



Environment, Forced Migration & Social Vulnerability International Conference

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The migration of large population groups is as old as human kind. Migration always has and continues to have multiple root causes. These range from economic marginalization to insecurity to social upheaval to political mismanagement and environmental pressures.

In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its most conclusive assessment of climate change science to date, shedding new light on the severity of current and projected climate change impacts. In view of this assessment, climate change impacts will increasingly add to existing root causes of migration. These impacts most prominently include lack of water and food security, and sea-level rise.

At the same time, environmental pressures are often exacerbated by socio-economic issues such as poverty, insecurity or political mismanagement. Climate change as an underlying factor for forced migration should be seen in light of these socio-economic factors. Nonetheless, most studies on the future social consequences of climate change identify increased forced migration of large groups as a prominent consequence.

The final word on the likely numbers of environmental migrants is still out. Presently, estimates range from some 50 to 250 million people by 2050. But even now, people are already being forced to migrate: in Tuvalu due to sea-level rise, in Bangladesh, Vietnam or Mozambique due to floods, or in Central Asia due to decreasing water supplies, melting glaciers and landslides - to name but a few examples.

These are human stories of real suffering. Despite having gained physical safety, forced migration often goes hand-in-hand with a loss of livelihoods. Forced migration per se means that people are forced to leave the homes that they hold dear and to establish a new space for themselves in an unknown, often hostile world in which people are already competing for resources.

Migration can lead to situations of conflict in receiving areas or countries, particularly if the migration in-flow is large and disorderly. The experience of many countries has shown that there is often great difficulty in accepting immigration. Problems arise when those who already live in an area feel that newcomers are an unwanted burden on already limited resources. This is especially so when communities in search of new livelihood options move to areas that are already stressed and only just viable. Their presence there can compound social pressures and fuel social tension. One example where this has recently happened is the wave of xenophobic attacks on migrants in South Africa in May this year.

Climate change impacts have the potential to undo development gains that have been made and increase poverty levels. In the context of migration, they have the potential to increase the likelihood of social tensions and conflict over scarce resources.



Taking all these issues into account, concerted international efforts are needed in four key areas:

1. Migration needs to be managed

Research linking climate change projections to potential population movements needs to be intensified. Identifying likely migration flows as a result of climate change impacts would do much to reduce the potential of conflict. In this way, destination communities or countries could be identified, problems could be anticipated, benefits identified and the migration process could be managed. With the top migration researchers in the room, I am sure you can work towards some real progress on this issue.

2. Developing countries need more support in their efforts to grow their economies and eradicate poverty

Responding to the root causes of migration in countries of origin is an important avenue to lessen forced migration. Such a response needs to include climate-resilient economic development, to safeguard against climate change-related set-backs.

3. Adapting to climate change needs to be an international priority - This needs to be catalyzed through the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change

Failure to help stressed communities with the additional pressure of climate change impacts and environmentally induced migration will mean that existing grievances are intensified. Effective adaptation is critical to lessen the potential of large-scale population movements. Adapting refers to minimizing the negative consequences of climate change on peoples' lives, such as drought-resistant seeds, building houses on stilts or constructing sea defences. However, adaptation is likely to run at billions of dollars annually and will need multiple sources of sustained and sufficient funding to be effective.

4. Mitigation, i.e. the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, needs to become much more ambitious than is currently the case to prevent climate change impacts from spiraling out of control. - This too needs to be catalyzed through the UNFCCC

To keep climate change manageable, economic development across the world needs to be transformed into low-emissions economic growth.

The world needs an enhanced response to climate change.

This conference has a full agenda that will no doubt increase the understanding of the link between forced migration and environmental degradation, and the needed policy responses. Ambitious climate change abatement policies on both adaptation and mitigation can make a key contribution to alleviating migration pressures.

Under the Climate Change Convention, a two-year negotiating process to enhance the international response to climate change was launched at the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali last year. The process involves negotiations on how to strengthen the future response to climate change in four key areas: adaptation, mitigation, technology and finance. The negotiations are set to conclude in an agreed outcome in Copenhagen in 2009. Given the wide-ranging consequences of climate change, it is essential that the outcome in Copenhagen 2009 be ambitious on all fronts of climate change abatement.

Current indications show that Governments are committed to a strengthened outcome in Copenhagen 2009 that results in real emission reductions and has support mechanisms to reduce the cost of mitigation and to leverage funding for adaptation. But much ground still needs to be covered between now and the end of 2009 to reach an ambitious outcome.

Ambitious climate change abatement actions - both mitigation and adaptation - are thus a prerequisite for sustainable development and for reducing forced migration.
