

**Environment, Forced Migration and Social Vulnerability
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**Keynote Address:
Environment, Forced Migration and Social Vulnerability:
Identifying Problems and Challenges**

**William Lacy Swing
Director General
International Organization for Migration (IOM)**

Delivered by:
Philippe Boncour
Head of International Dialogue on Migration
International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here today and I am grateful for the opportunity to address this distinguished audience on behalf of the Director General of the International Organization for Migration, Mr. William Lacy Swing.

The title I was given is “Environment, Forced Migration and Social Vulnerability: Identifying Problems and Challenges”. At the end of my presentation today I would like to leave you with **two key messages**:

- The first is that **a single-minded focus on forced migration may lead us down the wrong road**. The focus may be **misplaced**, when it means that we forget that environmental migration does not end with disaster-induced displacement (in which case migration is indeed forced). The focus may be **misguided** because it risks detracting resources and energies from a much bigger issue. **This is the part that addresses the problems.**
- The second message, flowing from the first, is that migration can be not just a problem, it is also a solution. **Migration is not just a failure of adaptation, but can itself be an adaptation strategy. This is the challenge.**

Migration spurred by environmental factors has long been a blind spot. For a long time, policy makers, practitioners and others tended to ignore migration, unless and until it came into their field of vision full force, and usually under dramatic circumstances. Even though the IPCC posited as early as 1990 that the greatest single impact of climate change might be on human mobility, incorporating migration considerations into environmental research or policy agendas has proven **slow, difficult and in some instances controversial**. Instead of mainstreaming the migration variable into every stage of the process of socio-environmental interaction, migration used to be seen as a passive outcome, a failure, **a worst-case scenario**, to put it bluntly.

Primarily, I want to take issue with the title of this talk – “environment, *forced* migration and social vulnerability”. The complexity of the topic is such that there are no real clear-cut connections between the three elements. An individual who decides to – or is compelled to – migrate will take this momentous step based on a whole host of considerations: how can I secure my income and livelihood? What are my options? What are my networks? And most importantly: what are my alternatives? In the complex picture of the migration-environment nexus, economic, social and political factors are just as likely as environmental factors to form pieces of the puzzle.

Drawing **the line between voluntary and forced environmentally-induced migration** is therefore quite a complicated business. Rarely can a single factor, be it social, economic, environmental or otherwise, be pinpointed as “the” trigger for migration. With the exception of natural disasters that provoke flight in the moment of occurrence, the distinction between forced and voluntary migration is blurred. It is usually an accumulation of factors that “pushes people over the edge”, so to speak. Through a progressive worsening of conditions, a “**tipping point**” may be reached, when the decision to move is not yet totally “forced”, but it is certainly no longer completely voluntary either. When does the move of a subsistence farmer to the city because her yields have been declining year after year become “forced”? How dry does a village’s well need to get before the decision to migrate classifies as “forced”? And most importantly, how straightforward is it to trace these developments back to a purely environmental root cause? Perhaps the title of this talk should be “environment, social vulnerability and migration” to show how social, political, developmental and other factors frequently mediate and bridge the causality gap between the environment and migration.

Equally tricky in many cases is the identification of a “**point of no return**”: when does a situation of environmental change or degradation reach such an extent that migration will be “permanent”? And what to do? The “sinking island scenario” immediately springs to mind as a dramatic illustration of this issue, with a whole host of quite unprecedented challenges and repercussions for the status and protection of affected individuals and communities. Progressive coastal erosion and desertification are other, if less graphic, examples of irreversible loss of livelihoods to which migration may be the only answer.

Limiting our field of vision to forced migration also has other implications. The media has caught on and is propagating buzz words like “climate refugees” or “environmental refugees”. The fact is, however, that those are misnomers under international law, and risk watering down the very precise legal definition of a refugee. Clearly, we can easily think of natural disasters that provoke flight for sheer survival. But there are and will increasingly be other groups of people who are compelled to move for primarily environmental reasons and whose needs deserve our dedicated attention and forward looking approach.

