

Social Work Interventions: A Socio-Ecological Analysis of Climate Change and Conflict Refugees in the Sahel

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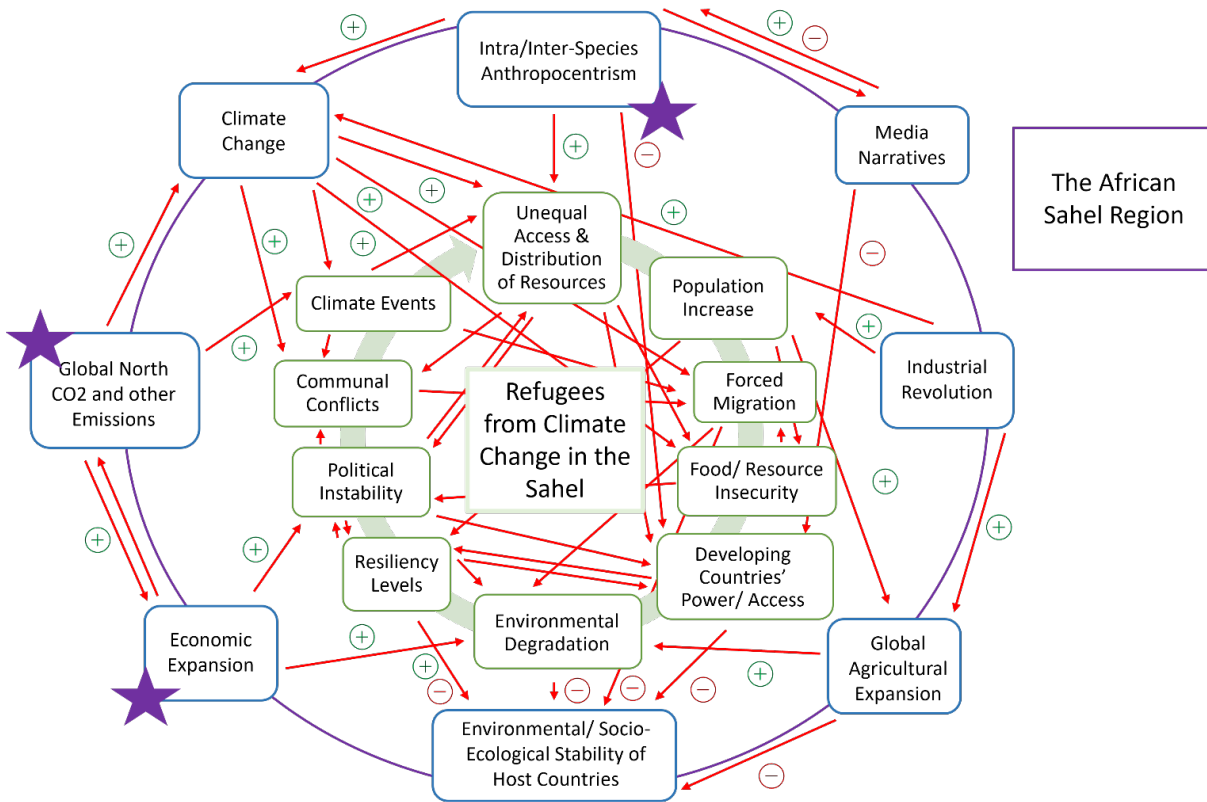
ABSTRACT

The UN Refugee Agency, the UNHCR, has stated that climate change will disproportionately impact the displaced as it becomes more unpredictable, intense, frequent, and dangerous (Gaynor, 2020). The UNHCR reported that in 2019, weather-related hazards resulted in almost 25 million displacements in 140 countries. This paper will examine the effects of climate change and ensuing conflict on refugees in the Sahel Region of Africa. This paper will first look at the effects from a social-ecological systems perspective, analyzing the interrelating contexts. This paper will then examine the harmful effects of climate change and ensuing conflict on humans, other species, and the environment. This paper will follow this examination with an analysis of which actors benefit from the systems that initiate these detrimental effects, and how they can be held accountable. The general media narratives of refugees will be examined, establishing barriers for humanitarian aid and public support to reach those in need. Then, this paper will examine three leverage points through which the profession of social work and other helping professions could intervene to address the problem, followed by the identification of one specifically poignant leverage point from the three – community organizing, providing a blueprint to effectively address the harmful effects climate change and conflict are having on refugees in the Sahel.

