



Submission of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to the Select Committee on the European Union Home Affairs Sub-Committee¹

(as per 12 March 2020)

Climate Change and Migration session: responses to suggested questions

Witnesses

- Ms Dina Ionesco, Head of Migration, Environment and Climate Change at the International Organisation for Migration
- Dr Roger Zetter, Emeritus Professor and Former Director of the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford
- Dr Caroline Zickgraf, Deputy Director of the Hugo Observatory at Liège University
- Mr Oli Brown, Associate Fellow to the Energy, Environment and Resources Programme at Chatham House
- Mr Alex Randall, Climate Change and Migration Project Manager at the Climate and Migration Organisation
- Dr Ricardo Safra de Campos, Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Exeter

Background

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been at the forefront of operational, research, policy and advocacy efforts, seeking to bring environmental migration to the heart of international, regional and national concerns, in collaboration with its Member States, observers and partners. Since 2007, member states requested IOM within its governing bodies to work on migration, environment and climate change. At the beginning of 2015, a dedicated Migration, Environment and Climate Change (MECC) Division was created to address the migration, environment and climate nexus.

IOM recognizes the necessity to step up national, regional and international efforts to address human mobility challenges associated with environmental factors and climate change. IOM's vision on migration, environment and climate change is that contemporary migration governance, policy and practice must reflect the significance of environmental, disaster and climate change factors on human mobility. Environmental factors must be integrated across all areas of migration management, such as: prevention, preparedness and response to displacement, border management, labour migration and integration, and return and reintegration.

IOM's objectives concerning migration, environment and climate change are:

¹ Dina Ionesco, head of Migration, Environment and Climate Change Division at the international Organization for Migration (IOM) submits the following evidence at the request of the Committee on the European Union Home Affairs Sub-Committee. Document prepared by the Migration, Environment and Climate Change Division and the International Migration Law Division, IOM Headquarters, Geneva, Switzerland, and submitted in March 2020.



- To prevent forced migration that results from environmental factors to the extent possible;
- To provide assistance and protection to affected populations when forced migration does occur in situations of environmental and climate change, and to seek durable solutions to their situation;
- To facilitate migration in the context of climate change adaptation and enhance the resilience of affected communities.

This document uses the encompassing terminology “environmental migration” and “environmental migrants” to refer to movements occurring in the context of environmental changes, including climate change, as well as the terms “climate migration” and “climate migrants” to specifically designate movements occurring in the context of climate change².

1. In your view, how great a problem does climate change and migration pose? What is the most compelling piece of evidence you can provide to support this?

Climate change and migration are two of the most defining challenges of our time.

- Climate change predictions for the twenty-first century indicate that even more people are expected to be on the move as weather-related disasters such as extreme precipitations and temperatures become more frequent and intense,³ and changes to climate conditions impact livelihoods. This is even more likely if prompt action is not taken to reduce emissions through mitigation measures and make the necessary preparations through adaptation measures.
- Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of sudden-onset disasters such as storms and floods, and also to worsen the impacts of slow-onset disasters such as droughts. It will also exacerbate gradual processes of environmental degradation, for example, desertification, ocean acidification and erosion. Some phenomena like sea-level rise and glacial melt linked to rising temperatures will combine both slow- and sudden-onset effects. Finally, nonweather events and processes – for instance, earthquakes, tsunamis and pollution – can also lead to environmental migration.
- Gradual environmental degradation is expected to cause most environmental migration in the long term, but all of these phenomena may result in large-scale

² Glossary of Environmental Migration, IOM, 2014

https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/meclep_glossary_en.pdf?language=en

³ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) - Climate Change 2014 – Synthesis Report
https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/05/SYR_AR5_FINAL_full_wcover.pdf



population movements. These issues are already posing major challenges at all levels and will require concerted responses.⁴

- There is already overwhelming evidence that climate change and disasters are shaping migration patterns in all parts of the world. In Central Asia, rural to urban migration is fueled by climate impacts on livelihoods. In East Africa nomadic populations are altering their ancient migration patterns to cope with desertification.
- We are witnessing for the fifth year in a row the East African drought affecting Somalia and forcing many to leave their homes. Because of sea level rise and coastal erosion entire communities in small island states need to relocate.
- Cyclone Idai displaced hundreds of thousands in Mozambique, Malawi, Madagascar and Zimbabwe; while Cyclone Fani displaced millions in India and Bangladesh. Powerful hurricanes stormed through the Caribbean for the second time in three years, impacting communities and forcing thousands to migrate.

