

Harry Ridgewell: Currently, what international legal rights does a climate refugee have?

Steve Trent: If you look at the current legal regime, climate refugees have no status, no meaningful status at all. The key problem here is that the definition has not even been agreed anywhere in an international forum, and I think that is the first step, the need to identify what a climate refugee is, and then have the discussion about what legal rights and what status they should have.

Harry Ridgewell: Do you it's likely that climate refugees will be given international legal rights any time soon?

Steve Trent: I think it's one of the great challenges. I think it's extremely difficult, both at a national level, regional level, and a global level, for all the obvious reasons. I think the narrative around refugees generally, not just climate refugees, is one that feeds into fear and fuels a very narrow vision of what's going on. So I think the challenge is extremely difficult, and I think it's unlikely that it's going to happen in the very near future, but within that context, our view is that the European Union in particular has a key leadership role to play, and one that doesn't just speak to moral imperatives or an idea of environmental justice or broader social justice, but one that quite simply speaks to enlightened self-interest.

Steve Trent: If you look at what happened in recent years with relatively small numbers of migrants trying to find their way into the European Union because of the Syrian conflicts, conflicts across North Africa, because of economic issues and such, you can see the disruption and dislocation it caused across Europe. It almost brought down the most powerful politician on the continent in Angela Merkel. Part of the reason for that disruption was because the response to those migrants, those refugees, was fractured, incoherent, and ad hoc. There was no unified response.

Steve Trent: Our message is, you need to identify a way in which you can deal with this situation collectively in a uniform way. You can't have one country operating in one way and another country operating in an entirely different form, if you want to maintain a unified response and a fair and equitable response that keeps the European Union together. So obviously, we talk about the moral imperative and environmental justice, but purely on that pragmatic view of enlightened self-interest, they need to step up and look at this, urgently.

Harry Ridgewell: One of your reports says that global warming will force up to 150 million climate refugees to move to other countries in the next 40 years. How should they be distributed, and who should take them?

Steve Trent: Well, that's the key question. I could give you a politician's answer and say that is the job of the politicians, the people that we pay to craft our laws, to define answers that are meaningful, fair, equitable, and that are workable. We need to engage in this debate in the real world and understand the different pressures and strains that come from this. But the one thing that you can be sure of is that

as people are forced to migrate, particularly in the areas that are very vulnerable, Southeast Asia, and in the European context, in sub-Saharan Africa, it is very unlikely that they are going to head south. They are going to head towards the money and the security, and that means heading north and towards Europe.

Steve Trent: Now, we can try and put up fences. We can try and put up barriers. I think it is very unlikely to work, and if we do that as climate refugees are forced to move, you will see a humanitarian crisis of biblical proportions. So we need to address this. There needs to be an equitable distribution that looks at factors ranging from economic ability to deal with them to cultural factors. We need to be sensitive to this. A large influx of people coming with maybe totally different perspectives, different religions, different ways of living, into areas that are settled is very likely to create conflict, so we have to try and find ways in which we can accommodate these forms of mass migration without simply building discontent and the potential for violence.

Steve Trent: It's not simple. We're not pretending. And central to this, to EJF's message, is we at this point in time are deliberately not coming to this with hard, fast, and fixed so-called solutions. What we are saying is that we need to have an intelligent, deep, and engaged debate. It's not good enough to simply say here's a one-size-fits-all stop for this. That's not going to work. There are no simple solutions, there are no easy ways out, but we need, if we're going to find the solutions in the longer term, to start the debate on a serious level now. And my view quite clearly is that that debate hasn't even begun.

Harry Ridgewell: Are you worried about the rise of populist and anti-EU movements, considering it's the European Union that will need to agree on how to share these climate refugees in the future?

Steve Trent: Yes, I am, on a personal level. And I think history speaks loudly on this. I think the European Union is, for all its faults ... and it does have them, and it does need to reform, there's no doubt about that ... but for all those problems, it has been a remarkable success, probably one of the greatest successes of the latter part of the 20th century and moving into the 21st. We've seen peace in Europe for an unprecedented period of time. We've seen growth and prosperity, and we've seen a social cohesion and a development in societies across the European Union that has been unparalleled. It is a success. People are too willing to forget that too quickly.