A focus solely on forced migration is therefore not only insufficient, but potentially also counterproductive. It limits our vision to a small proportion of environmental phenomena and an even smaller proportion of the total volume of migration that is to be expected as part of the changing global environment. It tempts us to stop at *ad*

hoc, emergency responses. **It blinds us to viewing – and managing – migration in a more structural sense.**

I would like to propose two paradigm shifts:

- **From migration as a worst-case-scenario to migration as an adaptation strategy**
- **From reactive to proactive thinking: from an *ex post* response to *ex ante* prevention and preparedness**

Human beings should be at the centre of *our* debate. The environment behaves and changes in a variety of predictable and unpredictable ways. No two individuals, however, will respond in exactly the same way to the same environmental conditions. IOM has come up with a *working* definition of “environmental migrants” which is currently attracting much attention and input from other agencies active in this field. The definition tries to encapsulate the breadth of the issue: “environmental migrants” are “persons or groups of persons who, for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions are obliged to leave their homes or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad”.

You are all experts here. There is no need to reiterate the controversies that surround the attribution of some environmental phenomena to human causes, or the debates over reversibility or irreversibility of environmental change. **I do not need to point out the uncertainties in the “guesstimates”.**

For our purposes, it is helpful to make a basic distinction. On the one hand, nature makes itself heard and seen through **extreme events** – floods like the one in China, cyclones like the ones in Myanmar and Haiti, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions. Natural disasters tend to attract more attention, **they hit the headlines**. Many of these do indeed *force* people to move, in many cases for sheer survival. IOM has attended to many such emergencies and is acutely aware of the need for immediate, effective assistance to the affected populations. Moreover, with the intensity of such disasters expected to rise, the humanitarian response mechanisms are in for a challenge.

On the other hand, the environment undergoes **gradual changes**, sometimes imperceptible to the “naked eye”, especially in its initial stages. Eventually, these changes may make certain patterns of productivity unsustainable. Dryland degradation and desertification is one such case. El Niño–type variations in fish stocks are another example; as is the combination of highland agriculture, deforestation and heavy rainfall that gradually strips the soil of its fertile layer. Such processes also provoke movement, and **it is precisely this kind of migration, which is likely to involve much larger numbers of people migrating on a more permanent basis, which has long been a “blind spot”.** It is this kind of migration which will increasingly demand our considered attention and concerted action.

Just to illustrate this point: UNDP estimates that rising sea levels and exposure to natural disasters could result in temporary or permanent displacement of 330 million people in the course of this century. In Africa, an estimated 10 million people have been displaced over the last two decades mainly because of environmental degradation and desertification, and the numbers are increasing. In China alone,

floods affect on average more than 10 million people a year. All in all, forecasts of the number of persons having to move due to climate change and environmental degradation by 2050 vary by a factor of 40 (between 25 million and 1 billion) and largely depend on which of the scenarios will materialize. While the exact magnitude may be uncertain, the actual impact on people is not.

The question that remains is **who moves**. The title of this talk mentions the term “**social vulnerability**” – which immediately begs the question if there is any other kind of vulnerability. What comes to mind are the twin concepts of carrying capacity and caring capacity. **Carrying capacity** refers to the particular characteristics of an ecosystem, such as naturally thin topsoil or inherent climatic conditions like wet-dry cycles that shape the ways in which the ecosystem sustains human activity. The **caring capacity**, on the other hand, describes the social, developmental and institutional variables that underpin how individuals, communities and societies cope with environmental stresses, both slow-onset and sudden.

Vulnerability is thus a composite of ecological and, broadly speaking, social factors. **Environmental pressures exacerbate pre-existing problems and accentuate underlying social fault lines.** It will come as no surprise, therefore, that developing countries suffer up to 98% of the casualties in natural disasters. In developing countries 1 in 19 persons are affected by climate shocks, compared with 1 in 1,500 in OECD countries. In turn, poorer and more marginalised communities, even within richer societies, tend to bear the brunt of environmental events and processes. One needs to look no further than to the patterns of distress, divided along ethnic and socio-economic lines, in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to illustrate this point.

What the concept of caring capacity implies is the **resilience** of people to withstand shocks and adapt to changes. **If vulnerability is made up of carrying capacity and caring capacity, resilience is made up of resources and alternatives.** A combination of material and non-material assets as well as the availability of different, equally viable options to distribute risk determines how individuals and communities react to changes and pressures in their environment. Increasing resilience, then, means expanding and improving the range of adaptation strategies available to people.

