

Migration, Development, and Environment: Introductory Remarks

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SSRC Migration & Development Conference Paper No. 7

“Migration and Development:
Future Directions for Research and Policy”
28 February – 1 March 2008 | New York, NY

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The subject of this panel is an area of research that has already attracted a good deal of interest, and one that is likely to grow in the future. The International Organization for Migration was told two years ago by its Member States, “Don’t touch the environment. It’s got nothing to do with migration. It’s not your concern.” That has certainly changed today. In fact in early February 2008 the International Organization for Migration organized a one-day awareness-raising event on migration and the environment with the World Meteorological Organization. It seems that everybody wants to work on this topic, with numerous meetings and conferences being organized on migration and climate change, migration and environment.

But I would argue that we need to think more clearly how we can really advance the knowledge base on this topic. The reason why the relationship between migration and the environment has attracted so much public attention, particularly in the media, is because some amazing figures have been floated. Some people talk about up to a billion people being affected by climate change and environmental degradation up to the year 2050. But there are some key questions we need to consider. Conceptually, is it meaningful to talk about the existence of environmental migrants or climate refugees? And if such people exist, is there any way in which we can grasp the possible extent of such movement in the future? If such people are going to move, where are they likely to move to, what kind of people might move, and what would be the policy implications of their moving?

This is not a completely new area of research. If you read through the literature, you see many references to papers from the 1990s, 1980s. IOM organized a number of conferences in the early 1990s on this subject. But it seems that we are still quite early on the process. One of the questions that I want to raise is why have we not made more progress in advancing the evidence base? Why are the numbers so shaky? Why do we still seem to find it very difficult to get our minds around this whole notion of environmental migration, climate migrants, or whatever we want to call them?

One of the two papers in this session, by Michael White, looks specifically at the impact of migration on the environment, and the other paper, by Graeme

Hugo, looks at the reverse. But I think it is important to recognize from the outset that you can't make a straightforward distinction. Often migration impacts on the environment and the environment then impacts on population movement; it's a circular effect to some extent.

The other thing that we need to flag right at the beginning is that this is clearly a development issue, but the relationship between environmental change and migration is something which has not yet been addressed within the context of the Global Forum on Migration and Development or the High Level Dialogue on Migration and Development. It is not on the radar screen of people who are talking about migration and development. But it is very clearly the case that environmental migration is likely to affect the movement of people in poorer parts of the world most. Graeme Hugo says that "migration as both the cause and consequence of environmental change occurs predominantly in poorer, less-developed countries." The IPCC has also made similar points about less-developed regions being most likely to be affected by environmental migration or environmentally-induced forced migration.

I was particularly struck by a sentence in Graeme Hugo's paper, where he says "our knowledge of the complex two-way relationship involving environmental change as both the cause and consequence of migration remains limited." Then I looked up his previous work and found that he first said that in 1996. So the question is why are we still saying that today? Why is research in this area apparently so limited? As neither of the papers really try and respond to that, I will try to do so in this introduction.

Perhaps part of the answer has something to do with the fact that, as Graeme points out in his paper, movement in response to environmental factors is most likely to occur are likely to occur within borders rather than beyond borders, and internal migration is not usually included in most research on migration and development.

We also have to recognize that the consequences of environmental change are likely to be very diverse and it is difficult to grasp the impact of the environmental variable. If you look at the literature, a distinction is generally made between the impact of gradual climate processes or gradual environmental degradation, desertification, sea level rise, etc., and extreme climate events, natural disasters, which seem to be occurring more frequently. Whilst we know quite a lot about natural disasters and their implications for population movement, we know much less about the impact of gradual changes in the environment. And yet those gradual changes, according to a number of experts, are potentially likely to affect many more people in the future.

There are also a lot of problems in deciding how important the environmental variable is. There is a lot of disagreement in the literature about the extent to which the environment is really a key driver of migration. Most people seem to agree that migration decisions are very complex. It is very difficult to isolate the environment as a factor, and we have to look at a range of social, political, and economic factors to really understand the impact of changes in the environment.

Another complication is that perhaps that migration may have both positive and negative consequences for the environment and development, and it is often quite challenging to sift through those. The good news is that there will be some positive effects of climate change, with some currently chilly regions becoming desirable places to live and the possibility of growing crops in areas they would not survive before – grapes in Scotland, for example. But I think the tone in the debate has essentially been that the movement of people has a negative impact on the environment rather than potentially having some positive impacts, and also that environmental change has a negative impact on migration, producing forced migrants, rather than being a potential coping strategy or having the potential to improve livelihoods.

And then, there is really very little agreement on how to conceptualize all of this. There is a lot of disagreement about terminology, and there seems to be a chronic lack of data, as is illustrated by the huge numbers. The term “environmental refugee” was coined in the 1970s and then promoted by UNEP in the 1980s. But it is not a term recognized by national governments and international agencies. The bulk of migration which is said to be caused by environmental change, and vice versa, occurs within national borders, and hence to use the term “refugee” is perhaps potentially a misuse of the term, certainly according to the 1951 Convention.

Some scholars, including Steven Castles and Richard Black have even dismissed the whole idea of talking about environmental refugees, or even environmentally-induced migration. Castles has said that this whole notion of environmental refugees is “simplistic, one-sided, and misleading, and implies a mono-causality, which very rarely exists in practice.” But Graeme Hugo in his paper argues that perhaps we need to move away from thinking about voluntary and forced migration as a dichotomy and instead see population mobility as being arranged along a continuum ranging from totally voluntary migration to totally forced migration, with environmental migration towards the forced end.