Steve Trent: So the rise of the populist movements, it's very easy ... you know, they often giving easy, simple messages that appeal to, in my perspective, fairly narrow niche interests. What we need to do is look at the EU as it stands now, understand where there are problems such as democratic deficit, where people feel divorced and disconnected from it, and ensure engages. We need the European Union as we work through the 21st century. There's something I could say here that's very simple. It's a self-evident truth. Climate change doesn't respect any boundaries, national or otherwise, and it's simply impossible for

individual nations and communities to address the multiple manifold problems that climate change will bring. Unless we work together, the fact is, we will not succeed.

Steve Trent: And on that basis alone, I think the EU has much added value, much to bring, if you are willing to accept that climate change is indeed an existential threat. And as people like the former US National Security Advisor, Richard Clarke, has said in the context of the United States, it's the single greatest threat to the entire US. And that is our view. So yes, worried about the rise of simple rabble-rousing, if you like, on occasion, populist movements, and keen to see the EU succeed.

Harry Ridgewell: Are you frustrated by the lack of agreed international targets to combat global warming, and Trump for pulling out of the Paris climate deal?

Steve Trent: I think we must be careful in this context. It is very easy to call for world peace. It's very easy to make grand gestures and statements, and I think you can always try to pull this back into the real world. My view is that Paris was a success. The agreement for 1.5 degrees, trying to limit increase to that, is very, very important, and I think many governments are committed to it, as are many others in global community. But we need to do more. That's clear. And the simple thing here, simple calculation to make, is the return on investment. The more we do now, the more we will reap the reward in the future, and the converse being exactly true. If we fail to achieve the targets that have been set or overachieve them, then the negative impacts, economically, socially, politically, will manifest in the future. We will pay for it. We're doing this on a credit card, if you like.

Steve Trent: With regard to Trump, I think this is a catastrophic short-sightedness. I think it is irresponsible, I think it is uninformed, and I think it is playing to the short term of a politician's perspective. I think it's hard to see many other examples of a failure of leadership at such scale and importance as Trump on climate. People may or may not want to agree with that, but the simple reality is, the scientific consensus is clear. There is no doubt. Those who are questioning climate change are calling the earth flat and such. The outcomes and implications are equally pretty clear, even if you take the most conservative view of them, and so to fail to act on this has simply been a complete abdication of responsibility in my view.

Harry Ridgewell: India's building a fence on the Bangladesh-Indian border, which as it's nearly completed, if climate change forces many Bangladeshis to migrate, do you think there'll be violence on the border, and how likely do you think India is to accept climate refugees?

Steve Trent: Well, it's very difficult, and again, all of these things, you start to gaze into a crystal ball. You start to make projections that are not possible on the basis of current science or current understanding. All I can say is beware the unexpected. But if you look at the whole area there, the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta in Bangladesh and India is home to more than 100 million people. Local sea level rise as much as 25 millimetres or now one inch per year have already been

recorded in parts of the Delta. It is absolutely clear that people will be forced to move in Bangladesh, and they will have very few places to go. Already some estimates suggest that about 90% of the current migration internally within the country is going to one city alone, Dhaka, a city that's already bursting at its seams and that is itself extremely vulnerable to sea level rise.

Steve Trent: So people are going to be forced to move. By 2050, you're looking at Bangladesh losing somewhere in the region of 11% of its land mass. So as they try and cross into India, the potential for conflict is clear, just as the potential for conflict in Europe with migrants coming from North Africa was clear. Will India accept them? It's hard to know. It will depend, obviously, on who is in power at that moment and what stresses and strains the Indian government is under. We would hope that they would take a humanitarian perspective, but the question you posed is the kernel of the problem. What do you do for people when they are forced to move in this way? You can't just put them in camps. You can't locate them elsewhere. It's an extremely costly, difficult, knotty problem to deal with, and that is why we need to start dealing with it now.

