

Canada's Policy on Climate Refugees: Mass Migration and the Need for a Paradigmatic Shift

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By 2050, the effects of climate change will force between 25 million and one billion people out of their homes.¹ This global catastrophe is affecting people all around the world already; in 2013, an estimated 32 million people fled their homes

because of floods, storms, and earthquakes – 98% of which is considered to be caused by climate change.²

Typhoon Haiyan alone displaced 4.1 million people in the Philippines from their homes in 2014. Climate change has been cited as a cause of drought in Syria, putting pressure on citizens' access to food and water leading up to the uprising and ensuing violent civil war in 2011.³ Drought is drying up more

than just water at Lake Chad. The lake, which once provided livelihoods for millions of people, is now facing the collapse of fishing and agricultural industries, the loss of local water supply, and increased poverty in surrounding regions due to climate change.⁴ And perhaps most

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worrying of all, the latest report from the International Panel on Climate Change projects that sea level will rise by 26-59 centimetres by the end of the 21st century. This means that the 60 percent of the population of the world's biggest cities who live within 100km of the coast will be put in precarious positions, and that island states, like the Maldives, could stand to be submerged entirely. Scientists warn that this is only the beginning.⁵

Despite these alarming statistics, people displaced by environmental factors are extremely under-recognized. Demonstrating this international erasure, the United Nations neglects to include these millions of people displaced by

environmental factors in the international definition of a refugee. The UN defines a refugee as someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”.⁶ Climate refugees are not protected under any major international body or government. This can place them in more danger than traditionally recognized refugees because when they are displaced, they are not able to access

the same support systems.

The millions of people displaced by these conditions are classified as environmental migrants, environmental refugees, or climate refugees. This paper will use the terminology

¹ Canada, “Climate Change and Forced Migration: Canada's Role,” Penny Becklumb. *Library of Parliament*. 2013.

² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, “Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change,” December 2015.

³ Kelly, Mohtadi, et al, “Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought,” Proceedings of the National Academy of the United States of America. (112) 11 November 2014, 3241–3246.

⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Fourth Climate Assessment Report: Climate Change,” UNEP, 2007, Section 5.1.

⁵ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Fourth Climate Assessment Report: Climate Change, UNEP, 2007, Section 5.1.

⁶ UNHCR, “UNHCR, The Environment, & Climate Change,” (2015).

‘climate refugees’ to acknowledge the displacement due to not only environmentally related events- but due to the effects of anthropogenic climate change- and refugees instead of migrants to denote involuntary nature of these people’s migration.

This paper will argue that Canada’s policy towards climate refugees is centred on national security, making it an ineffective framework to deal with rapidly increasing levels of environmentally forced migration. The first section of this paper will place Canada’s policy within the literature on the subject, demonstrating Canada’s positioning of the issue within a traditional security framework. The following section will point out the limitations of this state centric approach, and support these claims using the cases of the 2010 Haiti Earthquake and Typhoon Haiyan as examples of Canada’s inadequate response to environmental refugees. Next, this paper will consider the disutility of human security concepts before proposing emancipatory realism, drawing on Ken Booth, as a possible solution to these paradigmatic qualms. Finally, this paper will consider possible limitations and policy implications.

I. CANADA’S SECURITIZATION OF CLIMATE REFUGEES

Canada’s position on “Climate Change and Forced Migration” represents the securitization of a non-traditional security threat. As Williams explains, “issues become “securitized,” treated as security issues, through these speech-acts which do not simply describe an existing security situation, but bring it into being as a security situation by successfully representing it as such.”⁷ Rather than displaced peoples who are *in* danger,

this policy frames climate refugees to *be* a danger. The Canadian 2001 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act served to ‘tighten’ refugee policy as the paradigm embraced “a shift from a focus on refugee protection to one on control and security.”⁸ This reflects the change in public policy from Canada’s “liberal humanitarian tradition,” which prioritized refugee protection, to a security centred paradigm, which focuses on state sovereignty, national security, and public safety. However, not everyone in Canada is protected under the push for ‘public safety.’ Instead of providing opportunities for and supporting incoming refugees, this defensive security paradigm aims to limit refugees and prevent any migrants that might pose a risk, whether it be a real or imagined threat.⁹

Incoming migrants could be considered a security threat to the government economically, which potentially jeopardizes government’s political control. Refugees are suggested to be a drain on public services, but they are not voting citizens- thus representing more of a liability to the government than a support- unless they can contribute economically. Thus, the Canadian policy evaluates refugees based on their possible economic contribution. The document emphasizes that

“if refugees are able to integrate well into the Canadian labour market and society, Canada may stand to gain from a new influx of migrants. But there are costs associated with helping newcomers to integrate into Canadian society, especially in cases where skills are not relevant or recognized in the Canadian job market, and

⁷ William Aldis, “Health security as a public health concept: a critical analysis,” *Health and Policy Planning*, 23(6), 513.

