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Conference Paper

Preparing for environmental migration

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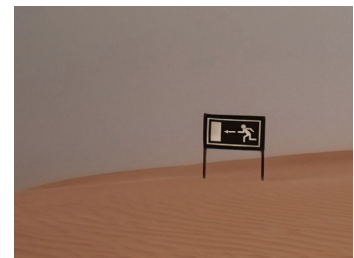


The Global Society

Preparing for Environmental Migration

The Challenges

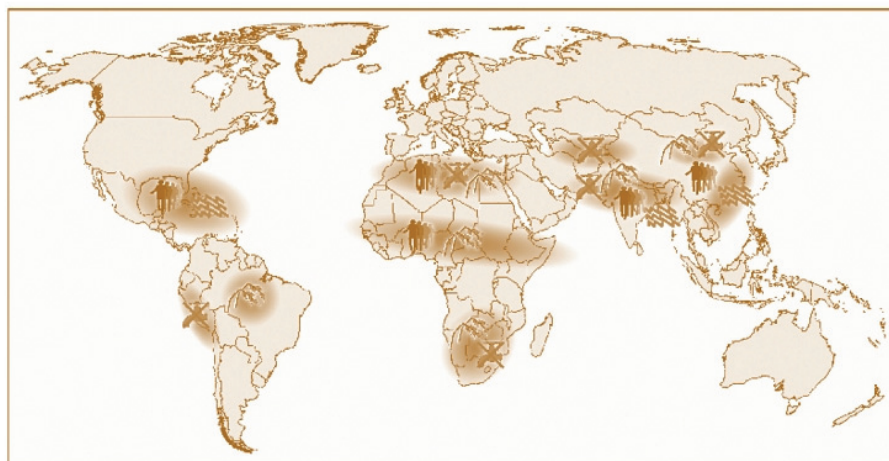
Global warming will reduce the “carrying capacity” of ecosystems in large parts of the world—that is, their ability to provide food, water and shelter for the people who currently live there. The most widely cited estimate puts the number of people affected at 200 million individuals by 2050—similar to the current total number of international labor migrants, and more than five times the number of refugees and internally displaced persons accounted for by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR).



In spite of the large number of people likely to be affected in the near future, the academic and policy communities so far have given little thought to how these people might find new homes and livelihoods.

Reluctance to tackle this issue reflects, in part, the potentially wide-ranging implications in international law of defining the status of an environmental refugee akin to that of a refugee from conflict or persecution.

Furthermore, environmental migration is a complex phenomenon. Only rarely will the impact of environmental degradation be as obvious as a farmer’s land being submerged by a rising sea level. More typically, local, regional, and international factors like population growth, soil degradation, higher temperatures, and extreme weather events will combine to threaten livelihoods. External or internal migration is one way in which individuals may respond to this threat: Either whole households leave affected areas or individual family members seek work elsewhere, giving the household an additional source of income.



Conflict constellations in selected hotspots



From: Warner, Koko. Frank Laczko (2008). Migration, Environment and Development: New Directions for Research. In: Joseph Chamie and Luca Dall’Oglio (eds), International Migration and Development. Continuing the Dialogue: Legal and Policy Perspectives Center for Migration Studies (CMS) and International Organization for Migration (IOM).



How can opportunities for international labor migration be enhanced to help people to cope with the consequences of climate change and environmental degradation? In what circumstances and to what degree are adaptation strategies substitutes for migration? Under what circumstances do we need an international regime for environmental migration? If so, which international organization would be best placed to take care of it? If people need to move, should they be directed primarily to high-income countries (where economic opportunities would be richer) or elsewhere within their own countries or neighboring countries (where integration might be easier)? What are feasible strategies for creating jobs for large numbers of resettled individuals and how can the private sector contribute? Should immigration regimes in high-income countries be readjusted to favor environmental migrants (rather than, say, the high-skilled)? How can business and civil society help address the migration problems? What policy framework would enable these groups to play an appropriate and effective role?

