

EF.GAL/11/05  
22 May 2005



ENGLISH only

**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**

**The Secretariat**

**Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and  
Environmental Activities**

**Vienna, 22 May 2005**

**Background paper for Session III of the 13<sup>th</sup> Economic Forum**

Contents:

1. Environmental root causes of migration
2. Environmental refugees
3. Migration impact on environment
4. Current OSCE activities
5. Possible recommendations

## 1. Environmental root causes of migration

### Poverty and Environment

Poverty and environmental degradation are closely linked. When the land is not able to sustain agriculture or other economic activity, poverty is the result. Equally, poverty weakens the resilience of populations to reverse environmental degradation. Poverty may indeed worsen the environmental problems since poor people may not have any choice other than further depleting water, forestry and soil resources in their efforts to seek out a living on already marginal lands. Once this situation becomes unmanageable, poor people seek a better life elsewhere, often in cities, putting further pressure on urban eco-systems.

### Ground Water / Salinisation/ Desertification

Falling ground water levels, land degradation and desertification pose a threat to the OSCE area and world wide. The 2003 Human Development Report states that land degradation affects nearly 2 billion hectares of land globally and the lives of around one billion people living on these lands. The UN estimates that as many as 135 million people may be at risk of being driven off their land by desertification. Research shows that aquifers are being depleted across the globe. Such unsustainable practices cause a “bubble economy” where an increasing output of agricultural produce is being supported by pumping dry the water resources necessary to sustain growth. As the water dries up, agricultural output and people’s income decreases, ultimately leading to rural economic collapse. This was demonstrated as early as in the 1930s by the Dust Bowl devastation of the Great Plains which drove 3 million American farmers to leave their farms for California. The Aral Sea disaster (as a result of overusage by the cotton industry) is a more recent example of unsustainable agricultural policy impacting on quantity of current water resources. Also with relation to water quality, the UNDP Human Development Report 2003 states that this leads to worsening living standards, and, hence, to outward- ‘unplanned’- migration.

### **The internally displaced in Central Asia: An IOM report:**

IOM commissioned a study (2004-2005) to analyze the underlying causes and current response strategies for internal displacement in Central Asia. Among others, it highlights the extremely important role of environmental factors in causing internal displacement. It identifies two broad clusters of ‘causal factors’:

Natural Disasters (predominantly in the Ferghana Valley region, mountainous areas of Tajikistan, and in southern Kazakhstan along the Syr Darya)

1. Mudslides/landslides
2. Flooding
3. Earthquakes

### Man-made Disasters

1. Nuclear testing sites and waste areas (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan).
2. Desertification/salinisation of the Aral Sea region and lack of water resources (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan)

### Some figures:

-CRED database lists 66,000 displaced in Tajikistan as a cause of natural disasters between 1991-2001

-Karakalpakstan region (Aral Sea) experiences average outflow of ca. 4,000 per year since 1990’s

### Natural Disasters

Another issue posing a threat to populations in the OSCE area are natural disasters. The Red Cross and Red Crescent World Disaster Report 2004 concludes that both hydro-meteorological and geophysical disasters have become more common, increasing by 68 per cent and 62 per cent respectively over the decade. In the OSCE area, heat waves, floods, fires

#### **Case study: Deforestation**

Deforestation continues at around 9 million hectares per year. Forested lands in Central Asia for example, especially in the foothills of the mountains and along the river ways, have shrunk to less than a quarter of their original extent. This deforestation has multiple effects:

- agricultural output decreases as fertile soil is washed away
- desertification advances
- the frequency of landslides increases
- the frequency of flooding increases as rainfall is not absorbed by the soil
- nutrient rich sediments clog dams which increase dredging costs,
- natural water filtration ability decreases
- soil salinisation increases, ultimately leading to desertification
- biodiversity is lost which weakens ecosystem's resilience to external shocks

and extreme weather have made headlines in the US and Europe. However, it is the populations in countries with weaker economies that are hit the hardest. Central Asia is one of the more earthquake prone regions in the world. Increased desertification, deforestation, land degradation and climate change exacerbate the frequency at which natural disasters occur.

Natural disasters inevitably cause 'unregulated' migration and increase the number of internally displaced people.

