

ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRATION THE CONSEQUENCE OF FLOODS

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THIS paper focuses mainly on environmental migration caused by floods, which in Slovakia and many other countries is a living topic over the years. Water is something we can't be without, but having this huge power it can also damage and destroy all we have. Until now environmental migrants are still not being recognized as migrants and this way they are not getting all the help and rights of migrants and have to struggle with all impacts of such a disaster by themselves or with help of other people. The treat of floods is always here with us and we, our family or friend can be anytime without any warning hit by them.

Purpose – The main purpose of this paper is to highlight the destiny of not very fortunate people being hit by floods and to find possible, available solution for them when building up their whole life from the scratch.

Design/methodology/approach – The primary and main method was the case study of people hit by floods, research in the archives, documents of different organizations dealing with floods, research in activities of voluntary organizations and government activities helping these people.

Findings – Despite the help of government and state still the burden of help is on voluntary help.

Research limitations/implications – Limited impact on help provided to affected people. Limited possibility to get many different views of such a big amount of people hit by floods.

Practical implications – Raised attention and possible more help to environmentally displaced people.

Originality/value – Currently due to huge degradation of environment and environmental catastrophes a very hot topic, for which a solution has to be found.

Keywords – Environmental Migrants, Floods, Catastrophe, Voluntary Help.

Introduction

Degradation of the environment, unexpected environmental disasters, people in need, the consequence of human careless behavior and the wild nature of the environment, this is what causes environmental migration.

Environmental migrants are people who were forced to leave their homes because of conditions not any more acceptable for life.

To solve their problems and help them get back to their everyday life the support of the whole society is needed.

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The Cause of Environmental Migration

It is difficult to distinguish the different causes of displacement because often displacement occurs as the result of a combination of different factors. There can be political, economic, and demographic factors involved. However, there is a consensus among scholars on five broad causes of displacement - natural disasters, long-term environmental degradation, development, industrial accidents, and remnants of war. This note will briefly examine three of these causes – natural disasters, industrial accidents, and war (Keane).

The happening nowadays brings several bad news about several natural disasters. One of them by which many countries on different continents are hit is floods. We suffer from them in Europe, Australia and even Latin America, where the number of the dead people is shocking and scaring.

Talking about floods is nothing new, nothing exceptional nowadays. You don't even have to be interested in this topic and you get to hear from it about different media. Radio, TV, and internet is full of articles, videos, and shocking stories about floods all over the world. This only underlines that it's an important and vivid issue, which if we are lucky enough touches us only via media.

We are sorry for these people, sad about the death and loss of these people, but unfortunately this will not help them in any way.

It was different. Everything was so different just few decades ago. People were here for each other, they helped each other and the most important thing was nothing else but the human.

People losing their home, in case they survived such a disaster as flood have to make decision. In many cases they do not even have an option as they lost everything, so they have to adjust to circumstances. They become migrants and not any migrants, but environmental.

Who are Environmental Migrants?

Environmental migrants are people who leave their homes due to both gradual environmental change, and extreme environmental events. Environmental migrants are otherwise known by the broader public, as “climate refugees” or “environmental refugees” (Towards Recognition).

Gradual environmental changes are mainly caused by people, by polluting their own environment, and by this causing the area becomes no longer livable. It's very strange that such things actually happen, but as long as there is still a place where we can move after destroying a part of our land, there is only a minimal change that we will change.

The extreme environmental changes such as floods, fires, earthquakes, hurricanes, and volcanic eruption is believed to be something we cannot affect.

The discussion about so called green house effect is never ending. We can for sure prove that harmful gases emitted by different companies damage our health, but it's very hard to say whether they cause climate change.

In our history we record huge climate changes from extreme hot to extreme cold without any touch of human race. The nature is unpredictable, so are the changes in our climate.

Migrants are people who left their home countries upon their decision where else refugees are people who were forced to such step. Still both terms are from the perspective of law not very compatible with the word environmental. Or may be the other way round the word environmental is hard to connect with the one of these expressions.

