

Note on climate change and migration

Two decades ago, the concept of “environmental refugees” was outlined for the first time (El-Hinnawi, 1985). Since then, the number and significance of the discussions on the impacts of environmental change and its links with population movements have increased. There is as yet no precise concept to define persons who may move or be displaced as a result of environmental factors. However, the literature refers to them as “environmental migrants”, environmental refugees”, environmentally displaced people” and “climigrants”.

More recently, the scientific evidence available on expected impacts of climate change in different regions has reinforced the perception that it is necessary to analyze more thoroughly the migration patterns caused or influenced by changes in ecosystems. Scholars have identified four ways in which climate change can potentially increase population movements: acute natural disasters, such as hurricanes and cyclones, which force people to relocate; intensification of slow-onset natural disasters, such as drought and desertification, which undermine livelihoods; conflicts resulting from competition over natural resources, which displace populations; and rising sea levels that destroy habitats and livelihoods, making it difficult for people to remain at home. In recent times, millions of people have moved - internally and internationally, temporarily and permanently – as a result of these phenomena.

Some scholars see the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on development as one of the major migration push-factors. They stress that if the proper measures are not taken promptly, this push-factor will have greater impact in the medium and long term. Others note that, historically, migration of some household members has been a coping or adaptation strategy, particularly in areas with variable weather patterns. The diaspora also often help home communities to rebuild after disasters, which in turn helps others to cope more effectively with changing conditions without migrating. Some scholars believe that there are still insufficient data, and more research is needed before starting a specific debate on this matter.

There is no doubt that climate change will pose new challenges to international migration and development. These challenges will require policy planning and cooperation aimed to design strategies to help decrease or alleviate the vulnerabilities of affected people. In light of the objective of the GFMD to discuss multidimensional issues of migration and development, the Chair-in-Office considers it useful to start a dialogue on the link between this phenomenon and migration and development. This will help identify the actions needed, if any, in the medium and long term on this important issue.

Some studies on this subject emphasize the need to promote new international principles on the implications of climate change. These principles could help governments to address the challenges raised by this topic.

From the beginning, the GFMD has dedicated one of its roundtables to data and research, as well as to the debate on strengthening policy and institutional coherence. The Chair considers that devoting one of the sessions of this Roundtable to climate change would allow the theme-leading states to take stock of current data and knowledge, share their experiences and explore initiatives in this regard. This would also stimulate further research to enrich the debate on this topic.