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Climate change and migration: how are they linked?

Both climate change and migration are complex and politically sensitive topics. This briefing, a collaboration between the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UK Climate Change and Migration Coalition (UKCCMC), will explore what recent research and policy developments tell us about the linkages between the two issues and how we can respond.

The context

Recent research has reshaped our understanding of the relationship between climate change and the movement of people. It is now clear that climate change may be influencing the movement of people in ways that have not previously been understood.

- People may be using migration as a way of adapting to environmental stress.
- Climate change may also be reducing people's ability to move, trapping vulnerable populations in high risk areas.
- Climate change is one among many forces that shape patterns of movement, and cannot be considered in isolation.

These new research findings are beginning to shape policy in this arena. However, there is still a need for policy makers and civil society to acknowledge these new insights and build them into their work.

It is now widely recognised that human mobility, in both its forced and voluntary forms, is increasingly impacted by environmental and climatic factors and that migration in turn also impacts the environment. The Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) highlights the importance and complexity of human mobility in the context of climate change.

Since the early 1990s, there has been increasing global awareness of the linkages between these issues on two levels. On the environmental side, the climate change debate has become key to

international policy processes; while migration issues are also increasingly visible and debated, notably with regards to labour migration and to the link between migration and development policies. Parallel advances within the international migration debate and the global climate change discussions were instrumental in putting environmental migration on the intergovernmental agenda.

What are the most pressing challenges to be addressed regarding the international governance of environmental migration?

There are a number of key challenges posed to international policy dialogue and action on migration in the context of climate change.

First of all, the difficulty to isolate environmental factors from all other drivers of migration, the complexity of issues related to climate change and the political sensitivity related to the issue of international migration governance make the topic of environmental and climate induced migration difficult to tackle.

Second, environmental migration should be integrated into other policy processes such as climate change, adaptation, development and security. Yet it also deserves to be considered as a standalone area of work within a migration-centered approach

Third, media oscillates between the perception of environmental migrants as "victims", impoverished by the loss of their livelihood, or the representation



of migrants as the new "heroes" of development, bringing wealth to countries of origin and destination. Fourth, the lack of solid evidence, data and estimates remain an obstacle as long as there are no serious investments in data development on migration and climate.

What is the role of an inter-governmental organization in the area of human mobility, environment and climate?

Over the past two decades, IOM has developed a comprehensive policy, research and operational programme on migration, environment and climate change. The Organization's interest in the topic is based on its mandate to develop emerging themes related to migration governance. The organization has a duty to keep up with issues that will have serious consequences for millions of migrants and their communities in the future.

IOM's strategy on migration, environment and climate change was shaped through two parallel processes: on the one hand the development of operational activities at a field level in response to migrants' needs and obligations to address them, and on the other hand work at policy, legal and research levels to conceptualize the complex linkages between migration and climate. Through these two entry points, environmental migration has gradually become a specific working theme in itself. This raises unique challenges on how to link the different levels of work as there remains a significant gap between the political discourse and the implementation of migration policies that take into account climatic and environmental factors.

What is the role of civil society in working on issues around mobility and climate change?

There is a strong case for refugee and migrant rights civil society groups becoming involved in advocacy around mobility linked to environmental change. Over the last decade the arena has been dominated by environmental organisations, and while these groups have pushed the issue up the public agenda, they have approached it from a narrow perspective. There is a need for policy in this area to be shaped by civil society

groups who work with and understand the needs of people who move, and grasp the nuances and controversies of carrying out advocacy on migration and displacement.

Where can civil society advocacy be focused?

There are several promising channels for creating policy change. There is a need for new forms of legal protection for people who move across borders during natural disasters. The Nansen Initiative (which includes IOM and UNHCR as part of the Steering Group) is currently the key forum for the creation of this protection. However there is also the possibility of addressing the issue through existing mechanisms such as the UNFCCC - where the negotiating text already contains references to migration and displacement.

Why is advocacy on mobility and climate change so difficult?

One of the key advocacy challenges is the complexity of the issue. Over the last 10 years research has consistently pointed towards multiple forces - including the environment - interacting to change patterns of mobility. Most evidence suggests the relationship between climate change and migration is not simple, linear or consistent. Creating compelling advocacy around complex issues can be difficult. In the past this has led to some campaigners over-simplifying the issue, and in the process creating unhelpful campaign messages.

It is vital that policy in this area is based on robust research. Policy makers and civil society must engage with the research community working in this area, and academics must conduct research that is focused on achieving the best outcomes for affected communities.

The new IOM Outlook publication on Migration, Environment and Climate change can be downloaded at http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/MECC_Outlook.pdf

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COMPAS Breakfast Briefings present topical, cutting edge research on migration and migration related issues. This research is made accessible every month to an audience of policy makers and other research users.