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United Nations Institute for Training and Research

## SEMINAR REPORT

### Migration and Development Series Climate change, environmental degradation and migration: Preparing for the Future

*organized jointly with IOM, UNFPA and the MacArthur Foundation*

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United Nations Headquarters, New York

#### BACKGROUND

Climate change ranks high on the international and the United Nations' agenda. While attention to the humanitarian consequences of climate change and environmental degradation has increased over the past year, its specific interaction with migration – in particular the impact of environmental degradation on human mobility – still remains comparatively little explored. Rough estimates are being circulated, which predict a dramatic rise in the movement of people, both internal and across borders that may have an unprecedented impact on lives and livelihoods. In the context of this year's Commission on Sustainable Development (5-16 May 2008), the seminar explored existing evidence and further research needs regarding the interlinkages between climate change, environmental degradation and migration. Key stakeholders were invited to discuss these various impacts and challenges, including questions of vulnerability and human security, as well as legal definitions and protection regimes for the environmentally displaced.

#### OBJECTIVES

The seminar was intended to: Discuss some of the challenges in analyzing the interlinkages between climate change, environment and migration, including data, research and terminology; Explore the impacts of climate and other gradual environmental changes on migration processes; Present effects of extreme climate and other environmental events on migration; Raise awareness of the intermediating social, economic and political factors affecting these interlinkages; Explore ways in which migration can be used as a response to climate and gradual environmental changes and extreme climate and other environmental events; Present the international legal framework governing the migration and environment nexus; Identify various key players in the climate, environment and migration domains.

Information on the seminar and the *Migration and Development Series* is available from [info@unitar.org](mailto:info@unitar.org) or at <http://www.unitar.org/en/migdevseries.html>

Postal Address: UNITAR New York – One United Nations Plaza, Suite DC1-603 New York, NY 10017-3515  
T +1 (212) 963-9196 F +1 (212) 963-9686 [www.unitar.org](http://www.unitar.org) E-mail : [info@unitar.org](mailto:info@unitar.org)

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Institut des Nations Unies pour la formation et la recherche  
Instituto de las Naciones Unidas para Formación Profesional e Investigaciones



## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

More often than not, climate change, environmental and disaster-related issues, and migration continue to be discussed in a compartmentalized fashion, by different expert and practitioner communities. One of the lessons emerging from the seminar is that bringing these various perspectives and actors together is likely to generate new insights, and to multiply potential areas of inquiry and collaboration.

### Remaining uncertainties

Despite the recognition that climate change is real, at least partly man-made, and with tangible impacts, the capacity to accurately predict exactly how it will affect eco-systems and the livelihoods of people around the globe is still limited. This also means that scenarios about the future concerning climate-induced migration flows are still highly speculative. While some studies on the nexus between climate change, environmental degradation and migration estimate that between 150-200 million (Stern Review) and 1 billion (Christian Aid Report) people may be displaced in the future, speakers concurred with the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change, which has called such figures "at best guesswork".

Experts discounted what they called a "top-down approach" to environmental migration research, which identifies areas affected by environmental and climate change, counts the number of people living in those areas and then, based on these figures, estimates the number of people likely to move. In fact, climate-related conditions such as drought can discourage, rather than spur migration, as increased food prices leave people without the necessary means to migrate. Thus, it is necessary to understand that migration decisions are usually not mono-causal, but influenced by multiple factors. These include political instability, unemployment, lack of access to resources etc. in the country of origin, as well as better employment prospects, higher wages and social networks, amongst other, in the country of destination. In addition, intervening factors such as immigration policies and transport infrastructures shape migration decisions and outcomes.

A more fruitful approach to determining the role of environmental factors in migration decisions therefore seems to lie in exploring the sensitivity of existing migration flows to climate change and environmental degradation. Using agent-based simulations of the migration decision-making process, such an approach allows for incorporating individual and collective definitions of what constitutes a dangerous climatic/environmental situation.

