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From Polybius to Dadaab: Traumatic Urbanization in the Anthropocene

Matthew Jelacic*

University of Colorado, Program in Environmental Design, 315 UCB, Boulder, CO, 80309, USA

Abstract

The 2007 *Fourth Assessment Report* published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that 145 million people will be permanently displaced from their homes in the next 90 years due to man-made climate change. This number is more than three times the number of people displaced today by wars, famine and natural disasters and yet little is being done within the humanitarian aid regime to create strategies for feeding and sheltering this destabilizing human tidal wave. This paper explores some historic context, root causes and potential strategies for a revised approach to traumatic urbanization.

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1. Introduction

The 2007 *Fourth Assessment Report* published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that 145 million people will be permanently displaced from their homes in the next 90 years due to man-made climate change [13]. This number is more than three times the number of people displaced today by wars, famine and natural disasters and is expected to rise when the 2013 IPCC report is issued [18]. The global economic, social and political disruption that will result from enormous population shifts is incalculable. And yet little is being done within the humanitarian aid regime to create strategies for feeding and sheltering this destabilizing human tidal wave.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jelacic@colorado.edu

Perhaps it is the sheer scale of this immanent humanitarian crisis that limits our ability to conceive of more appropriate responses. After all, how can one imagine constructing the shelter, water, food, sanitation, energy, education, security and healthcare infrastructures needed to support a displaced population equal to the population of Boston? Imagining the scale of this undertaking becomes even more daunting when one realizes that this imagined new city is on the far side of the globe and that the equivalent of more than 200 “Bostons” will be needed [15].



Fig. 1. Ariel photograph of traumatic urbanization in Port au Prince, Haiti following the 12 January 2010 earthquake. (Photo by Author.)

Another constraint on our ability to conceive of the scale of this crisis stems from the common misconception that impacts will be slow and incremental. We in the Global North discuss the impact of climate change in terms of gradually rising seas or slowly infiltrating deserts; we do not see the immediacy of the crisis. We allow ourselves to think that people will have time to consider their options and make intentional moves out of harm’s way. We hopefully resign the responsibility of reversing climate change to advances in science and engineering. The reality, of course, is that catastrophic climate events, as seen during the recent typhoon in the Philippines, displace countless thousands overnight. Rather than finding solace and security in the homes of extended families living in urban centers- the preferred and naive approach to sheltering the displaced in the humanitarian aid regime– huge populations will find themselves struggling to survive in areas destroyed by cyclones, fires or flooding.

2. History

For the last hundred years or so, the most visible humanitarian response to mass migration in the aftermath of catastrophes has been the establishment of “refugee camps.” Characterized by long rows of tents, this strategy has its origins the Roman Republican Army’s desire to systematically organize its legions on the battlefield [14]. For the Romans, the gridded plan ensured that their armies would be organized in a way that could be replicated at the end of each day’s march from one end of the empire to the other. The daily replication of the camp plan allowed each individual soldier to know precisely where their commanding officer was and who among their regiment was

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