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United Nations Institute for Training and Research

Migration and Development Series

Climate change, environmental degradation and migration: Preparing for the Future

Information note

New York, 8-9 May 2008

Background

While international attention on the humanitarian consequences of climate change and environmental degradation has increased over the past few years, the specific interaction between migration and the environment and -- in particular the impact of environmental degradation on human mobility -- still requires more attention from policy makers and other stakeholders. As early as 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted that "the greatest single impact of climate change could be on human migration -- with millions of people displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding and agricultural disruption". Still, the role of climate change and environmental constraints serving as push factors for migration has been comparatively little explored.

Both gradual environmental change (climate processes) and extreme environmental events (including climate events) put at risk the inhabitants, of coastal regions, low lying islands, and areas susceptible to drought, and may force them to move to safer areas. Such risks are even higher for indigenous peoples and for developing countries with limited caring capacity (i.e. the capacity to adapt to any changes in the ability of ecosystems to support basic standards of living) and to the poorest communities. The potential movement of people, both internal and cross-border, is expected to rise and have an unprecedented impact on lives and livelihoods. While no consensus exists on whether migration can be considered as a way of adaptation or as a failure of adaptation strategies, it is often a survival mechanism for those affected. Already today temporary migration and displacement have occurred as a result of numerous climate processes or events.

Human security challenges can abound in environmentally-induced migration. Destruction of basic services and infrastructure, public health risks and separation of families may create vulnerabilities to human trafficking, sexual and gender-based violence and enlistment in criminal activities. Mass environmental migration can also fuel new or reignite existing conflicts, creating tensions and competition between the host and displaced communities for scarce resources.

This event will examine the impacts of gradual environmental changes and sudden environmental events on migration. Key stakeholders will be invited to discuss these various impacts and challenges, with the objective of realizing a coherent approach to environmentally-induced migration.

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Organization

This event will consist of two parts:

On Thursday, 8 May 2008 an interactive expert meeting will explore challenges and questions of common concern to the climate, environment and migration communities, including issues such as terminology, research needs, policy design, and awareness-raising strategies. Two working groups and a plenary session on the impacts of both gradual and sudden environmental changes on migration are aimed at offering experts a platform for in-depth discussion and joint reflection.

During the seminar on Friday, 9 May 2008, the most salient points of these expert discussions will be shared with the diplomatic community in New York. The seminar is designed to familiarize delegates with existing evidence and forecasts of the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on migration movements. It will look at how existing strategies to address vulnerabilities associated with climate change and environmental degradation may be adapted to the challenges posed by increasing displacement and migration, and discuss appropriate international law and policy responses.

Objectives

This event is 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.

Participants

The first day of this seminar will be an invitation-only expert-group meeting of key actors in the migration and environment domains. The second day is designed for members of Permanent Missions responsible for the Second and Third Committees of the General Assembly and the work of the UN Peacebuilding Commission. UN staff and interested representatives of civil society and the private sector are also welcome to attend. Participants are requested to regard their registration as a firm commitment.



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Date and Venue

The closed expert-group meeting will be held on Thursday, 8 May 2008, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. in Conference Room C.

The seminar open to all interested parties will be held on Friday, 9 May 2008, from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. in Conference Room C.

Registration

Applicants who wish to participate in this seminar are requested to complete the attached nomination/registration form and return it to the following address:

UNITAR c/o Ms. Sarah Rosengärtner
1 United Nations Plaza, Suite DC1-603
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Phone: (212) 963-9684 or 9196
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Registration deadline: 2 May 2008