

Environmental exodus

Climate change is the largest environmental change expected this century. It is likely to intensify droughts, storms and floods, which will undoubtedly lead to environmental migrations and potential conflicts in the areas migrated to.

In the aftermath of environmental disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in the US, Rafael Reuveny from Indiana University in the US looks at the role of environmental degradation on population migration, or 'ecomigration'. He examines its impact on areas receiving migrants and resulting violent conflict in particular. His study has just been published online in Springer's journal *Human Ecology*.

People facing environmental disasters have no choice but to leave the affected area. The larger the migration and the shorter the period over which it occurs, the harder it is to absorb the migrants, raising the likelihood of conflict. For instance, migrants clash over jobs, resources and way of life, and violent interactions such as theft, beating, armed scuffles, seizure of resources and property, murders and insurgencies are likely.

In order to minimize the impact of environmental migrations, which can cause violent conflict in areas receiving migrants, Reuveny says developed countries would be wise to invest in preventive strategies both at home and in developing countries – since climate change is expected to degrade the environment considerably this century.

Reuveny's analysis of three case studies – the US Dust Bowl in the 1930s; Bangladesh since the 1950s; and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 – shows that although climate change can spur large population movements, public policy can alleviate the pressures of ecomigration. Indeed, if a country can invest in areas affected by environmental problems, the scope of ecomigration can be reduced and transitions can be smoother as more people are likely to return to the area.

In Reuveny's view, "minimizing climate change-induced migration and violent conflict in receiving areas requires an engineered economic slowdown in the developed countries, and population stabilization and economic growth in developing countries financed by the developed countries." These policies form the basis of the five-step approach he advocates to policy makers.

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