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**Research Report**

## Environmental change and migration: perspectives for future action

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## Environmental Change and Migration: Perspectives for Future Action

### Summary

The issue of what links exist between environmental change and migration has been attracting increasing attention both in the media and in the scientific community in recent years. There is still a lot of uncertainty about how exactly environmentally induced migration and its effects should be defined. Nonetheless, the results of several large international research projects allow some conclusions to be drawn as regards the link between environmental change and migration:

- Migration is rarely caused by ecological factors alone. In the vast majority of cases, it is the result of a complex interplay between political, social, economic and ecological factors.
- In areas facing creeping or rapidly occurring environmental changes, migration is an adaptation rather than a survival strategy.
- Migration that takes place in the context of environmental change largely occurs within national borders or sub-regions but not between continents.

For some time now, many discussions have been held about the possibility of improving the protection under (public international) law of persons who consider themselves as having been forced to migrate in the context of ecological changes. But neither the option to extend the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees by an ecological component nor the possibility to create an autonomous legal instrument for this group of forced migrants appears to be especially promising in this regard.

There is a problem of coherence at the international cooperation level: while some international organisations are very actively addressing the issue of environmental change and migration, others are virtually

completely ignoring it. Even during the international climate negotiations, the issue was first taken up only starting in 2010 in Cancún. However, the link between environmental change and migration has so far only represented a marginal aspect of the climate negotiations.

In many countries affected by environmental change, there is a clearly recognisable tendency to consider internal migration as a phenomenon that is important to prevent, or at least mitigate against. Thus, for example, many (planned) measures for adapting to climate change are understood to stem migration.

Based on the findings on the link between environmental change and migration, the appreciation of the problem at the international and national levels and the international legal situation, six areas in which action should be taken may be identified:

- Instead of extending the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or creating a separate convention for “environmental migrants”, existing legal instruments should be strengthened.
- The relevant UN and non-UN organisations from the areas of development, environment, climate, migration and humanitarian aid should create an international coordination unit for migration.
- “Migration management” (e.g. by providing relevant information for migrants) instead of migration prevention should be pursued.
- Both urban as well as rural living conditions should be improved.
- Migrants and population groups affected by environmental change – many live in marginal situations – should be involved in decision-making and planning processes.

### What do we know about the link between environmental change and migration?

Due to the increasingly important issue of the effects of climate change, international attention has also become increasingly focussed on the potential consequences of environmental changes for human migration. In recent years, a whole series of research projects and initiatives on the link between environmental change and migration have been set up. These include Environmental Change and Forced Migration Scenarios (EACH-FOR) or the Migration and Global Environmental Change project.

Their results have surely contributed to the creation of a consensus, according to which, in the vast majority of cases, it is not only environmental change in the form of directly occurring events (tidal waves, storms, etc.) or gradual processes (soil erosion, rising sea levels, etc.) that cause people to migrate. Complex interrelated economic, social and political factors likewise have an impact on migration decisions.

This also gives rise to a problem of definition: there have so far not been any uniform criteria or indicators to show when the effects of environmental factors may be deemed to be so strong that associated human migration is actually considered to be environmentally induced. The great complexity of the problem of environmental change and migration therefore makes it necessary to develop generally accepted definitions and categories. In addition, the interaction between environmental change, migration and its potential consequences must be better understood. Keywords are among other things intensified slum formation and housing sprawl in the cities, emergence and/or intensification of conflicts in regions with high levels of immigration.

Nevertheless, some global tendencies regarding the link between environmental changes and migration may be derived from the current research results:

- **Migration as a reaction to environmental change is also an important adaptation or coping strategy:** in the areas particularly affected by environmental degradation and/or by great climatic variation such as the Sahel region, especially small farming households often resort to migration strategies. When some members of the household migrate and support the remaining members by sending money and/or materials, the latter can better cope with the effects of droughts or tidal waves. This migration must be described as voluntary, if anything, and mainly takes place for a limited period.
- **Migration as a mere survival strategy has played a rather subordinate role in this regard to date.** Thus, according to estimates by the International Displacement Monitoring Centre, in recent years merely between 15 and 20 per cent

of the total populations affected by suddenly occurring natural disasters worldwide were temporarily or permanently "displaced" by these.

- **Persons who cannot migrate** – because they are physically unable (e.g. children, old people, sick people) or who do not have the financial means for this – **mostly live and survive under harsher conditions than do migrants.**
- **Not only emigration from ecologically vulnerable areas is problematic, but also the immigration to these areas.** This is especially the case for slums and urban areas affected by flooding.
- **Persons who migrate in the context of ecological change mainly move within their own national borders or sub-regions.** There are hardly any indications that international migration (e.g. from Africa to Europe) is influenced by environmental factors.

### Legal protection

The importance of legal protection for migrants who consider themselves forced to leave their homes due to environmental changes is frequently emphasised. As mentioned, not many migration flows are solely attributable to environmental events. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly forced migration that environmental events have significantly contributed to. There are "loopholes in the protection" and an improvement of the legal protection is worth striving for.

