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**“Migration management and its linkages with economic,  
social and environmental policies to the benefit of stability and security in  
the OSCE region”**

**Session VI: Addressing the environmental factors of migration**

**Introduction**

The environment and the climate have always played an important role in population movements. There is nothing new about that. And yet, the mention of “migration”, “climate change” and “environment” in the same sentence conjures up images of natural disasters, death, people fleeing hurricanes or flash floods. The message is clear: migrants and displaced persons are victims requiring urgent aid. This is true, of course. But this rather sensationalist approach is far from being the whole story. This is something that the OSCE, which is involved in prevention and long-term measures as well as emergency action, is well aware of.

At the same time, there is no denying the importance of these phenomena: 211 million people affected in 2007, five times as many as the displacement of persons as a result of conflicts and civil wars and seven times as many as the total number of displaced persons and refugees.

By focusing too much on extreme events, however, we run the risk of ignoring migrations caused by gradual degradation of the environment, which can quietly affect entire populations. Similarly, by focusing too much on the negative impacts of migrations connected with climate change, we lose sight of the need for a more balanced approach that takes into account both the (real) problems that they pose and the undeniable opportunities that they offer.

It would undoubtedly be a mistake to believe that we can stop or curb population movements caused by climate change. One of the most promising approaches would be to find solutions in partnership with the most exposed countries so as to improve management of the movements through specific projects with measurable results. This is the approach focused on by the OSCE together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the University of the United Nations, as we shall see tomorrow morning.

## **What is the scope of the phenomenon today? Can we predict the future?**

At the risk of disappointing you, we do not have really reliable figures today on the current extent of movements and the general future trends regarding environmentally induced migration.

This is not really surprising, since porous borders, the lack of technical and human resources combined with considerable internal budgetary constraints mean that many States have difficulties investing in the collection and analysis of primary data. Added to this is the difficulty in isolating the environment and/or climate change factors in the decision to migrate, since many other social, economic or political elements can also have an important bearing.

Ultimately, the exact extent of environmental migrations depends to a large degree on that of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) scenarios, but one thing is certain: these population movements will increase. What is the situation today? Around 25 million persons have migrated or been displaced for environmental reasons.

As for the future, the most commonly quoted figure is 200 million persons by the year 2050, double the total number of migrants in the world today from all kinds of migration.

However, the margin of uncertainty is enormous, since the estimates range from 25 million to 1 billion people, a factor of 40. There is a very nice word in English for this: “guesstimates”. So, the first conclusion is that there is a need for more investment in research both at the country level and directly at the agency level.

## **Terminological constraints and their impact on protection**

There is a lot of talk, particularly in the media, of climate refugees. The fact is, however, that the term “refugee” is not neutral: like the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), we believe that the term “climate refugee” is not applicable in most cases under international humanitarian law. The legal definition of a refugee includes manifest persecution on the part of the State, which in this context reduces the applicability to individual cases.

As for victims of natural disasters displaced within their own country, the Guiding principles on internal displacement, a non-binding instrument published in 1998, explicitly calls for their protection.

In 2007, the IOM came up with a working definition of “environmental migrants”, which has been widely adopted since then, in particular by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and by the scientific community: *“Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, 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”*.

An obvious shortcoming remains, however: except for the provisions connected with the Convention on Human Rights, there is no specific instrument today providing the required protection for a person or group of persons forced to cross an international frontier

because of climatic events or the advanced or irreversible degradation of his or her environment.

Despite this fact, there are no signs of a prevailing interest within the international community in a new convention or specific protocol. Likewise, an extension of the mandate of the UNHCR to take account of these people is not on the agenda either.

### **Some essential questions worthy of consideration**

#### Near or far?

First of all, migration is not an option available to everybody. The poorest of the poor will not be able to migrate, even to get to the nearest large town. Those who can leave their habitual environment are most likely to remain within their country, migrating towards the capital and swelling the numbers of people living in shanty towns. If they go abroad, it will most likely be to a neighbouring country where they will be able to preserve their social and cultural references.

Transcontinental migration in the classic sense, be it regular or not, is another marginal option and will probably remain so as far as communities affected by climate change are concerned.

#### Temporary or permanent?

Here, again, it is not possible to generalize. In the case of extreme climatic events, the populations will be forced to leave for a certain length of time but rarely permanently. They will usually opt to return to their village, even in the awareness that similar disasters could happen again and without necessarily taking any special precautionary measures.

