

DEPENDENT ORIGIN AND MIGRATION: THE NEED FOR BUDDHIST LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The number of displaced persons globally increased dramatically over the last decade. In 2018, there were almost 70 million people displaced, a new high. Displaced people flee from situations of substantial suffering, and are driven largely by violent conflict. Increasing ethnic and geopolitical tensions raise the prospect of additional conflict and millions more displaced people in future.

At the same time, climate change and other ecological degradation will likely increase the number of migrants, potentially on a scale which is unprecedented in human history. Sea level rise threatens many coastal communities, some of which are unlikely to be able to adapt over the medium and long term, especially when coupled with the destruction of reefs and increasingly powerful storms. Agricultural productivity will move toward the poles, leaving millions in developing equatorial countries without access to their traditional means of subsistence. These and similar factors will independently increase the risk of violent conflict. Some commentators have linked climate change to the onset of the Syrian conflict, which has been a key driver in the increase in displaced people in the last decade. Even without conflict, loss of livelihoods will drive many to seek new homes.

The vast majority of this migration is likely to be within and between developing countries. Many receiving communities are unlikely to

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have the resources necessary for the health of their existing residents and displaced peoples. New arrivals may be forced to live in unsafe conditions in slums, conducive to the spread of illness and suffering. Ethnic and political tensions may increase, spilling over into violence and perpetuating a cycle of migration.

While Europe's ambivalent acceptance of a substantial number of refugees from the Syrian conflict is an exception, the global trend has been for developed countries to strengthen their borders against refugees and for nationalism and xenophobia to increase. Buddhist wisdom is a useful anecdote to these trends. Greater understanding of the concept of dependent origination would foster action to reduce and ultimately stop climate change. A greater appreciation of the concepts of anatta and impermanence would enable the developed world assist the developing world for the climate change that could not be avoided and increase its humanitarian intake. This would allow for a more rational global conversation about the distribution of resources.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the number of displaced persons is rising fast, with almost 70 million displaced people. This surge of human tide is unequalled in history, with the UNHCR estimating that a new person is displaced almost every two seconds (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). People typically experience substantial suffering to cause them to leave home and become displaced. Violent conflict or political persecution is the most common cause of displacement, though environmental catastrophe is another driver (UNESCO, 2019). While it is reasonable to assume that most displaced people minimise their suffering by moving (where they do so of their own free will), displacement itself often entails additional suffering. Both the factors which cause displacement and the displacement itself are linked with poorer health, as displaced people must often live in conditions conducive to the spread of disease (Bowles et al., 2014c, Bowles et al., 2014b, Butler et al., 2014, Bowles et al., 2014a, Bowles et al., 2015).

The number of displaced people is likely to increase substantially in the future. Globally, humanity is degrading the natural environment on which humans depend at an unparalleled rate.

This will combine with increasing human numbers to create more displacement in response to ecological disasters, including from short-term extreme weather events and longer-term trends which permanently reduce the habitability of some areas. Degraded environments are less productive for humans, which can strain economic, social and political relations. In situations with imperfect governance, this can exacerbate existing ethnic or religious tensions, increasing the risk of violent conflict. In turn, an increased rate of violent conflict will lead to more displaced people.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

The ecological systems which support human civilization and a global population of almost 8 billion people are being rapidly degraded. Their capacity to continue their role supporting human civilization is at risk. Scientists indicate that a number of key earth systems are in danger. These include from climate change, and disruptions to the phosphorus and nitrogen cycles (Rockström et al., 2009). The current rate of species extinction may be comparable to the five mass extinction events, including the one which wiped out the dinosaurs (Barnosky et al., 2011).

Each of these problems is global in scale and could affect billions. While space does not permit a full examination of each risk and their interconnections, climate change is an illustrative example. Anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide and methane, are combining with degradation of carbon sinks such as forests, to increase the average global temperature. Increased concentrations of greenhouse gases act as a blanket around the earth, trapping more of the sun's energy and increasing global temperatures. This is disrupting the climate system.

Humans have already changed the climate, and have taken insufficient action to diminish the pace of climate change. One important effect is sea level rise, which will reduce the amount of land on which people can live. Sea level rise could be relatively rapid, though precise predictions are difficult. It will disproportionately affect low lying river deltas, currently centres of agricultural production and human settlement. Coastal communities may find adaptation difficult or impossible, prompting migration.

With a changing climate, extreme weather events, including hurricanes, floods, droughts, and periods of extreme temperatures, are more common and/or stronger. Each of these events can harm people directly, but perhaps more importantly, is disruptive to productivity and water and food security. Climate change is likely to reduce worker productivity in some places and industries because of biological limitations on the people's capacity to function in extreme heat (Kjellstrom et al., 2009, Hanna et al., 2011, Tawatsupa et al., 2012).

Extreme weather can devastate water security, both through drought and when floods or storm surges compromise clean water reservoirs. Crop production is also at risk, including at a scale which affects entire countries or regions (Butler, 2014, Butler, 2009, Butler et al., 2014). Equatorial countries are likely to experience some of the worst effects of climate change on food production. Some degree of adaptation may be possible, but adaptation has theoretical and practical limits. Importantly, many of the world's most disadvantaged, who are disproportionately represented in equatorial countries, are least able to adapt due to lack of access to information and capital. This is especially unfair given the relatively little contribution the most disadvantaged have made to climate change. In the long term, regular temperature extremes will become normal and preclude crop production and safe habitation. Some areas will lose the ability to consistently equal current food production.

