



Statement of the Global Migration Group on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Principals of the Global Migration Group*, assembled in Paris on 15 November 2011, have adopted the following statement:

The Global Migration Group is concerned about the consequences of climate change for human migration and human development. While there is mounting evidence that climate change has the potential to contribute to substantial movements of people, the response of the international community has so far been limited at best.

Climate change and environmental factors are rarely the sole cause of migration. People tend to move for a variety of reasons, including economic and social factors. Moreover, the environment has always been a key factor in migration dynamics, either because of the direct impact of environmental degradation or disasters on human mobility or through its impact on socio-economic conditions. While the precise effect of climate change on migration is therefore difficult to isolate, let alone to quantify, most observers agree that it will affect the lives and human rights of people, especially women and girls, whether in terms of livelihood, employment, housing, health or sanitation, and that migration and displacement are coping strategies, often of last resort, to adapt to these changes.

The impact of climate change on migration is multifaceted. Sea level rise may degrade living conditions in river deltas and other densely populated low-lying regions in the world and is already causing internal relocation and displacement in some countries. Rising sea levels may lead to significant loss of territory in some small-island States. Climate change is also associated with droughts and desertification, which affect the livelihoods of families, particularly those of subsistence farmers. Finally, climate change can contribute to the increased frequency of extreme weather events and natural disasters, including cyclones, storms and floods.

Climate change impacts mobility patterns in a variety of ways. Sea level rise is likely to make low-lying areas uninhabitable, and permanently displace populations. In contrast, droughts may at first lead to circular or temporary migration, enabling households to diversify sources of income. The majority of those displaced are likely to move short distances and to return as soon as circumstances permit. In some cases however, short-term internal displacements may pave the way and contribute to long-term international movements. Such movements are also likely to fuel urbanization and the challenges associated with it.

Of particular concern is the impact of climate change on migration in developing countries. Least developed countries often lack the resources to adapt to or manage the consequences of human

* The Global Migration Group (GMG) is an inter-agency group bringing together 16 agencies (14 United Nations agencies, the World Bank, and the International Organization for Migration) to promote the application of relevant international instruments and norms relating to migration, and to encourage the adoption of more coherent, comprehensive and better coordinated approaches to the issue of international migration.

displacement associated with climate change. Moreover, climate change is taking place in a global context marked by inequalities both within and between countries. It disproportionately affects the economically and socially disadvantaged segments of a population, exacerbating vulnerabilities relating to gender, ethnicity, health or socioeconomic status, and can have serious repercussions for the rights and welfare of women, girls, children, youth, the elderly and indigenous people.

Climate change and its consequences may also translate into conflicts over resources that in turn lead to displacement and migration. They may also generate human security concerns, both for those who are displaced and who may encounter new forms of vulnerability, including discrimination, human rights violations or risks related to smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons, and for the residents of the communities that receive them. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by such risks, particularly as far as human trafficking, sexual exploitation and forced labour are concerned.

Too often, attention is solely focused on the immediate consequences of sudden-onset disasters, such as floods, cyclones or hurricanes. Yet, in the long run, the silent crisis generated by slow-onset environmental degradation will also affect many people.

In view of these challenges, the GMG calls on the international community to recognize that migration and displacement induced by environmental degradation and climate change require urgent action. Specifically, the GMG recommends:

- To adopt gender-sensitive, human rights- and human development-oriented measures to improve the livelihoods of those exposed to the effects of climate change and increase their resilience, in order to counter the need for involuntary movements.
- To pay particular attention to the human rights situation of all people affected by the consequences of climate change, regardless of their legal status: international human rights law, including the fundamental principle of non-discrimination, as well as specific instruments such as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, should guide States' action towards people who are displaced as a result of environmental factors.
- To explore the complex interrelations between climate change and human mobility in order to collect data, develop expertise and build capacity to address this challenge, and to achieve close cooperation between the climate and social sciences communities to this end.
- To address the migration impacts of both sudden and slow-onset effects of climate change.
- To recognize migration as an adaptation strategy to environmental risks and to make migration an option available to the most vulnerable. Immigration policies could take into account environmental factors in the likelihood of cross-border movement and consider opening new opportunities for legal migration.
- To assist the least-developed countries in responding to climate change by mainstreaming migration and mobility in national adaptation plans.
- To incorporate the relationship between climate change and migration in Poverty Reduction Strategies and national development strategies.

In the long term, States may wish to review existing legal instruments and policy framework to identify possible new solutions to the situation of those who move in relation to climate change. This

would address normative gaps, enable a more focused and specific approach and possibly improve the governance of this issue. Yet, the development of a comprehensive normative framework should not hinder the immediate search for workable policy options to face the challenges raised by climate change, migration and displacement.

The GMG recognizes the difficulty of identifying a special category of migrants that could be quantified separately from other categories. In the absence of internationally agreed definitions, it notes the existence of different terms, including ‘environmental migration’, ‘migration related to climate change’ or ‘climate-related mobility’. Irrespective of their different merits and weaknesses, the GMG wishes to discourage the use of labels such as environmental or climate ‘refugee’, because the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees does not as such consider environmental factors as a basis for granting refugee status.

The GMG welcomes the initiatives already taken by the Global Forum on Migration and Development and the Conferences of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, including the Cancun Adaptation Framework, adopted in 2010 at COP 16 in Cancun. It also notes the Nansen Principles adopted in 2011 at the Nansen Conference on Climate Change and Displacement in the 21st Century. It encourages these intergovernmental processes to further address the relationships between climate change, migration and displacement. Additionally, it calls on the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (“Rio+20”) that will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2012, to incorporate these challenges in its global commitment to sustainable development.