“The term ‘migrant’ should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of ‘personal convenience’ and without intervention of an external compelling factor.

Migrants are people who make choices about when to leave and where to go, even though these choices are sometimes extremely constrained.

The Special Reporter of the Commission on Human Rights has proposed that the following persons should be considered as migrants:

- (a) Persons who are outside the territory of the State of which they are nationals or citizens, are not subject to its legal protection and are in the territory of another State;
- (b) Persons who do not enjoy the general legal recognition of rights which is inherent in the granting by the host State of the status of refugee, naturalized person or of similar status;
- (c) Persons who do not enjoy either general legal protection of their fundamental rights by virtue of diplomatic agreements, visas or other agreements (UNESCO).

On the other hand, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 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 or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR).

Current Issues

We don't have to really dig into the past to find some terrifying information about people being hit by floods.

Australia is suffering from floods since December 2010. The government authorities are tallying the devastating effects: at least 28 people dead, more than 30,000 homes and businesses swamped, and an estimated \$9.8 billion in damages.

Floods, which began in December 2010, engulfed 75 percent of Queensland – an area larger than Texas and California combined. A combination of heavy rainfall due to tropical cyclone Tasha as well as La Nina-related weather patterns caused the region's worst flooding in over 100 years. Australia's treasurer and deputy Prime Minister, Wayne Swan, said the disaster could be the most costly in the country's history and the rebuilding could take even years.

Meteorologists predict additional widespread flooding in Australia during the coming months (Australian Floods).

In the rescue process government and volunteers are involved as well. They are rescuing people, animals, and belongings. Still many people even during such hard times refuse to leave their homes. When we try to think of the reason why there are still people who don't want to move and rather stay until the last second when they themselves ask for help, we are getting to the main point why the importance of solving such issue as environmental migrants is put aside. The society is not any more people oriented, but the focus is rather on material things.

But the other part is that people are also scared that if they leave their homes, then the belongings left behind will not be available to them. They are scared of who will take care of them and of their families. This is how we built our society, already in the mindset of people it is prestored that it's only them who will take care of them. We cannot rely on other people's help, but ours.

Taking into consideration and during such disaster many people take advantage of the situation and steal what they see, the fear is justified. Shocking, but truth, there are people who not only do not help but they prosper from the bad luck of the others. Luckily there is still more people helping than stealing, but unfortunately what we see is that in the centre of the attention are things, material things and then comes the human.

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The west of Germany has been hit by floods as well during last days, unfortunately already two people died because of the floods (Gambling with People's Lives). The extensive floods were caused by strong rainfall and melting snow from the mountains. The first victim of the flood was a kayaker who was drawn down by the flood; the second guy was piled in with the falling snow.

The rivers Rhein, Odra, and Mosela overflow the banks and flooded the roads and many parts of various villages. The most impacted is the German federal state Rheinland - Palatine. In some towns the authorities had to stop the water transport and railage. The German meteorologists expect that the rain will continue and the situation will improve only in few days, but the rising temperature will again bring some snow melting. However the situation is not that bad as it was in 1993 and 1995 (Elections are over).

The situation is even more crucial in Brazil, where up to now more than 700 people became victims of the floods. And not to say that the rescue team hasn't reached yet the most affected areas. The catastrophe was caused by huge amount of never stopping rainfalls. The most affected cities are Teresópolis with at least 208 victims and Nova Friburgo with 214 dead people in the mountainous part of Rio de Janeiro. In the historical city of Petrópolis, where you could find luxurious vacation houses at least 39 people died. The Brazilian president Rousseff checked the affected areas and promised to save the people, to rebuild the area, granted the access to medicine. She promised that measures will be taken in order to prevent such a tragedy in the future (Catastrophical Floods in Brasil).

Unfortunately many state representatives promise everything when such a disaster happens, and may be they even fulfill it, but may be not to the extent as promised, but after a while when there is no more media attention no one is really acting. Every time people have to die in order to raise the attention to do something, to some measures ahead.

