

# “VAST MIGRATIONS AND THE COLLAPSE OF POPULATIONS”: GLOBALISATION, CLIMATE CHANGE AND CLIMATE CHANGE REFUGEES

Remarks to a 31 August 2009 Oxfam Australia workshop<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

I understand that the board of Oxfam is updating its policy position on globalisation – which Martin Wolf (author of *Why Globalisation Works*, 2004) says is ‘a hideous word of obscure meaning.’ Wolf goes on to say that

For many of its proponents [globalisation] is an irresistible and desirable force sweeping away frontiers, overturning despotic governments, undermining taxation, liberating individuals and enriching all it touches. For many of its opponents it is a no less irresistible force, but undesirable. With the prefixes ‘neo-liberal’ or ‘corporate,’ globalization is condemned as a malign force that impoverishes the masses, destroys cultures, undermines democracy, imposes Americanisation, lays waste the welfare state, ruins the environment [and I’ll come back to this in a moment] and enthrones greed.

Stated like that, ‘globalisation’ appears unmanageably broad, and it can mean many things. Columbia University professor Jagdish Bhagwati (author of *In Defense of Globalization*, 2004) like many others focuses on *economic globalisation*, and economic globalisation dominates the literature – integration of national economies into the international economy through trade, direct foreign investment by corporations and multinationals, short-term capital flows, international flows of workers and humanity generally, and flows of technology.

Those ‘discontented’ with globalisation – to use the Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz’s term – have many arguments, but the main one (it seems to me) is that economic globalisation is the cause of many social ills today, such as poverty in poor countries and deterioration of the environment worldwide. Stiglitz – former chief economist for the World Bank and chairman of President Clinton’s Council of Economic Advisors – outlines its various problems:

- an unfair global trade regime that impedes development;
- an unstable global financial system that results in recurrent crises, with poor countries repeatedly finding themselves burdened with unsustainable debt; and
- a global intellectual property regime that denies access to affordable life-saving drugs, even as AIDS ravages the developing world.

In his latest book, *Making Globalization Work*, in the chapter headed ‘Saving the Planet,’ Stiglitz writes that

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<sup>1</sup> Footnotes omitted; please see author for references.

[u]nlike the other problems of globalization, global environmental problems affect developed and developing countries alike. And globalisation, as it has so far been managed, has – with few exceptions – not dealt adequately with the global environmental problem [or, in other words, climate change].

I'm going to talk briefly tonight about one aspect of this 'global environmental problem' - climate change 'refugees' – an aspect with which Oxfam International has been vitally concerned. And, in so doing, I hope to illuminate some of the more general issues associated with globalisation and the environment and, specifically, climate change.

In Oxfam Australia's globalisation 'policy discussion' document, it's said that, since Oxfam's 2001 globalisation policy, 'there have been monumental changes and challenges in globalisation, some of which were touched on in the [2001] policy but which are now front and centre of international debates.' The document says that

*[c]limate change has implications for globalisation, as the poor now are disproportionately affected from climate change impacts and a global political resolution is required based on common but differentiated responsibilities and capacity to respond, as the agreed UN framework on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol recognise. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is an example of an intergovernmental institution helping [to] facilitate this resolution [emphasis added].*

## **THE SCALE OF THE DISPLACEMENT PROBLEM**

The IPCC, the World Bank and many others warn that the effects of climate change – including rising sea levels, heavier floods, more frequent and severe storms, and drought – will cause large-scale human displacement. Although precise figures cannot be known, Myers estimates that, by 2050, as many as 200 million people, or one in every forty-five, could be overtaken by such events. The World Bank reported last year that

the overall magnitudes for the developing world are sobering: Within this century, hundreds of millions of people are likely to be displaced by SLR [sea level rise]; accompanying economic and ecological damage will be severe for many. The world has not previously faced a crisis on this scale, and planning for adaptation should begin immediately.

Further, Lord Stern has written that

South and East Asia will be the most vulnerable because of their large coastal populations in low-lying areas ... Millions will also be at risk around the coastline of Africa ... Small island states in the Caribbean, and in the Indian and Pacific Oceans ... are acutely threatened, because of their high concentrations of development along the coast ...

And Oxfam has said in its publication, *Suffering the Science: Climate change, people and poverty* (2009), that '[c]limate change is damaging people's lives today,' and that

[e]ven if world leaders agree the strictest possible curbs on greenhouse gas ... emissions, the prospects are very bleak for hundreds of millions of people, most of them among the world's poorest.

Since the middle of last year a group of us have been meeting to discuss problems associated with climate change displacement. These discussions and a range of other meetings and seminars have led to our proposal for a convention for climate change displaced persons – or CCDPs – which I want to talk briefly about tonight. We've given seminars and presentations on our convention project (within a globalisation context) here in Perth and in London, Vancouver and Copenhagen.

