



ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION, CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND YOUTH*

Within the debates on the consequences of climatic and ecological change, international attention has become increasingly focussed on the links between environmental change and human migration. Several international organisations such as UNHCR, UNFCCC, IOM and UNICEF are addressing this issue. Furthermore, a series of research initiatives focusing on the link between environmental change and migration has been set up in recent years. These include projects such as Environmental Change and Forced Migration Scenarios (EACH FOR),¹ the Foresight: Migration and Global Environmental Change project² and “Where the rain falls”.³

First of all, the studies mentioned come to the conclusion that in the majority of cases, it is not only environmental change in the form of rapid-onset events (storms, flood events, etc.) or gradual processes of ecological change (soil erosion, sea-level rise, etc.) that cause people to migrate. It is rather a complex set of interrelated environmental, socio-economic, cultural, political and demographic factors that influences or drives migration decisions.

This leads to a severe identification problem: there are no uniform criteria or variables indicating that the effects of environmental change may be deemed to be so strong that related human migration processes actually can be considered environmentally induced. Accordingly, the complexity of the interlinkages between environmental change and migration makes it necessary to develop definitions and categories, which are universally accepted.⁴ Furthermore, there is still a huge demand for advancing the knowledge base concerning the interactions between environmental change, migration and its potential consequences. This is particularly valid for the affectedness and specific vulnerability of children, adolescents and youth as well as other population segments (e.g. women, elders) in this context.⁵

Nonetheless, some tendencies concerning the relationship between environmental change, migration and youth on a global scale may be derived from the results of the Foresight initiative and other research projects or databases:

*Prepared by Dr. Benjamin Schraven, Department Environmental Policy and Management of Natural Resources, German Development Institute.

This chapter is part of the book "Migration and Youth: Challenges and Opportunities" Edited by Jeronimo Cortina, Patrick Taran and Alison Raphael on behalf of the Global Migration Group © 2014 UNICEF"

- **Migration as a pure survival strategy plays a subordinate role** According to estimates by the International Displacement Monitoring Centre⁶ and the International Disaster Database⁷, in recent years in most cases less than 20 per cent of the total population affected by sudden-onset natural disasters worldwide were temporarily or permanently displaced by these⁸.
- **It is not only about migration away from ecologically vulnerable areas** Immigration to these areas is also problematic and increasing. This is especially the case for urban and peri-urban slums and shanty towns as well as urban areas prone to flood events⁹.
- **Migration in the context of ecological change mainly happens within national borders or sub-regions** So far, international migration patterns on larger scales (e.g. from Sub-Saharan-Africa to Europe) are hardly influenced by environmental change¹⁰.
- **Migration as a reaction to environmental change is potentially an important adaptation or coping strategy** In areas particularly affected by environmental degradation or by great climatic variation, many smallholder households often draw on migration strategies. This does not usually involve the migration of whole households but rather the migration of single household members. Migrants support the remaining household members by sending money and/or material goods in order to help the latter better cope with the effects of droughts or soil erosion. This mainly takes place for a limited period of time¹¹.
- **“Trapped” populations** Those who are unable to move since they do not have the necessary financial and non-financial resources or opportunities often live under harsher conditions than many migrants.
- **Youth play a key role in the context of environmental change and migration** Most of the countries affected by patterns of ecological change are also characterised by a youth bulge. Accordingly, children and adolescents are a key segment of the trapped population¹². On the other hand, people under 30 usually also form a majority of migrants moving in response to difficult environmental conditions. That means that children, adolescents and youths are not only among the most vulnerable in the context of ecological change and migration but they are also the ones who are predominantly responsible for assisting their families in adapting to the effects of environmental degradation and climate change¹³.

PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS: CHALLENGES AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

What about legal protection?

The importance of legal protection and a rights-based approach for ‘environmental migrants’ is often emphasised¹⁴ – in particular for migrants who forcedly leave their homes due to environmental hazards. Although not many migration processes are solely related to environmental events, there is certainly forced migration to which environmental hazards have contributed significantly. But there is no international legal instrument from which protective rights for environmentally forced migrant groups could be derived. A series of publications discussing legal prospects¹⁵ come to the conclusion that there are points of contact for the protection of forced migrants in the context of environmental change in several areas of law (human rights, refugee law, environmental law, etc.). But seen separately these areas of law do not offer any sufficient legal protection.

In the literature, some options to improve the legal situation for environmentally forced migrants are frequently discussed. One often mentioned option is an extension of the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees by integrating environmental factors. In its current form, environmental factors are not mentioned and accordingly do not legitimise legal recognition as a refugee. But an extension of the Geneva Convention would have fundamental shortcomings: first, a renegotiation could weaken the status of refugees who are currently still protected by it since many countries are interested in very restrictive immigration and asylum policies. In addition, people migrating in the context of environmental change are mostly internal migrants to whom the Convention does not apply. The basically applicable Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement do not have any internationally legal obligation as they are “soft law”. Another possibility concerning the enhancement of legal protection is the creation of a separate international convention for environmental migrants. However, the result of what would most likely be a lengthy negotiation and ratification process for such a convention would be highly uncertain. But the Nansen Initiative¹⁶, which – based on regional consultations - intends to establish a protection agenda for those who have been internationally displaced by environmental change, is certainly an important first step when it comes to legal protection in the context of environmental change and migration.