One of good and recent examples is the help to people from Slovakia, hit by floods during spring and summer 2010. On 12th of June elections to the parliament took place in Slovakia and politicians were promising to citizens hit by flood a great deal of help. But according to real help it was obvious then that those were only promises before elections.

The city mayors of most of the flooded villages in the eastern part of Slovakia haven't stopped even 2 months after the catastrophe. The people were slowly but surely recovering from the massive floods, but still one could see the consequences of floods everywhere. Destroyed furniture, appliances, home accessories, clothes, and shoes. Every week they are removing at least five containers full of these things, but it is not enough. Money is missing.

"The ex-government compensated the people very quickly, but the town did not get a cent", said the mayor of the town Velká Lodina Peter Lukáè. Only to remove the garbage the town would need around 17-thousand euro. The previous government, headed by Prime Minister Fico prepared a small surprise for little village Malá Lodina. What they got from the shares fund was 260 euro. The mayor is afraid that if he would take away from the village all the garbage that would ruin its poor budget. The civil association "Human in threat" offered the village an ex-interest loan for one year.

People would expect that the representatives of government would come to the affected areas, as it is very difficult to judge on the situation from behind the table. During the floods the small village of Malá Lodná lost its cemetery and a big part of communication was destroyed.

"After the floods my table is full of invoices for rescue work in the sum of 49-thousand euro, and the safeguarding works will cost another 1 million euro. What we got from the state in July was 200 euro", says the mayor Adriana Feèková.

The grant which was selected for the people affected by floods is considered by most of the people as a part of pre-election campaign. After the election the floods stopped to exist for the government.

“It was a complete chaos,” recalls the mayorees. “At 11:00 AM we got the tables, which we were supposed to fill in with the list of houses affected by floods. We had to give them back at 1:00 PM. The next day they were handing out the money. In case we would like to have the lists of objectives, they would not have enough time to give out the money until the election” (Floods in Germany have already 2 victims). And there are many other examples where the inhabitants and mayors as well can only confirm the media that it was full of promises, but nothing came. In many villages they still do not have money to pay for the rescue work, so everything was done just based on the good will of people. Of course it has to be paid back one day, but to find the money for it is the hardest thing.

According to the ex-prime minister Róbert Fico, “We started the help, the new government has to finish it.” According to the party Smer – SD they do not agree with the statement of ministry of finance Ivan Mikloš, who states that the previous government only took care about the people hit by flood until the elections. The spokeswoman of the party says that they distributed 20 million euro, so it is now up to the new government to continue (Floods in Germany finished the life of 2 people).

Environmental Disasters, Part of Our History

During my research I had a chance to talk to more people who have personally experienced the biggest flood which were in Rye Island in 1965. Many books have been written about it and many people still remember it lively as everyone from this area was somehow touched and affected by it. Luckily and on the other hand very surprisingly no loss in lives was detected. It was “only” material damage that occurred to the inhabitants of Rey Island.

Mr. Sajko Vojtech from a small village Patince remembers it lively as his house was almost ruined. “We got married and with my wife moved to our first common house in Patince, just few weeks before the huge flood came”. It was only spring, but the temperature was rising faster as expected in the month of March and the ice from the icebergs was melting and coming flowing down to the lowland. The second problem was the never ending rainfall. It all started already on the 20th of March, when the level of all rivers in the area started to rise. They had to measure the level of the rivers every single day (Australian Floods). The dams had to be supported by several sand duffel bags, and people from the area and soldiers were watching the level of the river and rainfall very carefully. On the 12th June 1965 the water already covered a part from Komárno city. All the work in the harbor in Komárno had to be stopped, ships were forbidden to transport on Danube. In order to protect all the equipment and machines in the shipyard dams had to be built around it. The ministry of defence sent almost from all over the country soldiers from different schools, academies and whoever who had anything to do with the defence of the country to help the people in danger to build dams. Whole troops with the best machines were sent to the dams. All the inhabitants of the Rey Island couldn't talk about anything else just the level of the water and of course the weather forecast, whether more rainfall can be expected. Everyone was tense and nervous about what will happen.