Among this range of adaptation strategies, migration is just one. While at best flight is still acknowledged as a survival strategy only in case of disaster, the potential of migration as a mechanism for adaptation and livelihood diversification has not yet totally entered our thinking and policy-making. Migration is and always has been an integral part of the interaction of humans with their environment. Nomadic peoples come to mind: economically and socially dependent on ecosystems whose resources and stability needed to be carefully managed, **mobility was the strategy of choice** to maintain a balanced relationship between societies and their environment.

Clearly, nomadic lifestyles are not an option for the vast majority of the world’s population today (with the notable exception of many of the people in this room!), but this should not detract from **migration as a normal, or near normal, adaptation strategy**, notably at early stages of environmental degradation. Sometimes a move dictated by hardship can have productive results. A successful migrant can improve his own lot and, through remittances, the lot of those he or she left behind. There are

cases where money from overseas has led to better irrigation, crop diversification and improved agricultural techniques.

Picture the following situation: a family lives off a plot of land in an area subject to periodic drought cycles. The number of people the land needs to support is growing, but the yields have been declining year by year. The farmers observe that they have to dig deeper and deeper to reach groundwater, while the pastoralists find themselves having to go further and further to feed their animals. One family decides to pool its resources to allow one of the sons to move to the regional capital as a wage labourer for a part of the year. With the help of his earnings, the family could eventually buy a generator to improve irrigation of their fields. At the same time, they witnessed a slow depopulation of the village, with mainly the young males disappearing to the cities, leaving behind women and the elderly.

And this is not a fictitious scenario: in the Tambacounda region of Senegal, particularly affected by soil erosion, 90% of the men between 30 and 60 years old have migrated at least once in their lifetime. **Some came back, most did not.** Temporary displacement as a result of recurrent flooding along the Zambezi River in Mozambique is taking on increasingly permanent characteristics. In Ghana, migration from the north to the south is a typical strategy to deal with structural scarcities of rainfall, food and land, but actually declined during times of severe drought and food crises. Until the political instability in Côte d'Ivoire in 1999, drought-prone villages in Burkina Faso regularly and in large numbers sent members of the community to the neighbouring country to work on plantations. Their remittances were invested in schools and hospitals as well as water and irrigation systems. Examples from Northeast Thailand show that returning migrants could have a positive impact on the environment by bringing back innovative land use techniques.

The list goes on. **It shows that migration can certainly be a manifestation of vulnerability, but it does not need to be.** Migration can be a problem, but it can also be a solution. Migration is always there, in the subtext of the interplay between people and their environment. What we need to do is to **make migration centre-stage**. There is no doubt that migration *is* forced in many instances, and this needs to be reduced as much as is possible. We need to ensure that migration can *also* be a choice, and thereby **a genuine adaptation strategy**.

The **adaptation potential of migration** does not receive enough attention, both in theory and in practice. **Replacing “social vulnerability” with “adaptation” in the equation may just turn a downward spiral into an upward one.** Attempts to stem migration at all cost may increase rather than decrease people's vulnerability. What is needed are institutions, policies and resources, both to stabilize communities and livelihoods in the face of environmental pressures and to make migration a viable option, one that can be chosen in **safety, dignity and security**.

Much more needs to be done to develop the adaptation agenda and specifically the role of migration within it. The adaptation funds pledged thus far remain a drop in the ocean. Here, I may propose a third paradigm shift: A focus on vulnerability reduction is important, but it will only get us so far. Inevitably and necessarily, **the adaptation agenda will merge with the development agenda**. It will be difficult to keep these

two aspects separate in the long run even if it implies drastic revisions of current practices and approaches.

In sum, the **problems** I have identified today are: **firstly**, a focus on forced migration that is conceptually difficult to sustain. We are not dealing with an “either / or” situation and more often than not the causal linkages between the environment and migration are blurry. **Secondly**, a focus on forced migration has consequences in practice. It immediately inclines us towards an *ex post facto*, reactive response. **Don’t get me wrong**: we need and will continue to need coordinated humanitarian action in the face of disasters, and more so as climate change will alter the pattern of these events. But to leave it at that means ignoring a vast issue, a vast number of people and a vast potential problem and potential solution.

The main **challenge** is therefore how to manage environmentally induced migration systematically rather than “putting out fires”. This essentially means **accepting that migration is also an adaptation strategy, and one that is both logical and legitimate**. To this end, we need to increase the adaptive capacities of vulnerable populations, link adaptation with development, and make managed migration a feasible, accessible solution.

Thank you very much.