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A CONFERENCE ON

CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND MIGRATION: ADDRESSING VULNERABILITIES AND HARNESSING OPPORTUNITIES

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BACKGROUND PAPER¹

Climate change and migration are two of the most pressing issues facing the international community today. According to the United Nations, the adverse impact of climate change constitutes “the defining issue of our time”², and “managing migration for the benefit of all has become one of the great challenges of our age”³. The linkages between these phenomena are attracting increasing attention, including in the broader context of migration and environmental degradation⁴. While the nexus between climate change, environmental degradation and migration involves complex interdependencies, the relationship between these phenomena can be argued to be two-fold. On the one hand, gradual environmental changes as well as environmental disasters, including those caused or exacerbated by climate change, can lead to both internal and cross-border movements of people; on the other, migration can directly affect environmental conditions in areas of origin and destination.

Today, the scale of these phenomena and their impacts on the lives of entire populations are making their management, including in relation to each other, both increasingly challenging and critical to ensuring human security and sustainable development. Unfortunately, the implications of the climate change, environmental degradation and migration nexus for

¹ This document largely draws on research findings and policy work of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), including relevant international seminars and reports compiled with partners on the topic of environmental degradation and climate change and migration.

² Ban Ki-Moon “Stronger United Nations Needs Stronger Development Pillar, Secretary General Stresses at Ceremony to Hand Over Group 77 Chairmanship”. 11 January 2008. Secretary –General SG/SM/11369, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sgsm11369.doc.htm> (last visited 18 January 2008).

³ Kofi Annan *International Migrants Day Message*, 18 December 2005. Secretary General SG/SM/10263 OBV/535, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2005/sgsm10263.doc.htm>

⁴ Environmental degradation refers to processes which can be caused or exacerbated by climate change, for example sea level rise, as well as by human activity, for example land degradation due to over-intensive farming. In some areas, both climate change and human activity contribute to environmental degradation.

human vulnerability, as well as its potential for contributing to increased conflicts, have not received sufficient attention from policy-makers and researchers. These implications are difficult to assess because of their interaction with other social, economic and political issues, such as under-development and demographic trends, which affect human vulnerability to environmental change and its migratory and other consequences.

Key Dimensions of the Climate Change, Environmental Degradation and Migration Nexus

Rising sea levels, altered patterns of desertification and dry lands degradation, and the increasing number and intensity of extreme environmental events, to name just a few effects of climate change⁵, are placing the lives and livelihoods of the inhabitants of affected areas at risk and are resulting in increasingly visible impacts on the movement of people. Estimations of the number of people who could be displaced or migrate by 2050 as a result of climate change and environmental degradation vary from 25 million to 1 billion⁶. Such wide variations in the existing estimations underscore the need to complement scientific models used to predict environmental changes with targeted research to identify their effects on the movement of people.

Just as climate change can lead to migration, the movement of people can have significant effects, both positive and negative, on environmental conditions in areas of origin and destination. Increased migration can contribute to further environmental degradation, but in many cases it is a survival strategy for those who move.

The relationship between environmental change and migration is often complicated by the multifaceted associations with human security and conflict. For example, environmental degradation in one area, caused by a mass inflow of people fleeing environmental degradation in their region of origin, can strain scarce resources, lead to the eruption of conflicts and pose significant challenges to human security. A comprehensive understanding of the impacts that the migration and environment nexus has on human security and development requires an analysis of these associations in a holistic manner.

In addition to conflict, other intermediating factors, such as population growth, poverty and governance, play a significant role in shaping the outcomes of environmental change. Such factors affect the capacity of formal and informal local institutions to adapt to any changes in the ability of ecosystems to support basic standards of living⁷ and therefore have an influence on a community's relative vulnerability to both gradual and sudden forms of environmental change. As a result, the challenge of climate change and environmental degradation for sustainable economic and human development is likely to have the greatest impact on less developed regions. For example, Least Developed Countries face challenges due to demographic developments straining already scarce resources and limited public infrastructure. In addition, the potential adverse effects of climate change could be particularly severe in some developing countries, such as some Small Island Developing States.

Within the affected populations, vulnerable groups, women and children, especially amongst the poorest section of population, bear the highest burden of losses due to environmental degradation and its consequences. They also suffer the most because of competition over scarce resources such as water and land, sometimes leading up to conflicts. At the same time,

⁵ International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *Fourth Assessment Report*, 17 November 2007. <http://www.ipcc.ch/> (last visited 28 January 2008).

⁶ See, Norman Myers (1993) "Environmental Refugees in a Globally Warmed World", *BioScience*, 43 (11), pp. 757-761; and Christian Aid *Human Tide: The Real Migration Crisis*, May 2007. http://www.christianaid.org.uk/Images/human_tide3_tcm15-23335.pdf (last visited 29 January 2008).

⁷ IOM *International Dialogue on Migration No. 11* "Expert Seminar: Migration and the Environment", to be published in 2008.

the poorest and most vulnerable are often constrained by lack of funds and difficult economic situations.