But unfortunately despite all the effort on the 14th of June at around 5:00 PM the dam in Patince could not hold on for longer and broke (Hegley, 1965). Even though there are some rumors that it has been manipulated in order to save the capital city Bratislava from floods, but this is something only involved people can really tell. The whole village was flooded within several minutes, soldiers started to rescue people from their homes. First they were taking women and children, men were helping to save furniture, livestock and anything that could be of certain value.

When Mr. Sajko heard that the water broke into the village he rushed back to the village as he was working outside the village. He clearly remembers how he was trying to get into the village, but already soldiers were blocking the entry to the village, it was not possible to enter just to leave it. “I tried to explain to them that I have to save our things, our belongings, but they didn't seem to understand, of course the human life was on the first place for them to save. I just told them they either shoot me or let me go, I just could bare the idea of loosing everything we had. Finally they let me enter. Luckily the water was not that high when I came, I remember how strange it was that

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around my house the level of the water was up to my waist and in the same village when I went to the pub there was almost no water. I rescued what was possible, I also saved the belongings of my neighbor as I saw he wasn't at home" recalls Mr. Sajko. The soldiers had a special means of transport which could move on the ground and in water as well, the so called amphibian. They helped to rescue people, furniture, livestock and whatever they found in houses of some value. Their help was priceless, I can tell you. Soldiers from Hungary, Russia, and Czech Republic came as well. The soldier crews were of mixed nationalities but it didn't matter. It didn't matter that they could not understand each other. What was clear for everyone that they have to help and they did it, what they promised they fulfilled.

"I remember many people, mainly men didn't want to leave their homes, they wanted to be strong and guard their houses, the house which they build up with their hands. And now all what they had was in danger. It was very difficult to explain them that in first place they have to be saved and that the soldiers will take care about the rest. It is in the human nature, to protect the material things. Many of such heroes later on cried for help when they were left there without any food and water, but many of them also survived the whole floods without leaving their homes." Mr. Sajko tells me.

From the 14th June until 21st of June already 35000 people were forced to leave their homes. Until 23rd June it was 40000 (Hegley, 1965). As the flood was spreading the number of people leaving their homes was rising. It seemed that the life will not return to this area any more. Everything was covered in water, houses were ruined. Families were torn apart, men were helping to strengthen the dams where it was still possible; to save what was possible from houses, animals. Women, kids, and older people were placed all over Slovakia. There was not one single person that would not be taken care of. It was either the family of the people who could put them up, give them clothes and food, or it was the state helping them. Antonín Novotný, the president of Czechoslovakia asked for the collaboration of Slovaks, Czechs, and Hungarians as well. They divided the districts between each other and took care of them. The help came in the form of clothes, food, and necessary machines. Even new houses were promised to people.

The most important thing was that everything what was promised was fulfilled. After the floods, people got all the material necessary for building their new houses for free from the state. Everything they lost including furniture was put back. It was forbidden for this time to build up the houses from mud, as these were the houses, which were ruined as first. Everything was built up from brick. From the first day when the flood hit the area until the last moment men were working, helping, salvaging what was possible without any rest.

They were exhausted, but they could not stop helping, when they had a look what damage the flood brought. After the floods they wanted their family to be able to come back to a home.

It is fascinating that in those times, when people had almost nothing they could help each other so much. Because what was important was the human being, who did not truckle, the human being who fight and rebuilt, the human whose name we have to write in capitals, the human who is the future (Hegley, 1965).

"The lessons from past experience are well known, yet they are generally ignored in the design of new operations. This synthesis concludes that institutional amnesia is the corollary of institutional optimism" (Gambling with People's Lives).

Organizations Helping Environmental Migrants

Even though these people do not have a right by law to get any help, or may be more because of this they get voluntary help. Of course voluntary means that no one hit by any disaster can rely on such a help, but fortunately there are still many people who are willing and able to help people in need.

One of the biggest and most known organizations, which are helping migrants, is the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which estimates that there could be 200 million environmentally induced migrants by 2050 (O'Reilly).

