

Alice Baillat

A few questions about yourself:

What is your academic training ?

I have a bachelor's degree in Political Sciences (Paris 1 University) and a master's degree in research specialized in International Relations (Paris 1 University).

What are your current activities ?

I currently am in my second year of doctorate in International Relations in Sciences Po Paris and I also am an invited researcher at the Center of Sustainable Development, being part of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) in Dhaka (Bangladesh).

How long have you been living in Bangladesh for ?

I don't live permanently in Bangladesh. I mainly live in Paris and when I go to Bangladesh I stay there for a few months as part of my research activity. I have spent a month there in September, 2011, I am currently there for four months, and I will probably go back once or twice before the end of my thesis.

Why did you choose this country ?

For several reasons:

- As part of my thesis, Bangladesh seemed to be the most significant example when you want to study environmental migrations. Considered as one of the most vulnerable countries when it comes to climate changes – along with the insular States – Bangladesh has to cope with several problems of environmental and climatic damages, what allows us to observe and study different impacts and different forms of migrations partly due to the environment and climate change.
- Moreover, at least in France, it is a rarely studied country and therefore still unrecognized.
- Finally, I had the possibility to be welcome in a young and dynamic research lab – CSD the way of working of which I appreciate, most of all when it comes to its investigations methods and its approach of the research in social sciences.

Are you personally in contact with environmental migrants ?

No and it is hard nowadays to really identify an “environmental migrant”. On this precise topic, you can refer to the debates over the definition of what is an “environmental migrant/refugee” and over the causal link between environment, climate change and migration. Most of the research workers now agree on the fact that the environment is seldom the unique factor of migration (except in the case of a brutal natural catastrophe) since have to be also taken into account the economic, political, social and cultural factors when an individual decides to migrate. Therefore, this blurs the distinction between “economical migrant” and “environmental migrant”. However, it is clear that in Bangladesh we can already observe flows of migrants who leave the regions which are the most vulnerable to climate change to go to the big cities

(notably Dhaka, the capital), inflating the shantytowns of a city already counting more than 12 million people.

Regarding Bangladesh, the number of “environmental migrants” in 2050 is estimated around 26 million people, both internally and towards the rest of the world. There is no reliable data for the current number of “environmental migrants” and it is important also to beware of the forecast data for “environmental migrants” as they often are exaggerated and based on not very rigorous methods.

The situation in Bangladesh and in India

Does the Bangladeshi government have an official program proposing to the environmental migrants an alternative to the migration towards India?

No, there is no official program related to this topic. It is actually rather a sensitive topic for the government who tries to deny the existence of this phenomena most of the time. If you have a look at the latest statistics published by the government concerning the Bangladeshis’ international migration and you’ll see that the number of annual Bangladeshis moving to India is that of zero migrant! This being interesting and most of all totally unrealistic!

Is the relationship between India and Bangladesh that tensed concerning this topic ?

There isn’t really a discussion over this issue between the two countries. If, as I already told you, it is a topic denied by the Bangladeshi government, it is, on the contrary, extremely present in the Indian political discourse. The migration of Bangladeshis to India, not necessarily related to environmental and climatic factors, are presented like a threat to the Indian national security, by the media and some nationalistic political parties essentially.

Are there means of guaranteeing security to the migrants? Do international institutions take part in the refugees’ security ?

It is here a very broad question that spurs a lot of scientific debates these days, most of all among legal experts. To be brief, we consider that there currently is an important juridical gap in order to protect these environmental migrants, who don’t have the right for any specific international, regional nor national legislation.

For instance, the 1951 Geneva Convention, the aim of which is to govern the rights of the refugees in the world, does not cover them. By being in majority internal displaced, migrants could eventually benefit from the rights granted to internal displaced (1967 Protocol¹) but this wouldn’t be a specific protection answering them for their situation of particular vulnerability.

Moreover, one of the big problems that is raised nowadays is the diversity in the cases of environmental migrations, according to what people are fleeing (flooding, dryness, rise of the sea level, erosion, natural catastrophe, etc.). By facing many different situations, a

¹ Investigator’s note : <http://untreaty.un.org/cod/avl/ha/prsr/prsr.html>

lot of research workers agree to say that it is difficult to imagine a new international convention specific to these migrants, since they are not a homogeneous category.

Therefore, research workers propose today to rather study the possibilities already existing in the current legislations, whether they are international or regional, instead of thinking about a new convention, which would take a long time for being accepted by all the States (in particular the welcoming ones) as they are not very prone to reckon their responsibilities, most of all in a context of closed frontiers in Europe and in the USA.

