

## **Global Migration Group (GMG) [GMG logo]**

### **Symposium**

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## **BRIEFING PAPER**

# **Cooperation – the Key to an Effective Policy Response to Global Environmental Change, Migration and Youth**

**UNESCO, IOM, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNITAR**

### ***Policy Recommendations***

In the context of migration and environmental change, the principal policy objective should be to increase the range of options open to those most vulnerable to the effects of environmental change, and thus reduce their vulnerability in the short, medium and long terms. This implies 1) preventing forced migration and displacement as much as possible; 2) where forced migration does occur, providing assistance and protection to those that are being and will be displaced; 3) facilitating migration as an adaptation strategy to environmental change; and 4) adequate the international legal frameworks and instruments addressing populations moving due to environmental reasons

Policy-makers need to take a holistic approach to tackling adverse impacts of environmental change that addresses both the drivers of migration in origin areas (e.g., livelihood insecurity, environmental hazards, conflict, demographic pressures, gender inequality) and the pull factors in destinations (e.g., demand for labor, aging of the population). A comprehensive set of policies would:

- Incorporate fundamental principles of humanity, human dignity, human rights in international cooperation, which should be guided by consent, empowerment, participation and partnership, and should reflect age, gender and diversity aspects. To the extent possible, vulnerable groups should be included in decision-making that will affect them.
- Promote sustainable growth of urban spaces, as these will be the destination for many environmental migrants. This is particularly important as urban dwellers are disproportionately young, with youth below the age of 18 making up more than half of the world's urban population.
- Support households to diversify income sources, particularly among rural populations where agricultural decline due to environmental change is likely to be substantial.
- Facilitate circular mobility, including seasonal migration and strong rural-urban linkages, which can help provide support structures and allow for income diversification for migrants and their communities who do not migrate when their livelihoods and human security are threatened.
- Adopt official, internationally recognized terms and definitions for environmental migrants, for both

international legal purposes and to facilitate research and knowledge-sharing.

- Involve the diaspora in designing and funding adaptation strategies that enable their home countries and communities to cope with environmental change.
- Support disaster risk reduction and conflict mediation strategies while strengthening humanitarian responses. If governments do not take action to reduce the risks people face from acute crises arising from natural disasters and competition over resources leading to conflict, governments will be called upon to help later, when the problem will be much more difficult to address. Investments could be made today in resilience building strategies designed to preempt uncontrolled crisis situations as well as in more effective humanitarian responses to natural hazards and conflict.
- Support those without the resources to move, who may be more vulnerable to displacement and forced migration and less able to use mobility in an adaptive way, to migrate in safety and dignity.
- Ensure gender perspectives relating to migration and environmental changes, for example by facilitating women's access to the judicial system; and by adopting a protocol to protect young people, especially girls, from being kidnapped and trafficked in post-disaster situations.
- Provide greater clarity with regards to the legal frameworks providing protection to those persons displaced or migrating because of environmental hazards, for example by adopting an internationally accepted protocol on displaced population. Further, define the status of statelessness of people in relation to sea-level rise.
- Support the collection, analysis and sharing of primary data on migration, particular on internal, short-term and cyclical migration, essential for informing policy-making for adaptation.

## ***Introduction***

In 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that “the greatest single impact of environmental change could be on human migration” – with people displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding and agricultural disruption. The issues affecting environmental migrants are multidimensional, including conflict, human rights, gender, age, economic and human development, public health, as well as governance questions. While scientists are increasingly confident about the negative impacts of environmental change, we still lack the capacity to accurately predict the results for human populations. Nevertheless, we can assess social dimensions of environmental change: what happens if people are resettling, what are the impacts on displacement and how migration can be managed to become part of adaptation strategies.

Slow onset environmental changes, such as sea-level rise, desertification and growing water scarcity, and acute natural hazards, such as cyclones and floods, do not take place in a vacuum. In exacerbating differences among various groups in terms of vulnerability and ability to cope with the effects, such environmental events can reinforce global inequalities that drive much of both international and internal migration today. The resulting population movements raise development concerns in at least four ways: by increasing pressure on urban infrastructure and services; by undermining economic growth; by increasing the risk of conflict; and by leading to worse health, educational and social indicators among migrants themselves.

Population vulnerability to environmental change is dynamic, and linked to mobility and displacement. Mobility is a crucial part of people's changing exposure to environmental hazards and their adaptive capacity. Populations have different mobility capacities and those who cannot move are often the most vulnerable. In identifying vulnerable populations and ensuring effective adaptation, it is essential to incorporate people's mobility into the equation.

Migration exists along a double continuum: from forced to voluntary, from internal to international and from part of humanitarian response to part of sustainable development. Thus, migration is one of a set of potential adaptation strategies to environmental change. It further implies that, despite international efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of environmental change, there have already been and will continue to be devastating consequences for the most vulnerable persons. Therefore it is essential to integrate a human rights dimension into the environmental change debate.

## **Evidence**

Understanding of environmental migration generally, and environmental change induced migration more specifically, is still limited. While reliable global and even regional figures are not available for either the current or future population flows triggered by environmental change, demographic trends and globalization all point to increased migration. Migration and displacement in response to past environmental disasters has primarily been short term and internal. Acute environmental events can cause widespread displacement, particularly given substandard infrastructure and unstable livelihoods. Over the past 20 years, the frequency of acute disasters has doubled, from 200 to 400 per year. While some of this increase is due to better reporting, environment-related disasters have also increased in frequency. More than 20 million people were displaced by sudden-onset of climate related disasters in 2008 alone (OCHA/IDMC 2009). Under these circumstances, the failure to prepare adequately for acute events can be a primary cause of increased movements, including forced displacement.