⁸ Sandy J. A. Irvine, “Canadian Refugee Policy: Understand the Role of International Bureaucratic Networks in Domestic Paradigm Change,” *Canadian Political Science Association Annual Meeting* (2011).

⁹ *Ibid.*

where newcomers speak neither English nor French.”¹⁰

Furthermore, Canada is the only country in the world to charge refugees for their travel costs and overseas medical exams and then to charge interest on the loans for these costs.¹¹

The Canadian policy notes its purposeful disregard for climate refugees, recognizing “the lack of provision in Canada’s current immigration system for the admission of people displaced for reasons directly related to climate change is consistent with international law, which does not recognize such people as refugees.”¹² Canada’s failure to officially recognize climate refugees is an expression of a state security focused approach to international public policy.

II: LIMITS OF A STATE-CENTRED APPROACH

The securitization of climate refugees reflects a debate “that has been at the centre of security scholarship for the last three decades: between the strategic practices of states and the insecurity of human beings.”¹³

By treating refugees as threat to state security, Canada privileges the lives of its own citizens (or institutions) over the lives of displaced peoples. By doing so, this position places climate refugees in a position of serious precarity. The securitization of this issue creates a system that enforces structural violence.

Just as the production of greenhouse gasses is not equally globally distributed, neither are the effects

of the climate crisis. Geographically, politically, and socially, it is the Global South that stands to suffer the most as a result of climate change. Experts project extreme weather conditions including water shortages in East Africa, heavier monsoons in West Africa, and growing seasons reduced by as much as 20% in some parts of the continent. Burma, Bangladesh, and India will see stronger cyclones. And a 16-24 inch sea level rise by 2100 could mean that many island nations will face unprecedented challenges.¹⁴ This means that climate-induced migration could be caused by any number of factors including hunger, political unrest, energy insecurity, etc. Countries in the Global South have the fewest resources and weakest infrastructure to deal with crises of such scale.¹⁵ Those most deeply affected by the disaster are the poorest segments of the population, whose livelihoods depend on local resources and industries, such as fishing, agriculture, and tourism.¹⁶

Deconstructing the Canadian “Climate Change and Forced Migration” policy as a national security tool, it can be argued that Canada has a responsibility to accept refugees created by climate change to which Canada has disproportionately contributed. The Union of Concerned Scientists confirms that Canada has the ninth highest carbon dioxide emissions in the world- 552 million tonnes in 2011 and 16.24 tonnes per person.¹⁷ The bulk of greenhouse gasses come from the Global North. Developed Nations (annex I) account for about 72% of total

¹⁰ Canada, “Climate Change and Forced Migration: Canada’s Role.” Penny Becklumb. *Library of Parliament*. 2013.

¹¹ Laura Kane, “Canada alone in charging interest to refugees on travel loans,” *The Globe and Mail*. (September 12, 2015).

¹² Canada, “Climate Change and Forced Migration: Canada’s Role.” Penny Becklumb. *Library of Parliament*. 2013.

¹³ Benjamin Shepherd, “Thinking Critically about Food Security,” *Security Dialogue* 43(3) 2012, 195–212,

¹⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Fourth Climate Assessment Report: Climate Change. *UNEP*, 2007. Section 5.1,

¹⁵ Richard Black, “Environmental Refugee: Myth or Reality,” *UNHCR Working Paper* No. 34 (2001): 1–19.

¹⁶ “Migration Matters: Environmental Migrants,” *Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC* (2014) (19).

¹⁷ “Each Country’s Share of CO₂ Emissions,” *Union of Concerned Scientists*, (2011).

carbon dioxide emissions that accumulated in the atmosphere between 1950 and 2000.¹⁸

Analyses prove that far from being a completely natural crisis, climate change and its effects have traceable anthropogenic contributions.

