

International Dialogue on Migration 2011

Intersessional Workshop

“Climate change, environmental degradation and migration”

29 & 30 March 2011

Opening Remarks by the Deputy Director General Laura Thompson

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Officials,
Members of the United Nations Family,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to this workshop, the first in this year’s International Dialogue on Migration.

I

- As we celebrate IOM’s 60th Anniversary this year and look back at 10 years of the International Dialogue on Migration, which was launched in 2001, let me take a moment to chart a brief history of IOM’s engagement on the topic of migration, climate change and the environment.
- 1992 marks the publication of one of IOM’s earliest studies on the issue of migration and the environment, the outcome of a conference on the same topic. Today, please visit the publications stall outside this conference hall to sample the products of nearly 20 years of research by IOM and its partners.
- Two years prior to that, in 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC) had remarked that “the gravest effects of climate change may be those on human migration” and our experience is starting to confirm that they might have been right.
- From that time on, IOM’s activity in this area has steadily increased. In the past 10 years alone, IOM has received funding for more than 500 projects in the context of our response to environmental migration.
- In 2007, the IOM membership deliberated migration and the environment at the IOM Council, concluding on several principles of effective environmental migration management: proactive policy and early action; coherent policies; bilateral, regional and multi-stakeholder cooperation. In the same year, UNFPA and IOM held an expert seminar on the same topic.

- 2008 saw the establishment of the Climate Change, Migration and Environment Alliance (CCEMA), a platform for research and dialogue on the migration consequences of climate change composed of international organizations, academic institutions and the private sector.
- Around the same time, the Office of UN High Commissioner for Refugees and IOM began co-chairing the informal group on Migration, Displacement and Climate Change of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to address some of the operational challenges that our organizations are likely to face in the future.
- This list goes on and is testimony to a growing awareness of climate change and other environmental changes. But above all it is evidence of the growing and palpable *impact* of environmental factors on human mobility.
- This has also been felt in IOM's activities: from Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998 and the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, to the Pakistan floods and the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 – the humanitarian community has been increasingly occupied by these and other natural disasters around the world, and IOM is no exception. Our primary role concerns movement following natural disasters, alleviating immediate human suffering, and preparing people for the future.
- Of course, not all natural disasters are related to climate change. And IOM has learned that the interactions between the environment and human mobility are much more intricate than displacement in the face of disaster. A small selection of IOM's projects addressing these aspects features at the side event this afternoon, which I encourage you to attend.
- For instance, we are witnessing the consequences of the gradual deterioration of the environment, such as coastal erosion, salt water intrusion and desertification. While they don't tend to make the headlines, these "slow" environmental crises have a more profound impact on the movement of people in the long run.
- But we have also seen that people are using migration as a strategy to adapt to their changing environment, both to the slow changes and the sudden events.

II

- Roughly two decades on, the issue of migration, climate change and the environment has entered highest echelons of policymaking.
- At this point, let me express my heartfelt welcome to Ambassador Luis Alfonso de Alba, special representative for climate change of the Government of Mexico. Mexico, as you all know, was the site of two major conferences last year, first the 4th Global Forum on Migration and Development in Puerto Vallarta, and second, the 16th Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Cancun. The link between climate change and migration featured at both conferences and we look forward to hearing more from Ambassador de Alba about these and where, in his opinion, the international community should go next.
- In this workshop, we hope to build on the progress made over the past years in understanding and addressing the linkages between migration, climate change and the environment.
- At the end of the next two days, we hope, you will take away the following:
 - A better understanding of the many ways in which the environment, including climate change, influence migration flows;
 - An appreciation of the idea that migration in the context of climate change can be a problem, but it can also be a solution;
 - A panorama of the areas in which your governments and institutions may need to reinforce their preparations and capacities
- We don't claim to have all the answers. As always in the IDM, we count on your participation to bring the discussions to life.

III

- At the end of the workshop, I intend to join you again and summarize some of the understandings we have reached.
- Lastly, let me reiterate a warm welcome to you all. I am honoured to see so many distinguished speakers, from governments, academia and from our partners inside and outside the UN system on the panels. I hope the workshop will stimulate thought and action and wish you fruitful discussions.