Movements result from different pathways. Intensification of acute natural hazards such as cyclones and hurricanes threaten the physical safety of affected populations; and competition over scarce natural resources lead to conflict especially where other mediating factors are at play in the same region, including social tensions, extreme poverty and weak governance. However, it is not just acute events which can give rise to population movements. In the long term, more gradual processes of environmental change, such as soil degradation or sea level rise affecting coastal deltas and low lying island countries, are likely to generate much larger numbers of environmental migrants. Slow onset events such as droughts which undermine agricultural livelihoods and reduce food security, can be multi-year and are already a cause for displacement. In addition, in most of these scenarios, the environment is not the exclusive driver of population movements. Instead, environmental migration is typically also influenced by a range of political, social, economic and other factors, and shaped by the specific vulnerabilities or capacities exhibited by those affected. Environmental migration is therefore a multi-causal phenomenon, yet one in which environmental drivers play a significant and increasingly determinative role.

### *Youth*

What is the impact of environmental change on the key drivers of youth migration? While more research is needed to understand mobility of young people<sup>1</sup> due to changes in the global environment, young people are potential migrants themselves who move in the face of disasters both sudden and slow onset. In addition, more than half of the world's urban population is under the age of 18, highlighting the need for attention to this vulnerable group in the context of urban planning and environmental change related migration. Migration, particularly to urban areas, will be an important adaptation strategy in response to changes in the global environment. This underscores the need for countries already experiencing fast-paced urbanization, that are primarily in Africa and Asia, to plan for increased rural-urban migration over the coming decades, taking into account special needs of urban youth populations.

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines 'youth' as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States.

## *Human Rights*

Environmental change is a process that exacerbates some of the most pressing human rights issues of our time. Environmental processes and events affect human development, inequalities within and between countries, and human security. Environmental change as a policy area may be relatively recent, but most of these issues represent long-standing challenges for states and the international community. It follows that policies focusing on the environmental change-migration nexus must be accompanied by renewed efforts to combat the very context that makes people vulnerable in the first place.

A human rights perspective would direct attention to the situation of environmental migrants, both past and potential, and underline the importance of procedural rights, particularly access to information, participation in decision-making processes and access to effective remedies of affected individuals and communities. A human rights-based approach (HRBA) recognizes that both the causes of environmental change and options for responding to it and mitigating its effects are matters of human choice in the hands of governments, companies, and other actors at the local, national and international levels. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of groups vulnerable to the short and longer-term impacts of environmental change. Moreover, there is a need to ensure that human rights are enshrined in international legal frameworks.

## *Gender*

Natural disasters kill more women than men, and kill women at a younger age than men (Neumayer and Plümper, 2007). Behavioral and mobility restrictions and poor access to information and resources can directly affect a woman's chance of survival during and after a natural disaster. Sudden-onset displacement in response to environmental related events can expose migrants, particularly women and young girls, to new situations of vulnerability which may, in addition, lead to human trafficking. The earthquake in Haiti in January 2010 has revealed how environmental related disasters aggravate gender violence. For example, according to reports of human rights organizations, international organizations, women's organizations and ordinary citizens, gender violence occurs in the makeshift camps in which thousands of displaced persons are still living a year later (UNFPA 2011).

## ***Gaps and Challenges***

There are a number of challenges that global environmental change and migration pose, namely ensuring both food security and livelihood opportunities in countries affected by environmental change. The IPCC's AR4 Report (2007) shows significant increases in the number of people expected to experience water and food stress across all scenarios relative to temperature increase. Losses of agricultural productivity in North Africa, Southern Africa (excluding South Africa) and Central and South Asia are expected to be particularly high, with impacts on millions of small scale farmers and rural residents. These indirect effects of environmental change will destabilize livelihoods and increase mobility, both forced and voluntary. In addition, it remains a challenge both to local and national authorities to develop disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation as preparedness measures, as these can in fact impact upon levels of future movements. Further, for some countries such as Bangladesh and some small Island States, reallocation of populations within their natural territories may not be a viable option because of either high population density or the likely submergence of their entire lands.

With regard to data, two main gaps exist. First, there is a serious lack of data and research on environmental migration in general and environmental change induced migration more specifically. The result is a deficit of historical knowledge of environmental migration and future projections of migration related to environmental change, and therefore a lack of clarity on how to prepare for environmental change induced migration and displacement. Secondly, it is also important to recognize the lack of data

globally on migration flows (flows in particular as stocks are calculated at the UN level) and in addition lack of data on youth migration.

## **Conclusions**

Migration is an essential part of development, as well as a principal method of coping with environmental change. Environmental migration must be integrated into national development frameworks, poverty reduction strategies, and other areas of policy including trade, urban planning and disaster risk reduction, as well as environmental change response mechanisms like the National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs). Policies leave much room for improvement in order to ensure better cooperation for an effective response to the effects of global environmental change, in particular with regards to protecting human rights of youth, women and girls. Policies should not only respond to but also prepare communities for environmental change. Youth are particularly vulnerable to the effects of environmental change in terms of rural-to-urban migration as an adaptive strategy, and should participate in decision-making about adaptation and mitigation strategies, along with other vulnerable groups. Policy-makers at all levels should commit themselves to fundamental principles of humanity, human dignity, human rights, and international cooperation, for which a better understanding of the age, gender and diversity aspects is crucial.

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IPCC reports

About the GMG (Brief description of mandate and members)