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Environmental Displacement and Environmental Migration: Blurred Boundaries Require Integrated Policies

*Michaela Hynie, Prateep Nayak,
Teresa Gomes, & Ifrah Abdillah*

*Contact Michaela Hynie, York University
mhynie@yorku.ca*

Executive Summary

As the pace and severity of environmental change increase, environmental migration is being recognized as a necessary and potentially beneficial adaptation to change, rather than a failure to adapt. The distinction between forced displacement and voluntary migration is blurred and thus current legal and policy frameworks do not apply. Moreover, there has been little progress on the development of policies governing international environmental migration. International environmental migration is typically regional, over the nearest border, and follows along pre-existing migration corridors. Because of Canada's relative physical isolation, we are unlikely to experience much increase in regional environmental migration but will likely see increased demand for temporary migration. Canada can take leadership in policies that recognize the place of environmental migration at the intersection of environment, immigration, development, security, and human rights by developing models of intersectoral policy and governance, while demonstrating that commitments to humanitarian principles, human rights, and sustainable development can be consistent with domestic goals of economic growth and security.

Recommendations

1. Canada should develop clearer guidelines for when and how it implements humanitarian responses to environmental disasters resulting in the sudden creation of large groups of displaced people and/or refugees, in coordination with international agencies and policies.
2. Canadian national and international environmental adaptation policies should continue to encourage mitigation and adaptation but also explicitly include support for migration as an adaptation strategy.
3. Establishment of a national intersectoral governance body is necessary to ensure effective and integrated planning of environmental migration.
4. Immigration policies need to recognize environmental change as an important, inevitable driver of global migration that intersects with and alters other drivers.
5. Canada's support for international policies governing internal environmental

displacement and migration should be strengthened as part of our commitment to global environmental and humanitarian goals.

6. Canada can build on its current status as a “best practices” model for temporary migration by endorsing the UN Convention on Migrant Workers and Families, and leading in the revision of national policies to better protect the rights of international migrants, including temporary and cyclical migrants.
7. Bilateral labour agreements for temporary and cyclical migration could be expanded to address humanitarian, environmental and livelihood needs, and revised to further ensure protection for migrants’ rights.
8. Expansion of international education programs should be explored as an additional means to provide access to temporary and cyclical migration for environmental migrants, perhaps as a parallel to the successful World University Service of Canada program.

Environmental Displacement: Strategies in Response to Increasing Environmental Change

In 2015, over 65 million people were displaced by conflict or persecution, with 15 million of those displaced over international boundaries (UNHCR, 2016). The international community struggled with its lack of readiness to respond to the needs of these forcibly displaced migrants. In contrast, the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (Bilak et al., 2016) notes that 25.4 million people have been displaced by natural disasters every year since 2006, double the number displaced by conflict alone. This number does not take into account migration due to slower onset environmental changes, which is more difficult to estimate than disaster-related migration, or the role of environmental change in influencing migration indirectly. Nonetheless, there are few national or global agreements on international environmental migration (Popp, 2014).

Environmental changes, conflict, livelihood opportunities, and other drivers of migration are interconnected, making it difficult to clearly state the ultimate factors that determine the decision to migrate (Asian Development Bank, 2012; Black, 2001; Black et al., 2011; Lilleor & Van den Broeck, 2011; Martin, 2013). This, combined with a lack of clear international legal definitions pertaining to forced environmental displacement, contributes to a lack of data, making it difficult to estimate the number forcibly displaced by environmental change per se (Black, 2001). A common estimate, however, is that 200 million people will be displaced by environmental changes by 2050 (Brown, 2007; Stern, 2006, p. 3). The rate and extremity of environmental change is rapidly increasing, and an equally increasing number of people are being affected (EM-DAT, 2016). The rates of environmental migration from all causes are expected to escalate and exacerbate other drivers of migration

such as conflict and dwindling livelihood opportunities. Environmental change is therefore unquestionably the biggest influence in patterns of migration worldwide.