Furthermore, the threat of climate change is not ‘securitizable’ in the same way as a military or state threat. This means that a traditional security discourse, that identifies threats to state sovereignty and military, is unequipped to deal with the effects of climate.¹⁹

Canada’s “Climate Change and Forced Migration” paper illustrates how security agendas “seek to secure the interests of those defining the agenda.”²⁰ As an issue that will hit underdeveloped nations first and hardest, climate change displacement could stand to be ignored by the states that could and should take action. The shifts in political structure and economic interest that would need to happen in order to acknowledge and formalize an acceptance of a greater number of climate refugees would potentially pose a risk to institutional arrangements and existing power structures, decentivizing action.²¹ Thus, Canada exhibits a reactionary approach to refugees that responds to climate refugees only when they appear to pose a security risk to Canada.²²

III. CASE STUDIES

There are previous cases in which Canada has accepted environmentally induced refugees. These examples will be used to demonstrate how the Canadian approach functions practically and to consider how the Canadian policy toward climate refugees is likely to continue. Because of the lack

of a provisional policy, the Government has taken a ‘case-by-case’ approach to refugee crises.

This argument will be supported by two cases in which Canada accepted a wave of climate refugees. Firstly, the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti, and then Typhoon Haiyan which hit the Philippines in 2013 will be considered as examples of the Canadian government’s response to waves of refugees created by environmental crises.

On January 12, 2010, a catastrophic earthquake struck Haiti, impacting an estimated three million people. The Canadian government immediately mobilized to evacuate Canadian citizens from the affected region and to provide military aid in the aftermath. The Haitian earthquake case study demonstrates that the Canadian response to the refugee flood is emblematic of Canada’s approach to refugees in general. Additionally, Canada’s ad hoc approach underscores that this strategy is likely to continue. Omeziri and Gore argue that the lack of a position

“provides no assurance to environmental migrant or refugee advocates about how the government will respond to future incidences of displacement, provides little guidance to individual immigration and refugee officers, leaving them to make decisions about admittance to Canada based on temporary, ad hoc policies, and priorities, and will do little or nothing to assist the international community in its future response and protection of environmental migrants.”²³

¹⁸ Congressional Research Service, “CRS Report for Congress: Greenhouse Gas Emissions: Perspectives on the Top 20 Emitters and Developed Versus Developing Nations,” (2008).

¹⁹ Benjamin Shepherd, “Thinking Critically about Food Security,” *Security Dialogue* 43(3) 2012, 201

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

²² Canada, “Climate Change and Forced Migration: Canada’s Role,” Penny Becklumb, *Library of Parliament*, 2013.

²³ Eric Omeziri and Christopher Gore, “Temporary Measures: Canadian Refugee Policy and Environmental Migration,” *Refuge Journal: McGill University* 29(2) (2014).

A similar response was invoked in 2013. After Typhoon Haiyan ravaged the Philippines on November 8, 2013, there were 6300 reported deaths, 4.1 million people displaced, and a total of 16 million people affected. To date, the Canadian government has accepted a mere 1097 refugees, 245 of whom are on temporary resident applications and 852 are in Canada on permanent resident applications.²⁴ Immediately following the typhoon, the Canadian government agreed to expedite immigration paperwork from victims who have relatives in Canada if their applications were already in the system, but had no protocol in place to deal with the mass influx of refugees.²⁵

As posited in the last section, the international structure as it currently stands, disincentivizes action to care for all people, and incentivizes action that protects a state's economic and political institutions. Furthermore, it must be asked how the government will deal with migrants seeking refuge from longer-term climate-induced dangers. Will people escaping drought, hunger, and rising sea levels be given the same treatment as those impacted by large and sudden climate change induced environmental crises that demand immediate responses from the global community?

IV. ALTERNATIVES: GLOBAL SECURITY AS GLOBAL EMANCIPATION

Therefore, if we wish, as a global community, to truly progress in a way that is just and equitable, we must reconsider security to include all people, in particular the communities further marginalized by the structural violence of climate change. Given that the current framework and institutions

are co-optable and exploitable, we must seriously and pressingly consider alternatives.

