

GLOBALIZATION AND THE REFUGEE LABEL

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the shifts in labeling refugees in the era of globalization. Previously, the term “*refugee*” was primarily reserved for those fleeing from war or violence. However, globalization not only facilitates movement but also increases factors driving people from their homelands, including climate change, natural disasters, and economic instability. Consequently, governments have had to introduce new labels such as “*economic refugees*” or “*environmental refugees*”. This not only complicates the asylum-seeking process for individuals but also oversimplifies the complex realities they face. The paper argues that these new labels not only reflect the increasingly complex nature of global migration flows but also demonstrate political calculations. Finally, the paper focuses on the need for Vietnam to address refugee issues within its legal framework. In a rapidly changing global environment, Vietnam must prioritize developing a comprehensive legal framework for refugee acceptance. This will ensure that Vietnam can fulfill its international obligations and uphold its commitment to human rights.

Keywords: Globalization, Refugee Labels, Forced migration, Climate refugees, Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Far from a recent phenomenon, the movement of people across the globe is one of the oldest forms of globalization. In the context of globalization, holy wars, ethnic conflicts, threats of genocide, and terrorist activities combine to create the impetus for forced migrations over greater distances than ever before.

When it comes to the political dimension of globalization, Steger (2003) argued that even though countries are still important, they're getting more involved in international stuff that actually weakens their power and independence. But Andrijasevic and Walters (2010) see it differently. They think that instead of globalization making countries weaker and borders disappear, we've actually seen countries strengthen their borders and control, especially in Europe. This shows that globalization doesn't automatically mean a world without borders.

Europe is the continent where this trend is most apparent. According to Zetter (2007), there's a contradiction in Europe's desires: they want an open market within closed borders. Economic liberalization promotes the free movement of goods and services, which could potentially include

labor. However, European countries are hesitant to accept "*new migrants*", especially economic migrants and refugees. This clashes with the idea of an open market and creates challenges in managing migration as European governments intend.

Because of this reluctance to open borders, refugee status has become the only viable pathway for mass migration. Ironically, the rise in the number and diversity of refugees happened at the same time as the boom in global economic integration in the 1990s. As refugees moved away from the Global South and closer to Europe, the international refugee system shifted its focus towards developed countries. As a result, the label "*refugee*" or "*asylum seeker*" has become a blanket term for any migrant, regardless of their actual situation.

The primary methodology of this paper involves the collection and analysis of scholarly articles and news sources related to globalization and the labeling of refugees. This aims to identify the evolution of the "*refugee*" label and the responses to this shifting label within the context of contemporary globalization.

2. THE FORMATION OF THE REFUGEE LABEL

While reasons like safety, economic need, and improving living standards are still the main drivers of migration, there's now a growing mix of different factors pushing people to move across the globe. This makes it crucial for governments to have effective tools to manage these complex flows, and one such tool is labeling migrants.

The term "*refugee*" emerged in the aftermath of World War I, when the League of Nations established the first legal framework to protect Armenian and Russian refugees (Jaeger, 2001). These efforts continued after World War II, leading to the creation of the International Refugee Organization (1946) and the landmark United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). This Convention, considered the cornerstone of international refugee law, defines a refugee as someone forced to flee their home due to persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion. The emphasis is on forced displacement stemming from a well-founded fear of persecution.

Regarding benefits for (legal) refugees, upon arrival, they are often eligible for various government benefits (for a limited time), including healthcare, food, financial assistance, resettlement support, and vocational training to help them adapt to their new lives. According to Articles 13 and 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to freedom of movement and the right to seek asylum; refugees are entitled to protection under international

law and cannot be forced to return to a dangerous situation (the principle of non-refoulement). This right is also the obligation of countries receiving refugees, so it is not simply (or not only) an act of kindness or hospitality but a legally grounded obligation.

As previously noted, terminology in international law serves as a powerful tool, shaping policies and determining who is granted protection and who isn't. In International Humanitarian Law, "*refugee*" is a legal status with specific rights, not a fixed identity. Yet, the term often carries connotations beyond its legal definition, shaping public perception and even self-identity. This labeling of migrants is crucial as it influences how they are viewed by others and themselves.

Because of these benefits, the "*refugee*" label is often associated with the stigma of being a burden on host societies. Refugees are seen as dependent on aid and taking resources from host citizens, rather than as individuals actively participating in their own lives. For example, those displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 were labeled "*refugees*" despite not leaving their country and having the means to support themselves in their new locations (they were later referred to as Internally Displaced People). This misuse of the "*refugee*" label inadvertently overlooks the reasons why people become refugees (fleeing violence, persecution, etc.) and their resilience.

Additionally, to prolong or avoid the "*refugee*" label, another status for migrants is "*asylum seeker*". These individuals are seen as fearing persecution and must prove to receiving authorities that they need protection. This proof isn't necessarily physical, like scars or documents, but relies heavily on personal testimony. This method of proof is subjective and lacks precise standards. As a result, many de facto refugees (those who are refugees in reality but not officially recognized) exist globally, ignored in their pleas for better positions they may be qualified for, due to political reasons and other factors that prevent them from receiving refugee status (Nawyn, 2010). Conversely, governments can exploit the opportunity of undefined migration to obtain cheap labor without clear policies.

