

Contribution to Topic D: Impact of Environmental Degradation, including Disasters, on Migration

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With this short presentation I would like to provide a rapid overview of the current state of the debate on the links between environmental degradation (including climate change) and migration. I will also present the preliminary conclusions from an international conference that took place in Bonn last week with the support of the OSCE, and dealing with the topic “Environmental Forced Migration and Social Vulnerability” or EFMSV. These conclusions and findings come in part from a European Commission-funded 6th Framework research project called “Environmental change and forced migration scenarios” (www.each-for.eu).

Most people accept that environmental change has influenced human movement throughout history. Today, however, the rate of environmental change and the complexity of our globalized world give added importance to understanding links between migration and environmental stressors. Slow or “creeping” processes such as land degradation or sea level rise or rapid onset hazards such as floods, earthquakes or tsunamis could serve as major push factors forcing people out of their original place of living. In recent years, a large number of research and documents have reported that our environment and ecosystems are degrading at a rapid pace and are increasingly affecting people and communities globally. I will name just a few of these recent documents: the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment published in 2005; the UNEP GEO-4 Report of 2007; the 2007 reports of the working groups of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; and the disaster-related data contained in the database of the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, as well as the first set of global empirical case studies performed in the European Commission’s EACH-FOR project. Global assessment reports do not only paint a bleak picture of the current state and future trends of our environment but also increasingly hint that these degradation processes could be the triggers for population movement.

There is a wide range of numbers that are circulating regarding environmental migration. Some reports speak of 24 million environmental migrants (UNHCR in 2002) and some, such as Christian Aid (in 2007), stress that after 2050, there could be up to 700 million environmental migrants. This disparity in numbers is due to variations in estimation methods, variations in environmental degradation scenarios, lack of precise definitions and other factors. Unfortunately the wide range of estimates does not help in framing the issue of environmental migration. Regardless of this debate it is becoming clearer that migration due to environmental factors is already taking place and could be exacerbated in the future notably because of the effects of climate change. The OSCE region (like most regions of the world) is and will continue to be affected by environmental migration, as source, transit and destination countries. For example papers presented at the EFMSV conference (some of which were linked to the EACH-FOR project) indicated that individuals migrating in and out of the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan do so sometimes because of environmental factors such as landslides, land degradation (such as salinisation and water-logging), pollution, and floods but in many cases, environmental degradation processes are just one of several pull and push factors which triggers migration (Khakimov and Mahmadbekov, 2008; Nasritdinov et al, 2008; Shormanbayeva and Makhmutova, 2008).

Conceptualising and/or defining environmental migration—a hotly debated topic—is an important step if we want to support policy and decision makers to prepare for, prevent, or respond to such movements of population. It is therefore time that research be implemented or increased in order to quantify environmental migrants rigorously and identify the major

environmental links precisely. Preliminary steps in this direction are taking place, notably in terms of definition and typology of environmental migration. The International Organisation for Migration has prepared a working definition for environmental migrants:

Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects 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 (IOM, 2007)

In addition, the United Nations University, Institute for Environment and Human Security has presented a preliminary definition tree recognising three different categories of environmentally-induced migrants:

- Environmental Emergency Migrants – to avoid the controversy that terms such as “Environmental Refugees” carry. This characterises people who flee the worst of an environmental impact. They have to take refuge to save their lives.
- Environmentally Forced Migrants. These would be people who “have to leave” to avoid the worst of environmental degradation. And,
- Environmentally Motivated Migrants. These would be people who “may leave” a steadily deteriorating environment to pre-empt the worst.

The proposed categories and the definition tree illustrate how the migration decision can be affected by environmental stressors such as rapid and slow onset hazards and capacities to adapt (other than through migration) (Renaud et al, 2008). These definitions could help in the setting up of protection mechanisms or a convention that would aim to protect individuals or groups of people who have to move because of environmental stressors as, indeed, there is no mechanism in place today to protect environmental migrants.

These are only first steps in a vast research agenda. The need for additional research has been highlighted in an expert research workshop on migration and the environment that was co-organised by UNU-EHS, IOM, the Munich Re Foundation and UNEP in the spring of this year; and is also one of the main conclusion of the recently held EFMSV conference. Other main, but still preliminary conclusions of the EFMSV conference that ended last Saturday were:

- Migration in the future may be a part of adaption to environmental change including climate change, but more often migration is not adaptation, but rather the failure to adapt
- The poorest often cannot migrate; although these very poor groups would need to move to survive, migration may be impossible and only an act that the relatively well-off can afford
- Research needs to be carried out in a trans- and inter-disciplinary way as there are many environmental, social and economic push and pull factors at play.
- It is possible to attribute single causality factors in migration, particularly when dealing with some types of rapid onset hazards. However, for slow deteriorating environments the livelihoods of the people are affected and influenced by many other factors.
- A rapid succession of events, such as recurrent flooding or drought can reach a social tipping point whereby the decision to migrate is taken. However, tipping points are more within individuals as a hidden social vulnerability dimension.
- People are attached to their original place of living and generally would prefer not to migrate. Improving livelihoods locally is a good development strategy.

In conclusion, we would like to suggest that the OSCE could play a major role in:

- Research on the topic of environmental migration together with other interested international and national partners. This could be by participating in the framing of definitions, participating directly and indirectly in field research and facilitating this research
- Continue to engage with other interested organisations in information, networking and dissemination of knowledge on the topic of environmental migration, and
- Supporting the idea that protection mechanisms, such as an additional convention or other international legally-binding instrument be put in place to protect environmental migrants

References

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