Identifying an agenda for further research, experts agreed that there remains a great deal of data gathering, modelling and research to enable the discussions to move beyond broad hypotheses. In this regard, they outlined three core areas for future research: firstly, the challenges of measuring the migration-environment nexus, including problems of definition, of uncertainty and subjectivity in current models, and the need to harmonize data from several different sources; secondly, the examination of basic questions of how, when and in what ways people migrate in response to environmental change; and thirdly, policy-based research, concerning how policies and institutions can best address the interaction.

### Risk and vulnerability: the role of development and human rights

One of the key messages of the seminar was that climate change unequally affects countries and people around the world, based on global development inequalities and unequal access to rights and resources. As the Human Development Report 2007/2008 aptly demonstrates, there is a significant difference between risk and vulnerability: While all countries are at risk, developing countries are more vulnerable, given that they have far less



resources and capacities at their disposal to cope with and adapt to climate change and environmental degradation. Thus, not everybody will be affected in the same way by the consequences of climate change. Most casualties are to be expected in the developing world, especially in South and East Asia, Africa and the Small Island Developing States.

It was stressed that it is necessary to further disaggregate vulnerability so as to look at how different groups of people are affected differently within any given country. Climate change tends to magnify existing inequalities and to exacerbate marginalization. Participants drew attention to the heightened vulnerability of the poor, women, unaccompanied youth and children, disabled people, minorities as well as indigenous populations. Their adaptation abilities are hampered by various factors, which often constitute infringements on basic human rights, including: a heightened exposure to risk (i.e. due to inadequate housing); lack of access to resources and information; specific sets of knowledge and skills or the lack thereof; and limited or no involvement in decision-making. It was highlighted that the negative impacts of disasters on women are exacerbated by the prevalence of gender-based violence in this context, and the burden that the care of others places on women during and in the aftermath of disaster.

Indeed, another key insight was that severe impacts of environmental changes, which damage the sustainable livelihoods of vulnerable people and reduce their resilience to further environmental changes, can to a large degree be attributed to failures of policy. One example in case is desertification. Though it is caused by multiple factors including droughts, climate change, urbanization, population dynamics and economic situations, desertification was deemed both predictable and reversible. It was suggested that the risk of famine, forced migration and conflict due to desertification can be reduced by addressing five kinds of policy failure: 1) the failure to converge the global and the local; 2) to mainstream strategies to combat desertification at the national level; 3) to distribute information and knowledge; 4) to disseminate and expand good practices; and 5) to mobilize the required resources. National, regional and sub-regional Action Plans, alongside thematic programme networks and South-South partnerships, were seen as important efforts in increasing understanding and organizing coordinated responses to the problem.

### **Migration as an adaptation strategy**

A third key message was that migration in the face of environmental changes should not be seen simply as a failure of adaptation, but rather as an essential component of migration management policies. Several experts stressed the fact that, in light of environmental hazards, migration has already become part of individual and collective adaptation strategies. In many cases, sending a family member to urban areas or abroad is a strategy to diversify income, which allows rural households to reduce their dependency on agricultural revenue. Legal frameworks and policies should be designed to accommodate this reality and to ensure that migration can happen in a legal and safe manner.

It was deemed important to distinguish between different sorts of environmental disruption, as these are likely to affect migration in different ways. Thus, speakers referred to four analytical categories that may be of use: less advanced stages of gradual environmental change, advanced stages of gradual environmental change, extreme or quick-onset environmental effects, and the effects of large-scale development and land conservation projects. Evidence also suggests that migration can have an effect on environmental conditions. In areas of destination, urbanization or population relocation, for example following a disaster, are associated with the erosion of formerly sustainable environmental resources. In areas of origin, investments of migrants and return, can lead to sudden



changes in land-use and ultimately to the exhaustion of the natural environment.

