

## CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENT AND MIGRATION:

### Frequently Asked Questions

December 2010

#### 1. What are the links between migration, the environment and climate change?

- **The migration - environment nexus is not a new issue:** the environment has always been one of the major drivers of migration. However, climate change significantly increases its current and future relevance.
- In its First Assessment Report (1990) the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) posited that “the gravest effects of climate change may be those on human migration”.<sup>1</sup> In its Fourth Assessment Report (2007) the IPCC notes population movements as a likely key consequence of climate change.
- Climate change is likely to exacerbate (a) the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events (e.g. tropical storms, floods, heat waves) (b) gradual processes of environmental degradation (e.g. desertification, soil and coastal erosion).<sup>2</sup> These effects of **climate change as well as its adverse consequences for livelihoods, public health, food security, and water availability will have a major impact on human mobility, likely leading to a substantial rise in its scale.**
- In most cases, it is **difficult to establish a simple and direct causal link between the movement of people and the environment:** the environment, including climate change impacts, is usually one of multiple factors involved in a decision to move. Other factors, such as levels of human and economic development, conflict, gender, livelihood strategies, demographic trends, access to networks as well as the availability of alternatives to migration, have an impact on whether or not a person migrates and the nature of migration.

#### 2. What patterns of migration have been observed today in relation to environmental change? What patterns are expected in the future as climate change advances?

- Environmental factors trigger diverse types of population flows, which require differentiated policy and programmatic approaches. The following criteria are useful to distinguish between **different types of environmental migration: internal or cross-border, temporary or permanent, and voluntary or forced.**
- Overall, **environmental migration is likely to be mainly internal**, and much of it will be directed from rural to urban areas. A smaller proportion of the movement is expected to take place between neighbouring countries, with even smaller numbers migrating long

<sup>1</sup> IPCC (1990) *First Assessment Report*, p. 103, para. 5.0.10.

<sup>2</sup> Please note that volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis are tectonic events. They are not related to climatic factors and climate change. Of course, they may also give rise to displacement.



distances. Some studies indicate that environmental degradation may lead to a fall in the rates of international, long-distance migration. This is due to the relatively high cost of long-distance migration. When such migration does take place, it is usually along pre-existing migration routes.

- The distinction between forced and voluntary movements, while fairly evident in cases such as impending or acute disaster, is not as clear cut in other instances, where the effects of environmental degradation imply a progressive deterioration of livelihoods and living conditions, compounded by social, economic, political and other factors. It may therefore be more useful to think in terms of **a continuum ranging from clearly forced cases to clearly voluntary movements with a grey zone in-between**. Most current and anticipated environmental migration is likely to fall within the grey zone.
- **Different types of environmental events and processes tend to produce different forms of movement**, although various socio-economic factors also play an important role.
- Extreme environmental events, including weather-related events, tend to lead to sudden, large-scale movements where return is sometimes feasible in the long run. In most cases, such movements are expected to be short distance. Some exceptions may occur, with increased migration flow along the existing migration routes.
- Although **slow-onset environmental processes are less visible than extreme events, over longer timescales, they tend to have a greater impact on the movement of people than natural disasters**. Slow-onset events can produce a wide spectrum of migration flows, including cross-border as well as rural to rural and rural to urban, with the majority of movements likely to take place either internally or cross-border to neighbouring countries.
- **Different stages of environmental degradation can be expected to have different outcomes for the movement of people**. At early and intermediate stages of environmental degradation, migratory responses are often temporary in nature and are more likely to be non-forced, serving as an adaptation strategy to environmental change. When environmental degradation becomes severe or irreversible, as in cases of sea-level rise, resulting displacement can become permanent and may require relocation of affected populations either internally or in a third country

### 3. Where will the environmental migrants come from?

- Climate change will have a differentiated impact, depending on the physical conditions and the adaptive capacities of countries and communities concerned. **Countries with a combination of low adaptive capacities and particularly vulnerable geographies and fragile ecosystems** (such as small island states, the Sahel Belt and low-lying megadeltas) will also face most profoundly the migratory consequences of climate change.
- **The majority of environmental migrants are likely to come from rural areas**, as their livelihoods are closely linked to climate-sensitive resources. However, environmentally-induced migration out of urban areas might also grow in the future as the sea level rise increasingly affects the densely populated coastal areas.

