

Jump directly to: [To the content](#) [To the main navigation](#) [To the contact link](#) [To the search link](#)
<http://www.inwent.org/ez/articles/156345/index.en.shtml>

[**Global trends**]

The challenges of climigration

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the mean temperature of the atmosphere will continue to rise by up to several degrees centigrade by the end of the century. The implications for humankind and the environment will be dramatic. Both rapid-onset events, such as an increased frequency and magnitude of weather-related natural hazards, and slow-onset longer term environmental changes will cause many millions of people to migrate.

[By Michelle Leighton, Thomas R. Loster and Koko Warner]

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) there are about 170 million migrants today. They have left their homes for political, economic and environmental reasons. If these people formed a single nation, it would make up the world's sixth largest country; and its population would grow fast as climate change is increasingly threatening people's current livelihoods.

The IPCC estimates that flooding will affect the homes of two to seven million people in coastal areas by 2080. More than 1 billion people will lack drinking water, and 200 to 600 million will be threatened by hunger. Estimates of migrant numbers today and projections for the future are controversial. Serious experts reckon there will be 25 to 50 million more by the year 2010, and almost 700 million by 2050.

Another controversy concerns the categorisation of people made mobile by environmental factors (including climate change). Some speak of "environmental refugees". Others disagree, arguing that "refugee" has a specific legal meaning in the context of the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Therefore, terms such as "environmental migrants", "environmentally motivated migrants" are used to describe the phenomena. Even new terms, for example "climigrant", have been coined.

Migration has positive and negative effects, but apprehension dominates public perceptions. Population pressure, social unrest, security risks and diminished opportunities for economic development are considered serious threats. Environmental pressures are growing, but they are certainly not the only causes of migration. One thing is certain, however: climate change will hurt people in the least developed countries first and worst.

Impacts are already felt

Climate change is already causing migration. The effects are evident, as shown by cases in Alaska or in the small island

D+C

inwent
 Internationale Weiterbildung
 und Entwicklung gGmbH

states of the Pacific. Polar ice and permafrost are disintegrating, sea levels are rising, contributing to coastal erosion and forcing people to move. The effects are so dramatic that some communities face imminent resettlement.

The Inuit people on the small barrier island of Shishmaref, off the coast of Alaska, have to move. Relocation plans have been on the table for at least 30 years, but now implementation has become urgent. Other Inuit in Alaska and Canada are under pressure too.

- In the case of small island states like Tuvalu and Kiribati, rising sea levels are forcing thousands of inhabitants to emigrate to Australia and New Zealand. Island states are conducting negotiations with Australia, New Zealand and other potential host countries likely to offer refuge.
- The Maldives archipelago does not belong to the African Union or any other regional umbrella organisation. Its government is actively calling on the international community for help, besides undertaking measures to help itself. When the Maldives sink, other countries will most probably help. However, last-minute rescue from drowning is neither a viable nor a sustainable solution.

Resettlement poses serious political and other challenges. Uprooted people are expected to integrate into a new environment. Resettlement is not just about infrastructure, money and relocation, but also about issues such as homeland, traditions, socio-cultural and political environment, health and personal lifestyles. Obviously, the people concerned must have a say in the process.

Inadequate action

No doubt, the migration issue will assume a new magnitude in the future; but, so far, politicians and the general public are only dealing with migration challenges on an ad hoc basis at best. The phenomenon is under-researched. Other global challenges have gained much more attention.

Only few governments have made migration an issue in their National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPA). The NAPA process is meant to channel resources from an adaptation funding mechanism, yet to be agreed at the Copenhagen climate summit in December. In some NAPAs, migration is a keyword, considered either a likely consequence of climate change or a possible consequence of a failure in adaptation. One or two NAPAs reference migration as an adaptation strategy, and a few suggest adopting some kind of formal involuntary resettlement programme.

There is little to indicate that migration within adaptation responses will follow international guidelines or standards such as human rights. As stated earlier, there are international norms protecting certain classes of refugees. However, the Convention of 1951 does not include any special protected status for migrants seeking refuge across borders due to environmental disasters, degradation or change. It does not even recognise this category of people.

A significant segment of the people likely to be displaced in future is thus not legally protected in any way so far. The people affected are persons moving

- across international borders due to the sudden-onset of natural disasters,
- inside or outside their country as a consequence of slower-onset climatic events (drought, for instance),
- to international destinations from islands threatened by sea-level rise, or once the sea moves inland, and
- across borders to seek refuge from designated "high-risk" zones too dangerous for human habitation.