Introduction

Research shows that without immediate climate action and risk reduction, climate-related disasters could double the number of refugees requiring humanitarian assistance to over 200 million each year by 2050 (Gaynor, 2020). Resilience, or a measure of a system's ability to survive and persist within a variable or volatile environment, is often lowest in more fragile or conflict-affected contexts (Meadows, 2009; Gaynor, 2020). The threat of climate change will disproportionately affect the systems in developing countries with the least resilience, as it will increase food insecurity, create barriers to accessing resources, place pressure on education and health systems, cause conflict over resource depletion, and more (Mpandeli et al., 2020). With these pressures placed on these systems, conflict is increasing, in turn, creating forced migrants and refugees (Gaynor, 2020). Specifically, the UNHCR has reported that Africa's Sahel region is one of the clearest examples of how climate change can interact negatively with other system trends, resulting in refugees fleeing from conflict (Gaynor, 2020). The Sahel has experienced rising conflict in the past few decades, so much so that security experts have identified the Sahel as a "ground zero of the confluence between climate change and conflict," especially when looking at the effects of resource scarcity caused by climate change (Friedman, 2012). The Sahel provides a glimpse into the realities for citizens of developing nations disproportionately affected by climate change in the context of weather-related threats, ensuing conflict and violence, and the need to flee and seek refuge.

A Social-Ecological Systems Perspective



This diagram illustrates the complex and interrelated nature of the challenges facing refugees from climate change and conflict in the Sahel. The inner circle of factors represents the most immediate factors facing the refugees, with the outer circle representing the larger systems in which these factors are embedded. Arrows are present to show the directional relationships of causation and relation among the factors, while the “positive” and “negative” symbols are placed to symbolize if those relationships are positive and helpful, or if they are negative.

The creation of climate refugees in Africa’s Sahel region is embedded within larger systems. Overall, the industrial system created by the Global North for “economic expansion” has created excessive CO2 emissions, a main contributor to anthropogenic climate change (Wolf, 2015). This system, accompanied by intra-species anthropocentrism, global agricultural expansion, and more have led to disproportionate effects of climate change on developing countries in the Sahel, especially those with the most conflict, political instability, reliance on agriculture and the weather for subsistence, and unequal access to resources (Wolf, 2015).

These factors are creating a migration crisis due to climate-induced food and resource scarcity, conflict, weather events, and more, causing refugees to enter neighboring countries. This migration has negative effects on neighboring countries through further socio-ecological pressures and environmental degradation, especially if they have low resilience factors (Mpandeli et al., 2020).

Harmful Effects on Humans, Other Species, and the Natural Environment

Humans

It is estimated that majority of victims of climate change will be humans living in the developing countries within Africa and South-East Asia (Wolf, 2015). Often, developing nations will find it harder to deal with the effects of anthropogenic climate change, as they hold less resources and power, both needed to cope with the effects (Wolf, 2015). The Sahel, a region of 100 million people that relies heavily on rainfall to survive, is experiencing worsening drought and floods due to climate change (AllAfrica.com, 2013). This has driven pastoral-farmer conflicts, fueling the migration of people escaping the violence, in effect creating “climate refugees” (Tower, 2020). For example, thousands were forced to flee from a Sahel nation, Cameroon, in August 2021 due to climate change-fueled clashes between cattle herders and fishermen, due to changing agricultural techniques developed to mitigate the effects of the drought (Ngargoune, 2021). Conflicts caused by the effects of climate change such as the previous example are taking place throughout the Sahel region, creating dangerous situations in which people are being forced to flee. Conflicts in the region also often spill into neighboring countries, creating regional crises of conflict that have displaced more than 3.5 million across the region (Tower, 2020). Small and more marginalized ethnic groups in the region may experience more conflict related to environmental pressures, resource scarcity and distribution, and climate change, which is expected to alter the political stability of developing states, making environmental-related violence much more likely (Raleigh, 2010).