2. *Given that there is no universal definition of this type of migrant and that it is difficult to establish causal links between climate change and migration, how are past and predicted figures of this type of migrants calculated, and how reliable is this data?*

Over the past decade, important advances on methodologies and data collection have been made.

- Academic researchers and specialized agencies are working on improved methodologies for comparative cross-country or cross-region studies, agent-based models, multi-factor simulators designed to predict future trends and hotspot identification triangulating environmental and social data. All these tools can greatly contribute to improving current evidence and future projections on environmental migration trends, in order to better inform policies and action.
- Big data methods can provide opportunities to strengthen knowledge on environmental migration. These new methods can help fill gaps in time series data, indicate the locations people have moved from and to, and enhance the timeliness of this information. In some cases, these new methods can also be used to inform life-saving early warnings. At the same time, privacy safeguards and ethical considerations need to be adhered to.

How reliable is current data?

- It is unrealistic to expect absolute certainty on the patterns and volumes of environmental migration. It is challenging to differentiate when environment

⁴IOM, 'Outlook on Migration, Environment and climate change'(2014)
https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mecc_outlook.pdf



conditions and climate change are the main driver of migration, or when they are combined with other factors.

- The most comprehensive data available only track people newly displaced by disasters within their own country on a given year. The quality and the availability of data on disaster displacement⁵ vary between countries and depends also on the type of disasters occurring.
- Also, in cases where conflict intersects with disasters, information on movements is lacking, in particular in terms of past displacement trajectories that could inform future predictions.
- In terms of projections, it is important to note that there is great uncertainty about the figures.
- A number of forecasts for the number of environmental migrants by 2050 have been produced by various researchers and should be considered with immense caution as numbers may vary by a factor of 40 (between 25 million and 1 billion). In reality these projections are rather highlighting populations at risk due to the adverse effects of climate change rather than actual migration projections.

Actual figures of future migration due to environmental factors will depend on, inter alia:

- a) Which climate change scenarios will occur;
- b) What adaptation actions are undertaken;
- c) The evolution of various socioeconomic, political and demographic factors influencing the decision to migrate, such as economic growth and development, population growth, access to labour market and educational opportunities and governance.

For this reason, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) does not provide estimates of the overall number of future environmental migrants.⁶

- In the Atlas of Environmental Migration published in 2017, we highlight that predicting the future of environmental migration is very delicate and estimates are still extremely fragile. Predictions generally ignore the multi-causality of migration and the estimates are based on the number of people living in at risk regions, such as low-lying deltaic zones or areas affected by desertification⁷.

⁵ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2019/>

⁶ IOM, 'Outlook on Migration, Environment and climate change'(2014), https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mecc_outlook.pdf

⁷ The Atlas of Environmental Migration, Dina Ionesco, Daria Mokhnacheva, François Gemenne, Earthscan Routledge 2017



- However, a number of new studies provide interesting projections data and methodologies though not with a global reach, such as the 2018 World Bank report⁸ and a multi partner Pacific project⁹. Comprehensive datasets on environmental migration are needed, including the number of people moving through a planned relocation process. We also need comparable quantitative, longitudinal, disaggregated and georeferenced data. Another gap is the lack of available data on trapped populations who cannot leave areas affected by disaster and environmental conditions.¹⁰

3. How do you think this type of migrant should be classified? How useful is the term ‘climate change refugee’?

Available evidence on how climate change and environmental degradation affect human mobility is growing and is uncontested, however the current focus of the debate on establishing a climate refugee status can lead to a narrow and biased debate and would provide only partial solutions to address the complexity of human mobility and climate change.

- In recent years, there have been a number of calls for the adoption of a new international instrument to ensure the protection of “climate refugees” or of the broader category of international or internal environmental migrants. The proposals for a new convention protecting these groups of people face a number of obstacles. Within those proposals looking at addressing forced movement, the applicability of the 1951 Refugee Convention has been discussed. However, the definition of “refugee” as outlined the 1951 Convention does not allow to address the plight of those who flee because of an extreme environmental event, and many have accordingly expressed concerns about the risk of diluting the protection afforded by the Convention. The proposal of annexing a Protocol to the Convention to expand its scope of application was not well received either.
- Other Proposals for a new instrument addressing forced movements within States’ borders have yet to be considered with concrete engagement by the international community. Other authors, however, look at the broader picture and call for the adoption of a new Convention for the protection of all those who move due to environmental factors. These proposals have not been successful, mainly because of the lack of political will from States to adopt a new binding document in an area which combines two very sensitive issues: migration and the environment.

