



A Human Ecological Approach to Environmental Security and Displacements

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ABSTRACT Persons who are displaced within their country of habitual residence or who have crossed an international border and for whom environmental degradation, deterioration or destruction is a major cause of their displacement, although not necessarily the sole one, belong to environmentally displaced people. These persons are refugees in the real sense of the word, but their situation does not coincide with the legal definition of "refugee". Therefore, the term "environmental refuge" which is common in the literature, is not used in this paper. Primary causes for environmental displacements include natural events necessitating disaster relief such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and floods. Human-made causes are by far the most underlying causes of the displacements. They include depletion of water, soil and other resources and/or environmental degradation, dam construction, nuclear testing, hazardous waste site construction, and industrial accidents. Global warming necessitates specific attention. Secondary causes (which in part result from the primary ones) include population pressure, diseases, malnutrition and poverty. In discussing environmentally induced displacements, it is important to grasp the underlying mechanisms. Environmental displacements are seldom caused by one event. Rather they are a response to multi-factorial stresses. Moreover, many of the causes are interlinked. Water shortage for example results in threatened harvests, famine, disease, poverty and social marginalisation. This type of environmental degradation spirals is the real motivation of a population's decision to move as their homeland cannot sustain them any longer. Action responses to environmentally induced migration have to do both with prevention and mitigation. At the prevention and preparedness side, environmental impact assessment, strategic environmental assessment, implementation of international environmental conventions and national environmental plans are among the most important instruments. Relocation policies, resettlements, technical improvements, early warning systems, and local ownership of mitigating actions are essential elements of the mix of instruments which is necessary to help environmentally displaced people with rehabilitation and their eventual possible return to their homeland whenever possible. At this moment, their number is estimated at 25 million and the trend is increasing. More research is needed to understand the fundamental causes and mechanisms driving environmental displacements. More interdisciplinary research is needed to understand causes and mechanisms and to come to better decision making. Human ecological frameworks are of particular importance in this respect. But probably the main problems these people actually face is a lack of official and legal recognition. This does not only hamper the formulation of more intensive policies to manage the problem, but also makes their presence prone to the generation of excuses to justify the outbreaks of ethnic tension and civil disorder. This shows how closely related environmental displacements and the broader concept of environmental security are. It equally shows that international recognition of

environmentally displaced people as a vulnerable group that needs special assistance, may now be seen to be desirable.

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