Forced Environmental Displacement, Environmental Migration, and Environmental Refugees

There has been an ongoing debate about applying the term “environmental refugee” or “climate refugee” to those forcibly displaced by environmental change, with environmental scientists generally more in favour of the terms, and migration theorists generally opposed (e.g., Gill, 2010; Piguet, 2013; Stavropoulou, 2008). Support for the language of “environmental refugees” has been reinforced through the leading role taken by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) in moving the agenda forward on recognizing migration as a response to climate change, and in encouraging states to recognize and offer protection to those displaced by environmental changes (McAdam, 2014).

Those forced across international borders by environmental change do not meet the legal requirements to be considered Convention Refugees (i.e., those forced to migrate as the result of conflict or persecution and a lack of state protection). Moreover, the distinction between forced displacement and voluntary environmental migration is rarely clear. It is difficult to isolate environmental change as the ultimate driver of migration because of the complex interconnections among the many drivers of migration (Foresight, 2011; Laczko & Piguet, 2014; Omeziri & Gore, 2014). Census data on tracking migration rarely include environmental causes, so migration may be attributed to other, more proximal causes, such as loss of livelihood, even when respondents believe environmental change is the root cause (Upadhyay et al., 2015).

Even subjective assessments of one’s own motivations may overlook the ultimate role of environment. When asked about their reasons for migrating, those leaving conditions of environmental hardship can perceive more proximal drivers, such as livelihoods, as the primary deciding factor, making it difficult to attribute specific environmental conditions to the cause of migration at the individual level (Black et al., 2011). There is also the challenge of recognizing that environmental changes tend to affect individuals and communities differently. Vulnerability theories emphasize that the impact of any specific environmental changes depend on the affected individuals’ and communities’ ability to adapt (e.g., McLeman & Smit, 2005). Thus, the likelihood that migration is a necessary adaptation strategy in situations of environmental change depends on the resilience and vulnerability of specific individuals, populations, and ecosystems.

The term “environmental refugee” is therefore starting to lose ground in favour of “environmental migrant.” The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines

environmental migrants as “persons or groups of persons who, for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to have to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their territory or abroad” (IOM, 2014, p. 3). This definition underscores the fact that the environment is one of many drivers of migration, and interacts with and exacerbates other factors influencing individual and group decisions to migrate (Black et al., 2011; Foresight, 2011; Lilleør & Van den Broeck, 2011; Martin, 2013).

While several human rights instruments refer to those forcibly displaced by conflict or persecution (e.g., the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951; the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, 1998), there is a lack of international instruments for those displaced across international borders by environmental changes (Nishimura, 2015; Omeziri & Gore, 2014; Zetter, 2009). Current international instruments are not inclusive enough to recognize environmental migrants or people otherwise displaced by environmental drivers to provide legal protection and respite. There is also no international consensus on who deserves protection under which conditions of international environmental migration (Laczko & Aghazarm, 2009; Zetter, 2009). Zetter (2009) therefore recommends building on existing norms and instruments protecting migrants but ensuring that they be sensitive to the rights challenges that emerge for those migrating in response to environmental change.

The efforts led by international agencies like the UNHCR and IOM, while supported by a small number of states, do not seem to be resulting in international agreements on protection in situations of forced environmental displacement. McAdam (2014) suggests that they will not because of the challenge in determining when environmental changes alone are the cause of migration, and because states are reluctant to assume new obligations for protection, especially in the absence of any specific precedence of states recognizing forced environmental migration as a basis of a humanitarian crisis needing prompt attention. In the current climate on refugee migration, expanding the circle of humanitarian protection seems even more unlikely.

Despite an absence of international frameworks, however, humanitarian responses to disasters have been provided through temporary ad hoc policies (Florémont, 2012). For example, Canada has accelerated access and increased support to immigration for migrants from regions experiencing disaster, as with Haiti following the earthquake in 2010 and the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. This has been achieved through Operational Bulletin 83, “Guidelines for Priority Processing in the Event of Disaster Situations,” that advises visa offices to use their discretionary powers to prioritize and expedite applications from countries that have experienced natural disasters (Omeziri & Gore, 2014).

Although there are advantages to flexible, ad hoc humanitarian responses, the result is inconsistency in how these responses are applied. They also make it more difficult to

engage in global planning and so ultimately hinder humanitarian responses on the global scale (Omeziri & Gore, 2014). Canada should take advantage of this policy gap and use this unique opportunity to offer its leadership in refugee resettlement to developing guidelines for forced environmental displacement and resulting migration. Greater clarity and planning, in light of the anticipated increase in severe weather and other forms of natural disaster, will help provide more effective and efficient global humanitarian responses.