Unfortunately, the debate about legal protection for ‘environmental migrants’ –largely leaves out voluntary forms of migration. ‘Unforced’ migrants - and in particular children, adolescents and youth – often live in very difficult situations in terms of socio-economic circumstances and legal protection. Young migrants are particularly affected by labour exploitation, abuse, crime, violence and human rights violations¹⁷. Respective legal conventions on international labour law or concerning children’s rights are unfortunately of a rather weak status¹⁸. Nevertheless, the discussion about legal protection mechanisms urgently needs to incorporate these aspects.

Who is addressing environmental migration at the international level?

Due to the multi-dimensional nature of interlinkages between youth, environmental change and migration, it is obvious that not only the international UN and non-UN institutions dealing with issues related to migration should be addressing emerging problems in this context. It would be necessary that a full range of international organisations working in the areas of sustainable development, environmental and climate protection, humanitarian aid as well as children- and youth-related issues should be involved in shaping international strategies and guidelines on the nexus between environmental change, migration and youth¹⁹.

But with regard to migration in the context of environmental change there is a problem of coherence: although the improvement of socio-economic and legal conditions of vulnerable populations and migrants is highly relevant to some organisations such as IOM, UNHCR, UNDP, UNEP and – self-evidently with a strong focus on children, adolescents and youth - UNICEF, the problem plays a more subordinate role in other international organisations, fora and committees. Furthermore, various institutions and organisations have differing concepts, approaches and strategies in relation to the topic²⁰.

Nevertheless, it was an important sign that the issue of migration was taken up during the international climate negotiations in 2010 in Cancún. In § 14(f) of the Cancún Agreement, the international community basically - but rather vaguely - accepted the obligation to take measures to increase knowledge, coordination and international cooperation efforts to address the relationship between environmental change and migration²¹. But whether the issue will soon be more than a minor aspect in international negotiations remains quite unclear. It is also mostly uncertain what

international organisation or institution could create more coherence with regard to the matter of migration and vulnerable populations like youth in the context of global ecological change.

What is happening at the national level?

Without doubt, regional and national actors have a key role to play in coping with the problem of environmental change and migration. However, migration and asylum policies of many industrialised countries have become ever more restrictive in recent years and decades. That is why many governments are reluctant to discuss environmental migration issues which could affect their countries (e.g. permanent admissions for environmentally displaced people or resettlement/relocation policies). Likewise, the governments of many developing countries are generally in favour of policies aimed at stemming migration. Whereas the positive links between migration and development are certainly recognised around the globe, the political focus in this regard is usually restricted to international migration and aspects such as financial remittances between destination and home countries. Internal and intra-regional migration is mainly perceived as something with negative socio-economic consequences such as urban sprawl or conflicts. Just like many international migrants, internal migrants often live in socially and economically marginal situations with limited opportunities for political participation²². This also applies to those populations which are heavily affected by environmental change, not to mention youth and other vulnerable demographic groups - although the potential role of youth in climate change adaptation in general is increasingly considered.

Analyses of national adaptation strategies and programmes in least-developed countries show that in the majority of these programmes²³, migration in the context of environmental and climatic change is usually considered as a phenomenon that is important to contain or prevent via implementing local adaptation or development projects. Only a few least-developed countries underline the positive and adaptive potential of migration in their strategies.

Moreover, only a minority of developing countries contemplate resettling persons from areas that are affected by severe processes of ecological degradation. The majority of these are small Pacific island states. Taking into consideration the direct threat to their existence from sea-level rise, this certainly does not come as a surprise.

Recommendations

Due to the complex and multi-dimensional links between environmental factors, human mobility and their consequences in particular for children, adolescents and youths, recommendations, which focus solely on either environmental or adaptation policies or migration policies do not make much sense. In view of the challenges and unanswered questions with regard to legal protection, the international and national levels and ranges of action, the following policy recommendations can be formulated:

- **Enhance the knowledge base** Although Foresight and other initiatives have significantly advanced the knowledge base on the relationship between environmental change and migration, further empirical research needs to be conducted – particularly in order to better understand the role of vulnerable population groups such as children, adolescents and youth.
- **Strengthen Protection and ‘intertwine’ existing legal instruments** Instead of considering the creation of a distinct convention on environmental migrants or the extension of the Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees, efforts to strengthen and draw closer together the existing legal instruments and conventions in the areas of human rights (especially children’s rights), migration law, labour law, environmental and refugee law for the benefit of all, and in particular young migrants affected by ecological, are more promising.
- **Institutionalise international cooperation for migration** To create more coherence and establish international policy standards in the areas of environmental change and migration as well as other migration issues, an international coordination unit for migration should be set up. This would have to build bridges between governments, the United Nations as well as non-UN organisations that work in the areas of migration, development, youth and humanitarian aid.
- **Support young migrants** Migration can be an important form of adaptation. But instead of focussing only on strategies to prevent migration, a supporting and proactive management of migration that considers the positive effects and aspects of migration would be desirable. For example, the infrastructure for financial remittances in many countries needs to be improved and information portals that inform young migrants about job opportunities could be important features of such a migration management strategy.
- **Improve rural and urban living conditions** On the one hand, it is desirable to provide greater support for adaptation-oriented rural/smallholder-oriented development

projects - at least to address so far “trapped” households and their often young members. On the other hand, not only migrants, but also children and other family members left behind benefit from an improvement in public services, infrastructure and working conditions in the cities through (potentially) higher remittances.