In addition, there is a large population increase occurring in the Sahel, with an expected almost doubling of its population over the next few decades. However, as the population has grown, the productivity of the land has dropped 30-40%, as reported by the World Bank (Gaynor, 2020). Population increase in the region is exacerbating resource deprivation and insecurity due to increased demand. Resource deprivation coupled with conflict and climate change are the main drivers of intra- and inter-migration in the region, and the devastating effects on humans forced to flee (Mpandeli, et al., 2020).

Other Species

Due to this increase in population, humans in this region have increased their ecological footprint. Biodiversity has suffered and become more “impoverished,” specifically woody vegetation, migratory birds, large birds, and mammals (Walther, 2016). Agricultural expansion due to population expansion has driven this loss, as have increased fire frequency, overharvesting, wetland conversions, and poisoning/ death caused by human disturbances (Walther, 2016). Agricultural expansion also contributes to the elimination of natural habitats for other animals and species, as more land is cleared for food production, and is also often accompanied by more use in toxic pesticides which are deleterious to native plants and animals. In addition to these considerations, the mass movement of humans in any capacity can result in degradation of the native flora and fauna of any environment, often displacing other native animals that may live in the habitats refugees are migrating through or landing in.

The Natural Environment

The effects that the movement of refugees can have on the natural environment generally receive less media or academic attention. However, the increase in refugee camps and settlements as climate change worsens are likely to have a higher environmental impact moving forward (Gaynor, 2020). Large-scale human migration is putting more pressure on urban areas in Africa as they work to accommodate climate refugees from the more resource-stressed rural areas (Mpandeli et al., 2020). In turn, the urban areas are exceeding their “ecological thresholds” to support their current built environment, resulting in socio-ecological challenges (Mpandeli et al., 2020). The future displacement of large

numbers of people due to climate change may have significant environmental impacts, as refugees disturb the natural environments of host countries through migration settling patterns. Significant issues associated with refugee movement include deforestation, soil erosion, and depletion and pollution of water resources (UNHCR, 2001). With the arrival of more refugees into environments unprepared to sustain them, competition for natural resources will increase and degrade the environment further (UNHCR, 2001).

Who Benefits and How They Can Be Held Accountable?

While those from developing or rural nations will be most affected by climate change, the main contributors to climate change are those who live in the wealthier and developed countries in the Global North (Wolf, 2015). For example, almost 60% of anthropogenic carbon dioxide emitted since the Industrial Revolution is from the wealthier countries through efforts to stimulate economic progress and world trade, a large portion of which have proven excessive in meeting basic energy requirements, while the poorest and least resilient nations barely contribute to the climate crisis (Wolf, 2015). On the other hand, in 2004, the “50 Least Developed Countries” emitted less than 1% of total emissions (Wolf, 2015). Those most affected by climate change, and therefore the people who will be largely displaced and left without resources, are the ones least responsible (Wolf, 2015). While the global elite prosper off their “economic development,” industrialization, fossil fuel burning, animal agriculture, and other systems, developing nations reap the detrimental harms from their actions. While industrial development and economic growth have taken precedence, there need to be policies in place to hold the Global North, the main drivers of climate change and therefore the plight of climate refugees, accountable. Policies that address greenhouse gas emissions could hold those producing the most accountable. In 2004, it was reported that the top 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change included 15 countries in Africa, which collectively emitted less than 0.7% of total carbon emissions (Wolf, 2015). Immediate sanctions on carbon and other harmful gas emissions would be a step in the direction of accountability and fulfilling the Global North’s promises of reduced emissions.

Climate Refugees Narratives in the Media

Climate-induced “refugees” are garnering attention in the media as conflicts continue to worsen, and refugee numbers continue to skyrocket (Bettini, 2012). However, the discourse has leaned more towards the “apocalyptic narratives” focusing on the massive and “unavoidable” flows of climate refugees, therefore instilling fear of refugees instead of support (Bettini, 2012). Early science and policy documents in the late 1900’s discussed climate refugees as a sort of “pathology” to be “prevented” (Methmann & Oels, 2015). Moving into the early 2000s, they began to follow the “savior” narrative, albeit without any political or legal movement to grant refugee rights to climate refugees (Methmann & Oels, 2015). In present-day, the rhetoric focuses on “resiliency,” putting the onus on those most vulnerable to prepare themselves (Methmann & Oels, 2015). This “alarmist” rhetoric paves the way for more xenophobic reactions, eliminating the space for progressive and democratic politics to aid climate refugees (Bettini, 2012). The portrayal of climate refugees as a “security threat” causes fear of climate refugees as threats, and may further militarize responses, instead of encouraging the humanitarian and efficient solutions needed that account for all social-ecological systems involved (Hartmann, 2010).