So far, no international legal instrument has been developed from which conclusive property rights for these migrant groups might be derived. A series of legal opinions draw the conclusion that there are points of contact for the protection of forced migrants in the context of environmental changes in various areas of the law (human rights, refugee law, environmental law, etc.). But taken alone, these areas of the law do not offer any sufficient legal protection.

How could an improvement be achieved? A frequently discussed option is to extend the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 by explicitly mentioning environmental factors. In the current form of the Convention, environmental factors do not legitimise recognition as a refugee. Another possibility discussed is to create a separate international legal convention for environmental migrants. But neither option appears to be very promising. In the first option, the status of refugees, who are currently still protected by the Convention, could be weakened. The immigration and asylum policies of many industrialised countries have become increasingly more restrictive in recent decades. In addition, migrants in the context of environmental changes are often internally displaced persons to whom the Convention does not apply. While there are the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, these are merely "soft law". Accord-

ingly, they do not have any internationally binding legal validity. In the option to create a convention for environmental migrants, the result of a foreseeably lengthy negotiation and ratification process would be extremely uncertain.

### Awareness of problems at the international level

The complexity of the phenomenon of environmental change and migration suggests that not only the international UN (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR) and non-UN institutions (International Organization for Migration, IOM) that are established in the area of migration and asylum should deal with the emerging problems. Rather, (UN and non-UN) organisations that work in the areas of sustainable development, environmental and climate protection as well as humanitarian aid should also be involved.

There is a problem of coherence here: although the improvement of the protection and the living conditions of people who migrate in the context of environmental changes is highly relevant to some organisations such as IOM, UNHCR, the United Nations Development Programme and also the United Nations Environment Programme, the problem plays a rather subordinate role in other international organisations and committees. Various organisations also have differing approaches and courses of action in relation to the topic of environmental change and migration.

It was nevertheless an important signal that the issue of migration was taken up during the international climate negotiations in 2010 in Cancún. In the Cancún Agreement, the international community undertook the obligation in principle, but rather vaguely, to take measures to increase the knowledge, coordination and the international cooperation for the environmental change and migration complex. Whether the issue will soon be more than a marginal aspect in international climate negotiations remains unclear however. It is also uncertain what international organisation or instance could create more coherence with regard to the matter of migration in the context of ecological change in the international arena.

### Awareness of problems in countries affected

Regional and especially national actors undoubtedly have a key role to play in coping with the problem of environmental change and migration. However, not only have many industrialised countries clearly strengthened their migration and asylum policies in recent years, the governments of many developing countries are also backing a policy of stemming migration. Whereas the positive links between migration and development are certainly recognised in many countries of the southern hemisphere, the political focus is largely restricted to the role of international migration in relation to financial remittances to the home country. Internal and intra-regional migration is

mainly seen negatively. Internal migrants often live in socially and economically marginal situations with correspondingly limited possibilities of political participation – this also applies to the rural smallholder population mainly affected by environmental change. The likewise mainly internal migration due to environmental change does not form any exception here.

Analyses of national programmes for adapting to climate change in least-developed countries show that in the majority of these programmes, migration in the context of environmental and climate change is mostly considered as a phenomenon that is important to prevent or contain. Only a few least-developed countries underline migration's positive potential for adaptation in their strategies.

Moreover, only a minority of developing countries contemplate resettling persons from areas that are affected by extensive ecological degradation. The majority of these are small Pacific island states, which is not very surprising considering the direct threat to their existence from rising sea levels.

### Recommendations

Due to the complex links between environmental factors, human mobility and their consequences, recommendations that only emphasise environmental change and migration do not make any sense at all. Against the background of the stated international legal instruments and the increased awareness of the problem at the international level, the following policy recommendations can therefore be formulated:

- **Strengthen existing legal instruments:** instead of reflecting on the creation of a separate environmental migration convention or the extension of the Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees, efforts that strengthen and draw closer together the existing legal instruments in the areas of human rights, environmental and refugee law for the benefit of the forced migrants affected by ecological change 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 (and other migration issues), an international coordination unit for migration should be set up. This would have to build bridges between governments, the UN as well as non-UN organisations that work in the areas of migration, development and humanitarian aid.
- **Not only prevent migration, but support migrants:** migration can be an important form of adaptation. But instead of only focussing on stemming migration, a supporting management of migration that considers the positive effects of migration would be desirable. Thus, for example, the

infrastructure for financial remittances can be improved and information portals that inform migrants about jobs can be created.

- **Improve the rural and urban living conditions:** on the one hand, it is a good idea to provide greater support for adaptation-oriented rural / smallholder-oriented development and thereby reduce migration pressure. On the other hand, not only migrants, but also the family members left behind also benefit from an improvement in
- **Involve migrants and population groups affected by environmental change:** measures regarding the last-named points can only be successful if migrants, their networks and the population groups affected by environmental change can be (better) involved in political decision-making and planning processes.

public services, infrastructure and working conditions in the cities through (potentially) higher remittances.

### Literature

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