

MIGRATION MERITS PLACE IN MAINSTREAM OF CLIMATE DEBATE



Among all the statistics about temperature increase, polar melting and sea level rise associated with a warming world, the impact on hundreds of millions of people forced to leave their homes due to climate change is often not fully considered.

But the International Organization for Migration (IOM), an intergovernmental body set up in the early 1950s to help resettle an estimated 11 million people made homeless in the aftermath of World War Two, is making new efforts to put questions of migration at the centre of the climate change debate.

Forecasts for the number of people who will be forced to move due to climate change vary considerably. At the top end of the scale, there are estimates that up to one billion environmental migrants could be created by mid-century.

The IOM is trying to bring together the various data and research on migration and climate change to better understand the issue, and has recently launched a website dedicated to the topic.

Environmental factors

As part of a new research programme, IOM will initially examine how environmental factors influence migration patterns – and impact on overall policy making – in six countries: Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, Kenya, Mauritius, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti.

The link between environmental change and migration is complex. Better educational possibilities elsewhere – or the lure of jobs and wages – are often primary reasons for people

leaving their homes. Often changes in climate – leading to floods or droughts, and resulting in decreasing crop yields – are just one added factor driving migration.

Migration can be one way people find of adapting to climate change. The IOM says: “Migration in the face of global environmental change may not be just part of the ‘problem’, but can also be part of the solution.”

The six-country study, funded by the European Union, will involve household surveys in places of origin and of destination. The aim is to determine to what degree climate change encourages migration, and also to assess whether migration is a positive or negative factor in the adaptation process.

Remittances to families left at home might be used to build more resilience to climate change – for example, money sent back to villages might be used to buy seeds that are more resistant to drought or flood. On the other hand, migration can mean that farms are left untended, with fewer crops harvested.

The headlines often portray migration in terms of large movements of people across borders, but the bulk of migration takes place within countries – from rural to urban areas. More than 50% of the world’s population now lives in cities.

Environmental migration can be slow to build up as land becomes degraded, soil fertility decreases and wateravailability shrinks.

But migration can also happen over a relatively short period of time. In China, in a little more than a generation, more than 250 million people have moved from the countryside to cities – mainly in search of work – in what is the biggest mass movement of people in history.

The IOM seeks to integrate climate change factors into migration management and policy making – and wants greater consideration of migration in climate change negotiations.

Legal status

Among the questions it is raising is how environmental migrants should be classified under international law – and whether they should be given the same legal status as, for example, refugees from conflicts and war.

Back in 1990, when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made its first detailed assessment of the threat posed by global warming, it said: “The gravest effects of climate change may be those on human migration.”

Over time, a lack of research and absence of data on issues linking climate change with the movement of people has meant that the topic has become sidelined in successive climate negotiations.

Among the projects the IOM has been working on is an Atlas of Environmental Migration.

“There are no reliable estimates of climate change-induced migration,” the IOM says. “But it is evident that gradual and sudden environmental changes are already resulting in substantial population movements.”

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