4. **What are the groups of people that are most likely to experience environmental out-migration pressures?**
- **Populations of the least developed countries and other countries most susceptible to the effects of climate change** are likely to experience increased migration pressures.
  - This also concerns **groups whose livelihoods depend on genetic species, ecosystem diversity and other climate-sensitive resources**, for instance, indigenous peoples.
  - Climate change tends to exacerbate differences among different groups in vulnerability and the ability to cope with its effects. Within societies, **vulnerable and socially marginalized groups**, such as the poor, children, women, older persons, indigenous peoples and, in some cases, migrants tend to bear the brunt of environmental impacts. Having fewer resources and options for adaptation in-situ, these groups tend to experience the greatest out-migration pressures as a result of environmental, economic and social impacts of climate change.
  - At the same time, as migration requires resources, **it is rarely the poorest, most vulnerable or severely affected who are able to migrate**. As a result, not being able to move can actually be a sign of greater vulnerability.
5. **What are the estimates of people on the move because of environmental pressures today, and at points in the future?**
- There are **no reliable estimates of the number of people on the move today or in the future as a result of environmental factors**, and more specifically, as a result of climate change.
  - **The most widely cited figure predicts 200 million people moving or being permanently displaced by 2050 due to environmental factors.**<sup>3</sup> This number is roughly equivalent to the estimates of the total of international migrants in the world today (214 million).
  - While reliable figures are not available for either the current or future population flows triggered by environmental factors, climate change, demographic trends and globalization all point to more migration. IPCC forecasts suggest that climate change is likely to be an increasingly important variable in this equation. **The absence of precise figures should not prevent the international community from starting to act today in helping the most vulnerable adapt to their changing reality.**
6. **What do we know about the relationship between environmentally induced migration and conflict?**
- There are links between climate change, conflict and migration, but it is **not a simple cause and effect relationship**.
  - As highlighted in the UN Secretary General's 2009 report to the UN General Assembly on "Climate Change and its possible security implications", the linkages between climate change and conflict are complex and need to be analysed in the context of pre-existing social, economic and environmental threats, or stresses. **Climate change can be**

---

<sup>3</sup> Norman Myers, Oxford University 2005; Stern Review Report on the Economics of Climate Change 2006

**viewed as a “threat multiplier”** which exacerbates existing sources of conflict and insecurity.

- The adverse impacts of climate change may push a growing number of already fragile States to a point where political crisis, poverty and environmental strains, including natural disasters, combine to form “complex emergencies”. Such complex emergencies can cause the displacement of populations who find themselves in conditions of exacerbated vulnerability.
- However, there is **little by way of solid empirical evidence to support that migration as a result of climate change leads to conflict, without any other factors shaping the situation.** Furthermore, migration can also be seen to serve as a conflict management mechanism that allows population pressures to be adjusted in line with environmental pressures.

## 7. What legal frameworks apply to environmentally induced population movements?

- All migrants are protected by **international human rights law**.<sup>4</sup>
- In addition, persons displaced within their country due to natural or human made disasters are covered by provisions laid out in the **Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement** (a non-binding instrument).
- **Those crossing international borders for environmental reasons would not normally qualify as refugees**, who are entitled to international protection within the existing international framework, nor do they fall squarely within any one other particular category provided by the existing international legal framework.
- Some States, however, have made some provisions for environmental migration: In Finland and Sweden, someone who left his or her country and is unable to return due to environmental disaster qualifies as a person in need of protection. The USA grants “Temporary Protection Status” to persons already in the USA and unable to return home as a result of environmental disaster; this was applied, for example, after Hurricane Mitch in Honduras and Nicaragua in 1998. In the EU, the “Temporary Protection Directive” allows for temporary protection under certain circumstances, when people are suddenly displaced in large numbers and it is not feasible to deal with their cases on an individual basis. Lastly, after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami Canada, Switzerland and the UK temporarily suspended removal of nationals of affected countries.

## 8. Does terminology matter? What are the implications of using terms like “climate refugees” or “environmental refugees”?

- Terminology has implications for moving forward both in the area of research and policy. **There is as yet no international consensus on the terminology** which should apply to people who move owing to environmental and/or climate-related factors. There are on-going inter-agency deliberations on this issue.
- It is too simplistic to say that “climate change” alone causes someone to move. It is the impacts of climate change (e.g. on soil fertility, water availability and quality) in combination with structural social and economic factors (e.g. access to resources,

---

<sup>4</sup> The issue of applicable legal frameworks is covered in more detail in *Climate Change, Migration and Displacement: Who will be affected?* prepared by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) informal group on migration/displacement and climate change, October 2008.

information and alternatives) that will tip the balance for or against migrating. While it is difficult to clearly identify the relative role of environmental factors in a decision to migrate, isolating the role of climate change is even more problematic. Therefore, **terms containing a reference to the environment are preferable to those referring to climate change.**

- In the absence of an agreed term, **‘environmental refugees’ or ‘climate refugees’** have been gaining currency, especially in the media and advocacy context. These terms however **have no legal basis in international refugee law.** ‘Refugee’ is a legal term which has a very specific meaning and centres on a “well-founded fear of being persecuted”. Environmental factors that cause movements across international borders are not grounds, in and of themselves, for the grant of refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Therefore, and there is an agreement among concerned agencies, including UNHCR, that the terms “environmental refugee” and “climate refugee” are not to be used.
- **Application of “climate change refugee” or “environmental refugee” could potentially undermine the international legal regime for the protection of refugees.** Furthermore, such terms may create confusion regarding the linkages among climate change, migration and persecution.
- In the absence of agreed terminology, **IOM has put forward a working definition of environmental migrants,** in an attempt to capture the complexity of the issue: “Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, predominantly 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.”

