



Collapsing societies and forced migration

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Looking through a displacement lens at environmental, technological, anthropological, political and other factors affecting societies now and in the past provides food for thought both on how we interpret the past and on how we envisage the future.

I first encountered the issue of climate refugees in 2008.¹ As focal point for refugee issues at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was charged with answering a question from the Norwegian parliament on how to respond to forced migration from areas affected by climate change. At the time, the Norwegian government had no good answers and no policy on this issue. Experts were therefore consulted and reports were commissioned from the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Refugee Studies Centre in Oxford. The question thus triggered a series of activities and marked the start of Norway's engagement in the issue of climate change and displacement.

At the time of the UNHCR commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Refugee Convention in 2011, the Norwegian government hosted the Nansen Conference on Climate Change and Displacement in the 21st Century, bringing together climate experts, policymakers and humanitarian organisations. The following year, having unsuccessfully tried to have the issue included in the declaration from the UNHCR Ministerial Meeting in December, Norway (together with Switzerland) decided to establish the Nansen Initiative to address cross-border displacement caused by natural disasters. By the time it was launched in Geneva in October 2012, the Initiative had already gained support from other countries, including some in the global South.²

While the Nansen Initiative has become an important part of my own journey into the issue of migration and climate change, I want to concentrate on slow-onset disasters (as opposed to the sudden-onset disasters which the Nansen Initiative has as its point of departure), and I will use Jared Diamond's book *Collapse* (2006) as a guide. The strength of Diamond's book, in my view, is the breadth of its concerns. It takes a multitude of factors – environmental, technological, anthropological, political and others – into consideration and analyses some past and present societies in the light of these factors. Reading *Collapse* with a displacement lens provides considerable food for thought both on how we interpret the past and on how we envisage the future.

The fundamental questions Diamond asks are: What made certain societies collapse in the past, while others survived? And what can this knowledge teach us today? By 'collapse' Diamond does not mean social transformation (as in the case of the fall of the Roman Empire or the end of the German monarchy after the First World War). Rather he is referring to the demise of whole societies and their populations.

A key lesson he draws from the past is that if a population grows rapidly and there is nowhere for people to settle, there is a real risk of exhausting the resource base and of the society in question breaking down. This

phenomenon was described by Thomas Malthus in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* as early as 1798.

Equally important lessons are the need to adapt to the environment and avoid unsustainable exploitation such as overgrazing and deforestation. Most of Diamond's cases of collapsed societies in the past were due either to overpopulation or to unsustainable use of natural resources. Obviously, the geographical and climatic conditions differed and certain societies, especially in marginal areas, were more at risk than others. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that some societies succeeded while others failed.

In some cases it was climate change that put societies under pressure and led to their collapse. The so-called Little Ice Age, normally dated from the early 14th century to the mid-19th century, made many marginal areas uninhabitable. The fate of the people of the Pitcairn Islands in the Pacific and of the Norse settlers in south-eastern Greenland are two prime examples. Exactly what happened to these populations is not clear. Most people are believed to have died of starvation or in conflicts over scarce resources. For some, migration may have been the key to survival. But even in these cases collapse could have been prevented. The Inuit in Greenland survived because of fishing – it is still a mystery why the Norse settlers didn't fish – and superior whale-hunting techniques. And in neighbouring Iceland, strict control of grazing prevented soil erosion, enabling the Icelanders to keep their sheep, one of several reasons why they survived the Little Ice Age.

Another interesting case is that of the genocide in Rwanda. Diamond refers to a study by two Belgian economists, Catherine André and Jean-Philippe Platteau, whose account highlights the problems faced by poor farmers who were working in rapidly deteriorating conditions, partly because of population growth and partly because of over-farming. Many farmers were forced to sell the little land they owned to a few rich families, and were then unable to feed their own families with what remained. According to the two economists, the rural population of Rwanda was close to starvation when the violence broke out. In the villages they studied most closely, Hutu as well as Tutsi were killed. Rather than ethnic hatred, they present the view that land disputes were an ignored driver of the conflict unleashed in 1994. In other words, this tragedy was to a large extent due to poor policies that were unable to prevent the population from growing too rapidly or to develop a diversified economy that could have eased the pressure on agricultural land.