Recommendation 1: Canada should develop clearer guidelines for when and how it implements humanitarian responses to environmental disasters resulting in the sudden creation of large groups of displaced people and/or refugees, in coordination with international agencies and policies.

The Multisectoral Nature of Environmental Migration

Most migration in response to environmental change falls within the realm of voluntary migration rather than humanitarian crisis. While both migration and environmental issues are leading international concerns, these are also areas where there are the greatest challenges in developing multilateral policies, in part because of the way these issues are framed with respect to national policy goals (Popp, 2014). Policies on environmental migration have tended to focus on trying to reduce the influence of environmental change on migration, by trying to reduce the rate of change, and building the adaptive capacity of communities (Foresight, 2011). Although mitigation is important from the perspective of global environmental change, these responses tend to be linked to a class of arguments that assume that migration of this scale is undesirable, that it will lead to increased conflict, that maintaining secure borders is essential, but that doing so will be impossible (Castles, 2010; Popp, 2014; Zetter, 2009).

Mitigating environmental change and promoting adaptation that can keep people safely in their homes are important national and international priorities, but migration may at times be the best or only adaptation response (Laczko & Piguet, 2014; Martin, 2013). In recent years, environmental migration is being reframed from a failure of adaptation that should be prevented, to a resilient response, one that has traditionally been used by many communities around the world. Migration can allow individuals and systems to adapt to and recover from environmental changes in ways that may transform how individuals and communities inhabit and relate to the local, regional, and global environment (Methmann & Oels, 2015). Thus, while migration can threaten the existence of communities and increase local vulnerabilities (Robson & Nayak, 2010), it can also provide opportunities if properly planned and supported.

Recommendation 2: Canadian national and international environmental adaptation policies should continue to encourage mitigation and adaptation but also explicitly include support for migration as an adaptation strategy.

Other arguments for the international responsibilities with regard to environmental migration are the result of focusing on diverse interpretations of migration (Zetter, 2009). The Foresight report argues for the need to plan for and respond to environmental migration, both internally from rural to urban regions, and externally across borders, while recognizing environmental migration as a resource, one that also brings opportunities, not only for the migrants but also for the regions they migrate into.

A focus on the vulnerability of those exposed to disasters and environmental degradation, and international humanitarian obligations in the face of this vulnerability, is frequently invoked in the context of environmental disasters where migration is more clearly forced. The poorest people in both high- and low-income countries are the most affected by environmental change, and the most vulnerable to these changes; the poor have limited resources to mitigate change or adapt when it happens, and a greater likelihood of living in settings susceptible to environmental risk (Assan & Kumar, 2009; Leichenko & Silva, 2014; IPCC, 2014). This perspective typically looks to international legal tools and agreements for the protection of people displaced by conflict as a model. However, as noted above, it is not clear that these tools are appropriate in their current form.

Another argument focuses on restorative justice, noting that high-income countries have made the greatest contribution to global environmental effects. Poorer countries are not only less responsible for the environmental changes that are disproportionately experienced by their populations, but also have fewer resources to invest in other adaptation strategies that could reduce the impact of these changes (Bierman & Boas, 2010). This draws attention to the international community's responsibility for shouldering the costs of mitigation and adaptation in poorer regions and countries and is a frequent issue in international discussions around climate change.

The approach that has been gaining greatest favour in this decade rests on the observation that environmental migration links the related policy objectives of sustainable development, climate change adaptation, humanitarian responses, security, human rights, and disaster risk reduction (IOM, 2014; McAdam, 2014). In this view, environmental migration is an inevitable part of these multiple policy domains and therefore requires comprehensive and coordinated international planning. This is challenging because of the policy segregation that often occurs within some of these areas (Popp, 2014). Tackling the complexity of environmental migration policy requires communication between the different areas and the sharing of expertise from different domains in the development of policies.