## **9. Where does environmentally-induced migration fit into the continuum of adaptation options?**

- Most people think about migration as a survival strategy, especially in the event of impending or acute natural disaster. These are usually instances of forced migration brought about directly by the event (the disaster) in which migration is a strategy of “last resort”.
- However, **migration can also be a proactive adaptation strategy,** particularly at early stages of environmental degradation, and should be recognized as such. Migration can help reduce risk to lives, livelihoods and ecosystems, and enhance the overall capacity of households and communities to cope with the adverse effects of environmental and climate change. Contributions of migrants through the transfer of remittances, as well as knowledge and skills upon their return can significantly strengthen the livelihoods of families and communities facing environmental challenges.

## **10. What can governments and the international community do to address environmental migration?**

- It is important to **identify priority areas for action** for addressing environmental migration. Such “hot spots” include: 1). areas with a complex mix of environmental, social and political issues, as pre-existing tensions, brought about by ethnic discrimination, socio-economic inequalities and poor governance, environmental strains, including natural disasters, may combine to form “complex emergencies”; and 2). areas where sudden-onset disasters are a recurring feature, and in areas where vulnerabilities are cumulated (e.g. combination of extreme events and gradual environmental degradation). Within these countries, **the focus needs to be on vulnerable and**

**socially marginalized groups**, such as the poor, children, women, older persons, indigenous peoples and, in some cases, migrants, as they tend to bear the brunt of environmental impacts.

- **Increasing the range of options open to those most vulnerable** to the effects of climate change and thus reducing their vulnerability in the short, medium and long run is the overall objective. In the context of migration, climate and the environment, this implies a three-pronged approach: 1). **preventing forced migration** as much as possible; 2). where forced migration does occur, **providing assistance and protection** to those that are being and will be displaced; and 3). **facilitating migration as an adaptation strategy** to climate change.
- To accomplish the above, there is a need to **develop comprehensive policy and programmatic approaches** at both the international and national levels by:
  - **mainstreaming migration considerations the world's climate change discussions and policies and practice and vice versa.** At the international level, implications of climate change for human mobility need to be considered within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (e.g. paragraph 4(f) of the draft negotiating text refers to the movement of people as a result of climate change). At the national level, more systematic integration of migration in the existing national adaptation programmes and in any future adaptation framework is required. This needs to be coupled with efforts to incorporate environment and climate change considerations into national migration management policies.
  - **closing the gap between the humanitarian, development and climate change communities and policies.** This would involve, for example, factoring climate change adaptation considerations into existing national development plans or into Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers as well as into Disaster Risk Reduction Strategies (DRRs) and other risk management strategies aimed at building resilience and reducing vulnerability. Migration and in particular migratory consequences of climate change need to be part of all the above measures.
- The international community needs to **move from reactive to proactive approaches** in order to ensure planning and preparedness for natural disasters and to increase the resilience of states and communities vulnerable to the effects of climate change. For example, by:
  - **bolstering humanitarian action** with adequate resources to meet the growing challenge of climate change, including measures to ensure adequate assistance and protection for people on the move as a result of environmental factors;
  - **supporting adaptation measures**, investment into sustainable development and vulnerability reduction **in the most vulnerable countries** to increase their resilience. This can help reduce migration pressures and minimize forced migration;
  - **developing temporary and circular labour migration schemes for environmentally vulnerable communities**, including measures to strengthen the developmental benefits of such migration for areas of origin (e.g. through the provision of information, strengthening of remittance channels and reduction of the costs for transactions, protection against human security risks and longer-term skills development in environmentally vulnerable areas);

- **planning for orderly relocation, sensitive to local contexts, in areas that are expected to become uninhabitable** to avoid a crisis situation and ensure sustainability of the move. This requires close cooperation with the affected communities as well as the communities of destination. If relocation outside the country of origin is considered, there is a need for close cooperation with a potential receiving country; and
  - **factoring climate change and altered population distributions into rural development and urban planning policies.**
- Effective policy development and implementation in this area requires **multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder cooperation** at the national, regional and international levels. The thematic constituencies that need to be involved include, inter alia, development, humanitarian, environment and climate as well as migration.
  - Population movements for environmental reasons are generally found to be primarily local and will be the responsibility of governments. However, **the involvement of other stakeholders such as international organizations, NGOs, civil society, the private sector and development partners is also critical.**
  - Perhaps most importantly, **the affected communities (both of origin and destination) and migrants themselves need to be actively involved** in the planning and implementation of policies to address the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities of environmental migration.

About CCEMA:

The **CCEMA** (Climate Change, Environment and Migration Alliance) aims to mainstream the environmental and climate change considerations into migration management policies and practice and to also bring migration issues into the world's on-going environmental and climate change discourse. A broader interdisciplinary research is necessary to understand these complex processes. The Alliance provides a platform for this interdisciplinary broad-based regional, international and global collaboration and coordination to:

- Bring together key stakeholders
- Develop the knowledge base on climate change, migration and the environment
- Provide a setting for creativity and innovation
- Provide practical support to the most vulnerable.

Contact: [www.ccema-portal.org/](http://www.ccema-portal.org/)