

> Environmental Change and Human Mobility

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Experts generally agree that the environment is but one of the many reasons that prompt people to move, sometimes operating on its own but more often through other mechanisms, particularly loss of livelihoods affected by environmental disruption. Nevertheless, there has also been growing recognition that climate change poses profound consequences for human mobility. The Fifth Assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projected that climate change would increase displacement of people. The detailed review of the evidence indicated that extreme weather events would be the most direct pathway from climate change to migration but sea level rise, coastal erosion, and loss of agricultural productivity would have a serious impact on movements in the longer-term.

Migration is not only a consequence of environmental change, however; it is also an important mechanism for adaptation to the changing environment. Migration is an age-old risk management strategy that enables households to diversify livelihoods, particularly for those who would otherwise be fully dependent on climate-related occupations, such as farming or fishing. Migrants send remittances to their home communities, not only to support their own families but also to invest in or provide technical advice on sustainable practices. Migration can also reduce pressures on fragile environments, allowing some to remain in situ while others seek new places to live.

When planned, migration can be highly beneficial. Yet, often people are unable to move in a safe, orderly fashion. Migration is expensive, requiring financial, human and social capital. Instead, many of the expected movements will be in the form of displacement—that is, reactive and often mass movements when conditions force people to flee their homes. People survive but few of the benefits of migration accrue to those who are

displaced. Perhaps most at risk are those who are immobile, unable to get out of harm's way on their own. The poorest, oldest and most infirm are often in this category. To survive, many will need assistance from governments or other actors in planned relocation programs. The history of such programs, particularly in the context of large-scale development projects such as dams, is not promising, though, in providing adequate protection for those who are relocated. Too often, the affected populations are worse off after relocation than they were beforehand.

Vulnerability or resilience—that is, the capability to cope or adapt to changing environments—will determine the degree to which people must move and whether those movements will be beneficial or detrimental. To some extent, these factors relate to pre-existing conditions in the affected households. To a large extent, though, policies matter in determining whether people have the wherewithal to cope in situ or the means to move safely elsewhere. Migration, environmental and development policies and plans need to take into account the ways in which vulnerability and resilience influence decisions and capabilities to stay or move in the face of deteriorating conditions, as well as their short, medium and long-term impacts.

Despite the important role that migration can play in helping people adapt to environmental change, there are few legal admissions alternatives for affected populations. Nor are there legal frameworks in place for protection of those who are displaced or moved through planned relocation programs although there is some progress in developing such policies. The Nansen Initiative (renamed the Platform for Disaster Displacement) is a case in point. Aimed at addressing protection gaps related to cross-border displacement in the context of natural disasters and the slow onset

effects of climate change, it was governed by a Steering Committee, chaired by Switzerland and Norway, and including Australia, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Germany, Kenya, Mexico and the Philippines. A Consultative Committee¹ was formed to bring the expertise of representatives from international organizations dealing with displacement and migration issues, climate change and development, researchers, think tanks and non-governmental organizations to bear.

The Agenda for Protection, adopted as the outcome of the Nansen Initiative, focuses on three principal areas of action. The first is to improve the collection of data and to enhance knowledge on cross-border disaster-induced displacement. The second area of the agenda focuses on “humanitarian protection measures.” This section is most pertinent to the development of measures to complement and augment protection of those displaced by environmental factors. These measures include ones related to the admission of disaster displaced persons from abroad as well as those preventing the return of displaced persons to countries experiencing natural disasters and the effects of climate change. The third set of recommendations is aimed at strengthening the management of disaster displacement risk in the country of origin so that those affected by natural disasters and the effects of climate change would not need to cross international borders.

The protection agenda is non-binding but includes concrete steps that governments can take to improve their policies. It was endorsed by 109 governmental delegations during a global consultation in October 2015. More than 360 participants from governments, international organizations, academic institutions and civil society attended. That so large a number of governments endorsed the agenda was impressive. Those who spoke at the consultation noted the utility of the agenda and the flexibility of governments to adopt its recommendations in accord with national law. The German government has funded a follow-up that includes resources for training and technical assistance for countries that wish to implement these measures.