Human security offers an alternative to state-centric approaches. The UNDP posed it as a shift from securing states, to securing people through two forms of protection: safety from chronic threats (hunger, disease, repression), and safety from sudden threats.²⁶ However the broad and open concept of human security can be as problematic as it is useful. Roland Paris suggests that what constitutes human security is purposely kept broad: "slippery by design."²⁷ Conversely, if the concept of human security is narrowed so far that it is forced to essentialize and prioritize, it is rendered no longer useful.²⁸ Rather, it is more plausible that states would choose to frame human security issues within the traditional state-military framework in order to access greater political will and economic resources that lie within this sector.²⁹

Thus, neither Canada's state-centric, nor a human security approach adequately address the structures that are inherently causing this kind of systemic violence which privileges countries such as Canada. This destructive system prioritizes those countries which contribute disproportionately to the perpetuation of the climate crisis, but are not as impacted by the effects and therefore are less motivated to mitigate the results and to help those who are displaced and harmed.

This paper suggests an emancipatory paradigm shift in order to overcome the structural problem of treating climate refugees as a security issue in Canadian refugee and immigration policy.

²⁴ Canada, "Climate Change and Forced Migration: Canada's Role," Penny Becklumb, *Library of Parliament*, 2013.

²⁵ "Migration Matters: Environmental Migrants," *Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC* (2014) (19).

²⁶ UNDP Human Development Report 1994, Chapter 2 "New Dimensions of Human Security."

²⁷ Roland Paris, "Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?," *International Security* 26(2) Fall 2001, 88.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁹ David Chandler, "The security-development nexus and the rise of 'anti-foreign policy,'" *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 2007, 10.

The Critical Security approach rejects the use of the state as the referent, noting how states do not necessarily act in the interests of their citizens, but rather in the interest of state sovereignty, and thus can be considered as a threat to individuals.

Critical Security Studies places states as a means to- not the ends of- security. This paradigm advocates human freedom from any obstructions to full human potential and would reframe climate refugee security in terms of securing marginalized people from the structural violence of environmentally forced migration. Ken Booth illustrates the focus of an emancipatory approach, placing “the experience of those men and women and communities for whom the present world order is a cause of insecurity rather than security at the centre of the agenda.”³⁰

Climate change and climate refugees provide a perfect opportunity to implement such a paradigm shift. While traditional security measures defend state sovereignty against outside state or military forces, climate change poses environmental and social risks that cannot be overcome with military power. And because liberal perspectives still aim to work within a structurally unjust political and economic system, they are not equipped to deal with the power inequalities that would overcome any kind of international institutional agreement. Emancipation is the only paradigm able to properly treat the threat of climate change effects.

This approach would mean immediate and complete structural recognition and inclusion of all peoples, even those who exist outside of Canada’s national borders and in precarious positions. In the context of climate refugees this would mean that rather than acting in the interest of state sovereignty and institutions, the Canadian government would immediately put a system in place to diminish human suffering from climate-

induced displacement and try to maximize Canada’s efforts to help and accept these people.

V. LIMITATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This analysis is limited by the pragmatic application of this proposal. As demonstrated in the case studies, Canada tends to take a reactionary approach to dealing with waves of climate refugees and seems uninterested in reforming this strategy.

Furthermore, it was noted that the concept of climate refugee is discussed, but not officially recognized in the international community. Because there is no precedent, it difficult to project that Canada will be the first to take a stance on climate refugees before it is recognized internationally.

Thus, this paper advocates a policy shift away from a security focus and towards an emancipatory approach to climate refugee policy. The practical outcomes of this paradigmatic shift would be first demonstrated in a change in Canadian policy. Given the nature of the international economic system producing political competition, this change would need to be a global paradigm shift towards an inclusive and human-centred set of interactions.

CONCLUSION

Canada’s current “Climate Change and Forced Migration” policy treats a structural insecurity issue within the framework of traditional security. This paper maintains that Canada’s state security oriented position towards climate refugees is ineffective at supporting people. Lack of formal recognition in the international community creates a dysfunctional system in the face of a rising

³⁰ William Aldis, “Health security as a public health concept: a critical analysis,” *Health and Policy Planning*, 23(6).

crisis. But simple recognition by governments that promotes state sovereignty does not necessarily mean the state is acting in the interest of its own citizens, nor to support a functioning global community. While human security conceptions seem to offer a better understanding of what is needed to deal with such an international crisis, human security does not provide a means to prioritize serious action on this issue. In dealing with a climate crisis that affects the most marginalized communities first and most severely, this kind of exclusionary policy clearly represents structurally violent system. Those that lose out are already oppressed, and are left even further marginalized. Emancipatory realism offers a framework to undertake this issue and create a preventative and preparatory approach which would be more effective for the entirety of the global community.