Fish and other marine animals will be adversely affected by warming water. Coral reefs, which currently support rich ecosystems, will experience more frequent bleaching. Oceans absorb a substantial fraction of excess carbon dioxide emissions, increasing their acidity. This affects the ability of many marine animals to grow, including shells (Baumann et al., 2012, Cooley and Doney, 2009, Barnett, 2011). Ecological diversity will plummet. Fish stocks which provide critical protein and calories for millions of people are at risk (Barnett, 2011, Baumann et al., 2012). Some scientists go so far as arguing that humanity should plan on coral reef ecosystems collapsing, because they have so little chance of survival due to the combination of ocean acidification, pollution and overfishing (Bradbury, 2012).

Extreme weather events have always led to human displacement. As they become more extreme and more frequent, this will be exacerbated. Global civilisation has never experienced the sort of long term alteration to the climate that anthropogenic climate change is bringing, but long term changes may increase the number of displaced people by many times. Expert estimates have varied by more than a factor of ten, and have been as high as 300 million (Gemenne, 2011).

3. ENVIRONMENT AND CONFLICT

Many countries' defence leaders recognize the link between climate change and violent conflict, and have started to prepare for further climate change (Bowles and Butler, 2014, Schwartz and Randall, 2003, Ministry of Defence, 2010, Department of Defense, 2014). Food and water security are important for peace. Their absence increases the risk of conflict (Bowles et al., 2014a, Bowles et al., 2014b, Bowles et al., 2015). Poor governance increases the risk, as it inhibits a government's capacity to address legitimate grievances of its citizens. Unscrupulous actors can use food insecurity to increase ethnic and religious tensions or incite violence (Kahl, 2006, Bowles et al., 2014a).

There is evidence that climate change may have helped initiate the civil conflict in Syria. Syria experienced a severe drought in the lead up to the conflict, which may have been caused or exacerbated by climate change. This substantially reduced rural food production in Syria, creating substantial problems for farmers. At the same time, the Asad regime reduced support to rural families. As a result, young men from rural families travelled to the cities in search of work to support themselves and their families. Many were unable to find it. The cities then became hotbeds of discontent with the regime, potentially precipitating the civil conflict (Gleick, 2014, Kelley et al., 2015).

4. CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT

Over one quarter of the world's 24.5 million refugees come from Syria. In addition to the 6.3 million from Syria, South Sudan and Afghanistan contribute another 5 million refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019),

clearly demonstrating the importance of avoiding conflict to limit the number of displaced people.

Displaced people are in need of help, but can be perceived by locals as competition for limited resources including employment. This perception often colours the reception displaced people receive. While displaced people frequently originate from developing countries, many in developed countries worry about an influx of refugees or other migrants. This xenophobia is frequently played out in elections, with recent and important consequences for the leadership and long-term strategic policies of a number of democracies (Welzer, 2012, Macgregor-Bowles and Bowles, 2017).

While citizens of developed countries often worry about an influx of refugees, in fact 85% of the world's displaced people are in developing countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). This is in spite of the fact that developing countries have fewer resources to accommodate new migrants, and have typically contributed far less to the global ecological degradation that is anticipated to increase migration. Developing countries' capacity to provide displaced people with the relief they need could be strengthened by material and expert assistance from developed countries.

5. THE NEED FOR BUDDHIST WISDOM

Buddhist wisdom and core concepts should prove a useful antidote to these trends. Action on climate change would be enhanced with greater understanding of Buddhist core concepts, such as anatta, dependent origination and impermanence (Bowles, 2015, Bowles, 2014). This would facilitate the developed world recognising its disproportionate contribution to the suffering associated with climate change and other forms of environmental degradation and act to alleviate such suffering. This would include action to mitigate environmental degradation including climate change and efforts to assist those in the developing world adapt to problems which cannot be avoided. The former could involve transitioning to renewable sources of energy, which are already near parity in cost with some forms of fossil fuels.

Assist the developing world to adapt to a world with a

degraded ecology would involve increasing dialogue and with and understanding of those in developing countries which are most vulnerable to climate change. Helpful actions might include increasing the number of migrants accepted by developed countries, and enhancing their prospects upon arrival, given the role of remittances in some economies. Importantly, it would also recognise that the act of displacement is often traumatic, and should be avoided where possible. This means assisting developing countries to adapt to climate change to prevent displacement. Effectively, this would help reduce global inequalities between people and nations. Ideally, Buddhist wisdom could help guide a conversation about improving global equity.

Buddhist wisdom could be a guiding light, helping to reduce suffering from displacement associated with environmental degradation. For this potential to be realised, it is important that Buddhists actively and visibly demonstrate compassion to ethnic and religious minorities. The world needs good role models demonstrating tolerance acceptance to the rest of the world. Such action will also enhance Buddhism's already strong reputation globally. In turn, this will increase the number of people who find refuge in its teachings and could reduce suffering.

6. CONCLUSION

Displacement of people, due to conflict or environmental catastrophe, causes immense suffering. Environmental degradation will increase the already overwhelming number of displaced persons globally, through both environmental catastrophe and violent conflict. This will cause immense suffering. Buddhist wisdom could help stop environmental degradation and foster compassion for those adversely affected by it.

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