Proposed Solutions

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Emerging global governance arrangements

Although there is a lack of evidence and consensus on the nature of the relationship between environmental change and migration, and despite the expectation that most resulting population movements will take place within national borders, it seems likely that considerable numbers of people will also cross international borders either directly or indirectly as a result of the effects of environmental change. A proportion of them will fall outside existing legal and normative frameworks. Because they have crossed borders they will not be covered by the soft law framework of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement; yet neither will they satisfy the criteria for refugee status defined in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees which does not recognize environmental factors as a cause of displacement.

The growing scale of cross-border movements, and the prospect of “environmental migrants” falling into protection gaps, are two strong arguments for revising the legal and normative framework, and reforming current institutional roles and responsibilities.

Some countries have established special policies that permit individuals whose countries have experienced natural disasters to remain at least temporarily without fear of deportation (such as Temporary Protected Status in the USA and the Temporary Protection Directive in the EU). Sweden and Finland are rare examples of states that have included “environmental migrants” within their immigration policies. A number of other countries provide exceptions to removal on an ad hoc basis. But at the moment there are no examples of legislation or policies that address the migration of people from slow-onset climate changes that may destroy habitats or livelihoods in the long term—for example desertification or rising sea levels. Equal there are no international legal instruments that specifically address international migration stemming from climate change or other environmental factors. Proposals to address this gap in the legal and normative framework range from a new international convention, to amending the 1951 Convention, to developing “guiding principles” to inform national laws and policies.

Just as international legal frameworks for addressing climate change-induced cross-border movements are weak, so are the institutional roles and responsibilities at both the international and national levels. With the exception of the refugee regime, there is no existing international regime for managing international movements of people, although a plethora of international



organizations have some responsibilities related to international migration. “Environmental migration” may serve as a trigger for the global governance of international migration. Policy options include: creating a new agency, designating a lead agency from among existing agencies, bringing IOM into the UN system, a coordination model, a leadership model, a WTO model, and an incremental model.

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The extent of environmental migration will depend on how successful global and national policies to mitigate environmental degradation will be and whether individuals, households, and communities in affected areas can adapt their economic activities to changing environmental conditions. Therefore, new global rules for environmental migration should be combined with adequate incentives for mitigation and adaptation.

Solutions will likely be based on the following considerations, among others:

- A large proportion of the global environmental degradation will occur in developing countries with severely limited resources for mitigation, adaptation, and resettlement of migrants within their borders. International donor support will therefore be crucial. Conceivably, transfers from high-emission to low-emission countries under a future follow-up agreement to the Kyoto Protocol could be earmarked for these purposes.
- For (the relatively few) people in areas where human survival is becoming infeasible due to environmental degradation, a legal status of "environmental refugee", broadly similar to the status of refugee from persecution, should be defined. Provisions for international support for these refugees and for their resettlement should take into account that, while persecution may end due to a change in the political regime, environmental degradation is mostly permanent. Therefore, environmental refugees should be quickly be resettled permanently.
- When resettlement is not feasible within the country of origin, even with international support, the search for permanent host countries should give priority to areas where employment opportunities will allow former environmental refugees to become self-sufficient quickly. These are likely to include high-income industrialized countries.
- Where the carrying capacity of ecosystems is reduced but not eliminated, the growing scarcity of agricultural land will require a shift in the structure of output away from agriculture towards industry or tradable services. While development aid has not been successful generally in accelerating economic growth, donor support may be helpful for specific purposes, such as infrastructure investment.
- To facilitate adjustment and diversify income sources at the household level, additional opportunities should be created for temporary labor migration to high-income countries. These should benefit primarily the residents of areas that bear a particularly heavy burden of adjustment to climate change. Countries that contribute disproportionately to climate change through high emissions should accept a larger number of environmental migrants.
- Charter cities can play a positive role in promoting structural change and the growth of industry and tradable services in developing countries as well as in resettling environmental refugees.