Leverage Points for Social Work Intervention

There are multiple leverage points through which social work practitioners and others could intervene to address the problem. Meadows (2009) identifies 12 leverage points, or “places within a system where a small change could lead to a large shift in behavior,” which interventions can aim to target. There are four types of system characteristics which correspond to the level of potential system change and are parameters, feedbacks, design, and intent (Abson et al., 2017).

Leverage Point 1 – Caps on Emissions

When thinking about intervening for change in a system, it may seem like addressing the highest leverage points, under the classification of “intent,” could be the most effective; however, sometimes intervening at points on the lower end of the scale is necessary to set the stage for larger, systemic change. Therefore, in selecting leverage points for intervention in this global-scale problem, it may be beneficial to start with lower end interventions that could set the stage for future paradigm shifts to ensure sustainable change and benefits for climate refugees from developing nations who are disproportionately impacted by climate change. One strategy to address this challenge at a lower leverage point could include placing rules or caps on global greenhouse gas emissions, resting at the “parameter” level. While rules that stem emissions would not necessarily create large scale global paradigm shifts, it could set strong standards and allow for the global community to begin to work together, with each state being held accountable towards reducing global climate change. This could then potentially reduce the impact on climate refugees, especially when considering the disproportionate impact emissions have on developing nations where many climate refugees are coming from.

While there have been efforts in the past to set similar rules, it seems as though they have not often employed systems that hold nations accountable to the promises they make. One example of this can be seen in the outcomes from the 2015 Paris Climate Summit and Accords. Mahapatra and Ratha identify multiple factors that made it difficult for the promises made by states at the Summit to truly be carried out (2016). They note that due to a lack of actionable commitments, disagreement on carbon levels and finance, lack of clarity, and the sidelining of the least developed and most vulnerable countries, the Summit did not result in much actionable change (Mahapatra & Ratha, 2016). The authors suggest that by implementing new systems of governance and infrastructures, in changing practices, institutions, policies, and cultural meanings, this accountability could be reached (Mahapatra & Ratha, 2016). Therefore, if an intervention at this level were to be effectively implemented to set the stage for future paradigm shifts and attitude changes it would be necessary for it to consider changing policies to ensure accountability, in turn ideally leading to changing practices within our institutions. One strategy to accomplish this could be using either incentives or punishments for countries that are in compliance or not with their promises and goals. Clayton et al. speak to this when discussing the psychology behind global climate change (2015), and state that public policies that reward people for energy-saving behavior are more acceptable by individuals and communities than policies that “punish” (Clayton et al., 2015). Therefore, if policies and parameters were to be put into place in this situation, it may be beneficial to err on the side of providing incentives, to garner more public support for the policies in a collective and community-based way (Clayton et al., 2015). For example, if global policies were in place that allowed for tax cuts or other public benefits for nations if they adhere to their emission reduction promises, perhaps countries would be more willing to follow through. Perhaps by further showing positive results from the implementation of this new policy or parameter, those in power might see the value in these types of changes. In addition, as Mahapatra and Ratha point out, developing countries are generally side lined and marginalized when it comes to policy creation and implementation about emissions (2016). However, by ensuring inclusion of representatives from developing nations, in ways that are more than symbolic, in discussions such as the Paris Climate Summit, their viewpoints could be considered. This may aid in ensuring that policies consider the disproportionate emissions’ impacts on developing nations.