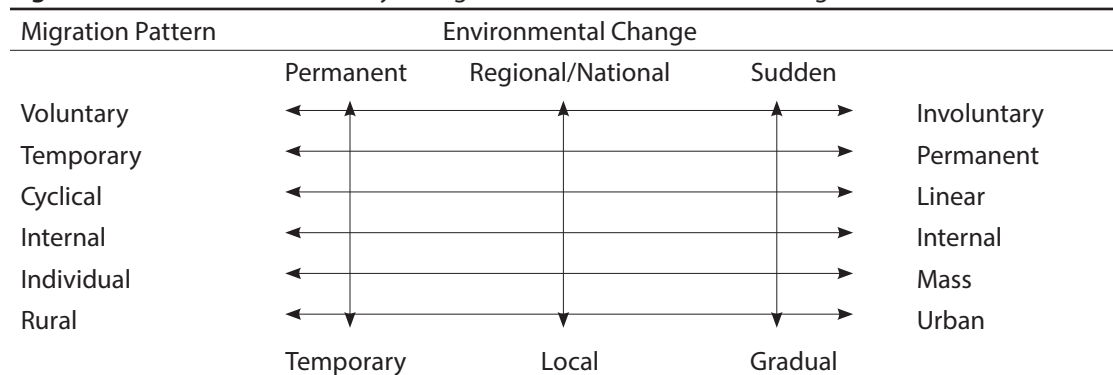
The strategy that is most likely to develop successful national policy in the area of international environment migration is one that relies on intersectoral governance bodies at the national level. This is the strategy at the international level, with the major planning bodies like the Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility, which includes international agencies representing forced migration, migration, security, international relations, environment, development and security. Advisory committees and roundtables that deliver recommendations to planning bodies at the national level may have limited impact, since the details of implementation and policymaking will revert to policy streams that remain segregated. Developing a model that ensures ongoing and meaningful engagement across sectors, whether through development of multisectoral expertise within policy areas, integrated policymaking, or other innovative strategies would be a valuable contribution to international environmental migration policy.

Recommendation 3: Establishment of a national intersectoral governance body is necessary to ensure effective and integrated planning of environmental migration.

Environmental Change as a Driver of Global Migration

Both environmental change and migration patterns vary along a number of continuous dimensions (Kniveton et al., 2009; Naik, 2009). Commonly discussed dimensions are shown in figure 1. Different kinds of environmental changes can result in different kinds of environmental migration. These relationships are complex, and documenting and understanding all possible combinations of environmental changes and forms of migration may not be possible or useful (Bates, 2003; Geddes et al., 2012; Kniveton et al., 2009). Nevertheless, certain combinations of conditions and migration responses seem to be more common (McLeman & Hunter, 2010).

Figure 1. Dimensions of Variability in Migration and Environmental Change



Environmental changes can influence migration through a variety of pathways and are, in turn, affected by the other drivers of migration (Foresight, 2011; Martin, 2009; McLeman & Smit, 2005). The use of the term “environment” rather than the narrower term “climate” acknowledges that climate change is a subset of environmental changes that may include natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, or other anthropogenic changes, such as dams or deforestation. Climate change can also interact with these other environmental changes, increasing each other’s impact. For example:

1. Changes in temperature and rainfall can result in decreased agricultural yields and lack of access to clean water but also increase in the use of agricultural strategies that further deplete the land.
2. Natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions or tidal waves can create immediate threats to life and as well as long-term threats to livelihoods, and their effects can be exacerbated by anthropogenic changes like deforestation.
3. Environmental degradation can create or exacerbate conflicts over limited resources, and conflict is one of many forces leading people to inhabit ecosystems that are highly vulnerable to environmental change.

A major shift in the framing of environmental migration has thus been away from trying to isolate the independent impact of the environment on migration pathways to emphasizing the importance of recognizing environmental change as one of many drivers of migration, both as an independent driver of migration and as factor that amplifies or reduces the impact of other drivers. Environmental factors are typically not considered in immigration policy, but only in humanitarian policies. However, given the complex relationships between these drivers of migration, a broader immigration approach is more appropriate and allows for more proactive planning in response to ongoing environmental changes.

Recommendation 4: Immigration policies need to recognize environmental change as an important, inevitable driver of global migration that intersects with and alters other drivers.