Harry Ridgewell: How responsible do you think climate change is for the effects from the Syrian War?

Steve Trent: I think only a fool or a fraud would say that climate change was responsible for the Syrian War. What I would say is that the impacts of climate change in a prolonged drought, its impact on food production and food prices, and subsequent impact on migrations of people there magnified existing stresses, multiplied them, and contributed to conflict, both the potential for conflict and the reality of conflict. It was a factor in the Syrian War, in the development of that conflict. It's important to remember here that something in the region of 1 million people were already on the move before a single bullet was fired in Syria.

Steve Trent: Now, with those kind of migrations, those kind of stresses and movements, it's not particularly surprising that conflicts localised or as, in this case, as it developed into a nationwide civil war, was going to arise. And I think what we can do from this is, rather than argue the particulars of what percent of the conflict was caused by climate change, how big was its impact, we can take a lesson from it and say it did contribute. And it offers a signpost to the future. Syria will not be unique, and that is our worry. Large parts of that region are going to be increasingly stressed by climate change, and they're going to see similar migrations and with it, similar economic, social, and ecological stresses. So if we learn from this, and if we understand about the potential, then perhaps we can avert some of the worst outcomes that are possible.

Harry Ridgewell: How likely do you think Australia is to accept South Pacific climate refugees, and how much responsibility do you think it bears?

Steve Trent: Again, it's easy to make grand statements on this. I think it's probable that they will accept some members of South Pacific communities. How many, I just don't know. And again, it depends upon the particular complexion of the government

at any one time and the sentiment nationally, how they are sold the story and how they respond to it. So I can't tell how many or give any meaningful thought there. Should they do it? Well, you know, if you look at this through a lens of human rights or environmental justice, climate justice, speaking in broad brushstrokes, the top 10% rich have produced about 50% of global carbon. The bottom 50%, in terms of income in our planet, have produced about 10% of global carbon. Those who are affected first and worst, like Pacific Islanders, tend to be among those who have contributed least to climate change.

Steve Trent: So is there an issue of justice here? Yes, there is. In the Australian context, if you look at per capita emissions, extremely high on anybody's scale. They have contributed their fair share to global warming. Should they then be participant in dealing with the consequences in a moral and just way? Then yes, our view is, quite simply, they should.

Harry Ridgewell: You say a new multilateral legal instrument is required to address the needs of climate refugees. What kind of agreement would you like to see, and what rights should climate refugees have?

Steve Trent: It's a great question, and as I said, we're deliberately not coming at this with very clear specifics at this time, because we want legislators, we want parliamentarians, we want the wider community to discuss and come at it with an intelligent view. But what I can say is that we need a legally binding instrument. Voluntary instruments, I am fairly sure, will not work. It needs to be broadly accepted. It needs to be something similar to a framework convention that allows flexibility and locally specific legal tools, whilst giving a broad legal definition on a global perspective. We need to do it quickly.

Steve Trent: Our view is, let's look to Europe, wealthy, able, has the capacity to deal with some of these issues, perhaps, better than most other places on the planet, and see if we can have leadership there to develop a framework agreement, some kind of example, that can deal with these difficult problems about what do you do for these people and with these people as they're forced to move? What are our rights and obligations and responsibilities, and what are theirs?

Steve Trent: We've actually commissioned legal opinions from a number of different sources as draught and outline, which we will be publishing in the not-too-distant future, to give some idea of what these things could look like, both within the context of the existing international legal framework and mechanisms and in terms of something that's entirely new, possibly. So it has to be binding, has to confer rights and responsibilities, and in our perspective, ideally in the longer term has to be global. So you've got to create something that nations will be willing to sign up to and work through this on time. Again, it's not a simple A to B journey. It is an evolution. Of that I'm sure. Politics is never easy, diplomacy's never easy, so we will have to spend many years doing this, but hopefully, if we start that journey now, then before the situation becomes critical, for want of a better description, we will have some meaningful responses in place that can adapt and deal with situations as they arise.