Governments will need to marshal the political will to close these legal gaps and to establish new agreements. To date, they have resisted the negotiation of a comprehensive multilateral migration agreement that could capture migration more broadly and climate more specifically. Immigration issues tend to be highly politicised in most developed countries, viewed as a security and economic equity issue.

Some countries such as Finland and Sweden have immigration categories for environmental migrants. Other countries have an ad hoc approach. The United States, for example, have a "temporary protected status" that provides a statutory safe haven of six to eighteen months for individuals who do not qualify as refugees, but are unable to return home due to potentially dangerous situations. Perhaps more encouraging, the European Council has in the past year called upon European governments to adopt more specific standards to protect climate-related migrants within a formal migration agreement or as part of the European Convention on Human Rights. International humanitarian agencies have requested the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) to consider the issue in the climate negotiations leading up to an anticipated agreement in Copenhagen. Some non-governmental organisations are calling for a full UN convention on the subject.

A robust debate on what policies, standards and measures of protection are appropriate for climate-related migrants is certainly warranted. One thing is sure: we need substantial empirical evidence and policy-oriented research if we want to support policy-makers with sustainable solutions. One recent effort called EACH-FOR has started to fill this empirical and policy-oriented gap (see box below).

Synergies in policy and research

To create sustainable solutions and better understand the nexus between climate change and migration, the IOM, the United Nations University (UNU), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and the Munich Re Foundation established the Climate Change, Environment and Migration Alliance (CCEMA) in April 2008. This was a first major step in the right direction. The Alliance was founded in response to the growing realisation that there is need for synergies in policy and research, interdisciplinary multi-stakeholder collaboration and the development of comprehensive approaches at the country level.

The major aim of the Alliance is to mainstream environmental and climate change issues into migration management, both in terms of policies and practice. At the same time, migration issues must be considered in ongoing environmental and climate-change discourse. CCEMA creates a platform to bring together the stakeholders from research, policy and the public.

Insights from EACH-FOR

In order to improve the knowledge of links between environmental change and migration, the European Commission has co-sponsored a project called Environmental Change and Forced Scenarios (EACH-FOR). The goal was to assess the impact of environmental change on migration at the local, national, regional and international level. Case studies of 23 different countries in various world regions served to create a snapshot of environmental processes such as extreme flooding, desertification, land degradation, sea level rise or water shortages.

EACH-FOR undertook desk research and expert interviews to examine historical and current migration patterns as well as the dynamics of environmental change. Researchers also took into account people who did not migrate in order to find out what factors keep people from moving away in spite of serious environmental problems.

The most important findings from EACH-FOR include:

- Seasonal migration already plays an important part in many families' struggle to deal with environmental change. This is likely to become even more common, as is the practice of migrating from place to place in search of ecosystems that can still support rural livelihoods. The breakdown of ecosystem-dependent livelihoods is likely to remain the premier driver of long-term migration.
- Disasters continue to be a major driver of shorter-term displacement and migration. Countries that fail to invest in disaster-risk reduction and where the official response to disasters is limited will face serious trouble.
- Sea level rise will worsen saline intrusions, inundation, storm surges, erosion and other coastal hazards. Island communities are in particular danger. There is evidence that impacts of climate change will devastate subsistence and commercial agriculture on many small islands. In the densely-populated deltas of the Ganges, the Mekong and the Nile, a sea level rise of only one meter would probably affect up to 24 million people and reduce the land currently under intensive agriculture by at least 1.5 million hectares.
- Many people will not be able to flee far enough to adequately avoid the negative impacts of climate change unless they receive support. Migration requires resources – including financial, social, and political capital. The most vulnerable people normally lack such capital. Case studies indicate that poorer environmental migrants can find their

destinations as precarious as the places they left behind. (*ml/tl/kw*)

Michelle Leighton

is the Director of Human Rights Programs, Center for Law and Global Justice, at the University of San Francisco School of Law.

Thomas R. Loster

is the chairman of the Munich Re Foundation. He is a former member of the Geoscience Research Group at Munich Reinsurance Company, the world's leading reinsurance company.

»» tloster@munichre-foundation.org

Koko Warner

heads the Environmental Migration, Social Vulnerability, and Adaptation Section at United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS).

Related Articles

»» [Read more about Climate, Energy](#)

»» [Read more about Global Governance](#)

»» [Read more about Refugees, migration](#)

■ D+C, 2009/09, Focus, Page 323-325

[Print] [Top] [Imprint]

© D+C 2007 - 2009