

Seminar on Environmentally Induced Migration and Climate Change

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On behalf of UNFPA, I would like to welcome you all to this seminar on Environmental Migration and Climate Change. Thanks to our colleagues at UNITAR for co-hosting this event, and to all of the panelists for their participation and contributions.

We are here to learn about one of the most important components of the climate change response, as well as one of the key pillars of the field of demography: migration, and specifically how climate change will impact the flow of people internally and internationally.

There are many ways to think and talk about migration and climate change. The simple way, the headline, is that many people will move because of climate change. This headline leads many to think about climate-induced migration as a crisis, with tens to hundreds of millions of people flooding across international borders. But what is beyond the headline? The causes of migration, and particularly climate-induced migration, are complex, and cut across several different axes.

The first is whether migration is an effective and important part of adaptation to the impacts of climate change, or a failure, the undesired result of environmental changes. Over the past several years, UNFPA, IOM and a number of NGOs have been focusing research and advocacy on the importance of migration as an adaptation strategy, and therefore as an effective part of the response to the impacts of climate change. Environmental factors have always been a part of people's decisions to migrate, and extreme environmental events have always caused displacement for periods of time. Climate change is, however, beginning to result in new kinds of environmental impacts, from changing drought patterns to sea level rise, which may fundamentally change the nature of the migration calculus.

Second, it is important that we distinguish between short and long term migration and displacement. Climate change will cause more frequent and more severe acute weather events, yet research has shown that most migration in response to these events is short term and internal. These short term effects may nonetheless have longer term implications for livelihoods and well-being of migrants.

Climate change will also cause longer term changes to temperature, precipitation and sea level that, together with other push and pull factors impacting people's decision-making, may result in more permanent migration. We need to recognize that environmental migration drives or happens within a context of other population and development dynamics, from urbanization to changing occupational structure. Both climate change and migration have significant implications for development and poverty reduction over the long term.

A deeper, more nuanced understanding of environmentally-induced migration, as both a potentially beneficial and adaptive phenomenon and part of a larger development process, will help to move the conversation beyond the crisis mentality and towards the creation of effective policies and legal frameworks to maximize the benefits of migration.

As we prepare for more and more impacts of climate change in the coming years, it is essential that we put in place measures to support people in adapting to new and changing environments. This includes planning for migration and improving adaptation to help avoid future displacement and migration.

It also includes examining the broad and significant measures that may be taken to address mitigation and adaptation, and the impacts those measures will have on where people live, what kind of work they do and their mobility. For instance, what will the impacts of increased use of farmland for biofuels be on people's decisions to migrate? Migration may come from the response to climate change as much as climate change itself.

Today's sessions and the continuing work of all of our colleagues gathered here constitute an important contribution to understanding these issues. Thank you for your attendance and participation.