Patterns of Environmental Migration

Most environmental displacement in response to climate change and disasters is local, and when migration is international, it is often across the nearest international borders (Kniveton et al., 2009), making environmental migration primarily a regional issue. Internal displacement is particularly dominant for the poor. The poor have fewer resources to invest in other adaptation strategies and so may need to rely more on migration to adapt to environmental change (Bierman & Boas, 2010). However, although migration might become

the only possible adaptation in the face of increasingly severe environmental degradation, severity of environmental changes can also decrease international migration. The resources required for longer distance migration are no longer available, and this again is felt most severely by the poor, since they have the fewest resources available for long-distance migration (Kniveton et al., 2009, Laczko & Aghazarm, 2009).

Internal migrations in response to environmental degradation are often temporary or seasonal/cyclical, with temporary migrations often also being undertaken by only a subset of the members of a household (e.g., Nawrotski et al., 2015). Pre-existing patterns of cyclical and seasonal migration facilitate migration as a response to increasing environmental change, although these historic patterns are also altered by environmental changes (Hugo & Bardsley, 2014; Morrissey, 2014). Temporary and circular migration can bring a number of benefits to migrants, and to households and communities left behind (Castles, 2010). Not only can the migrants send remittances, they can also return with innovations such as farming strategies or implements that may improve adaptation in the original community (Adger et al., 2002). In some circumstances, although certainly not all, temporary migration has been found to have ecological benefits, such as that land lies fallow for periods of time (Laczko & Aghazarm, 2009; cf. Robson & Berkes, 2011). Thus, temporary and cyclical migration can serve multiple purposes, aiding in both mitigation of and adaptation to environmental change.

Many regions have already developed agreements on international migration, with the African Union leading the way in incorporating environmental issues in its regional migration agreement (Popp, 2014). This agreement recommends that environmental concerns be incorporated into migration policies for both internal and international migration, whether voluntary or forced, improved data collection, and increased mitigation strategies for environmental change. Other regions, like the European Union, have shown little appetite for developing policies at the nexus of environment and migration.

Canada's location in North America suggests that it will not experience the same levels of regional environmental migration as countries in regions that are simultaneously experiencing high levels of environmental change, limited resources to adapt to and/or mitigate these changes, and large populations vulnerable to environmental change living in close proximity to international borders. Canada's most important role in this regard may therefore be to work with other states to encourage movement on regional agreements, support international organizations like the IMDC in their work on collecting data and sharing knowledge on internal displacement due to migration change, and encouraging adherence to current policies, such as the UN Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement (1998).

Recommendation 5: Canada’s support for regional and international policies governing internal environmental displacement and migration should be strengthened as part of our commitment to global environmental and humanitarian goals.

Although temporary international migration is less common, policies that open up migration corridors can facilitate long-distance migration. Once migration pathways are established within a community, additional community members are more likely to migrate, and to migrate to the same locations as previous migrants. For example, Nawrotski and colleagues looked at predictors of first and subsequent international out-migrations from households in Mexico (Nawrotski et al., 2015). They found that environmental factors had a greater impact on the first migration out of a household than subsequent migrations, perhaps because the migrant provided resources that allowed for alternative adaptations for households. Moreover, environmental factors had less impact on first migrations in communities where migration was more common. The impact of environmental degradation on international migration may therefore be less pronounced than the impact of social and policy variables.

Arguments have been made to expand beyond humanitarian models of asylum and resettlement for those forcibly displaced by conflict to a more flexible range of options, including extending labour and study visa options and other temporary solutions (Long & Rosengaertner, 2016). Similar arguments could be made for environmental migrants. In light of the preponderance of and preference for temporary migration in response to environmental change, this may be one possible model to meet the complex character of environmental migration and the increasing number of people affected.

Environmental migration into Canada will likely follow migration pathways and so will be primarily from countries that are already source countries for migration to Canada. Countries in Asia are both major source countries for migration into Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016) and are experiencing considerable environmental change (Hugo & Bardsley, 2014), and might therefore be a leading source of increased migration. However, the majority of those most affected by environmental change will not be able to avail themselves of this route.

Canada may make a greater contribution to supporting environmental migration through temporary migration, as suggested by the IOM, including committing resources through dedicated budgetary provisions where necessary. However, expansion of these agreements must be accompanied by increased protection of migrants’ rights. There is very little protection for the rights of international temporary migrants, despite the existence of the UN International Convention of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families (UNOHCHR, 1990). Very few countries have signed this convention; Canada is also not a signatory.