Harry Ridgewell: Why not update the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees?

Steve Trent: We just don't believe politically, diplomatically it would work. It's not going to fly. It would become very, very complex. And also, I think the debate goes way beyond the Convention. I think it needs an entirely new thinking and an entirely new set of responses. So to try and squeeze this square peg into that round hole, I think just will not work, and I think that's the accepted view from a very broad range of opinions, not just in the non-profit NGO sector, but across the world. Very few people are willing or interested to open up the Convention for this kind of amendment. So rather than fight that battle, which is frankly unnecessary, let's look at a new legal mechanism that is fit for purpose, that's built for this problem and designed from the start for this problem.

Harry Ridgewell: A Kiribati national who lost his appeal for asylum in New Zealand, in a case that would have made him the world's first climate refugee, do you think that's set a precedent for other countries that they don't need to accept climate refugees?

Steve Trent: I think in every context it sets precedent, yes. I think that this is a big problem, and it's one that we have to look at, but equally, I think this is a situation that is evolving. I've seen first hand at a very senior level, minister and above, how perspectives can change very quickly in light of new evidence and circumstance. So you have this precedent that's happened, but I think just recall some of the things that have happened in relatively near history. I'll just give one example, if you like.

Steve Trent: When Hurricane Nargis hit the coast of Myanmar, the local authorities there stopped counting the dead when they had reached 138,000 people. Now, they stopped counting the dead because they were fearful of civil unrest and such, but 138,000 people. Now certainly, I want to put on record that you can't draw a direct causal link between climate change and any one single weather event, but what you can say is the severity and the frequency of extreme weather events is increasing as a result of global warming.

Steve Trent: Now, if you translate that 138,000 dead into other localities, if you imagine that happening in Washington or Berlin, London, or Paris, you would see an entirely different reaction to climate change and to how we deal with it and the perspectives on it. And I think it's clear that while you might not have events of such catastrophe, of such human suffering as that in the near term in the relatively well-protected, relatively wealthy northern developed countries, I think you will increasingly see extreme weather events that have a profound impact on the popular consciousness and political direction.

Steve Trent: So again, I think gazing into a crystal ball and saying, "Is this a precedent? What will happen here?" I think all bets are off. I think this is an extremely complex situation that will involve, at times very rapidly, and you will see massive changes in response and reaction to it over the next 10, 15 years.

Harry Ridgewell: Do you think inevitably that communities in the South Pacific will have to eventually move, or do you think that there's any chance that by building flood defences that they can stay?

Steve Trent: No, some will move. Which and where? I mean, even with development in technology, financial assistance, the whole idea of adaptation, without doubt, it has value, but in some circumstances it is just not appropriate or possible. And I think in the South Pacific, that is largely the case. It's not going to be possible to stay there and have a meaningful existence that's safe and secure. So no, they will be forced to move, as will others. Coastal Bangladesh in the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta, those kind of places, people will be forced to move. Simple as that.

Steve Trent: But it's interesting. I think where that question probably has more pertinence and applicability is, what will happen to some of the coastal cities in the world's developed nations? So if you look at New York or New Orleans, or if you look at London, if you get the more extreme predictions of global warming and sea level rise, thermal expansion and melting polar caps, how safe and secure will those cities be? And there again, I'll echo again the words of Richard Clarke, the former US National Security Advisor. I don't believe these people are indulging in simple hyperbole or scaremongering. They're looking at cold, hard figures and saying this is going to be a big problem for us, because if you look at what's already baked into the system, sea level rise is happening.

Steve Trent: Even if we meet and exceed all the targets set in Paris, you still have this massive problem. I mean, that is one of the reasons why the US military decided to try and go climate-neutral. That is why in interviewing former very high-ranking senior military officials, they have said again and again, climate change is a threat multiplier and a magnifier. It risks our national security. It risks our economic stability. It risks our social well-being. They are saying, so not an organisation like EJF or a person like me, who you might expect and anticipate to make these statements. You have them coming from generals and admirals, who are saying this is a massive problem. I think the key point here is that our politicians lag way behind in terms of their understanding, their thinking, and their response to the threat, and they desperately need to catch up.