⁸ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2018/03/19/groundswell---preparing-for-internal-climate-migration>

⁹ The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) of the Norwegian Refugee Council, Platform on Disaster Displacement and IOM project “Understanding and enhancing preparedness and response to risks of disaster displacement in the Pacific” (Fiji, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu from August 2019- April 2022)

¹⁰ IOM Migration Data Portal

https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/environmental_migration



- Over time, it became clear that, in any case, the diversity of the types of movements occurring in the context of climate and environmental impacts could not be reduced to one single category.
- Drawing on new theories and research, IOM argues that not all climate - or environment-related movements can be considered as forced and that any legal approach needed to take that critical factor into account. Most of the movements happen in a continuum between fully forced and entirely voluntary migratory movements and, in practice, it is difficult to determine the exact level of compulsion or voluntariness in any given migration situation. Recognizing this continuum between forced and voluntary migration is critical. Intervention – whether normative or operational – aimed at protecting those affected by climate or environmental change (whether moving across or within national borders) must take account of the varying and complex legal, policy and practical implications which come into play at particular points along the forced-voluntary continuum.¹¹
- Moreover, environmental and climate migration is mainly internal: when migration is internal, people moving are under the responsibility of their own state, they do not cross borders and are not seeking protection from a third country or at the international level. Hence other frameworks in particular those designed to support internally displaced people will be the most meaningful to protect and assist these populations.
- As early as 2007, IOM tried to capture these intricacies by developing a descriptive definition of ‘environmental migrants’. According to this definition, environmental migrants are considered as: *“Persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.”*¹²
- The 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), the first intergovernmental agreement on international migration successfully negotiated by a large number of United Nations Member States, contains multiple references to environmental migration, articulating a wide and comprehensive understanding of the challenges linked to the environment-migration nexus. Most of the references related to environmental migration are made under Objective 2: Minimizing the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin, which contains a section specifically dedicated to the subject and entitled “Natural disasters, the adverse effects of climate change, and environmental degradation” (Objective 2, paragraphs 18.h-18.l). Furthermore, a few important references can be

¹¹ From “G. Appave, A. Sironi, M. Traore Chazalnoel, D. Ionesco and D. Mokhnacheva, ‘Organizational Perspectives: International Organization for Migration’s role and perspectives on climate change, migration and the law’ in B. Mayer and F. Crépeau (eds), *Climate Change, Migration and the Law* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2017) 288-315.

¹²Glossary of Environmental Migration, IOM, 2014
https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/meclep_glossary_en.pdf?language=en



found under Objective 5: Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration. In Objectives 5 g and h of the Compact, the need for specific types of humanitarian visas is mentioned¹³ that can also provide future solutions for people forcibly moving because of the adverse impacts of climate change.

4. If this group are not to be given refugee status under international law, what sort of protections should they be afforded?

States have the obligation to protect environmental migrants, whether their movement is forced or of a more voluntary nature. As human beings, migrants (forced or voluntary, internal or cross-border, temporary or permanent) are entitled to have their rights protected by States under the jurisdiction in which they find themselves. It is important to keep in mind that control of the admission of non-nationals to their territory falls within States' sovereignty.

- While there is currently no global legal instrument (binding or non-binding) which specifically addresses environmental migrants or environmental migration, there are a number of existing legal instruments or principles, at the international, regional and national levels, which protect or might be used to protect environmental migrants. They are drawn from different branches of international law (such as human rights, refugee, international humanitarian and environmental law) and may be binding or non-binding (“soft law”).
- Moreover, protection against non-refoulement is of primary importance and environmental migrants should be allowed to enter and stay in a given country until the situation in their country of origin improves. Given that addressing the impacts of climate change is normally a long-term endeavour, it is important that people compelled to leave their countries due to climate impacts that are threatening their *right to life with dignity*, are granted the right to work and provided access to livelihood options. Attention to underlying vulnerabilities should also be a consideration. For example, environmental migrants should be granted access to health care if their health has been weakened by the degraded environmental situation back in the country of origin. Family reunification schemes should also be opened to them.
- Temporary or seasonal migration schemes could also be explored for countries where the impacts of climate change are not life-threatening, to decrease pressure of limited resources in countries of origin. Student visas are also an option that could be explored.