#### Industrial / Nuclear waste

Purely man made environmental disasters can also have long lasting devastating effects forcing people to leave their homes, as demonstrated by, the Chernobyl nuclear accident. In the OSCE area there are many obsolete industrial installations

and hazardous waste dumps that pose a threat to the surrounding population and their environment. Toxins can spread through the air, water and food chain. Even if they do not directly impact on human health they can render agricultural land unusable, prompting out-migration.

### Climate Change

Climate change adds another, potentially devastating and not yet fully understood, component to the problem of environmental migrants. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted in 1990 that the greatest effect of climate change could be human migration. Climate change has the potential to exacerbate several of the different factors causing environmentally induced migration described above, such as droughts, floods, extreme weather and desertification. In addition to this, rising sea levels will cause further loss of land and will force people to resettle away from coastal areas.

Around half of the world's population lives in coastal areas. The IPCC reported in a 2001 study that sea levels could rise by nearly one meter during this century. Other research completed since then indicates that the possible rise might be even higher. A one-meter rise in sea levels would necessitate relocation of many millions of people and destroy important agricultural lands, for example large sections of the low lying rice plains of South- and South East Asia, with effects resonating on the grain markets globally.

## **2. Environmental Refugees**

Various international agencies note growing numbers of displaced people as a result of environmental problems such as drought, soil degradation, desertification, deforestation, and natural and man-made disasters. Yet there is still far less attention devoted to these kinds of migrants than to those forced to flee because of political instability, ethnic conflict or economic collapse. However, since the Asian Tsunami of 2004, there has been a growth in official literature on the topic of displacement due to natural disasters. Walter Kalin, UN Representative for internally displaced persons, has finalized his report on the issue following his visit to Asia in February and March . (It be downloaded from the OCHA website).

The Red Cross and Red Crescent World Disasters Report 2003 estimates that 25 million people have become 'environmental migrants'. The uncertainty about the numbers stems from the difficulty to assess in what ways environmental degradation actually influences a person's decision to migrate. Environmental factors are closely intertwined with other factors such as poverty, institutional constraints, population pressures and political instability – all of which are given as reasons for migration. Research and population surveying undertaken by Medecins Sans Frontières (2001-2004) in Karakalpakstan showed a marked increase in out-migration from villages during a two-year severe drought. Although the link between the drought, lack of water resources and inability to sustain a living was obvious, the majority of migrants interviewed stated economic reasons versus environmental reasons as the most important reason for leaving.

Globally, 135 million people already face threat of desertification and another 550 million are subject to chronic water shortage. This number will rise if the predictions of global warming come true (sea level rise, disruption of yearly rains, droughts).

Many more come on top of this figure if one takes into account the poverty stricken areas of the world. Many poor people live on agricultural areas with very low potential, of which 57% try to survive in areas prone to erosion, droughts, floods and other environmental hazards. Most of the population increases over the next years will come from communities living in such marginal environments. For people who can no longer sustain a livelihood on their land due to intense soil degradation, lack of grazing pastures, or the destruction of home or residence due to a natural disaster, moving into urban areas is a survival mechanism. They can almost always be found in "shanty towns" where they contribute to urban poverty statistics. Ultimately this leads to un-managed urban expansion, and puts further pressure on urban ecosystems.

The existence of environmental refugees was first recognized and categorized in 1985 in a United Nations Environment Program publication, "Environmental Refugees". The data and conclusions were drawn from United Nations' research, particularly from the UN Disaster Relief Agency. The publication defined environmental refugees as "...those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life."

This definition does not correspond to the official definition of "refugees" by the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which protects only those who have crossed an international border and have a "well-founded fear" of being persecuted. The plight of millions of forced environmental migrants does not fulfil the second of these criteria and

often not the first one either, as many people move within their country. This exclusion raises serious ethical and legal questions. Some experts opine that adding environmental migrants to the definition of refugees would be unhelpful, as it would overload the existing refugee apparatus. The result is that no UN agency is currently mandated to help them. National governments are technically responsible, but millions go unaided.

For example, the Government of Spain and the UNCCD organised an international symposium on desertification and migrations in Almeria, Spain, 9-11 February 1994. It concluded that the corollary of the recognised right of freedom of movement is the right to remain. The freedom of people to stay at home, on their land and in their own culture deserves to be supported by the international community.