It was recommended that looking at past experiences of temporary and permanent resettlement of populations affected by natural disasters and environmental degradation could be useful for identifying good practices. Moreover, speakers outlined three principles required for effective management of environmental migration: proactive policy and early action, comprehensive and coherent policies, and bilateral, regional and global cooperation. Supporting these efforts requires inter-agency cooperation, research and data assessments and capacity building at all levels.

### **Human security implications**

Much emphasis was placed on the human security and human rights implications of climate change, environmental degradation and migration. These implications are multi-dimensional. While displacement and migration often come with human security risks, so too does staying in a place that is affected by environmental degradation or disaster, and which may be affected by hunger, malnutrition, lack of access to water and adequate housing, exposure to disease, and the loss of livelihoods and ultimately lives. Scarcity of and competition over natural resources due to environmental changes may lead to violent conflict, ultimately forcing people to flee. At the same time, as migration and displacement spread the burden to receiving communities and countries, it is feared that this may increase the likelihood of violent conflict in areas of destination. There was some reluctance, though, to overstress these dangers.

Displaced persons and migrants themselves face a range of human security risks, ranging from the disruption or strain of infrastructures and services to the separation of families. For example, a growing number of people in search of a better livelihood migrate to cities, where they often end up settling in locations that for their part are exposed to the risks of extreme weather conditions such as landslides and flooding, and characterized by a lack of security of tenure, and inadequate basic services.

### **Legal Protection**

Greater clarity about the legal frameworks applying and affording protection to those displaced by or migrating from environmental hazards is essential. As was laid in several presentations, human rights instruments and other standards such as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, spell out relevant rights and obligations of States and other actors. Several of these obligations are relevant to addressing specific vulnerabilities in the context of climate change, environmental disruption and displacement. These include the obligation to provide better housing, located away from hazardous zones; improved access to sanitation, safe drinking water and healthcare; access to adequate food; effective participation in planning and decision-making; accountability; as well as access to information and justice. Ensuring that these basic rights and entitlements are fulfilled may help to prevent displacement or migration in the first place. In addition, it was emphasized that this protective framework also applies to those who chose to or were forced to move for environmental reasons.

Despite the frequent use of terms such as “environmental refugees” or “climate change refugees” in academic and public discourse, it was clarified that the 1951 UN Refugee Convention does not apply in these cases. It defines refugees as those fleeing across international borders for a “well-founded fear of persecution” tied to a fixed set of reasons that do not include environmental factors. Nevertheless, in practice the UNHCR often faces a dilemma over how to delineate its responsibilities. While legally speaking, environmentally



induced displacement clearly goes beyond the High Commissioner's mandate, on the ground it can be closely interrelated with other situations such as persecution and armed conflict.

To avoid confusion with existing protection mandates, the IOM proposed using the term "environmental migrants" to provide a legal definition for *"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."* Intended to encompass population movements or displacement that may be temporary or permanent, internal or cross-border, voluntary or involuntary, and sudden or gradual, the definition was met with some criticism because of its all-encompassing scope. It remains to be seen, whether it can help to close the gap in the international protection regime, and also what this would imply in terms of States' responsibilities to accept, protect and assist environmental migrants.

Throughout the day, it became obvious that, besides political will, resources and capacities will be needed to further explore, better understand, and humanely handle the complex interconnections between climate change, environmental degradation and migration. It is particularly in developing countries that the international community needs to invest in and help build capacities for improved data gathering, research and forecasting. Furthermore, those most affected must have a say in the design of adaptation and resilience strategies, which need to be tailored to local situations. Experts felt that that greater coherence is required between short-term and long-term strategies for disaster response, development and climate change adaptation. In addition, climate change and environmental migration need to be integrated into national planning instruments such as poverty reduction strategies, and taken into account in a wide range of other policy areas, including immigration, trade and industrial policies, intellectual property regimes, disaster related strategies, urban planning and land management, development cooperation etc. Finally, efforts to mitigate climate change must be vehemently pursued at all levels of governance.

**UNITAR New York is responsible for the content of this report.**