What happens with gradual processes? Fishermen find fewer and fewer fish, cattle breeders have fewer and fewer pastures for their herds, etc. When human safety is threatened, some members of the family can migrate, often on a seasonal basis or from the country to the city, to improve the family's daily lot.

In the event of irreversible destruction of the natural environment for whatever reason, displacement can involve reinstallation, generally within the country if there are no agreements with outside countries. This kind of forced migration could well become permanent.

#### Forced or voluntary?

This distinction, which is made a lot of, does not really apply in most cases with the obvious exception of natural disasters forcing people to flee at once to save their lives.

The distinction between voluntary and forced movement is difficult to define and is sometimes tenuous. There are many cases, in fact, when the migration results from a decision based solely on the desire to avoid the worst as its approach becomes imminent. Voluntary, yes, but not really. Forced, yes, but not entirely.

To take an example, at what point does the migration of a farmer to the city because his fields are no longer fertile become "forced"? Not easy to determine. This idea of a point

of no-return is at the heart of the process and depends on a number of associated factors, particularly economic ones.

This distinction is important, however, for political reasons: if we limit our analysis and our work to forced migration, we run a great risk of concentrating on emergency situations on an ad hoc basis and of losing sight of the need for a more comprehensive approach to migration management.

#### Problem or solution?

Migration is still seen as the worst-case scenario, a failure to adapt. And yet it is evident that it can also be a livelihood adaptation or diversification strategy, especially in the case of environmental degradation. This possibility has not yet entered into our thought patterns. And there is even worse: if attempts are made to prevent migration at all costs, the pressure on vulnerable populations as a result of environmental circumstances is going to increase rather than diminish.

#### A key issue: vulnerability

Exposure to climate or environmental risk is not the same everywhere and not all regions are the same when it comes to dealing with such a risk. For example, while the Netherlands is currently putting in additional installations to protect against the rise in sea level, Bangladesh, which is exposed to the same problem, suffers recurrent flooding that endangers the lives of several million people without their having the means to combat it effectively.

The vulnerability of a community obviously depends on its exposure to climatic conditions but also on its capacity for adaptation. That is the reason that cyclone George caused six deaths in Cuba, which has long had early warning mechanisms, as against almost 400 in Haiti, where the authorities have not taken the same measures.

Discussion should not be limited to economic aspects alone, however. The most important thing is the people, the men and women affected by this vicious circle, and it is in the interior of the least developed countries that the most vulnerable populations are threatened to the greatest extent.

This vulnerability to risk could well be the explosive issue of the future, as illustrated by the hunger riots that broke out in many places last spring. For a family in Burkina Faso, where more than 70 per cent of the population live on less than two dollars a day and 86 per cent of the workers depend on the primary sector, an increase in the price of flour or rice is critical, and it is not just a question of purchasing power.

In the face of threats of this kind, the determining factors that are not linked to the climate, such as government policies, demographic growth and the resilience of the communities to natural disasters, are also important. All of them have an influence on the level of vulnerability of populations, and the government should not be exempt from responsibility because disasters are unpredictable or a matter of chance.

### What are the links between migration and conflicts?

It is easy to see how and why climate change and environmental degradation can exacerbate some existing problems. In defined external conditions (bad governance, recession, ethnic tensions, abundance of small arms, etc.) these problems can undermine economic and political stability. But environmental factors are not generally considered to be fundamental determinants as such and there would need to be an as yet unlikely combination of major and lasting changes to the climate for this situation to change.

While the link between conflict and the abundance of resources is relatively easy to understand, the way in which attrition or the disappearance of vital resources might be linked to conflicts has not yet been completely documented.

The case of Darfur is often cited in this context. It is evident that desertification, soil degradation and deforestation have exacerbated the impact of recurrent droughts on local communities and have contributed to tensions between semi-nomadic herdsman and farmers when pasture, arable soil and water resources become more and more limited. It would be going too far, however, to say that the conflict in Darfur is the first environmental conflict, as there are other external factors that need to be taken into consideration in order to understand the local situation, including the role of third countries.

### Migration as an adaptation strategy

In spite of everything I have said up to now, the consequences of migration are not all negative, even if the collective awareness tends to ignore this aspect.

The choice of destination often depends on the resources available at a given moment. In an agricultural region, a good harvest can provide a family with sufficient resources to send one of its members to work abroad. Even if considerable amounts of money can be transferred, this approach is still highly speculative: apart from the fact that the voyage is hazardous, “profitability” is not guaranteed and the economic and financial crisis increases the risks of not being able to find work at a time when many migrants, including those in a regular situation, have trouble finding jobs.

