

Excerpts from Steven Castles, “Environmental Change and Forced Migration: Making Sense of the Debate,” Working Paper no. 70, Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2002.

North-South Disparities, Development and Migration

The real issue, though, is not to protect and assist people forced to migrate by environmental and other factors, but rather to adopt policies which will deal with the root causes of all types of forced migration, and make them unnecessary. Here one can generally agree with the catalogue of measures put forward by Myers (Myers, 1997), which includes:

- Promoting sustainable development (defined following the 1987 Brundtland Report as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’).
- Foreign aid measures designed to alleviate environmental pressures, and to address the needs of the most impoverished groups.
- Measures for the relief of foreign debt of the poorest nations...
- Specific initiatives designed to help developing countries confront environmental challenges.

However, I think it is mistaken to focus narrowly on environmental issues in development strategies. It is important to recognise that environmental change has always been part of human development. In today’s developed countries, the natural environment has been profoundly changed and remoulded to fit human needs over many centuries. In the last century we have become increasingly aware of the need to preserve natural resources and bio-diversity, and we are beginning to make some progress in doing so – as the return of fish to British rivers and the increase in forest coverage demonstrates. Are today’s less-developed countries going to be able to make such transitions, or will they be prevented by rapid population growth and climate change? If we impose too much ‘environmental conditionality’ on poor countries, we may condemn them to remain poor.

It is important to remember that the rich countries of the North are still responsible for the greatest environmental problems. This applies in a direct sense: the average American produces ten times as much greenhouse gas and global warming as the average Indian or Chinese. But it is also true in a much more pervasive way. Globalisation as a new world order is based on the opening up of all regions of the world to economic activities largely controlled by Northern-based transnational companies and motivated by their profit interests. The global economic institutions – the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation – impose conditions of privatisation, free trade and investment and control of intellectual property which protect the dominance of the transnationals. The military might of the only super-power is available to police this world order if it is threatened by those it designates as rogue states, fundamentalists or terrorists.

Underdevelopment is not a natural condition of the South, but a process resulting originally from colonialism and now from the North-South division. The decline in living standards and welfare in

Africa and parts of Asia over the last 20 years – at a time of rapid economic growth in the rich countries – illustrates the way whole regions are becoming uncoupled from global development.

In mid-2001, a world conference was held to debate ways of controlling the illegal trade in small arms which fuels the local wars, which in turn lead to human-rights violations, misery and flight. The conference failed, because US arms manufacturers, backed by their government, rejected any control even of illegal arms trading as an infringement of their market freedom.

So if we really want to deal with the root causes of forced migration, the first step is to stop Northern practices that make things worse in the poor countries of the South. Stopping the arms trade and the trade in alluvial diamonds that has fuelled conflicts in Cambodia, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo is essential. A much more important – but also more difficult – second step is a reform of global rules on trade, investment and intellectual property to give countries in the early stages of development and industrialisation better economic and social opportunities. A package of aid measures, as listed above, is only the third step.

Eliminating forced migration is thus a long-term project, closely bound up with global power relations and the North-South division. Invoking ‘a frightful future of third world ecological ruin threatening first world stability’ is harmful, because it is likely to encourage new immigration restrictions – what State Department Geographer Wood aptly calls ‘Green Walls’ (Wood, 2001, 55-7). We clearly need a much broader approach, which recognises the complex causes and the global dimensions of the crises that force people to flee their homes.