

Knowledge to lead

Seminar on Environmental Migration and Climate Change

20 April 2010, UNHQ, New York
Conference Room A (TNLB)

Information Note

Background

Even though the movement of people as a response to changes in the environment is not a new phenomenon, this issue has risen on the international agenda as a result of the growing awareness of the reality of climate change and its possible implications. Climate change is predicted to increase climate variability and lead to greater intensity and frequency of extreme weather events. With the number of extreme weather events doubling over the past 20 years from 200 to more than 400 a year, some of these effects are already felt. More than 20 million people were displaced by sudden-onset climate related disasters in 2008 alone (OCHA/IDMC 2009). Moreover, *gradual* changes in the environment are expected to affect even more people and have an even greater impact on the movement of people in the coming years, as is already the case in some parts of Africa due to water shortages. Estimates have suggested that between 25 million to one billion people could move as a result of climate change over the next 40 years, with 200 million being the most widely cited figure. Although these figures are controversial and questionable, they have brought the likely implications of climate change for human mobility to the attention of the international community.

The migration, environment and climate change nexus is a complex one. Environmental changes can occur gradually (i.e. desertification, erosion, rising sea levels), intensifying existing vulnerabilities – but still providing some people and communities with adequate opportunities to plan their migration. Others occur suddenly (i.e. storms, floods) displacing many in an immediate fashion. In both its slow-onset and sudden forms, they trigger and affect human mobility. Little doubt exists in the expert community that an increase in environmental degradation and extreme weather events can be attributed to the effects of climate change.



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However, environmental degradation can also be caused by other factors, such as over-intensive farming activities which eventually lead to land degradation. Similarly, many natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis are tectonic events and are not related to climatic factors and climate change, while they may also give rise to displacement. Overall, it can be difficult to differentiate the role of climate change or environmental factors more generally as a primary driver for migration, as in most instances it is a combination of factors that leads to the decision to move.

The complexity of the interrelations between migration and environmental/climate change results in manifold challenges at the policy level. Most of the population movements induced by environmental changes are taking place within state boundaries (and will likely continue to do so in the future), raising the issue of elaborating national policies and measures needed to grapple with internal migration and displacement phenomena. While in the short-term the displacement of people following natural disaster calls for responses in the humanitarian and emergency domains, this needs to be complemented by longer-term forward-looking policies, including disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. Furthermore, migration induced by environmental degradation also calls for needed policy responses. In some cases, guaranteeing a sustainable future to the population affected may require looking at the possibility of resettlement or relocation where return is not a viable option. The phenomenon also presents the international community with the challenge to ensure adequate protection for this conceptually “new” category of migrants under existing legal frameworks. Moreover, the inclusion of environmentally induced migration into existing strategies that have been developed to respond and adapt to climate change (such as the National Adaptation Programmes of Actions (NAPA)) remains limited, and the need for integrating these to other processes undertaken to reduce vulnerabilities and promote development persists.

This one-day seminar on Environmental Migration and Climate Change will look holistically at the role of sudden-onset disasters (storms, floods) as well as slow-onset environmental changes (desertification, droughts, land degradation, water scarcity) in propelling both internal and international migration. Spanning the responsibilities of a range of actors and fields of intervention– from humanitarian assistance and disaster preparedness to climate change adaptation and sustainable development– the linkages between migration and development and the environment need to be better understood and mainstreamed into existing assessment and strategic planning tools.

Seminar Objectives

Beyond speculative and sometimes alarmist scenarios of mass movements due to climate change, this one-day seminar aims to:

- Present a nuanced picture of the interrelations between migratory decisions and environmental degradation, exacerbated through climate change;
- Discuss the implications of environmental migration for development;
- Raise awareness of the international legal instruments and policy tools that exist to address the challenges posed by disaster displacement and environmentally driven migration;
- Bring together the migration, development, climate change and environment perspective.



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Logistics

Participants: This seminar is designed for the members of Permanent Missions. UN staff and interested representatives of civil society and the private sector are also welcome to attend. Applicants are requested to regard their participation as a firm commitment.

Date: Tuesday, 20 April 2010 from 10 am to 6 pm

Venue: Conference Room A, Temporary Northern Lawn Building, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Contact: If you have questions about the seminar, please contact Ms. Valeska Hesse at valeska.hesse@unitar.org or Tel: (212) 963 3190/ 9196.

Registration: If you wish to participate in this seminar, please register online at: <http://www.unitar.org/ny/international-law-and-policy/migration-and-development-series> or fax a completed nomination form to: UNITAR New York Office, Fax: (212) 963-9686 or 0995



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