Psychiatry, Psychology and Climate Change

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A search of U.S. National Library of Medicine using "mental health + climate change" produces 342 papers [1]. Every one of these recognizes that temperature change, sea rise, or extreme weather events causes a negative correlation with mental health. This includes 97 papers addressing the influence on babies yet unborn when their mothers go through a climate change related event [2]. If the search is expanded a bit to "mental health + migrants", 1,092 papers come up on the PubMed database and, once again, the mental health effects are all negative [3].

If you search the Elsevier SCOPUS database just on the search term "climate change" you get 539,366 results [4]. I note all this so precisely to make the point that there should be no fact-based argument about this; we have a lot of data telling us that climate change is coming that it causes a spectrum of mental problems, some of which are lifelong. Also, that, at this point, the nations of the world are already experiencing, as any day's news will tell you, flooding, sea rise, changing ecosystems, wild fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, and the like.

How bad is this going to get? Just take the migration issue, which is already profoundly affecting the world's geopolitics, and the stability of several nations. I have chosen to feature Germany to make my point, but any European country would have much the same story. This is what I published in another paper.

"In 2016, Germany had 745,000 men, women and children apply for asylum; that is almost 100,000 more people than the entire population of Frankfurt am Main, Germany's fifth largest city. Of that number 256,136 were granted refugee status [5,6]. In far-away Sweden there were 71,576 asylum seekers, and so it goes throughout Europe, and the political effects have been transformative [7]. These refugees are not just going to Europe, either. In the United States, "Of the 84,995 refugees admitted to the United States in fiscal year 2016, the largest numbers came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma (Myanmar), and Iraq" [8].

Already, today, that's where we are. Camila Domonoske, of National Public Radio, gives us the correct perspective, I think, when she says, "One in every 113 people on Earth has now been driven from their home by persecution, conflict and violence or human rights violations... Each minute, 24 people around the world flee their home because of violence or persecution. And if the world's displaced people were their own nation, it would be larger than the United Kingdom" [9].

The UN's Refugee Agency says, "Global forced displacement has increased in 2015, with record-high numbers. By the end of the year, 65.3 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. This is 5.8 million more than the previous year (59.5 million)" [10].

In 2015, the Institute for Environment and Human Security of the United Nations University published a widely respected study projecting climate change migration levels. They said, "Currently, forecasts vary from 25 million to 1 billion environmental migrants by 2050,

moving either within their countries or across borders, on a permanent or temporary basis, with 200 million being the most widely cited estimate" [11].

The World Bank sees much the same future, "...by 2050 the worsening impacts of climate change in three densely populated regions of the world could see more than 140 million people move within their countries' borders" [12]. We know three things for sure: 1) Climate change produces enormous mental health problems. 2) Millions of migrants will, by 2050, be roaming the earth seeking somewhere to go. 3) A significant subset of those migrants, as well as the people where they end up, itself involving hundreds of millions, will have mental health problems as a result of the social instability and probable violence.

So, what do we do?

There are, of course, a myriad a small efforts already underway in various nations, but not with the funding and international coordination that is going to be required. I believe the answer is to be found in the War II period, when much of Europe and large parts of Asia were being reduced to ruins, and 11 million former slave laborers, prisoners or war and concentration camp inmates joined with other millions of homeless people roaming over Europe [13]. They were called Displaced Persons. What made me think of this period was two things: the vast movement of populations in the 1940s, and the fact that the response to this crisis was recognized and planned for years in advance of its occurring. Even as the Second World War was just beginning, world leaders met in London in September 1941 and created the Inter-Allied Committee on Post-War Requirements which came to be known as the Leith-Ross Committee [14].

Less than a year later, on 21 November 1942, this initial effort was ramped up when the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations of the United States Department of State was established [15]. A year after that, when the scale of what was coming was beginning to be more clearly understood, a 44-nation conference was held at the White House on November 9, 1943, specifically to create the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. This was 2 years before the United Nations itself came into existence. "The purpose of UNRRA was to 'plan, co-ordinate, administer or arrange for the administration of measures for the relief of victims of war in any area under the control of any of the United Nations through the provision of food, fuel, clothing, shelter and other basic necessities, medical and other essential services (Agreement, Articles 1 and 2)'" [16].

All of this pre-planning would prove its worth in avoiding a complete social breakdown in Europe, and yet it was still not enough. Two years after WWII ended there were still about 850,000 people, 150,000 of whom were children under the age of six, living in Camps [17]. This enormous movement of people during and after World War II, although largely forgotten today because it was handled with such success, was at the time a defining reality of the post-war world. I recounted a summary of this early effort both to demonstrate what can be done, and to ask the question: Why is such planning not occurring at a similar scale today? Why aren't the psychiatric and psychological communities in every country, as well as internationally setting up a well-funded crisis mental health structure in preparation for what we know is coming? What really is the alternative if we are to survive as a civilization?

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