I plan here to discuss why a Convention is needed, to outline the main provisions of the Convention, and then to raise some key problems and issues. The Convention would establish an international regime for the status and treatment of climate change displaced persons – or refugees (although there are problems with using 'refugee' here, which I'll come to).

Calls for action are common across the debate on the human impact of climate change. However, few detailed and substantive proposals have been made in relation to CCDPs. Our project seeks to focus debate by proposing mechanisms through which an international approach to persons displaced by climate change might be coordinated.

## **WHY A CONVENTION?**

- 1. The scale of the problem** (I mentioned this just a moment ago)
- 2. No existing practical mechanism exists at international law to provide protection to CCDPs**

The status of people displaced by climate change is unclear in the current international framework for protection of refugees and displaced people.

### 'Traditional' refugees

- The 1951 UN Refugee Convention sets criteria for determination of refugee status: There must be a 'well-founded fear of persecution' in the country of origin arising from an individual's race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a social group and they must be outside their country of origin. *Climate change refugees don't meet the criteria.*

### Internally displaced people

- There are UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement which define internally-displaced persons as people forced to leave their homes as a result of, or in order to avoid, (a) the effects of armed conflict; (b) situations of generalised violence; (c) violations of human rights; or (d) natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed a state border. The Principles 'identify rights and guarantees relevant to the protection of persons from forced displacement and to their protection and assistance during displacement as well as during return or resettlement and reintegration.'
- The Principles cover environmental refugees, then, only within their country of origin.

- They are not legally binding – they don't constitute a binding instrument – but they reflect - and are consistent with - international law.

So: A Convention for CCDPs would provide consistency and certainty for a discrete problem; existing international law is fragmented and does not currently provide for CCDPs.

- Refugee law does not provide a framework, and the UNFCCC does not provide an appropriate mechanism. Its objective – and that of Kyoto - is 'to achieve ... stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system' (Article 2). Neither the UNFCCC nor its Kyoto Protocol is concerned with the movement of people.
- One of the benefits of our proposed convention is that it doesn't 'muddy the waters' by trying to make an international instrument or instruments match a problem with which they're not designed to deal.

### **3. A Convention would provide a mechanism for governments acting together (given the nature of the problem) to address it**

- There has been no co-ordinated response by governments to address human displacement caused by climate change, whether it be domestic or international, temporary or permanent.
- Given the nature and magnitude of the problem, ad hoc measures are likely to lead to inconsistency, confusion and conflict. The International community has an obvious interest in resolving displacement in a co-ordinated fashion. There are obvious international security issues at stake - dispossessed populations fighting for ever-scarcer resources is a nightmare vision.
- And we're not short of nightmare scenarios here: Gwynne Dyer's book, *Climate Wars*, amongst many others, describes a nightmare world in 2050 of hundreds of millions of climate change 'refugees;' vast migrations prompting fortress defences by countries; global wars driven by climate change; and the collapse of populations following droughts and crop failures.

## **OUTLINE OF THE CONVENTION**

The seven main features of the Convention are as follows:

### **1. Convention organisation**

- The Convention would establish an organisation, initially to draft and design a uniform, standardised research programme and then to administer, deal with and be responsible for climate change displacement matters the subject of the Convention.
- It would be a decision-making, co-ordinated organisation funded by Convention parties.

## **2. Research programme**

As a first step, Convention parties agree to participate in a research programme to establish the information and knowledge necessary to effectively plan for and respond to the human impacts of climate change. A focus would be on these impacts and the resources available for states to adapt and not on assessing – or predicting – the extent to which a population is likely to migrate. The study would build on the existing work on adaptation that has taken place by, for example, the IPCC.

The research programme would be carried out by Convention parties themselves and subject to review/critique in international fora and fora established by the Convention, and in other arenas.

## **3. Resettlement**

- Provision would be made for both long-term and short-term resettlement, either in anticipation of forced resettlement as a result of slow-onset climate change events (that is, prior to actual displacement) or following sudden events.
- The Convention would provide for long-term resettlement either (a) internally within affected countries (as a priority); or (b) internationally. However, and in common with most migration experts, we believe that most climate change displacement will occur internally, within the borders of a state, rather than externally. There is general agreement that the people most vulnerable to climate change are not the ones who will always be most likely to migrate across state borders (they won't have the resources or capacity to migrate).
- If resettlement internally within affected countries is not possible, external resettlement should involve, to the extent possible, CCDPs being received by parties in the same geographic area of, or with particular connections (religious, cultural, political, historic) to, affected countries.
- We propose the inclusion of a limited range of human rights protections within the Convention, including – as applicable – those found in the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, those dealing with the movement of populations. Existing human rights principles which are part of existing international law would, of course, continue to apply.