There are numerous typologies around. My favorite is by Bilborrow, who distinguishes between three categories: the first is environmental refugees, forced migrants who move across borders; the second is displaced persons

who move within borders; and the third, and largest category is “others,” people who migrate from rural areas within their own country at least partly for reasons of environmental deterioration. This ‘other’ category is obviously huge.

We in IOM have come up with our own working definition, which we first presented to our Member States in November 2007 in a concept paper. There is no international definition of “environmental migrants,” but we felt that it would be useful to at least try and develop a working definition. So we call environmental migrants “persons or groups of person who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.” This definition tries to encompass population movement or displacement, and both temporary and permanent forms of migration, internal and cross-border migration. It also includes both voluntary and involuntary movements, and movements which may be due to sudden or gradual environmental changes. We will probably want to come back to this whole notion of definitions, because it is obviously important in terms of collection of data, and also in terms of policy responses.

There is a lot of discussion in the papers about conceptualizing environmental migration and, particularly in Graeme Hugo’s paper, a lot of discussion about the extent to which environmental factors are a cause of migration. Without dwelling on this to any great extent, I think the consensus view is that when environmental degradation leads to migration it is generally as a proximate cause linked to questions of economic growth, poverty, population pressure, conflict, etc. A number of examples are given from different case studies in the literature to show that often what may seem at first sight a movement that has been produced as a result of environmental change is also linked to a number of other factors, and these have to be borne in mind in the analysis and in the responses that we make.

In terms of extreme events, it is obviously much easier to identify the environmental push factor. We certainly have better numbers. There seem to be growing numbers of people, according to Graeme Hugo’s statistics, being affected by natural disasters: he gives a figure of something like 200 million people per annum. However, what we don’t know is the extent of displacement resulting from disasters and the extent to which that displacement is either internal or international.

However, in this context it is useful to think not only about the people who are displaced who are the natives of those countries, but also about international migrants who are often caught up in these disasters. The

literature mentions, for example, a case close to home, Hurricane Katrina, where 1.5 million people were temporarily displaced, of which 100,000 were migrants, and many of them undocumented migrants. There are also cases during the tsunami of Burmese workers in Thailand who were in the main undocumented and not able to access some of the services which were provided by international agencies. So migrants can be a vulnerable group in these situations.

Michael White's paper talks more about the impact of migration on the environment. This seems to be where the bulk of research has been carried out in the past, which actually surprised me, given the amount of attention that is currently being given to the impact of environmental change on migration. It seems that much of the research interest in the past has actually been looking at the impact of migration, and particularly refugee movements, on the environment. And a lot of that discussion, again, is fairly negative. It is about refugees putting pressure on the environment, causing deforestation, etc.. But there are also some examples in the literature of some positive effects that even refugee movements may have on the environment, leading to perhaps better services being provided for the local community in some examples given.

Both of the papers towards the end try to draw out some policy implications and discuss some of the potential impacts and effects of environmental change on migration and development. Again, most of these effects are regarded as being essentially negative. There is a lot of attention to the risk of conflict and the impact on security. There is a lot of talk about worsening health and education and social indicators for migrants, increasing pressure on urban infrastructure.

But as I said at the beginning, there seems to be less attention, or less often do we pose the question: Will climate change boost development by actually making some places better able to sustain larger populations; and will migration linked to environmental change bring its own benefits for places of origin, destination, and the migrants themselves, particularly in cases where environmental degradation may not be particularly advanced and migration or temporary migration is seen as a coping strategy that may bring some benefits to the place of origin or relieve population pressures in the place of origin? There seems to be much less attention to those sorts of issues.

In terms of policy issues and the policy framework, there is a fair amount of discussion in the literature about whether or not we need some kind of a new international convention where we identify and recognize environmental refugees or climate refugees, or whatever we wish to call them, as a special vulnerable group in need of protection. This is advocated in a number of

recent reports, although not so much in the papers of the two authors.

What we at IOM have tried to do recently in developing a policy paper is not simply to come up with a set of recommendations, because I think it is difficult to come up with recommendations when you don't really understand what the impacts are. Instead it may be more helpful to come up with a framework for thinking about these issues and about policies which relate to different types and degrees of environmental change, for example less-advanced stages of gradual environmental change, advanced stages of gradual environmental change, and extreme environmental events. We also need to think about how migration impacts on the environment in both areas of destination and of origin, and to consider more comprehensively whether there is such a thing as environmental migration. If there is, and if it is going to increase in the future, we need to think about how we are going to best manage environmental migration in order to ensure that it does not impact negatively on development.

By way of conclusion, I learned a great deal from the papers in terms of the wide range of studies that are being carried out on this topic. But what I would really like the authors to address in the discussion is the question of where do we go next with this issue, because this has now become a high priority for a number of policymakers. How do we advance the knowledge base in this area?

If we want to sum up research in this area, we could probably say that most research has been on the impact of migration on the environment, rather than the environment as a cause of migration. The extent to which environment is a primary driver of migration is still rather contested. Most of the research has been focused on movements within countries, and there is an assumption that most of the impact will be on internal migration, although Graeme in his paper alludes to the fact that we need to pay more attention to this issue because it is going to have more of an impact on international migration in the future.

In policy terms, there are very few migration policies directly targeted at environmental migrants, although sometimes, for example in the case of natural disasters, governments in OECD countries do modify their policies. For example, they don't send people back to disaster-affected areas, or they encourage diasporas to support people who have been forced to move in those areas. Even within the South, I think Malaysia for a while changed its policies towards undocumented migrant workers after the tsunami. That is an interesting set of questions.

The final point which I wanted to stress is that in the literature migration is

too often seen as a failure of adaptation and not a form of it. I think there is too much emphasis on the negative impact of migration, or the negative consequences for migration, and there is a real danger that migrants could be scapegoated in the future in some of this discussion.