoring environmental refugees or their status under international law keeps them in legal limbo and endangers their survival.

The Conclusion:

1. This scenario can be averted by either expanding the ambit of the existing UN Refugee Convention to include climate migration, or by creating an independent treaty framework addressing the challenges of climate change-induced migration comprehensively. It is also pertinent to mention that while India, the U.S., and China have all ratified the Paris Agreement, there is little discussion on steps to be taken by the three largest emitters of greenhouse gases.
2. The absence of such discourse is ironic given that the three countries are predicted to suffer tremendously from climate change-induced migration, resulting in large-scale displacement of their own populations. Therefore, it should be in their collective interest to lead efforts on finding an international resolution to this problem before the ensuing harm becomes irreparable.

Link:

http://www.unccd.int/Lists/SiteDocumentLibrary/Publications/MIGRATION_Update_Sept_2015.pdf



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