- **Let migrants, youth and other population groups affected by environmental change participate in planning processes** The above strategies and concepts can only be successful if migrants and their networks, as well as youth and other population groups affected by environmental change, can be (better) involved in political decision-making and planning processes.

NOTES

- ¹ EACH-FOR 2009. Synthesis report. Budapest: Atlas Innoglobe Ltd.
- ² Foresight: Migration and Global Environmental Change 2011. Final project report. London: The Government Office for Science.
- ³ Warner K., T. Afifi, K. Henry, T. Rawe, C. Smith and A. de Sherbinin 2012. Where the rain falls: climate change, food and livelihood security, and migration. An 8 country study to understand rainfall, food security and migration. Bonn: United Nations University.
- ⁴ Piguet, E. 2010. Linking climate change, environmental degradation, and migration: a methodological overview. *Climate change* 1(4):517-524.
- ⁵ Cortina J. and B. Schraven *forthcoming*. Methodological considerations for survey research on children, adolescents and youth in the context of environmental change and migration. New York/ London: UNICEF/The Government Office for Science.
- ⁶ www.internal-displacement.org
- ⁷ www.emdat.be
- ⁸ Own calculation. See also: Schraven B. 2012. Environmental Change and Migration: Perspectives for Future Action. German Development Institute, Briefing Paper 15.
- ⁹ See also: Barlett, S. 2008. Environmental Change and Urban Children: Impacts and Implications for adaptation in low-and-middle income countries, Human Settlements Discussion Paper Series – IIED.
- ¹⁰ See also: Tacoli, C. 2009. Crisis or adaptation? Migration and climate change in a context of high mobility. *Environment and Urbanization* 21(2):513-525; Scheffran, J., Marmar E and P. Sow 2012. Migration as a contribution to resilience and innovation in climate adaptation: Social networks and co-development in Northwest Africa. *Applied Geography* 33:119-127.
- ¹¹ Foresight (2011) *op cit*, note 2; Warner et al. (2012) *op cit*, note 3; EACH-FOR (2009) *op cit*, note 1
- ¹² You, D and Anthony, D. 2012. Generation 2025 and beyond: The critical importance of understanding demographic trends for children of the 21st century, UNICEF- Division of Policy and Strategy, Occasional Papers, No. 1, November 2012. http://www.unicef.org/spanish/media/files/Generation_2015_and_beyond_15_Nov2012_e_version.pdf consulted on 18 September 2013.
- ¹³ See also: Barlett, S. (2008) *op cit*, note 9
- ¹⁴ e.g.: Zetter, R. 2009. The role of legal and normative frameworks for the protection of environmentally displaced people. In: Migration, environment and climate change: assessing the evidence edited by F. Laczko and C. Aghazarm. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.
- ¹⁵ Ammer, M. 2009. Climate change and Human Rights: The Status of Climate Refugees in Europe, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights. Vienna: **Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights**; McAdam, J. 2009. Environmental migration governance. University of New South Wales Faculty of Law Research Series; McAdam, J. 2012. *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Piguet, E. and A Pecoud. 2010. Migration and Climate Change: an Overview. University of Oxford, Centre on Migration, Policy and Society Working Paper No. 79.
- ¹⁶ www.nanseninitiative.org/
- ¹⁷ UNICEF 2012. Access to Civil, Economic and Social Rights for Children in the Context of Irregular Migration. http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Access_to_Civil_Economic_and_Social_Rights_for_Children.pdf consulted on 21 September 2013.
- ¹⁸ Schraven (2012) *op cit*, note 7
- ¹⁹ McAdam, J. (2009). *Op cit*, note 15..
- ²⁰ Global Migration Group 2011. Statement of the Global Migration Group on the Impact of Environmental Change in Migration: Endorsed at the 15th November Global Migration Group Principals' meeting in Paris.
- ²¹ UNFCCC 2011. Report of the Conference of the Parties on its sixteenth session. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2010/cop16/eng/07a01.pdf> consulted on 20 September 2013.
- ²² Tacoli 2009. *op cit*, note 10.
- ²³ Martin, S.F. 2009. Managing environmentally induced migration. in Migration, environment and climate change: assessing the evidence, edited by F. Laczko and C. Aghazarm. Geneva: International Organization for Migration; Martin, S.F. 2010. Climate change, migration and governance. *Global Governance* 16:397-414.