Work on increasing protection in the context of planned relocation has been driven by academia and international organizations. A coalition led by

Georgetown University includes the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, International Organization for Migration, World Bank, and UN University. The project has resulted in a set of principles based on existing international law and guidelines based on practical experience. The principles emphasize that relocation should only take place when there is strong evidence that there are no other alternatives and there is consultation with the affected populations. The guidelines focus on actions to be taken at each stage of a relocation, from the planning process through the integration of the relocated into their new communities. A second stage of the project involves development of operational guidance on implementation of the guidelines in accordance with the principles.

Where there has been less progress is in the migration area. Environmental migrants fall in between regular labor migration policies and those related to refugees. They are not moving for purely economic reasons, although they may have lost their livelihoods because of environmental change. Nor are they displaced by conflict or persecution, as are refugees. But, as is the case with refugees, many cannot return safely to their home communities. The international community has recognized the gap. The September 2016 UN High Level Meeting Addressing Large Scale Movements of Refugees and Migrants recognized a category of vulnerable migrants who fall outside of existing legal frameworks and pledged to take action to fill the gap, likely via a mechanism of what is now being called mini-multilateralism as exemplified in the Nansen Initiative. The results are to be discussed in a summit in 2018 that will adopt a new global compact on safe, orderly and regular migration to include these vulnerable groups.

Policies to address the interconnections between environmental change and human mobility will need to include provisions to build resilience, prevent displacement, prepare both source and receiving communities, establish legal frameworks for admission, and enable households and communities to benefit from migration. More specifically, recommendations include:²

Educate both climate-affected populations and policymakers about current and expected changes in the environment, as well as potential adaptation

¹ The author was a member of the Consultative Committee.

² These recommendations are drawn from Susan F. Martin and Jonas Bergmann, Environmental Change and Human Mobility: Reducing Vulnerability & Increasing Resilience, Policy Brief (Washington, DC: World Bank KNOMAD project), forthcoming.

strategies. Such education can enable better decision-making regarding mobility options. There is a gap between people's understanding of future climate impacts on their lives and livelihoods and their own migration opportunities and costs. At the same time, policymakers must understand how climate-affected populations perceive their vulnerabilities.

Increase resilience through multi-faceted approaches that will benefit vulnerable households and help them avoid entrapment or displacement in detrimental circumstances. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions for people in affected communities. Building resilience includes enabling people to remain in place to the extent possible while recognizing the need to facilitate movements, when needed, including through planned relocation and new labor migration programs.

Address structural sources of poverty and unsustainable environmental practices that create vulnerabilities, especially among those dependent on subsistence agriculture. Improving access to credit, land tenure and land rights would help many affected populations remain safely in place or move in safety.

Ensure that the most vulnerable groups are involved in adaptation planning. Groups such as the elderly, extreme poor, and disabled need to be involved in the development of migration-related adaptation plans if the benefits are to accrue to them as well as more resilient households.

Plan and consult with those in need of relocation in order to avoid entrapment and displacement. Planned relocation is an essential strategy for assisting particularly vulnerable populations move to safer and more sustainable locations but, without careful planning as well as effective consultation, relocation can be disastrous for all parties. Plans need to take into account a range of circumstances, amongst them compensation for lost property and access to livelihoods, health, educational, and other services.

Design effective labor migration programs that enable safe and orderly movements. Such programs will reduce risk, however, only if migrants are able to earn enough to support themselves and their families. Existing temporary mobility schemes in Australia and New Zealand are potential models for other regions.

Facilitate remittance transfers to migrant households and communities to help ensure greater resilience. Increasing access to financial literacy, financial inclusion, and skills training programs, particularly for poorer households, will help increase the positive benefits of migration and remittances.

Encourage diaspora investment in sustainable land management that can help entire communities benefit from migration. Governments should give greater attention to the potential role that diasporas can play in financing investments in land restoration in climate-affected communities.