### **3. Migration impact on Environment**

Reversing the above-mentioned logic, it is worth considering the impact migrating people have on their environment. Mediterranean countries are experiencing an increase in wild fires as a consequence of farmland being left unattended by people moving to seek a more prosperous life in the cities. Equally, when the movement of people from rural to urban areas outpaces urban infrastructure in terms of waste management, water supply, sanitation and transport, the implications for local health and welfare become serious.

Refugees also have an environmental impact. Humanitarian assistance to displaced people can proceed without sufficient attention to the potentially avoidable environmental impacts of their operations, even though these can play a role in driving future conflicts. The majority of the world's refugees are found in marginal regions of poor, developing countries. Here, the "footprint" or environmental impact of their activities is often of great magnitude and long duration. Collecting shelter materials and firewood can cause serious deforestation and soil erosion. Water contamination within the camps results from overuse and contamination due to pollution and the presence of livestock near water sources.

Refugee related impacts can lead to tension with the local host community, as competition for resources intensifies and refugees new to the area are unfamiliar with traditions or laws protecting wildlife or sacred sites.

### **4. Current OSCE activities**

The OSCE is already working on a variety of projects and activities aimed at abating the environmental and economic factors forcing people to migrate. The Environment and Security Initiative (EnvSec) is a partnership of three organizations – the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the OSCE. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has also associated itself to the Initiative. The Initiative aims at providing a framework for co-operation on environmental issues across borders and promoting peace and stability through environmental co-operation and sustainable development. The Initiative currently operates in three regions: Central Asia, the Caucasus and South Eastern Europe. Expansion to Western CIS is planned for 2005.

The EnvSec initiative has identified the threats posed by natural disasters, industrial sites, hazardous waste and unsustainable land and water management in Central Asia, South Caucasus and South Eastern Europe. Targeted work programs comprising over 30 projects have been devised to deal with these issues. In addition, OSCE Economic and Environmental

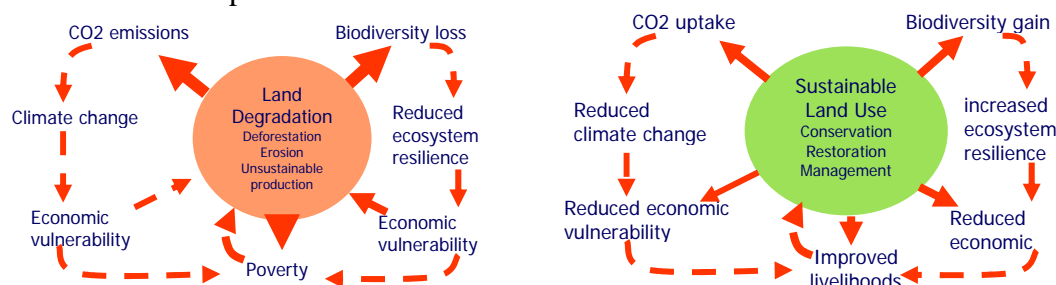
Officers in the field missions are carrying out activities relating to water quality and quantity, natural disasters, hazardous waste and industrial installations at risk.

The OSCE is currently in consultations with the UNCCD to explore co-operation on reforestation programs in at-risk areas (see SecuriTree) to combat land degradation and to fully integrate the concept of human security into classical notions of security and environmental security.

## **5. Possible recommendations:**

### Root causes:

- Assist Participating States in improving relevant environmental policies to address root causes of environmental migration, including awareness raising and capacity building programs
- Encourage the implementation of existing national and international environmental rules and standards, including activities creating synergies under the Rio conventions.
- Support research and activities to assist affected populations and to address and resolve environmental root causes for migration (water depletion, soil degradation, natural disasters, deforestation)
- Strengthen co-operation under ENVSEC and potentially expand to Northern Africa and Eastern Europe



### Environmental Refugees:

- Recognising environmental refugees and allocating resources to assist affected groups;
- Assist in the coordination of actors to avoid overlap and improve synergy of programmes assisting environmental migrants;
- Assist the modification of labour codes to include migrants' rights;
- Help promote the legal rights of migrants; put special emphasis on the rights and liberties of migrants; in this context, the work on vulnerable groups should be continued;
- Encourage and support the role of NGOs in addressing migrants' problems.

### Migration impact on environment

- Assist UNHCR environmental programmes:  
→ Participatory environmental decision making engaging displaced persons with their host communities.
- Capacity building assistance to city planners (environmental impact assessments)
- Awareness raising among refugee population
- Continue co-operation under ENVSEC