

14th Conference of the Parties to UNFCCC

Side Event

UNHCR in association with IOM and UNU Climate change, migration and forced displacement: the new humanitarian frontier?

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Aesculapian Snake Room

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Keynote: “Migration and climate change: from emergency to adaptation”

Human beings are resourceful creatures. Over the millennia, we have adapted not only to the most varied environments, but also to *changing* environments – and one of the strategies of doing so, was by migrating. It seems almost too obvious to state. And yet, nowadays migration rarely figures in environmental research or policy agendas. Human mobility and its links with climate change are still not included in the UNFCCC process; they are nowhere to be found in the Kyoto Protocol or in the Bali Road Map. This is even more surprising when we consider that as early as 1990, in its very first assessment report, the IPCC estimated that the greatest single impact of climate change might be on human mobility.

So why do we seem to be “forgetting” about migration?

One of the reasons is that migration is still predominantly seen as a **worst-case scenario**. “Common wisdom” has it (and the media likes to confirm this) that migration is always and necessarily associated with crisis, that migration is a “last resort”. And no doubt, there are cases where this is true. Yet what I want to underline here today is that migration has been and always will be a variable in the interaction between societies and nature. And as such, **migration can be not only one of the problems, but also one of the solutions to the challenges presented by climate change.**

The evacuation of people in face of a fast-approaching hurricane; a subsistence farmer heading for the city because her yields have been declining year after year; the movement of nomadic peoples with the seasons; a drought-affected village putting together money to send some of its young men to a neighbouring country for temporary work; the relocation of entire populations whose territory is threatened by rising sea levels – all these are possible and actual examples of “migrations” related to environmental factors and climate change.

Such manifestations of the link between migration and the environment throw up a number of questions, for example: Who moves, for how long and where? Will they come back? Who does not move and why? What are the alternatives to migration? When is migration a choice, when a necessity? Do the answers to these questions

differ depending on the severity of environmental degradation? If yes, can we identify a “tipping point” between moving rather than staying?

Already from these questions it is obvious that we are dealing with a complex issue. What we need is to see the “**big picture**”: the environment can clearly be a driver of migration, sometimes a predominant one, but more often than not it is a **complex combination of causes** that determines whether – or not – someone moves. Therefore, just as the environment is just one factor driving migration, migration is just one possible response to the pressures exerted by climate change. In addition, the **type of mobility** – whether long or short distance, long or short term – will vary with the type of environmental event or process and their severity. Crucially, IOM has reason to believe that movement caused by gradual environmental change will be *as*, if not *more*, significant in terms of patterns and volumes as displacement triggered by natural disasters.

Given the multi-causality of migration, drawing a **line between voluntary movement and forced** is quite a complicated business – barring obvious cases such as impending or acute disaster when people move for sheer survival. For the most part, however, environmentally-induced migration takes place along a **fluid continuum**, ranging from clear cases of forced migration to clear cases of voluntary migration, with a large **grey zone** in between.

If migration linked to climate change cannot, in most cases, be unambiguously classified as either forced or voluntary, then we are obliged to revisit the assumption that migration is necessarily a worst-case scenario. Again, let me remind you that migration is and always has been an integral part of human interaction with their environment and can be seen as **logical coping strategy**.

We must also question the assumption that all consequences of migration are necessarily negative: Sometimes a move triggered by hardship can even have **productive results**. For instance, remittances can supplement the income of migrants’ families. Returning migrants may bring back with them new skills, know-how and savings. All this can strengthen and diversify livelihoods or, in agricultural areas, contribute to innovative land use methods. In some cases, out-migration can even allow a degraded environment to recuperate. In other words, **migration is not just a failure of adaptation, but can itself be an adaptation strategy**.

However, the potential of migration as a mechanism for adaptation and livelihood diversification has not been fully recognized in our thinking, institutional responses and policy-making. We need to do much more to **develop the climate change and adaptation agenda and the role of migration within** it. This means both stabilizing communities and livelihoods in the face of environmental pressures and recognizing the potential of migration as a viable option, one that can be chosen in safety, dignity and security. This, in turn, cannot be done without bringing **development** into the equation.

We need to build synergies between actors and institutions from the development, humanitarian and adaptation field, devise comprehensive policies, and summon the necessary resources to make the leap **from purely reactive to more proactive thinking on climate change and human mobility**. We need to bolster humanitarian

action to rise to a growing challenge of natural disasters, certainly – but we also need to reinforce the move from response *to* disasters to preparedness *for* them. Yes, we need to be alert to instances of migration induced by natural disasters – but we must also wake up to more gradual, more ambiguous, but ultimately much larger movements resulting from climatic and environmental change. And yes, these movements will have their own consequences, social, economic, humanitarian and otherwise – but they also harbour a great positive potential, for individual and community adaptation as well as development.

Let me sum up: **Firstly**, we need to include migration in the world’s on-going environmental and climate change discourse, in particular in the context of the UNFCCC negotiations. **Second**, I recommend we engage in genuine lateral thinking to comprehend the intricate links between climate change and human mobility in all its dimensions, *both* the possible humanitarian implications *and* its positive potential. And **third**, to convert this thinking into action, we need to strengthen the complex linkages between development, adaptation and humanitarian action, in policy and in practice.

So far, we have been “putting out fires”, so to speak. Are we going to stop there? Or are we ready to adopt a big picture approach and act on it?