Leverage Point 2 – “Degrowth Model”

Higher up on the leverage scale, nestled under the changing system “designs” level, sit interventions that include restructuring institutions (Meadows et al., 2009). Institution is a major barrier to addressing climate change, as our institutions are currently designed to continue the trend towards growth through increased emissions, competition, conflict, and human rights violations of marginalized populations in developing countries. Globalization has also led to a global system of capitalistic growth, favoring economic expansion over the rights of humans, other species, and the Earth (Powers et al., 2019). This system is especially detrimental towards marginalized populations including those forcibly displaced by climate events (Powers et al., 2019). Therefore, an intervention at this level could include

promoting a “limits to growth” institutional shift and finding points to intervene through which, by favoring ecological justice and human rights over economic growth, climate change could be stemmed, resulting in fewer climate refugees (Powers et al., 2019). Rockstrom et al. discuss this by postulating what a “safe operating space for humanity” would look like, as a potential solution to this growth mindset problem (2009). They conceptualize this using “planetary boundaries,” a tool to identify thresholds of growth which if crossed, unacceptable environmental change and human rights violations would both be reached (Rockstrom et al., 2009). By implementing these boundaries, limits that consider both the problems of anthropogenic climate change and related human rights violations could be placed on our growth-minded global institutions, aiding the plight of climate refugees at its cross-section.

Another potential way to shift this global institutional system defined by growth, specific to economics, may be to change society’s idea of what “economic growth” means to an institution. Currently, gross domestic product (GDP) is used to calculate a country’s growth and success; however, it fails to consider other factors of growth, instead, favoring economic success over human rights (Sturgeon, 2019). The way we measure a country’s success has the ability to drive political focus and public activity (Sturgeon, 2019). Therefore, if the system were shifted towards a “limits to growth” approach, measuring the overall wellbeing of humans, other species, and the Earth over economic success, perhaps human rights and our world’s health would not take a back seat to economic prosperity.

An alternative way to fight the current “growth mindset” could be through the “degrowth” model proposed by Powers et al. (2019). The authors identify that while growth ideologies in institutions result in growing social inequalities and increasing ecological injustices, social work and other disciplines could incorporate a “degrowth” model to transform institutions and shift the way we operate from a “development” design to a “sufficiency mindset and economy” (Powers et al., 2019). Without decoupling economic growth from the capitalistic and globalized resource consumption, growth will continue at the expense of equality and human rights while the Earth continues to suffer (Powers et al., 2019). If there is a shift towards a non-capitalistic degrowth mindset at an institutional level both in policies and structure, it could be possible to stem the effects of climate change while reducing human rights violations, such as those affecting climate refugees in developing nations.

Leverage Point 3 – Shifting From a “Power-Over Paradigm” Through Community Organizing

On an even larger scale, shifting the values and goals of human systems on Earth could allow for a shift from our current inter- and intra-species anthropocentric “power-over” paradigm to a way of life that would not disproportionately impact those in developing countries while promoting climate change and its effects (Advaya, 2019). This type of intervention would involve intervening at the system’s “intent” level of leverage points, changing the norms, values, and goals embodied within the system and underpinning paradigms out of which they arise (Abson et al., 2017). Community organizing could be a strategy to intervene at this leverage point, as it has been shown to cultivate socio-political development by elevating psychological empowerment and enhancing civic engagement (Speer et al., 2021). Community organizing aims to enhance the capacity of community leaders to act for the “common good” in collaboration with civil society and acknowledges that organizing citizens to come together for change can create momentum towards altering paradigms (Tattersall, 2015).

To shift our current “power-over” paradigm there would need to be a critical amount of people willing to organize through media, policy, advocacy and more, otherwise known as “critical mass” theory in social science (Crossley & Ibrahim, 2012). If there is enough momentum from a critical mass, those with the least power may be able to create large-scale social change, creating implications for developing nations where marginalized citizens are already facing climate-related human rights violations. An example of this can be seen in South Africa within the Transition Town Movement, which aims to address climate change, peak oil, and create resilient communities by facilitating a “cultural shift” and community mobilization through empowerment and engagement (Bay, 2016). This strengths-based resilience-building method draws on “people power” to create large scale cultural and social change and is just one example of how a “critical mass” can create social movements by beginning at the grassroots level,

trickling up into governments and systems, eventually instigating a paradigm shift towards a more collective and sustainable future (Bay, 2016).