For these research workers, the thing would be to establish “bridges” on an international level, between the environmental right, the humanitarian right, the Human rights, the right governing the management of natural catastrophes etc. All these sectors are concerned, at different levels, by the protection of the environmental migrants and already make use of a series of established regulations that, being put in common, constitute an interesting path in order to give the migrants an adapted juridical protection.

Here again, you can consult different references; among them are the works of Jane McAdam, Benoît Mayer and Christel Cournil on the international governance of environmental migrations.

India decided to build a wall all along its frontier with Bangladesh: what are the effects on migration and security ?

First of all, it is not a wall but rather an alternation of frontier routes and lines of barbed wire, but that still haven't been finished since the beginning of their creation in 2007.

From what I know, it is an extremely porous barrier and it is crossed in both ways every day. That is why I'm not really sure it has a real impact on migration. However, you can consult another reference on the issue of the frontier between India and Bangladesh, which I have also attached here.

Other questions

In a presentation that you did in 2011, you talk about the media as an actor who stimulates and nourishes the debate on environmental migrations. Do you have concrete examples? Do you think this influence is positive or negative?

For this question, I suggest you take a look at the dissertation². I wrote during the second year of my master's. It is available online on the TERRA network website. You will find information about the role of the media on the integration of an issue to the political agenda, the issue being here environmental migrations.

Overall, the media present the advantage of making public environmental migrations end therefore of obliging the public opinion and politicians to get involved. The media bring consciousness to this issue. However, by often taking the most alarmist remarks and data, the media poke even some ideals concerning security and do not always present an objective vision of the problem.

² Investigator's note : <http://www.reseau-terra.eu/article1078.html>

What is your position in the debate between skeptics and alarmists³?

It depends on what you are trying to show. If you want to raise a fast consciousness of the problem and convince the more people of the state of emergency of the problem, the alarmist approach seems to be the more adapted. However, if you are instead trying to understand the complexity of the question, to have a scientific understanding of the different causes of migration, it is more important to draw the attention on the skeptical position. But, to be a “skeptic” doesn’t mean that you don’t believe in the reality of the problem; it means that you don’t think that the environment can be a sufficient factor by itself to understand the decision of an individual to migrate.

The alarmist position, if it puts a stretch on the state of emergency of the problem, doesn’t allow us to respond to the specific needs of the environmental migrants either, since it denies a whole bunch of other factors at the origin of a migration.

The definition of “migrant” or “refugee” is a problem. According to you, what terminology seems to be the most adequate?

Concerning the terms “refugee” or “migrant”, I prefer to use the terms “migrant” or “displaced”. The term “displaced” shows very well that it is a forced migration. The term “refugee” is defined by the 1951 Geneva Convention which disposes of very strict criteria to attribute the status of “refugee” and which don’t let us include environmental migrants in this juridical definition.

However, several criticisms are being raised against the obsolete character of this Convention, which doesn’t allow us to respond to the current needs of the majority of the migrants in the world. In this optic, it is possible to consider a redefinition of the status of refugee liable to include environmental migrants, but right now, such a proposition seems very little applicable because of the reticence of the various States.

In general, researchers and scholars use the terms “migrant” or “displaced”. They use the term “refugee” when they want to provoke politics or medias.

Moreover, it is very difficult to know what adjective we have to use: “ecological”, “environmental” or “climatic”. What is the difference ?

I don’t use the term “ecological” because it is too vague. “Environmental” is more including than “climatic”. For example, you can say “environmental displaced” when someone has been displaced because of an industrial disaster, an earthquake or a volcanic eruption. All these phenomena are not linked with climate change. The term “climatic” only refers to people who have been displaced because of climate change. About the use of “environmental” or “climatic”, it depends if you want to adopt an including approach or a more restrictive approach of displacements.

What needs to be done in order to improve the environmental migrants’ condition?

This is a wide question at the heart of most of the current works on the question. Different options are proposed and it is then difficult to answer simply to this question.

³ Investigator’s note : François Gemenne’s video on skeptics and alarmists

However, I think that it is important first to agree on a definition of “environmental migrants” and to think about the already existing possibilities in the current juridical frames in order to provide an adequate protection.

For example, researchers in law suggest to think about bilateral or regional conventions which can answer to the specific needs of a population. To me, I think that a cluster approach⁴ would can offer interesting axis to answer to the need of protection without having an international convention.

⁴ Investigator’s note :

<http://onerresponse.info/COORDINATION/CLUSTERAPPROACH/Pages/Cluster%20Approach.aspx>