Ensuring human security today requires addressing the implications of the climate change and migration nexus. There is a growing need for the development of policy tools and approaches to manage the migratory causes and consequences of environmental change, particularly as these relate to human security and development.

Addressing the Impact of Climate Change and Environmental Degradation on Human Security and Migration

Aggravated by climate change, more frequent and intense weather phenomena and deteriorating environmental conditions are putting significant strain on living conditions, health and well-being of populations in affected areas. Extreme environmental events caused or exacerbated by climate change can result in considerable damage and destroy basic infrastructure and services. Resulting displacement can involve sudden large-scale movements, often making return infeasible, at least in the short run. Families might be separated for long periods of time and children and young people might become vulnerable to human trafficking, sexual and gender based violence, and involvement in criminal activities.

The stresses on ecosystems resulting from environmental degradation and global warming can necessitate the movement away from uninhabitable areas or from those severely affected by lack of sufficient natural resources. The costs of staying on degraded lands and coping with deteriorating living conditions can be even higher than those related to moving. However, some vulnerable and/or marginalized groups can be prevented from leaving affected areas by either lack of funds or their social status. This can lead to overexploitation of diminished natural resources and further impoverishment of these groups' livelihoods.

One possible adaptation strategy is to facilitate a transition to alternative income generating activities for those facing loss of livelihood or earning capacity before relocation becomes the only potentially viable option. These activities need to ensure that the most vulnerable groups are implicated. Temporary and circular migration schemes for members of environmentally vulnerable communities can be considered among the livelihood diversification strategies. Effective implementation of such schemes requires matching existing skill levels with the demand in other regions or countries and necessitates the involvement of all the relevant stakeholders, including the host authorities and the private sector. In addition, it is crucial to engage environmental migrants⁸ themselves. Migration can generate remittances and other financial transfers which could contribute to the development of affected areas, thus improving the ability of the population to adapt to the changes caused by environmental degradation and climate change. Furthermore, diaspora members and returning migrants can be involved in targeted community stabilization initiatives and programmes and in efforts to prevent further environmental degradation of affected areas.

In other cases, permanent internal or cross-border migration from areas affected by, or at high risk of, severe environmental degradation and/or extreme environmental events may be inevitable. This, in some cases, would require the development and implementation of comprehensive resettlement schemes, comprising, when possible, pre-departure preparation for migrants as well as integration assistance following the arrival in the host area or country. Planning and preparations would also need to be carried out in the host areas, including

⁸ In the Discussion Note on Migration and the Environment (2007), IOM defined environmental migrants as *“persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.”* The Discussion Note can be accessed at http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/IDM/workshops/e-volving_global_economy_2728112007/MC_INF_288_EN.pdf

environmental impact assessments, to ensure that resettlement does not lead to environmental degradation and/or conflicts over resources with the local population. Public infrastructure in the areas of destination, including housing and basic services, would also need to be adjusted in order to be able to accommodate the needs of migrants.

Effective and organized resettlement of environmental migrants requires long-term planning and multi-stakeholder cooperation, especially when it takes place across borders. Concerned parties will have to improve preparedness and management of environmental migration, implement effective early warning systems, keep their populations well informed, and plan for housing and other measures to accommodate migrants.

Addressing the Impact of Migration on the Environment and the Interaction of these Phenomena with the Potential for Conflict

Though frequently overshadowed by the issue of the effects of environmental change on migration, the effects of migration on the environment is a subject that also warrants attention and study. The migration of large numbers of people (in some cases, with even larger numbers of livestock) can have significant environmental repercussions for areas of origin, areas of destination, and the travel routes in between.

Migration can alleviate demographic pressure in areas of origin thereby allowing for the regeneration of overexploited land in the mid- or long-term. Remittances, if channeled into schemes to make local livelihoods more sustainable, might help to reduce environmental degradation caused by human activity. Temporary and circular migration can also bring and develop skills needed to reduce negative impacts of human activity on vulnerable environments and to improve environmental protection in areas of origin.

At the same time, permanent and large-scale migration could reduce the already limited human resources required to address environmental degradation in the area of origin. In this respect, orderly return migration to areas of origin after conflict or disaster-induced displacement can reduce the impact on the environment and, if coupled with sound reconstruction and rehabilitation, could have a net environmental benefit. If return is spontaneous and unassisted, it can lead to mismanagement of resources, such as overgrazing or deforestation, which could create renewed migration pressures.

Increasing urbanization and the influx of environmental migrants into towns or cities with limited infrastructure and absorption capacity can have negative environmental effects. In the absence of affordable housing, migrants may resort to unregulated construction, as well as unsustainable and unsanitary livelihood practices leading to serious public health risks, deforestation, soil erosion, pollution, etc. These areas will have a heightened vulnerability to mudslides and floods and their populations will be more susceptible to outbreaks of disease. Migration-related coping strategies and responses include environmentally-sound urban and rural planning to facilitate the integration of migrants.