Harry Ridgewell: What do you make of the news that New Zealand's prime minister has said that she's going to create a special visa for 100 Pacific Islanders forced to relocate because of rising sea levels?

Steve Trent: It's a gesture. It's a gesture. You can face both ways on this. On the one hand, you can say well that's good, it's a start, and you can take a positive view and commend. On the other hand, you can say to call it a drop in the ocean would be laughable. It's a tiny number. You have a vast, wealthy country that's relatively ... that has a very low population density. You could, and you should, do much, much more. So both views are possible, both views are legitimate. The perspective of EJF is that we think you need much more to be done on this kind of individual level. But again, I go back to the collective action. I think there's an

understanding that needs to be developed that we must work together. These individual ad hoc responses, whether we like them or we don't, are not going to be effective in the long run.

Steve Trent: Unless we have a multilateral approach that pools resources, technical resources, financial resources, our scope and ability to accommodate refugees, it won't work, and what you will see is, as a result, as mentioned before, a magnitude of human suffering that is biblical on this scale that has been hitherto unseen, and with it the potential for multiple forms of disruption. And I refer there to yes, the development of localised and possibly regional conflicts, the development of economic stresses that will degrade living standards, that will pull people back into poverty, that will make some rich people poor. And through that, social, political disruption, possibly the rise of extremes.

Steve Trent: None of this takes great intellect to work out. It's fairly simple to map it, and you can learn from both history and the basics of the science. So I think politicians need to now get to grips with this in a much more fundamental way. Stop posturing, stop dealing in platitudes, and talk in terms of dollars, euros, and pounds, real political energy, and an engagement that hasn't yet been seen. Paris was good, but we need much, much more.

Harry Ridgewell: And finally, how hopeful are you that global sea level rise will be tackled before it creates hundreds of millions of climate refugees and a global crisis?

Steve Trent: Not very, and one of the problems that you have here is that you have a time lag, so by the time you get ... I think we have, quite clearly, the scientific recognition of what is happening with sea level rise, so that is there, that knowledge is there. But by time you get the political recognition of it, then it embeds and you are able to motivate the kind of actions that you need to prevent further sea level rise, it's already too late. When I said a minute ago, what's already baked into the system is going to lead to substantial significant sea level rise that will in low-lying coastal areas force many people to move, millions of people to move, that is already a prediction that we can bank on.

Steve Trent: So are we now going to take the necessary steps and measures? Well, I think not. If you look at what Trump has done, you know, this massive act of self-harm and an irresponsible political response, those kind of reactions are simply not good enough. And even in nations where they are now taking really huge step forwards, in major countries such as China and India, where the move towards renewable energy and trying to introduce sustainability systems, the reality is, it's not enough. It's too little too late.

Harry Ridgewell: Okay. Thank you. Is there anything else that you want to add?

Steve Trent: No, only that I think you can have a simple view of this. And again, already, when I say every year around over 21 million people are being forced to move by extreme weather events, and the kind of cliched representation, 59.600 every day, 41 every minute, that's happening now. So these are human lives that are



being massively impacted by climate change, our addiction to carbon. I stress again and again and again, whether or not you want to take a moral perspective on this, view it through a human rights lens, an environmental lens, is almost immaterial. Perhaps best if we all just look at this as a point of enlightened self-interest. Relatively small investments today, relatively small investments today, will give massive returns in every sense if we combine and work them together.

Steve Trent: But if we fail to make those investments, then the costs on our collective credit card are virtually incalculable. So it is in our own self-interest. You don't have to have a political perspective, a humanitarian perspective, or anything else. You just have to look at this through the lens of self-interest, if that's your preference. But failure to act is not really an option.

Harry Ridgewell: So you're happy for me to quote you on all of this, then?

Steve Trent: Yep, absolutely. Please do. Fire away. It's what I think.