6. In 2016, Ioane Teitiota, a national from the Republic of Kiribati, brought a case to the UN Human Rights Committee against the government of New Zealand for refusing to grant him asylum, the claim for which he made on the basis that

¹³ Perspectives on Environmental Migration — 10 Key Takeaways from the Global Compact for Migration on Environment, Climate Change, Global Compact 08/30/18
Dina Ionesco and Mariam Traore Chazalnoël



his home was at risk of being submerged under water. (According to the IPCC, the Pacific island nation may be completely underwater within the next 25 years.¹⁴) Although he lost his appeal, the UN Committee ruled that governments must take into account the human rights violations caused by the climate crisis when considering deportation of asylum seekers. In your opinion, will his case lead to more cases of individuals attempting to claim asylum because of climate change? What do you think the responses to such claims might be?

- Although the claim of Mr. Teitiota was rejected, the significance of the case lies in the fact that, for the first time, the Committee recognized the application of the principle of *non-refoulement* to situations where the impacts of climate change are so severe that they risk infringing upon a person's right to life with dignity, under article 6, or the prohibition of inhumane and degrading treatment, under article 7 of the ICCPR (para. 9.11).
- However, the Committee has not defined the specific immigration/protection status that these persons should be granted. Therefore, the options outlined under question 4 are all types of statuses that should be further explored.

8. As host of COP26, what lead should the UK be taking on the issue of climate change and migration, and is it taking the steps that you think are necessary?

- The 2015 Paris Agreement outlined the obligation of states to mitigate and adapt to climate change and to respect the human rights of everyone under their jurisdiction, including migrants. This Agreement also created the [Task Force on Displacement](#), an expert body under the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage (WIM) that produced recommendations ([Decision 10/CP.24](#)) adopted at COP24 in 2018 on how to avert, minimize and address climate change impacts on displacement. The Task Force has developed over the past twelve months a new workplan ([Workplan Phase 2](#)), with the extensive support of IOM who hosted a technical meeting for Taskforce members and the UNFCCC Secretariat in July 2019. More broadly, the WIM has [a work stream on migration, displacement and human mobility](#), which includes the work of the Task Force.
- The implementation of the Task Force on Displacement's plan of action takes place in the greater context of the discussions on loss and damage occurring under the WIM. At COP25, despite the contention around the topic of loss and damage, it was recognized during the WIM Review process that the Task Force on Displacement is a good practice that leverages the expertise of its members to produce solid results.
- The UK is not represented within the Task Force on Displacement, but it has a representative in the WIM. The UK is therefore in a position to champion issues of

¹⁴ Rajendra K. Pachauri and Leo Meyer (eds.) *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland



climate migration in the intersessional work and during official UNFCCC events, such as the June 2020 Bonn Climate Change Conference.

- In terms of migration, the priority at COP 26 is to continue to showcase the relevance of the Task Force to support countries most vulnerable to climate change, share progress made in the implementation of its plan of action and garner states' support. One of the main challenges identified by the WIM is to ensure synergies with the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, the first intergovernmental agreement among United Nations Member States on international migration, and discussions on that topic will be expected. Another challenge lies in the sensitivities usually witnessed around the topic of loss and damage, which can obscure the achievements made by the Task Force in terms of migration issues.
- In the context of COP26, the UK could support the development of synergies on climate migration before and during its presidency, notably by ensuring that the work of the Task Force is referred to and mentioned in other intergovernmental policy discussions where the UK is active. This includes, but is not limited to,
 - i) Migration policy discussions, notably through the regional review process of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) (throughout 2020);
 - ii) Discussions on the United Nations Decade of Action and the implementation of the SDGs (throughout 2020);
 - iii) UN General Assembly Committees discussions (September);
 - iv) Discussions on ocean policy, notably through the United Nations Global Conference on Oceans (June);
 - v) Discussions on biodiversity, notably through the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Conservation Congress (June);
 - vi) Discussions on clean energy in displacement situations through the Global Plan of Action for Sustainable Energy in Situations of Displacement (GPA) (throughout 2030); and
 - vii) Gender-related policy discussions (throughout 2020).
- At the COP itself, the UK could consider sponsoring/organizing an event on climate migration at the UK Pavilion, participating to the annual official event of the Task Force on Displacement, and support strong references to migration in the annual negotiations on the WIM at COP26 as well as give visibility to migrants who are actively involved in the fight against climate change.
- During its Presidency, the UK could engage in 2021 in a thinking exercise and develop policy analysis on the implications of climate change on migration trends to/from and within the UK.



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