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# **“Climate refugees” in Europe? Climate-related migration affects developing countries in particular**

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# The Current Column

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## “Climate refugees” in Europe? Climate-related migration affects developing countries in particular

Bonn, 10 December 2015. The refugee crisis is this year's central issue and one that we are likely to be dealing with for a long time to come. We are already receiving some very vocal warnings that the current refugee crisis is just a foretaste of larger and unbroken streams of “climate refugees” that could descend on Europe in future as climate change continues. These forecasts are alarming and misleading, because they fail to get to the heart of the matter. Individuals are already leaving their homes, for example as storms, drought and flooding increase as a consequence of climate change. However, it is developing countries that are most affected by climate-related migration since they are the ones that feel the impact of climate change most acutely. Even if Europe has no reason to expect the mass arrival of “climate refugees” in the short term, its states must lay the groundwork now at the Paris UN Climate Conference for providing appropriate support to poor countries particularly affected by climate change.

There is no direct cause and effect scenario when it comes to climate change and migration, that is, the fact that it is getting hotter or raining less does not automatically lead to more migration. In the vast majority of cases, migration is caused by the interplay between economic, political, social, cultural and environmental factors. The same goes for the outbreak of violent conflicts, which are a primary cause of the recent refugee crisis. Climate change may represent a building block in the development of violent conflict, as is being discussed with reference to the civil war in Syria, for example. However, it is factors such as political stability and the ability to provide emergency assistance in the affected countries that are crucial in determining whether or not conflicts escalate.

At the same time, when viewed in the context of global warming, migration manifests itself far more often in temporary and regional movements than in mass emigration to other continents, for example from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. This is because many of those most acutely affected by climate change depend on the direct use of natural resources

for their livelihoods as small farmers, herders or fishermen. As such, they often belong to the poorest population group and, in some cases, do not have enough money to migrate at all. For this reason, they are also referred to as trapped populations. These individuals are hit particularly hard by the consequences of climate change, for example, by decreasing food security. As such, “non-migration” can pose as much of a problem as migration. When people leave their homes due to the direct impact of climate change, they usually move within their own countries or between neighbouring states. And it is frequently individual members of households and families who leave their homes, rather than the whole family. They use the money that they earn in what are mostly very adverse circumstances to support their families in dealing with the effects of climate change.

The question of whether and how many “climate refugees” will arrive in Europe reveals a self-interested and narrow-minded way of looking at the world that gives little consideration to the actual challenges. People are already being forced to leave their homes due to the consequences of climate change. Even if we hear little about this in Europe, our actions should show foresight and a willingness to look beyond our own borders. To do so, we need ambitious greenhouse gas reduction targets and a commitment to limit the increase in global warming to 1.5° Celsius until the end of the century, the maximum temperature rise called for by island nations and other countries and currently being negotiated in Paris. Sharing as we do a historic responsibility for causing climate change, we need to take responsibility for dealing with its consequences far from our own front door. This will require the provision of finance for adaptation measures in heavily affected countries and of assistance to these nations in dealing with the damage and loss resulting from climate change. In the Paris climate agreement, states need to agree on a framework for future action that also lays the ground to prevent people becoming “climate refugees” and to manage climate-related migration.