Fleeing the climate: The 'great migration' ahead

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This Somalian family left their home due to droughts. Climate change is expected to make droughts and many other disasters more frequent and more severe, causing millions to flee their homes. Credit: Oxfam East Africa/Flickr

One of the biggest challenges of today is the migration of people associated with the impacts of climate change on crops, water resources,

droughts and risks related to health. Climate models are in agreement: higher temperatures and the increase in heat waves will make many areas of our already overpopulated planet unlivable. The results of a recent study speak for themselves, finding that in next 50 years, temperatures will rise more than they have in the last 6,000 years. For most of human history, people lived in a surprisingly restricted range of temperatures and the alteration of such balances, even moderate, brings great consequences.

There have been several recent studies looking at how to understand and predict the problem of climate migration or study plausible alternatives. Joining these efforts, the *New York Times* recently collaborated with the online newspaper ProPublica to try to understand how the people of Central America will move within their own countries and to other countries as a consequence of global warming. Their model shows that the areas where humans can barely survive today (for example, the Sahara desert), which today cover about 1 percent of surface of our planet, will grow to about 20 percent within the next 50 years, with about 200 million climate migrants estimated by 2050. The model suggests that migration will increase regardless of the climate, but that the number of migrants will increase significantly with climate change. In the most extreme climatic scenarios, more than 30 million migrants would make their way to the US border over the next 30 years.

Estimating the number of people who will be involved in migration is, in general, complicated and depends on a series of socio-political-economic factors which are as difficult (if not more) to predict than those related to climate change. It is also true that the general trends of the model (and of other models) are clear and unambiguous showing that, once again, the regions most affected are among the poorest in the world, despite being among those that contribute the least to greenhouse gas emissions per person.

Extreme drought and rainfall will affect food production in rural areas, forcing people to move to cities, exacerbating pressure on already vulnerable urban infrastructure; the Red Cross estimates that 96 percent of urban growth will occur in cities that are among the most fragile in the world. This, according to the analysis of the New York Times and ProPublica, will favor an increase in unemployment, crime and socio-economic inequalities, increasing social tension and political crises. Obviously cities will not be able to welcome migrants forever and estimates foresee a reversal of the original trend, as in the case of Addis Ababa—the World Bank predicts that many of the people who are now seeking refuge in the Ethiopian capital will have to leave the city again by the middle of the century.

Unlike internal migrations, international ones are and will continue to be strongly controlled by the policies of different countries. There are two solutions available: to let migrants pass through or to close borders. Unfortunately, the general trend of many countries seems to be the latter. To complicate matters, it is not yet possible to speak of "climate refugees," as international law does not recognize asylum for environmental reasons.

But perhaps the most important result of the model is the one that shows how political responses to both climate change and migration can lead to drastically different future scenarios, highlighting the responsibility of governments which, so far, have been absent and unable to find a solution.

Behind the apparently dry and cold numbers provided by the model, there are the lives of millions of people, painting a landscape of the incredible human suffering that will disproportionately impact, once again and unfortunately, the poorest.

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