## **4. 'Common but differentiated responsibilities'**

In common with principles set out in the UNFCCC, Convention parties would provide for resettlement and CCDP assistance

on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities ... developed country parties [of the Convention] should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof (Art 3.1).

This accords with the approach taken generally with regard to climate change by Oxfam International.

## 5. CCDP Fund

In accordance with the principle which we just mentioned, developed countries would contribute to a fund which is used to (a) assist internal resettlement; (b) enable responses to specific climate change events; and (c) assist adaptation and mitigation by affected parties.

## 6. Basis for assistance by developed Convention parties: GHG emissions

- In order to provide a formula for developed countries to assist CCDPs, we propose that parties' obligations to accommodate or assist CCDPs or fund internal resettlement be based on their GHG emissions.
- We would apportion 'responsibility' for CCDP obligations under the Convention according to GHG emissions (either by volume, or per capita, either historic or present day). On a present 'GHG emissions by volume' basis, China would be most 'liable' (and there's a problem – it will have significant CCDPs of its own to assist, and it's a developing country ...). On a historic GHG emissions basis – the US would have the greatest obligation.

## 7. Finally – adaptation and mitigation

- The Convention would contain an acknowledgement, or recognition, that parties with populations at risk of climate change displacement continue to take climate change adaptation and mitigation actions.
- As part of such actions the Convention could provide for financial mechanisms, including the application in affected countries (with incentives) of the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism.
- These provisions would help make our Convention 'mutually reinforcing' with Kyoto.

For us, resettlement of CCDPs is a form of climate change adaptation. And, as the IPCC noted in 2007, with implications for our proposed Convention, 'effective adaptation measures are highly dependent on specific, geographical and climate risk factors as well as institutional, political and financial constraints.'

## CONCLUSION

The displacement of millions of people as a result of global warming presents real global challenges. As Corlett has noted in *Stormy Weather: The Challenge of Climate Change and Displacement* (2008),

[to take] the lead in international efforts that develop a framework for responding to the possibility that Tuvaluans and many millions of others may be displaced due to climate change ... is not to concede that mitigation and adaptation efforts are beyond us, although the longer we delay, the more real this possibility becomes. Rather, planning for a future of mass displacement due to climate change gives us the opportunity – *before* millions of people are on the move throughout the world because of climate change; *before* we, and other nations, become tempted to erect walls to keep them at bay; [and] *before* we start to say as though as a reflex that "we will decide who comes and the circumstances in which

they come” – to develop frameworks and institutions that might not only be politically realistic, but also based on principles that promote human rights and dignity [emphasis added].

Joseph Stiglitz, who I mentioned at the beginning of the presentation, says that

[m]aking globalisation work will be of little use if we cannot solve our global environmental problems. Our atmosphere and oceans are global resources; globalisation and so-called economic progress have enhanced our ability to exploit these resources more ruthlessly and at a pace faster than our ability to manage them has grown (*Making Globalisation Work*).

The US author Jared Diamond puts this most clearly. In his recent book *Collapse*, his question is how societies choose to fail or succeed - how societies failed because they ignored the environment. He explains that

[o]ur world society is presently on a non-sustainable course ... [B]ecause we are rapidly advancing along this non-sustainable course, the world's environmental problems *will* get resolved, in one way or another, within the lifetimes of the children and young adults alive today. The only question is whether they will become resolved in pleasant ways of our own choice, or in unpleasant ways not of our choice, such as warfare, genocide, starvation, disease epidemics, and collapses of societies [*and these are all, it's clear (with the possible exception of societal collapse), consequences of a 2°C increase in global temperature and a 450ppm world which now appears unavoidable*]. While all of these grim phenomena have been endemic to humanity throughout our history, their frequency increases with environmental degradation, population pressure, and the resulting poverty and political instability.

Finally, as Oxfam has said in *Suffering the Science: Climate change, people and poverty*,

In 2009, we must convince world leaders that political action is non-negotiable. We must use every opportunity to tell them that we want a fair and safe deal in Copenhagen, particularly for billions of poor and vulnerable people whose governments cannot afford to pay to fix a problem they played no significant part in causing. The true cost of climate change will not be measured in dollars, but in millions or billions of lives. This is the real human cost of climate change.

There won't be either a 'fair' or a 'safe' deal – and there might not even be any global deal – at Copenhagen in December, but the Oxfam quote is, nonetheless, an appropriate way to end my presentation.

Thanks. Thanks for your time.