In cases of displacement caused by extreme environmental events or conflicts, inappropriate emergency shelter/camp set-up, management and closure can have a debilitating effect on the environment. In such cases, displaced populations can mismanage available resources by, for instance, felling trees around the camps to use as fuel and thus causing deforestation of the area. Strategies and responses for addressing these issues currently in use by IOM, UNHCR and other stakeholders include, *inter alia*, integrating environmental considerations into planning of emergency shelter/camps.

Resource mismanagement by environmental migrants in areas of destination can increase the likelihood of conflicts. Contention can arise over diminishing resources available, including fishing waters, freshwater supplies and fertile land, and increase disputes over property use rights. Resulting conflicts can lead to further human displacement in addition to migration flows directly induced by environmental degradation. Policy responses should address long-

term environmentally-induced migration and potential tensions over resources and public services.

Major Policy Challenges

In order to establish effective policy approaches for managing the migratory causes and consequences of climate change and environmental degradation, governments and other stakeholders need to address a number of broad policy challenges.

Developing Multi-Stakeholder and Multidisciplinary Dialogue and Cooperation

Climate change, environmental degradation and migration are complex and multidimensional issues. They are also cross-border phenomena and, as such, merit consideration at international policy levels. Inter-state cooperation and multi-stakeholder partnerships are essential if the migration and climate change nexus is to be understood and managed properly. Governments and other stakeholders urgently need to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration and sharing of experiences and perspectives. Support and resources for the development of comprehensive policy approaches to migration and climate change need to be mobilized now to enable early and effective interventions by different stakeholders at various levels.

Early Planning to Address Migratory Consequences and Causes of Environmental Change

Early action and planning are critical elements of orderly and humane environmental migration management. Long-term policy planning can reduce future costs and result in a more effective and sustainable response to both gradual environmental changes and extreme environmental events, and thus reduce adverse impacts on human security. These policy approaches need to include assistance to vulnerable communities to mitigate the impacts of environmental degradation and climate change and to reduce their vulnerability to the effects of such phenomena. In certain cases, such measures can reduce mass migration and the negative repercussions for human well-being, especially for the most vulnerable groups. Long-term planning can also mitigate the adverse environmental impact of unmanaged mobility.

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in global efforts to address climate change and its consequences, which may include both extreme environmental events and gradual environmental changes. Effective response to these phenomena requires a combination of both short-term and long-term measures. One of the hurdles that need to be addressed in this context is the political and practical difficulties of making the long-term budgetary commitments needed to step up the efforts to combat such changes.

Leveraging the Development Potential of Migration as an Adaptation Process

Migration is not only a consequence of but also an adaptation process to climate change. In order for migration to be effective in this respect, policies should harness its opportunities for sustainable development. One possibility to enhance the development potential of the movement of people is to consider diverse migration strategies, including circular schemes, temporary or even permanent migration together with accompanying measures such as pre-departure orientation, integration and reintegration assistance.

Migrants' human and financial resources can play an important role in improving the overall environmental situation and the sustainability of livelihoods in areas of origin. Remittances can be particularly significant for boosting household income, income diversification and community development in areas of origin. Encouraging the investment of remittances into the local infrastructure and coping mechanisms can further help to reduce the negative impact of the climate change and environmental degradation and migration nexus on human security and development in areas of origin, transit and destination.

Raising Awareness and Building Capacity

Raising the awareness of the international community regarding the significance of the migration and climate change nexus for human security and development is essential. This is especially important with regard to the long-term effects of gradual environmental degradation. Such effects are likely to significantly contribute to the increase in the number of environmental migrants and may result in mass displacements, which can seriously constrain the institutional and governance capacity of states at national and local levels. Therefore, there is also a need to build the capacity of governments and other stakeholders worldwide to respond effectively to such displacements, including by developing early warning systems and evacuation plans.

The limited availability of data on migration in general, and on the interaction between climate change, environmental degradation and the movement of people in particular, constitutes another challenge that needs to be addressed. Improved data collection and ongoing research on the impacts of “the defining issue of our time” on human security and well-being, in particular that of the most vulnerable groups, is essential. Comprehensive data will help ensure that the migration and the environment nexus receives the attention that it deserves from the international community and that evidence-based policies be developed.

The Way Forward

The human security dimension of the climate change, environmental degradation and migration nexus clearly deserves greater attention by both researches and policy-makers. The conference organized by the Greek Chairmanship of the Human Security Network and the International Organization for Migration seeks to increase political and public awareness of these human security challenges and their implications for research-based policy.

There is an important need to develop better understanding of the net impact of migration on the environment in areas of origin and destination and for assessing the complex interaction of environmental change, migration and conflict. Such an understanding is necessary for developing informed policies in the area of environmental migration management. This will require research, interdisciplinary collaboration and the development of comprehensive approaches. With better policy tools and multi-stakeholder cooperation, the international community will be better placed to address the challenges of migration management and environmental change for human security and sustainable development.