3. MORE LABELS IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

The globalized context of migration has fueled the creation of new labels for forced migrants. Drivers of movement, such as resource scarcity, unemployment, and overpopulation, are putting communities under strain, and it would be a mistake to single out one of the many factors and pair it with the label "*refugee*" (e.g., "*economic refugee*", "*climate refugee*", "*political refugee*") to define an individual. A case in point is Syrian refugees. They might be known as refugees from the Arab Spring (2011). However, drought was also a factor forcing Syrians to leave their homes.

Thus, the complex situation caused by the conflict in Syria makes it difficult to say whether violence or climate change was the primary cause of displacement.¹

Politically, Zetter (2007) identifies two defining features of refugee labeling in this new era. First, the proliferation of new labels serves to distinguish and disassociate asylum seekers from the fundamental right of international protection. Second, these new labels originate from the Global North, rather than from humanitarian organizations in the Global South as was previously the case. These new labels are often negative: "*illegal asylum seeker*", "*bogus asylum seeker*," and so forth. They are designed to portray refugees as burdens, threats, or unwelcome outsiders.

In another instance, the term "*climate refugee*" is used to describe people who are forced to relocate due to environmental changes. With full meaning, Biermann and Boas (2010) define this forced migrant as:

"Individuals who have to leave their homes, either immediately or shortly, because of sudden or gradual changes in their natural environment. These changes are linked to at least one of the three main impacts of climate change: rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity."

However, experiencing environmental disruptions doesn't fit the 1951 Convention's definition of "*persecution*". Without legal standing, the term "*climate refugee*" doesn't offer any real benefits to those it describes.

The label "*climate refugee*" is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be used to raise awareness about the impact of climate change on human displacement. On the other hand, it can be weaponized by those with xenophobic or anti-immigration agendas. They may exploit the label to amplify the perceived threat of "*climate refugees*", using it to justify harsher border controls and anti-immigration policies. This fosters an "us" versus "them" mentality, painting climate refugees as outsiders and potential threats to national security or cultural values. It can also distract from the root causes of climate change, such as unsustainable development and global inequalities, shifting the blame onto vulnerable populations.

4. VIETNAM

Vietnam has yet to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention, with the Constitution (Article 49) being the sole legal framework addressing refugee matters. Despite this, Vietnam is committed to upholding human rights and tackling migration challenges by adhering to international agreements

¹ Read more in the article: *A major contributor to the Syrian conflict? Climate change*. PBS NewsHour. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/a-major-contributor-to-the-syrian-conflict-climate-change>.

and national policies. Notably, Vietnam adopted the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) on December 10, 2018, marking a significant step in its engagement with global migration issues.

This, however, is not enough. With the world rapidly changing, Vietnam needs to pay closer attention to the evolving migration landscape. Establishing a robust legal framework for refugee reception would allow Vietnam to meet its international obligations while effectively addressing new challenges and opportunities. In the near future, Vietnam may have to grapple with issues such as women migrating for marriage through trafficking and deception; social unrest and instability in neighboring countries or countries with Vietnamese diasporas; and climate change impacts in the region and within its own borders (particularly the Mekong Delta).

As such, Vietnam is witnessing a significant increase in the scale and diversity of international migration, with changing patterns and types. Meanwhile, Vietnamese law still has many "gaps" that need to be filled to create a legal basis for protecting rights and controlling cross-border migration, as well as enhancing cooperation between governments and between Vietnam and international institutions.

By learning from the experiences of other countries and prioritizing both national interests and humanitarian values, Vietnam can develop policies that protect refugee rights and promote social integration.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The concept of "*refugee*" has evolved significantly in the age of globalization, reflecting the increasingly complex and multifaceted nature of forced displacement. While the term was initially reserved for those fleeing war or violence, it has expanded to encompass a broader range of individuals displaced by factors such as climate change, natural disasters, and economic instability. This diversification of refugee labels carries both practical and political implications.

In practice, the proliferation of labels can complicate the asylum-seeking process for individuals. They may find it difficult to identify with a specific category and navigate the complex eligibility criteria associated with each label. Furthermore, the use of specific labels can influence the level of support and protection refugees receive. Different labels carry different connotations and may evoke varying levels of empathy from the host community.

Politically, the emergence of new refugee labels can be seen as a strategy employed by governments to manage and control migration flows. By assigning specific labels to different

refugee groups, governments can justify differential treatment and prioritize certain types of displacement over others. This can lead to the marginalization of certain refugee groups and perpetuate stereotypes that hinder efforts to promote social integration and address the root causes of forced migration. In short, while labeling was once used to allocate resources, it has now become a tool to restrict access to refugee status, and the political discourse has shifted from refugee rights to national identity and immigration concerns.

Finally, let's turn our attention to Vietnam. Vietnam has been actively participating in international human rights standards and migration frameworks, reflecting a growing awareness of the importance of protecting the rights of refugees and migrants while effectively managing migration flows. Vietnam should continue to strengthen its legal and policy frameworks and engage in international cooperation to address potential migration challenges in the region proactively. In doing so, it's crucial to be mindful of how we label individuals affected by migration. Vietnam needs to carefully consider the political context and how it shapes our understanding of migration, delving into why people migrate and how they identify themselves.

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