The dangerous combination of rapid population growth and land scarcity has also affected my own country. Norway covers a large surface area but has relatively little



arable land. Agricultural production is low due to cold weather and short seasons. From 1814 (when Norway gained its independence from Denmark) to the middle of that century, the annual net population growth was 1.3%, making it the fastest growing nation in Europe. As the population increased, people started farming less productive forest areas and moorland. Farms were established further north and higher up in the hills and mountains. According to customary law, the right to the farm passed to the eldest son and the others had to clear land for their own farms or work as tenant farmers. Industrialisation came late to Norway and provided few job opportunities. By the middle of the 19th century only a few Norwegians had left for the United States but during the second half of the century, and especially in the 1880s and 1890s, the outflow was significant, with waves of emigration following the economic downturns.

Norway was a poor country at the time, and those who emigrated came from among the poorer segments of society. They were not, however, the poorest, as they had either the means to finance the voyage themselves or relatives to lend them what they needed. They were also influenced by those who had already found a new home in the American Midwest. All in all, around 800,000 Norwegians left for the promised land (the total population of Norway in 1890 was only two million). Without the option of migration, there would have been widespread hunger and many would probably have died. Migration – first within Norway and then outside Norway – was an adaptation strategy.

What can we learn from these examples that is relevant to the issue of migration and slow-onset disasters today? Malthus has been out of fashion in academia and politics for generations but this may now change. Soaring prices on the global food market and increased global competition for resources, including arable land (not least triggered by recent Chinese long-term lease agreements in Africa), are signs that food shortages are foreseeable – an idea that lends itself to Malthusian analysis. Add to this rapid urbanisation, environmental degradation, the depletion of natural resources – and finally the escalating threat of global warming. Climate change will take its toll in different ways from one region to another, depending on local preparedness and resilience. Low-lying islands will disappear as the sea level rises. The most populous deltas, such as those of the Ganges, Mekong and Nile, will not only be hit by rising sea levels but also by salinisation and extreme weather, including flooding caused by heavy rain and, in some cases, ice melting upstream. The Horn of Africa will face severe droughts, as will areas around the Mediterranean and countries such as Australia, Mexico, Russia and the United States.

If Diamond's hotspots differ from those of the climate scientists, it is probably because he takes a wider range of factors into account in his analysis. His hotspots include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burundi, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Madagascar, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines,

Rwanda, the Solomon Islands and Somalia. He points out that many of these countries are also conflict-ridden and failed states. He may seem to attach greater importance to environmental and resource-related causes than political ones, and this argument obviously has some shortcomings, but his analysis is not in fact based on this approach. Rather, Diamond considers the way people respond, or fail to respond, to environmental and resource problems as a factor in itself. He describes a situation where all the root causes reinforce each other and must be solved simultaneously. The failure to respond adequately could, he suggests, result in the following scenario: "When people are desperate, undernourished, and without hope, they blame their governments, which they see as responsible for or unable to solve their problems. They try to emigrate at any cost. They fight each other over land. They kill each other. They start civil wars. They figure that they have nothing to lose, so they become terrorists or they support or tolerate terrorism."

This is a clear message to those who believe that the dynamics of modern collapse will not affect them, that we who are far away from the hotspots are safe. The global population will continue growing and people in the global South will demand higher standards of living. This will lead to unsustainable growth, depleted resources, failing energy sources, polluted environment and accelerated global warming. If the countries in the global South fail to develop and deliver higher standards of living, it will lead to mass migration to the global North. Either way, it is clear that no country will be left untouched.

However, consolation may be found in these words from a Dutch friend of Diamond's, quoted in *Collapse*: "If global warming causes polar ice melting and a world rise in sea level, the consequences will be more severe for the Netherlands than for any other country in the world, because so much land is already under sea level. That is why we Dutch are so aware of our environment. We've learned through our history that we're all living in the same polder,³ and that our survival depends on each other's survival." If we can apply this mind-set globally, surely it provides hope for the future.

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The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has for several years granted core funding to FMR to support its work and has provided support for specific themed issues too, in particular FMR's special issue to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement www.fmreview.org/GuidingPrinciples10

1. In fact 'climate refugees' is not considered an appropriate term but initially this was the term used. We now prefer to talk about 'environmentally displaced persons'.

2. See 'From the Nansen Principles to the Nansen Initiative' by Walter Kälin in *Forced Migration Review* 41 www.fmreview.org/preventing/kalin

3. 'Polder' is a Dutch word meaning acquired land, created by huge dykes and kept drained by constant pumping.