In years of drought, by contrast, when the harvests are meagre, young people tend to stay much closer to home, preferring to go to work in neighbouring towns so as not to put a strain on the family’s food supplies and to contribute to the household. In years like this, the risk of losing in the “migration lottery” is simply too high.

### Human security: how to act?

Human security could be seen as a “guiding principle” in all approaches to political action or activities in the field. Why is it important? Human beings must be at the centre of our debate if we are to gain an overall understanding of the concept of vulnerability and resilience. With this approach, economic and physical security, health, education, networks and survival options clearly play a role. The decision to migrate is recognized as the result of a combination of economic, social and cultural factors.

There is a risk that the absence of individual security will turn into an objective threat to collective security – in a wider sense than national security in the military sense.

The human security approach also has a humanitarian dimension, which includes the need to aid populations that are repeatedly exposed to natural disasters that progressively erode their ability to resist them.

The concept of human security is seen by some as being too broad, too catch-all and too vague to be of any utility to policy makers, who prefer “compartments” and more classic frameworks. But two topics as transversal and multidimensional as migration and the environment cannot be dealt with within the framework of a single research or policy domain.

What can the international community do about the humanitarian consequences of climate change, in particular migration and displacement?

1. Devise a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach to research into the following areas so as to foster understanding:
  - The existing links between climate change, environmental degradation and migrations and the influence of these phenomena on human security and sustainable development;
  - Forms of migration caused by climate change so as to permit early political intervention in favour of organized movements and diversified migratory strategies;
  - Migratory flows, their socio-economic and cultural dimensions and their impact on regional economies, in particular ways of disaggregating the underlying factors that cause migration.
2. Provide targeted support to the most vulnerable countries by strengthening capacities and through partnerships so as to improve the ability of these States to confront the threats and challenges posed by climate change.
3. Ensure respect for human rights, particularly those of vulnerable groups. States and other stakeholders could take measures, individually or collectively, to lessen the threats and adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation as they affect human rights.
4. Set up a combined national approach that involves the various ministries concerned together with other national actors. It is important to ensure that migration is an integral consideration in all discussion and policies connected with climate change and conversely that discussion of the environment and the climate are included in migration policies and management programmes parallel to preparations for humanitarian emergencies and rehabilitation operations.
5. Strengthen inter-State and multilateral co-operation at all levels. The countries of origin and destination should play a central role in this type of co-operation. Civil society, the private sector and non-governmental organizations in particular have an important contribution to make, particularly with regard to capacity-building.
6. Promote at the global level national strategies adopted in response to the degradation of national natural resources, such as the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) national action programmes, which include local development

programmes aimed at reducing poverty within local communities affected by desertification and drought. These programmes help to diminish factors likely to provoke migration.

7. Development incentive systems to channel financial and non-financial migrant resources so as to make local living conditions more viable and reduce environmental degradation as a result of human activity.

Before concluding, I should also like to mention a few less comfortable questions, which people often prefer to avoid.

Is it really possible to combine the development and climate protection agendas? This is one of the fundamental issues in the discussion: is development (as currently understood) the way to save the planet or, on the contrary, an obstacle to it?

What role is played by migration? Considering how much climate change and migration are politically and socially sensitive on their own, we can readily understand what could happen if an attempt is made to deal with them together: a political magnetic field would result that would prevent them from coming together.

What are the real political priorities? The Global Environment Facility finances small-scale adaptation projects. It is worth 320 million dollars at present and its current disbursements do not exceed 50 per cent of this amount. At the same time, the annual cost of adaptation to climate change in the developing countries alone in 2018 is put by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) at 86 billion dollars. This amount might seem enormous, but it represents only about 10 per cent of the amount spent by developed countries on defence.

It is not for me to answer these questions, but I think that it is important to ask them. There is clearly an urgent need to act in order to anticipate natural disasters, prevent or limit environmental degradation and improve the management of population movements caused by climate change.

However, this “sense of urgency” now needs to take concrete shape through the mobilization of funds to meet the challenge. By way of guidance, I list here some of the priorities that should be taken into account in achieving this aim:

- Put human beings at the centre of discussion on climate change;
- Increase support to populations directly affected, especially in the early stages of environmental degradation;
- Increase the number of countries eligible for National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPA);
- Combine the co-ordination of emergency humanitarian aid with consideration of adaptation strategies in a comprehensive vision;
- Consider industrial options that will help to mitigate the effects of climate change.