

The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration (THP)

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE ON MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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Brunson McKinley
Director General, International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Introduction

Comprehensive and coherent policy-making on migration calls for an awareness of the subject in all its breadth and complexity. To avoid gaps and blind spots, the inclusion of other actors, institutions and fields of expertise is crucial. In this contribution, I would like to place migration in the context of two issues which themselves rank high on the agenda of national and international policy-makers: development and environmental change

Part One

Migration, Development and Environmental Change

Nomadic peoples, it seems, have understood the connections between migration, development and environmental change all along: 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. Yet, the analogy still has some purchase in understanding the web of multidirectional interactions between migration, development and environmental change.

Central to understanding the relationships between the three inherently complex spheres is the concept of social and environmental resilience: a combination of socio-economic, technological and ecological factors determines the extent to which societies and environments can withstand shocks and adapt to changes. **At stake are individual livelihoods and general patterns of productivity as well as the sustainability of social and economic activity in an area.** As a result, least developed countries and those characterized by specific climatic or environmental conditions, such as small-island States or delta regions, tend to be considered less resilient and more vulnerable.

Development can both stimulate and reduce migration, just as the level and sustainability of a country's or region's development can mean different things for the environment. While the most common assumption is that underdevelopment drives people to move, this can be misleading, as it is rarely the poorest of the poor who have the resources to migrate. Instead, economic development can also increase migration. Furthermore, development almost always implies changes to the systems of production in which the environment functions as source and sink and to the composition and requirements of the labour market. Likewise, large infrastructure development projects, such as dams, can entail population movements, as well as having significant environmental repercussions.

Environmental change, including as a result of climate change, **can take place gradually or suddenly**. Its **impact on and interactions with development and migration will thus vary with the time scale and spatial extent of the phenomenon**. Examples of changes anticipated in the context of climate change include processes such as sea level rise, desertification, reductions in soil fertility as well as an increase in the frequency and intensity of events such as tropical storms, heat waves, floods or droughts. Environmental change will affect systems of production, particularly in agriculture and fishery, and may therefore challenge the development path of many regions and countries. Environmental change may lead directly to migration and vice versa, although in many instances the association will be mediated by other social, political or developmental factors. Again, resilience and adaptation capacities of the affected communities are key in negotiating the impact of environmental change.

Part Two

Migration – Considerations for Policy-Makers

Given the interplay between migration, development and environmental change, as presented in the first part of my contribution, **migration deserves a central position in policy-making**. It is neither solely a cause nor a consequence of underdevelopment and environmental degradation; similarly, its effects cannot be automatically identified as either positive or negative. Migration can be a reaction to a deterioration of environmental conditions, just as it can stem from lack of economic development and opportunity. In cases of extreme and sudden environmental events, migration can be simply a survival strategy. Low socio-economic and ecological resilience therefore sometimes finds an outlet in migration.

Migration, in turn, can bring about changes, both positive and negative, to the environment and socio-economic development in areas of origin, transit and destination. For example, migration **may relieve population pressure** on land and on the local labour market and thus directly **promote the environmental and economic recovery of the area**. In addition, migrants can further the development of areas of origin via remittances and other, non-monetary contributions. Eventually, the **transfer of knowledge may also benefit the environment**, for instance by introducing new ideas, technologies or land-use practices.

Migrants also encourage development in areas of destination by mitigating labour shortages, enriching the human capital of host countries, and improving the flexibility and productivity of their economies. On the other hand, **migration, if poorly managed and especially in cases of sudden mass inflows**, may have detrimental effects on the environment in areas of destination, **including the results of unsustainable consumption of water, food and fuel**. Especially in large urban agglomerations migrants may be forced into precarious living conditions, settling for example on steep slopes or floodplains. This in turn **may involve accelerated deforestation, pose hazards to public health and put strains on public services**, increasing risks not only of environmental concerns but also of social tensions.

Migration can therefore be a manifestation of acute vulnerability, be it economic or ecological. At the same time, migration represents a logical and legitimate livelihood diversification and adaptation strategy that has been used for millennia and is likely to be of growing importance in the future. **Migration can help reduce risk to lives, livelihoods and ecosystems and enhance overall resilience of households and communities to the adverse effects of environmental change and economic crises**. In practice, this means employing a wide lens when tackling the issues of migration, development and environmental change. **Awareness of each element needs to inform considerations of the others** if we are to assess realistically and prepare adequately for current challenges and future scenarios.