

## Fact-Sheet on Climate Change and Migration

### A. Introduction

Climate change will likely cause a significant increase in migration over the coming years. How governments prepare and respond to this increase will shape migration as an adaptive response. From the rural poor struggling with crop yields in the face of more and longer drought, to urban slum residents escaping inundated flood plains, climate change may lead or even force people to move in search of better livelihoods, greater security and well-being. To address the relationship between climate change and migration, we need to consider:

- 1) Under what circumstances can migration be part of adaptation, versus a result of the failure to adapt?
- 2) How does migration vary when caused by acute versus long term climate impacts?
- 3) What are the circumstances of those who are unable to migrate when the environment changes?
- 4) What existing legal frameworks are relevant to migration and displacement linked to climate change and what are the gaps in these frameworks.

“Environmental migrants are 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.” IOM, 2009

### B. Key findings

Understanding of environmental migration generally, and climate-change induced migration more specifically, is still limited. The conventional wisdom on migration caused by climate change, popular in press reports and among some advocacy groups, has hundreds of millions of migrants crossing international borders. Yet migration and displacement in past environmental disasters has primarily been short term and internal (Tacoli 2009).

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, climate-related disasters have also increased in frequency. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, as many as 20 million people were displaced in 2009 due to climate-related disasters, though these disasters cannot necessarily be attributed to climate change (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.

Historical experience has shown the importance of migration as a response to long term environmental changes. Slow onset disasters, including droughts, desertification and recurrent flooding, affect far more people than sudden events. 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 hundreds of millions of small scale farmers and rural residents (Leighton 2009). These indirect effects of climate change will destabilize livelihoods and increase mobility, both forced and voluntary.

Migration, particularly to urban areas, will be an important adaptation strategy. This underscores the need for countries already experiencing fast-paced urbanization, that are primarily in Africa and Asia, to plan for increases in rural-urban migration over the coming decades. 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 climate change.

If migration is a key component of adaptation, then the more pressing challenge may be in helping those who cannot move, due to lack of resources, networks and options. When acute or long term climate events arise, impoverished households and groups are less likely to move, and therefore more reliant on local livelihood alternatives, to the extent that they exist.



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Women are generally less likely to move, due both to cultural and economic reasons, as are children and youth, the elderly and those with dependents (Tacoli 2009), so local adaptation efforts should target these groups specifically.

The legal frameworks protecting those who are displaced or migrate as a result of the impacts of climate change require greater clarity. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, for instance, describe important, but non binding, rights and obligations, while the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which is binding, clearly does not apply. National legal frameworks are particularly important given the consensus that climate-change induced migration will, in most cases, not involve crossing international borders.

### C. Improving Data and Research

There is a serious lack of data and research on environmental migration in general and climate-change induced migration more specifically. The result is a deficit of historical knowledge of environmental migration and future projections of migration related to climate change, and therefore a lack of clarity on how to prepare for climate-change induced migration and displacement. The following are recommendations to improve empirical and conceptual understanding (IOM 2009):

- 1) Establish a global dataset on migratory movements prompted by natural disasters, building upon existing data, to provide the foundation of comparative studies of environmental migration. Data should be disaggregated by age and gender.
- 2) Conduct research to distinguish environmental causes of migration from other push/pull factors.
- 3) Generate and strengthen methods for future scenario building that link projections of climate impacts with scenarios modeling who will be impacted and who may migrate or be displaced. Large scale specialized surveys, GIS mapping and agent based models for scenario building should be used and will provide the basis for links with climate impacts projections.
- 4) Develop better models of migration decision making that explain how people respond to expected hazards in the context of their mobility options.

### E. Conclusion: Better Policies

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 climate change response mechanisms like the National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs). Even as we await further data and research that will provide deeper insight into the complex causes and consequences of climate-change induced migration, several clear directions in migration policy can be advanced that will create a stronger foundation for adaptation:

- Prevent and respond to climate change, from a human rights-based approach, particularly with respect to groups whose vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the effects of climate change;
- Diversify income sources, particularly among rural populations where agricultural decline due to climate change is likely to be substantial;
- Support circular mobility, including seasonal migration and strong rural-urban linkages, which can help provide support structures for migrants and those who do not migrate when their livelihoods and security are threatened;
- Support the sustainable growth of small urban centres, which will be the destination for many environmental migrants. Rural development programmes tend to increase rural-urban migration, and small urban centres are experiencing the fastest growth rates.
- Strengthen legal supports, particularly for internal migrants and displaced people.

### Key References

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