



Climate Change and Human Trafficking After the Paris Agreement

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Climate change is a major contributor to migration and displacement. Persistent drought forced as many as 1.5 million Syrian farmers to move to overcrowded cities,[1] contributing to social turmoil and ultimately a civil war that drove hundreds of thousands of people to attempt to cross the Mediterranean into Europe. Drought also worsened refugee crises in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and other parts of the continent.

Climate change can cause displacement in multiple ways. The most prominent are water shortages and desertification that threaten food supplies and livelihoods, extreme weather events, sea level rise, and loss of Arctic sea ice. Often these conditions combine with existing poverty and political instability and make those worse.

No reliable estimates exist of the number of people who will be displaced partly or wholly by climate change, due to uncertainties concerning the rate of climate change, the ability of different societies to cope with this change, and other factors. However, several estimates put the number of people in the hundreds of millions in the latter part of this century. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as of mid-2015 approximately 58 million people were displaced from their homes as a result of natural disasters, conflict, and other factors – the largest number since the Second World War.[2] Climate change could displace several times that number. Unless there are advance planning and preparations, we can expect to see further international crises over where people fleeing uninhabitable areas will go, as well as degrading and dangerous conditions in the inevitable refugee camps.

It is well documented that displacement leads to a considerable increase in human trafficking. The UN Environment Programme has indicated that trafficking may increase by 20-30% during disasters, and INTERPOL has warned that disasters or conflict may increase the exposure of women to trafficking as families are disrupted and livelihoods are lost.[3] There are multiple instances in which trafficking has been shown to increase in the aftermath of cyclones, flooding, earthquakes and tsunamis.[4] Some of this is for sex trafficking, some of it is for forced labor, some if it is the acceptance of money for false promises of safe passage.

The United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is the principal international mechanism for dealing with climate change. It holds annual Conferences of the Parties to set its course. At the Conference of the Parties held in Cancun, Mexico in 2010, for the first time the Convention acknowledged the problem of human displacement. It called on the parties to undertake “measures to enhance understanding, coordination and cooperation with regard to climate change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation, where appropriate, at the national, regional and international levels.”[5] The issue was taken up again at the Conference held last December in Paris. There a request was made to a specialized body, the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage, “to develop recommendations for integrated approaches to avert, minimize and address displacement related to the adverse impacts of climate change.”[6] However, nothing in this agreement addresses the crucial question of what countries will take in the very large number of people who will be displaced by climate change.

At the Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen in 2009, an agreement was reached that the maximum tolerable increase in global average temperatures is 2°C (3.6°F) above pre-industrial levels. However, the small island nations protested that this is too high, for at 2°C they would be under water. They pressed for an objective of 1.5°C (2.7°F). They achieved some success at the Conference held last December in Paris. Agreement was reached there that the objective would be to hold the increase in global average temperature to “well below 2°C,” and “to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C.”

Regrettably, the Paris conference did not lead to agreements that will in fact achieve that objective. The Paris conference adopted what has been called a “bottom up” approach, in which each country puts forward its own pledge for reducing its greenhouse gas emissions, called Intended Nationally Determined Contributions. Almost every country did submit such a pledge. The pledges are not binding and not enforceable. However,

when they are all added up, these pledges if fully carried out would lead to a world in 2100 that is 3.5°C (6.3°F) above pre-industrial conditions.[7]

Such a world would be utterly catastrophic. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and virtually all other examinations of the subject, an increase of 3.5°C would not only drown the small island nations. It would also submerge significant portions of Bangladesh, the Nile Delta, the Mekong Delta, and other low-lying areas of the world, and would lead to melting of the Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets that would endanger many of the world's coastal cities, from New York to Shanghai. There appear to be no estimates of the number of people who would be displaced in such a situation, but it would no doubt be in the billions. This would, in turn, lead to a massive amount of conflict and trafficking.

The negotiators in Paris fully understood that the pledges made there would not be sufficient, and thus they created what has been called a “ratchet mechanism.” Every five years, the state parties to the Convention will make new pledges that are stronger than those made in Paris, in the hopes that they will meet the temperature objective. However, we are running out of time to do this. Greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide stay in the atmosphere for a century or longer, and every year their level in the atmosphere is higher. Already we know that meeting the temperature objectives will require “negative emissions” by the latter part of this century, meaning more greenhouse gases would have to be removed from the air than are emitted into it; no one knows just how this will be achieved.

But one of the necessary actions is phasing out the use of fossil fuels. This was implicitly acknowledged in the Paris agreement, and it was explicitly foretold by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*: “We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be progressively replaced without delay.” (§165). Unfortunately this necessary transition is being massively resisted by powerful economic forces around the world.

The Encyclical also eloquently discussed the plight of those displaced from their homes: “There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.” (§125)

Climate change represents one of the most profound injustices in today's society, for those who will suffer the most, those displaced from their homes, are the poorest among us -- those who contributed the least to the excess energy use that is at the root of much of the problem. There is an urgent need for people, regardless of their faith, to heed the call of *Laudato Si'* to protect the environment and reduce the suffering of the least fortunate. Those of us in this room have a particular responsibility to act on this sentence in Paragraph 53 of the Encyclical: “The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable, otherwise the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice.”

[1] Colin P. Kelley et al., Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought, 3241-3246, doi: 10:1073/pnas.1421533112.

[2] UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2015.

[3] Christian Nellemann et al., Women at the Frontline of Climate Change: Gender Risks and Hopes, UN Environment Programme (2011), p. 7.

[4] Andrea Truger, In the Eye of the Storm: The connection between extreme weather events and human trafficking in the case of typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. Lund University (2015), p. 29.

[5] Cancun Adaptation Framework § 14(f).

[6] Paris Decision § 50.

[7] Andrew Jones et al., Deeper, Earlier Emissions Cuts Needed to Reach Paris Goals, Climate Interactive, May 18, 2016.