

Environmental Change and Displacement

Assessing the Evidence and Developing Norms for Response

Report of a workshop held by the Refugee Studies Centre and the International Migration Institute, University of Oxford, 8-9 January 2009

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On the 8-9 January 2009 the Refugee Study Centre (RSC) and the International Migration Institute (IMI) of Oxford University convened a two-day workshop on Environmental Change and Displacement, with the support of the UNHCR. Attended by about 50 participants, the conference examined current research evidence on the relationship between climate/environmental change and migration, and the role the academic community should play in providing policy makers with guidance in forming policy in preparation for potential large-scale migration. The majority of participants were either academics or representatives from organisations engaged in research in the field of environmentally induced migration. Participants also included representatives from intergovernmental and international organisations and research students from various universities.

The first day of the workshop focused on evidence and case studies as well as broader questions concerning the prediction of environmental migration and addressed methodological challenges. The second day moved on to consider legal and normative responses. The wide ranging discussion addressed many significant issues for future research and policy responses, yet clear answers were hard to reach.

Themes discussed

Multicausality of factors causing migration, labelling and definitions

The multicausality of factors causing migration induced many participants to oppose the predictive modelling of future patterns and processes of population displacement attributable solely to changing environmental conditions. Professor Roger Zetter (RSC, University of Oxford), in the first keynote paper, emphasised that migration is almost always triggered by a combination of interrelated socio-economic factors. James Morrissey (Department of International Development, University of Oxford) noted that although environmental change can be an important driver of migration, it is important to recognise that its significance is contextual rather than absolute. This makes it extremely difficult to establish a causal link between environmental change and migration. Yet it was recognised that policy-making assumes that this link exists; hence the importance for the academic world to stress the need for caution in influencing the direction of policy making and the fact that current knowledge on the relationship is not well-founded. Equally, Professor Zetter noted that stressing multicausality had dangers: it may allow policymakers to fragment and deny the

responsibility to protect the rights of migrants, in particular diminishing the rights of refugee claims under existing norms and legal instruments.

Professor Zetter showed how the environmental migrant has been conceived as subject of policy and how policies in turn have shaped the label of 'environmental migrant'. By transforming the subjects and their capabilities, our preformed conceptions of the label shape the expectations we have and thus the policies constructed. Labelling people can have powerful implications on the subject and François Gemenne (University of Liège) argued that trying to isolate specific reasons for why people migrate, carries the risk of categorising migrants in ways which may neither represent their 'reality' nor provide the a sound basis for policy making.

Oliver Bakewell (IMI, University of Oxford) raised similar objections questioning whether we should be focusing on environmental migrants at all: he argued that we should avoid making such categories since all migrants have rights and vulnerabilities which need to be addressed. He questioned the existence of a purely 'environmental migrant' due to the multicausality of factors, and saw it as unjustified to create exceptionalism of rights to certain migrant groups. However, Simon Addison (RSC, University of Oxford) expressed concern that a lack of focus on the causes of migration and attempts to provide definitions makes it hard to pose viable research questions and thus limits the capacity of research to provide much needed understanding of migratory processes.

Forced versus voluntary migration and environment

Another important, and related, issue discussed was where environmental migrants sit upon the spectrum of 'forced' versus 'voluntary' migration. This issue raised a number of contradictory contributions which confirm the limited amount of research-based understanding of the relationship between environmental change and migration.

Only in certain clear-cut cases, such as sea level rise, is there an unquestionable element of force where the environmental factor can be said to be the most dominant in triggering migration. This is also the only case where Professor Etienne Piguet (University of Neuchatel) saw the possibility of a direct causal connection that would allow for measurement.

Professor Zetter, amongst others, argued that there are methodological and conceptual challenges in seeking to judge or to measure whether environmental migrants are forced to leave or not, and how strongly people will resist this force. Not least, the multicausality argument is relevant here. Conversely it is plausible that most people impacted by environmental degradation will not migrate for a variety of reasons. Some, such as the very young and the elderly will be less able to migrate, and those who do migrate are expected to move only over relatively modest distances

within countries and regions. Some participants believed strongly that people would not move unless there were severely deteriorating circumstances.

Conversely, again, migration could also be seen as a solution and a proactive response to change. Migrants should not be perceived as passive movers but rather as active agents: as Gemenne's evidence indicated, some people want to move. However, the capabilities of these agents are limited, since their vulnerability is often a critical factor and the scope to protect their rights is currently very limited.

Distribution of responsibility, adaptation and protection

The question of responsibility was touched upon but answers were hard to find. From one perspective, the burden of environmental migrants was concentrated in the global south, but the responsibility was seen to lie with the global north as the main contributor to climate change. Yet within the North responsibility was seen to carry high disparity. Protection was accepted as a rights-based issue, where environmentally-induced migrants in the global south have the right to expect protection from the North, which has produced the problem.