This number is shocking and scaring as regrettably there is no official solution for such people. Where to place them, how to do it and may be the most important is the financial side of this problem. Currently people who are forced to move due to some natural disaster are supported by organizations and individuals on voluntary basis, which of course is not a long term solution.

There are also conferences organized in favor of these people, most recently in Cancun, where the 16th Conference of the Parties (COP16) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), (organized in Cancun between 29th November – 10th December) has reflected a growing concern of the international community for migrations induced by climate change, which is going to affect hundreds of millions of persons in the next decades. Several civil society initiatives attempted to raise awareness on this topic (Mayer). Yet, another significant contribution to the debate on climate migration came from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which released a new report on “Disaster Risk Reduction, Climate Change Adaptation and Environmental Migration”. While briefly referring to IOM ongoing projects relating to climate migration, the Report takes an original perspective when presenting climate migrations as an appropriate adaptation strategy, contrasting with the current international paradigm. International organizations often considered that a first-rank political answer to climate change should consist only in mitigation efforts, i.e. measures taken to prevent or, at least, reduce climate hazards; that adaptation should be a second-rank solution to limit human vulnerability to unavoidable climate hazards; and that climate migration should be considered as a third-rank “solution” that one adopts only after a failure of both mitigation and adaptation efforts. Thus, considering migration only as a means of last resort, this paradigm may push populations to remain in locations threatened by increased natural hazards – while adaptation remained in any case deeply under-financed (Mayer).

And it is not only the International Organization for Migration, which is giving a helping hand. It is always more and more voluntary organizations which are raising money for these people. In Slovakia it is for example the association, Human in threat, which is raising money not only for victims of disasters in Slovakia but all over the world.

On the 8th June 2010 it announced a public collection for help for people hit by floods. In consequence of heavy rainfall at the end of May and beginning of June many habitations were flooded, bridges damaged, and hundreds of people were forced to be evacuated. The most affected areas were Nitra, Banská Bystrica, Prešov, and Košice (SOS floods 2010).

By the 30th September 2010 more than 233000 euro was collected by the means of program SOS floods 2010. It is still possible to send money on the account of the organization for victims of floods.

But it is not only money, what the organization is raising. Many volunteers enter many different programs and help people hit by any disaster. They do it voluntarily without any remuneration. The only thing what they get during the period they help is food and accommodation. They do not have tasks what to do and what not to do; they just do whatever needed to be done. The association is distributing cleaning agents, rent of desiccators, ensuring of volunteers for cleaning jobs, who were sent to more than 2500 affected families (SOS floods 2010).

Many other associations joined the association Human in threat in order to get as much money as possible. Looking at the amount collected 1381820 EUR, it is a huge amount which was raised by people, upon their free will without forcing. But on the other hand if we think of the number of families, which is 815, where this amount was distributed it is still just a tiny bit of a help and is only sufficient for the most crucial things (SOS floods 2010). People remain without a place to go, without everything they were collecting over their lives. But this cannot be solved without the help of government and whole society. Without realizing that next time it can be us hit by a disaster.

If we would compare only happening in Slovakia from 1965 and 2010, people hit by floods the difference in terms of help is more than visible. Of course it is very difficult to compare such thing one to one, as

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the time has passed, but what I wanted to emphasize is that it is people who changed. The change of the society. Our preferences have changed.

Until it will not be supported by the state and by the whole society it is almost impossible to save these people, to help them and provide them with what they had before the disaster.

Conclusion

To conclude my work and get to a solution I would rather suggest that each and every single person should do it by himself. The main conclusion is that regardless of place, time, conditions it should be always human in the center of the attention and moreover if he is in need. As proved from the history we can see that only in case we can think about others and help them in good conduct it is possible to survive. As long as there will be other things in the center of the attention it will be still very difficult to make people help each other. May be we have to get to a stage when everyone will be helpless, when everyone will be in need and then the only possibility how to survive will be to help each other.

I am convinced that it is not the matter of money, when helping to others, there are so many things we or the state spend money on, and the important is to set priorities.

But this everyone has to do by himself.

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