Environmental migration a real possibility for island states

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German artist Hermann Josef Hack’s World Climate Refugee Camp in Hannover displaying 600 miniature climate refugee tents. The model camp is a public art intervention that depicts the social impacts of climate change.

Scientists predict that if there is an increase in global temperature of up to 4° Celsius — which the current trajectory has us reaching by the end of this century, small island developing states (SIDS) face the threat of extinction. SIDS, with similar characteristics of tropical climates, small populations and related socio-economic and development challenges, are perhaps the most vulnerable countries to this phenomenon of global warming, primarily because of their low-lying position in relation to the sea and their limited economic ability to respond to catastrophic events.

For a small island like Jamaica, which has already begun to experience effects of climate change, using the significant beach erosion in the tourist areas of Negril and Hellshire, as well as lengthy periods of droughts as examples, a call for action cannot be overemphasized. Let’s act while we still can.

Identifying the problem
The unfortunate reality of industrialisation is that, although it has improved the lives of many, it has single-handedly resulted in a wealth of environmental catastrophes — climate change is arguably the worst.

Historically, States like the US and China, in their quest to becoming developed, have played a notorious role contributing to the destruction of the environment. Ironically, however, despite SIDS having contributed the least to global warming (accounting for less than one per cent towards Green House Gas (GHG) emissions), they stand to be the worst affected.

Extreme weather patterns, like extended droughts and increased temperatures, are just some of the threats of climate change. Of the list, perhaps the most serious is a rise in sea levels. This will not only potentially cause ground and surface water sources to become contaminated but also affect the livelihoods of many. Sectors like tourism and agriculture, both of which are heavily relied on by many SIDS for economic growth and stability, will suffer greatly as beaches become eroded, fisheries collapse, and arable lands are destroyed. As a consequence, governments will have to contemplate strategies at domestic and regional levels to address issues of public health and job and food security.

In addition to the threat to infrastructure and economies, climate change also puts millions at risk of becoming either internally displaced or altogether stateless. That would create the real possibility of climate migration in the future. Issues surrounding statelessness and climate refugees have been widely discussed in the public domain, with many questioning the ability of the international community to cope with yet another humanitarian crisis.

Some critics believe that the overwhelming number of migrants that will result from climate change will far exceed the scale and gravity of any of the humanitarian disasters being experienced today. What’s worse, they posit that if the response of the international community to the humanitarian crisis in Syria is anything to go by, it is unlikely that attitudes towards climate-related event will be any different. For those who live amongst SIDS, this should be a matter of grave concern.

Maldives and Kiribati are two SIDS which have already researched relocating their populations to different countries due to their imminent threat of becoming submerged by rising seas. Other SIDS ought to follow suit with urgency to avoid the worst.
Solving the problem

It is prudent for States to appreciate that climate change is an economic issue just as much as it is an environmental one. Numerous developing countries, including SIDS, have traditionally concentrated their efforts on advancing development while postponing action on pertinent environmental issues. In recent years, the issue of climate change has increasingly gained recognition by the international community and has been put at the forefront of the agendas of many world leaders. Of note is the Paris Agreement arrived at in December last year, in which some 150 countries have agreed to take steps to limit global temperatures at or below 2°C Celsius.

Caricom, including Jamaica, which lobbied in Paris as part of the Alliance of Small Island States, had pushed for it to be capped at 1.5°C Celsius. It would therefore be now remiss of us not to follow through and implement practical steps towards achieving the target.

Traditionally, economics has influenced decision-making on a domestic and international level, and although it is justifiable to some degree, States need to divorce the practice of allowing economics alone to dictate political momentum. Environmental problems are becoming increasingly acute and nothing but short-term pain for long-term gain will bring about the kind of revolutionary change towards reducing carbon footprint and creating a greener space.

The truth is that the problems posed by climate change can no longer be ignored; they are here to stay. SIDS have the choice of mitigating the threats and adapting to the changes now, or suffering the consequences later.

While some may prefer one option over the other, particularly since adaptation over the long term can be significantly more costly than mitigation, the Paris Agreement calls for both methods to be employed. SIDS have little option but to do both, for again, they contribute the least to the problems, but will be the ones most affected.

On a wider scale, reducing GHG emissions in line with the Paris Agreement is a target that all States should buy into as successfully ‘holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels’ is contingent on the participation of all states.

It is hoped that with the US$100 billion pledged to developing countries under the Paris Agreement, SIDS will receive greater financial assistance that facilitate promote capacity building, sustainable livelihoods, and appropriate
mitigation and adaptation schemes. It is hoped, too, that countries don’t wait until it is too late to act, but move with urgency now.