Briefing on Migration, Environment and Climate Change

Celebrating the signing of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change

Key messages
10 May 2016, UN HQ, New York

On 10 May, the Permanent Missions of Bangladesh and France to the United Nations, in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), convened a briefing on Migration, Environment and Climate Change. IOM Permanent Observer to the UN, Mr. Ashraf El Nour, was joined by Dina Ionesco, Head of IOM’s Migration, Environment and Climate Change Division; Ms. Sadia Faizunessa, Deputy Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the United Nations; Ms. Shereen D’Souza, US Foreign Affairs Officer, State Department, and Co-Chair of the Executive Committee (EXCOM) of the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) for UNFCCC; Mr. Peter Kenilorea, Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States; Mr. Reinhard Krapp, Minister and Head of the Department for Economic and Financial Affairs, Permanent Mission of Germany to the UN; Ms. Katrina Wyman, Professor, New York University School of Law; and Ms. Karen AbuZayd, Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on the Summit on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants.

The following is a summary of the key messages raised.

Critical to moving forward is continued understanding and exploration of the nexus between migration, environment and climate change

- People have always moved due to environmental reasons. Climate migration disappeared from the international community’s radar for a few years while other drivers took precedence, but human mobility is now squarely on the agenda – how do we frame the issues of linkages between migration, environment, and climate change?
- The international community must ensure the nexus between migration, environment and climate change continues to receive attention. The climate agenda is well-integrated into the pillars of the new transformative agenda being driven by the UN, and continuing engagement will ensure migration is increasingly recognized as a positive force for development.
- The international community cannot afford delay in understanding and devising strategies to address this nexus. States need to identify what their climate adaptation capacity covers and what it doesn’t – if the existing capacities do not extend to addressing environment-driven mobility, states need to identify new and additional approaches to ensure climate migrants are not left behind.
- Climate change, environmental degradation and human mobility are cross-cutting issues with significant relevance to issues of human rights, human security, humanitarian action and development – interrelated factors which are critical to take into account, including as the UN moves forward with political processes dealing with climate change.

The international community must capitalize on current momentum and political will

- Strong political will has been achieved thus far on climate change, and should only continue to grow.
- The momentum on climate change and human mobility must build and be further mainstreamed in development plans – including at international, regional, and national levels.
- Those countries facing the greatest impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are also the poorest and most vulnerable; scientific models project these countries will bear heaviest the negative impacts. Recent initiatives and processes, particularly those specific to Small Island Developing States (SIDS), demonstrate international recognition and movement on the issue of climate change and should be built upon.
- There is commendable work being done to integrate human mobility and displacement into key policy processes on climate change, environment, ecosystems, earth, land and related issues.
- The question facing the international community now is how to integrate a better understanding of climate and environmental factors within the ongoing dialogues and discussions on migration governance and management.
Here especially the 19 September High Level Meeting on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants will be critical.

- The international community should now seize the momentum in the UN to go beyond just local and bilateral agreements to engage on issues of climate change and related displacement at the international level with Member States and stakeholders to achieve an overarching framework for safe, regular and orderly migration.

**Contextualized response to climate change and environmental degradation, and resulting displacement, is necessary**

- A one-size-fits-all approach alone will not work – climate migration entails significant geographic specificity.
- Traditional knowledge and resilience is a rich source to take onboard and contribute to new adaptation strategies and, by extension, disaster risk reduction (DRR) programmes, particularly at national and local levels.
- Climate migration includes both cross-border migration and internal movement within countries – for many Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), internally displaced persons (IDPs) pose challenges to community cohesion and social harmony as new cultures and languages are introduced by people moving from one island to another. Such issues of integration could spur land rights disputes, conflict and community tensions.
- Bottom-up responses by states and groups of states are likely to be particularly important to addressing and facilitating migration necessitated by climate change. It is often mayors and other local community leaders who bring the most heartfelt pleas for adaptation assistance and who have the nuanced, important local area knowledge.
- Climate change and resulting displacement is a problem, but in many cases it is a matter of adapting and strengthening livelihoods. Diaspora populations can be a key resource and contributor to prevention, resilience building, recovery and rehabilitation.
- Given the interaction between environmental, social and economic factors, climate migration is a cross-cutting issue and national policies should ensure all mobile populations are incorporated into national development strategies and action plans. People themselves are often the greatest frontline of resilience building.
- Environmental degradation and climate change strains and can increase competition for natural resources. Mismanagement of resources is an important issue to reflect upon, especially as it can drive further displacement.
- Secondary or repeat displacement is a significant concern, especially as large concentrations of people of concern are often in areas especially vulnerable to climate change.

**Legal gaps exist and should be remedied**

- The Paris Agreement does not commit countries to address the legal needs of climate-displaced migrants, leaving broader gaps in rights and funding. There are gaps in legal protections, particularly in international law, for persons moving across international borders for environmental reasons; these gaps extend to persons moving internally driven by environmental degradation. Funding gaps exist, and financing for migration and for climate adaptation should be open to populations and governments facing climate displacement challenges.
- There need to be legal protections for persons forced to move due to climate change. Member States must also give due consideration to migrants caught in countries experiencing climate crises or natural disasters.
- An integrated approach is needed to address normative gaps. All actors – humanitarians, DRR experts, climate adaptation specialists and development actors – need to be working together and coordinating in the most effective way.

**Policy coherence in addressing climate change and environmental migration is essential**

- Climate change significantly raises the stakes in terms of the need for international cooperation on migration and migration governance. The international community needs to ensure the linkages with national and regional processes and normative frameworks are in place.
- Addressing legal gaps related to climate change and migration will require movement from above – existing initiatives, organizations, the UN – but national and regional level initiatives will also be integral.
• Some affected populations may not want to move, and often the most vulnerable may be those without the means to move – coupled with considerations of voluntary versus forced climate migration, all these have impacts on which policy proposals are most relevant for individual and groups of states.

• Responses can be concrete, and individual responses must feed into larger policy processes. Being concrete means helping people who want to stay, stay; who want to move, move; and assisting those in transit. The ultimate aim should be to facilitate legal migration channels and uphold means of facilitating migration with dignity. This requires finding a common language within the international community.

**Increased data collection and analysis on issues of climate migration is key to shaping response and preparedness**

• There is a dearth of data on slow onset climate change impacts, but long-term environmental degradation can and is expected to cause immense impact on vulnerable populations. Data collection, projection and analysis of slow onset environmental degradation should expand.

• People move for a multitude of reasons – more data collection on root causes and compounding factors contributing to climate migration should be pursued.

• There needs to be analysis and understanding of what the gaps are and what we need to do at the international level to address these gaps. Data collection on this issue can be fundamental – current data demonstrates only those environmentally displaced within national borders. More information is needed on cross-border climate migration, and on broader regional and global trends.