Social Work and Community Organizing

The third leverage point addressed may be the intervention to which social work could bring the most to the table. While shifting the global anthropocentric “power-over” paradigm is a feat that will take decades if not generations, it also lies at the very core of our current population’s passivity on climate change and unwillingness to change their ways of life to help both our planet, and our fellow citizens on Earth, making intervening at this level of utmost importance. Social work has often aimed to address both environment- and refugee-related issues through formal nonprofit sector work; however, this has the potential to contribute to the “nonprofit industrial complex,” a system that promotes competition for funding between nonprofits and detracts from the true goals and missions aiming to address the problems (Incite!, 2007). This complex often traps social workers who wish to be change agents as they become dependent on large foundations and “philanthropist” grant makers from the “ruling class” that impose their own agendas (Incite!, 2007). It can also promote a social movement culture that is narrow, competitive, and non-collaborative, preventing activists from engaging in collaborative dialogue and community-based collective work, necessary for large scale social change (Incite!, 2007). By shifting social work’s approach to social change towards enabling community collective action through community organizing, social workers may find a unique niche and leverage point for intervention to truly make change and help shift the paradigm.

Community Organizing Social Work Solutions – Plan to Address the Problem

Social work has some very important potential points of intervention through community organizing for protecting humans, other species, and Earth from climate change and its impacts on marginalized populations. Yet, social work has historically lacked an emphasis on community organizing, favoring either micro-level solutions or macro-level policy work, which while both important, create barriers to social development, especially in post-disaster situations which continue to affect climate refugees (Pyles, 2007). Community organizing at a mezzo level offers the opportunity for social workers to activate “people power,” as social problems require complex and sustained intervention at all levels, including in the community (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014). One way to organize this “people power” could be within our social work education systems, as there is an increased demand and need for trained organizers and community organizing education (Fisher & Corciullo, 2011). Currently, there is a small percentage of social work students enrolled in macro methods-focused programs who are being prepared to actively participate and provide leadership at grassroots, policy, and coalition levels (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014).

A point of intervention is for more social workers to be educated to become community “change agents,” primed to facilitate community organization for social change (Fisher & Corciullo, 2011). However, while working at the community organizing level it will be necessary for social workers to avoid “colonizing” social work that enforces the privileged “white” perspective on marginalized communities both at home and abroad, a legacy from social work’s beginnings (Gray et al., 2008). Social work has historically been slow to accept non-Western world views, local knowledge, and traditional forms of helping, resulting in difficulty delivering culturally appropriate services to non-Western cultures (Gray et al., 2008). This has implications for this leverage point, as community organizing may involve social workers traveling to other communities and cultures. It will be important to continuously ensure that instead of imposing Western social work values on global communities, social work raises local and Indigenous voices instead to be the leaders and organizers of their communities (Gray et al., 2008). In doing this work both here and abroad, social workers can incorporate “authentization” social work, which encourages social workers to move from adapting Western practice to generating knowledge and practice models from the ground up; drawing on beliefs, values, and norms of local and Indigenous people (Gray et al., 2008).

Summary

The threat of climate change is poised to disproportionately affect marginalized citizens in developing nations, especially those in the Sahel region in Africa (Mpandeli et al., 2020). Pressures from climate change are increasing conflict in the region, forcing residents to flee as forced migrants and refugees (Gaynor, 2020). These pressures are not only affecting humans, but also the natural environment and other species through resource deprivation, food scarcity, degraded environments and more. Three leverage points are well-poised for social work intervention, with one showing further promise – community organizing, potentially allowing for a social work solution by shifting norms and values away from the engrained anthropocentric paradigm that is allowing humans to ignore climate change and its effects (Abson et al., 2017). Encouraging and developing effective community organizing would provide a platform for mass movement and awareness, an ideal tipping point for a future paradigm shift. I want to be part of solving this issue as it is the most important issue of our time that social workers or any other human, animal, or our planet will face. Social work lies at a unique intersection of disciplines, positioning it for impact on this problem at multiple change levels. Some strengths within social work that I hope to activate in addressing this issue would be community organizing, policy advocacy, interdisciplinary collaboration, activism, and movement-building. In doing so, I would also hope to use skills of cultural humility and identity awareness as this work is necessary on a global scale, across cultures and nations, to unite us as one Earth, one Community, one Planet.

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