

## Statelessness and environmental displacement

Jessie Connell

**Stateless people and migrants are at greater risk of displacement and are less likely to receive assistance; in turn, environmental displacement (especially multiple migrations) heightens the risk of becoming stateless.**

Stateless people and other 'non-citizens' often reside in areas which are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and have few options available to them to mitigate its impacts. One of the barriers to improving support for stateless people in the context of climate change, especially its potential to create displacement, is the paucity of reliable data which might inform appropriate responses. Further research is needed to map the potential points of vulnerability created by statelessness in circumstances of environmental displacement and other impacts of disasters and climate change. Some of the areas where empirical research is needed include:

- the degree of influence that environmental factors play in displacing or motivating stateless persons to migrate
- the nature of this movement in different contexts and the barriers stateless people face in seeking assistance
- the potential exclusion of stateless persons in receiving humanitarian assistance following disasters, or in receiving climate adaptation finance and support
- whether 'environmental displacement' contributes to people becoming stateless.

To be stateless is to not be considered a citizen by any state under the operation of its law. There are estimated to be at least 11 million stateless people in the world, and many more who are unable to prove their nationality through appropriate documentation or registration.<sup>1</sup> Little research has been done on how stateless populations residing within nations such as Bangladesh, Myanmar and Malaysia are affected by environmental

change, and how their status as non-citizens affects access to services, 'climate finance', development assistance, humanitarian aid and other support designed to help communities recover from disasters or facilitate adaptation to climate change.

Stateless people and migrants often reside in shelter that is temporary, 'illegal' and in settings which are geographically most vulnerable to environmental impacts. In addition these groups are particularly vulnerable to both environmental displacement and development-induced displacement, due to their tenuous legal standing and the ease with which they can be 'moved on' without compensation or support. There is also evidence to suggest that being stateless or residing as a migrant (legally or illegally) in places affected by environmental processes, such as disasters, makes it difficult to access support services.

An example of the complex interaction of statelessness and environmental displacement can be found in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Some sources estimate that there are around one million stateless children living in Thailand, many of whom are children of migrants from Myanmar. Local organisations working with communities following the disaster estimated that 127,714 people from Myanmar were living in Thailand's five tsunami-affected provinces; of these only 22,504 (less than 18%) were registered with the Thai authorities, and many migrants were ineligible for official aid following the tsunami due to their uncertain legal standing.

Stateless people are not prioritised in efforts to support communities to recover

May 2015

from disasters or adapt to climate change. Climate finance is usually channelled through national governments rather than directly to the most affected individuals, making citizenship a potential condition for support. Beyond the consideration of stateless people in some environmental mitigation strategies, it seems that there is no substantial research currently underway that links environmental processes and statelessness, with the exception of

work relating to climate change and the disappearance of low-lying island states.

Jessie Connell [jessieconnell@gmail.com](mailto:jessieconnell@gmail.com) is an Associate of the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University based in Bangladesh.

<https://devpolicy.crawford.anu.edu.au/>

1. See *Forced Migration Review* issue 32 (2009) on Statelessness [www.fmreview.org/statelessness](http://www.fmreview.org/statelessness)