Canada already has a number of temporary foreign worker programs, including bilateral agreements for seasonal agricultural workers from Mexico and countries in the Caribbean (ESDC, 2016; CIC, 2015). Canada should consider expanding this program to explicitly include environmental migrants within its purview. Canada could also target new bilateral agreements in other sectors where we already experience temporary migration in response to environmental changes. The fisheries sector, for example, is seeing increasing numbers of temporary migrants from countries that have been struggling with collapsing fish stock. Expanding bilateral agreements is a strategy that allows for a regulated response to environmental change within our frameworks.

Canada's approach to temporary foreign workers has been celebrated as a model in international circles, providing greater protection for migrant worker rights than many others. However, more could be done to ensure that these programs protect the rights of the workers, including removing restrictions on freedom of movement, ensuring opportunities for integration into communities, and protecting workers from exploitation by employers (Hennebry & Preibisch, 2012). By virtue of its "model" programs, Canada is a recognized leader in this area of policy and can leverage this reputation to encourage adherence to migrant workers' rights in other countries, and to transform our own temporary migrant worker programs into one that meets the humanitarian needs of the environmentally displaced, respects the rights of workers, and still fills domestic market needs.

Temporary migration can also increase inequities in sending countries. Temporary migration can be a more successful strategy for those who already have more resources, while being less successful, and even creating new vulnerabilities, for those already marginalized (e.g., Robson & Nayak, 2010). It may also leave communities less resilient, in the absence of key community members, and make an entire community politically voiceless and disempowered (Adger et al., 2002; Nayak, 2014). Undertaken with the rights of migrants and sending communities as core values, bilateral agreements offer a means of developing temporary migration policies in partnership with other countries and their citizens to simultaneously protect the rights of migrants and address the vulnerability of those communities left behind.

Recommendation 6: Canada can build on its status as a "best practices" model for temporary migration by endorsing the UN Convention on Migrant Workers and Families, and leading in revising national policies to better protect the rights of international migrants, including temporary and cyclical migrants within Canada.

Recommendation 7: Bilateral labour agreements for temporary and cyclical migration could be expanded to address humanitarian, environmental, and

livelihood needs, and revised to further ensure protection for migrants' rights.

Long and Rosengaertner (2016), in exploring ways to introduce a more flexible set of options for refugee migration, recommend increasing study visas as a strategy to support temporary migration. As the authors note, educational programs may meet the needs of only a very small proportion of refugees, and there is similar concern for those forced by environmental change. However, Canada currently sponsors small numbers of refugees through the World University Service of Canada program, which provides private sponsorship for permanent resettlement to university students. It might be worthwhile to explore whether a parallel but temporary program that targets university students who are environmentally displaced is feasible, on the assumption that these students may wish to return on completion of their degrees.

Recommendation 8: Expansion of international education programs should be explored as an additional means to provide access to temporary and cyclical migration for environmental migrants, perhaps as a parallel to the successful World University Service of Canada program.

Conclusion

Although the international community has become more aware of environmental migration as a form of adaptation, there has been little success in developing international policies to protect and plan for those who are forced or compelled to migrate. To some extent, the lack of planning of protection for environmental migrants has been driven by the emphasis on security in the responses to environmental migration, consistent with a general increase in the reframing of immigration in security terms (Aikin, Lyon, & Thorburn, 2014). It may also be an unintended consequence of the evocation of mass migration as a threat in order to motivate action supporting mitigation strategies by high-income countries.

Migration and environment are policy realms that elicit high levels of concern, both politically and among the public. Developing strategies to integrate these issues will be challenging, domestically and on the international stage. Nonetheless, although environmental migration can be unpredictable, it is inevitable (Foresight, 2011). Proactive responses are necessary to ensure that this migration maximizes the resilience and adaptive capacity of individuals, communities, social systems, and ecosystems. The absence of policy frameworks to support and protect individuals who are compelled to migrate by environmental change will not prevent migration. Rather, it will force vulnerable people into

precarious and irregular migration (Long & Rosengaertner, 2016). Eventually, the effects of environmental change will affect us all, and being prepared with policies that protect those affected now will also ensure we can protect a wider range of individuals, communities, and countries in the future.

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