However, according to Chloé Vlassopoulos (University of Picardie) the responsibility is often difficult to pinpoint partly due to institutional barriers that allow shifting blame and migrants tend to fall in to the gaps. Professor Piguet suggested the possibility of measuring the level of impact each country has had on climate-change (the extent of the carbon footprint) in order to identify a 'quantum' of responsibility for migrants to be allocated and distributed among them. Concurrently, Karin Boschert (German Advisory Council on Global Change) highlighted the importance in having the developing world on board, but also the challenge emanating from countries like China which are recognised to be both 'victims' and perpetrators simultaneously.

Numerous forms in which responsibility could be carried out were identified. Alexander Betts (Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford) proposed a form of burden-sharing linked to cost-effectiveness and efficiency. On occasion it might be wiser for a country with a stronger ability to produce funds to finance the resettlement of a number of migrants in another country that is capable of allocating the resettlement but unable to afford it. However, Vikram Kolmannskog (Norwegian Refugee Council) reminded the participants that a dollar will always buy more in Africa than say, in Norway, which might lead to the North paying themselves out of the problem.

The body to direct this protection was not identified. Jeff Crisp (UNHCR) brought insights from the UNHCR's perspective on the protection of environmentally induced migrants. Although 'environmental refugee' is not accepted terminology, resource competition, pressure from interest groups, stakeholders and NGOs and the

personal interest of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres have increased the involvement of UNHCR in the area of environmental migrants and generated the publication of a policy paper on the matter. Victoria Metcalfe (UNOCHA) reminded participants that her organisation is already responsible for considering the protection of people displaced internally (within nation states) due to climate change and Michèle Morel (University of Ghent) argued that 'soft law' on IDPs (e.g. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement) was gradually changing into international customary law. Vikram Kolmannskog in fact, argued that environmental migrants could be protected within existing legal frameworks for protection if certain gaps could be filled, particularly on cross-border movements, and if international acceptance could be granted for the application of these norms to the environmentally displaced.

Participants stressed the need for provisions for those who stayed behind – the majority in situations of incremental environmental change – either because they choose to do so or because they have no other choice. They might be the least fortunate, the old, the ones suffering from illness and the most poor, who are unable to leave as the study introduced by Koko Warner (UN University), Frank Laczko (IOM) and Francois Gemenne suggested. Often their livelihoods were bound to their locality and their land, which might make it impossible or complicated to leave. However, their livelihoods might be less sustainable if their local community gets dispersed or depleted by out-migration.

In this context, Petra Tschakert's (Pennsylvania State University) study introduced Glenn Albrecht's term *solastalgia*, describing a sense of homesickness experienced while still living at home. Since environmental degradation and the emigration of the community gradually changes people's surroundings, staying becomes an experience of transformation as well. Those who remain may become increasingly vulnerable: increased insecurity caused by new environmental conditions precipitates the need for clear plans for their protection. Exposure and sensitivity of socio-economic systems to climate change needs greater understanding and mitigation responses, as argued by Douglas Bardsley (University of Adelaide), who also identified a number of adaptation strategies within which migration was but one possible response. He, like other participants, stressed the need to empower local communities to plan and manage their local complexity. Craig Johnson (University of Guelph & Tyndall Centre) explored similar ideas on how to reduce the vulnerability of the most poor to climate disasters by building resilience through crop diversification, technological innovations or insurance programmes and market-based strategies which might incentivise people to migrate away from highly vulnerable environments.

Prediction and methodological issues

Professor Piguet, in the second keynote paper, provided an overview of current research methodologies. From this evidence he concluded the following. Firstly, the

various socioeconomic indicators of the propensity to migrate because of changing environmental conditions vary according to the situation. The evidence suggests that households in similar situations respond in different ways to factors promoting migration. Therefore it is very difficult to measure accurately the choices people will make in the face of environmental degradation. An overview of current research suggests that migratory decisions are also highly linked to cultural and economic conditions as well as state policies and possible conflicts, which might also be triggered by environmental factors.

Second, much current research is focused on migration; the question should be reframed as most people are expected to stay behind. Even so the validity of this prediction needs also to be questioned.

Third, not only are people's reactions hard to operationalise, the consequences of actual climate change are also uncertain. Some geographical hotspots with the highest risks of impact can be isolated. But the risks are multiplied due to the combination of poor living conditions, environmental destruction and lack of options where to resettle. Yet the research evidence suggest that we know little about the time-scale, the locations and with which consequences of climate change will have large scale migrational impacts.

The workshop included a number of presentations which highlighted the challenge of predicting the consequences of climate change and the incidence of hotspots for vulnerable populations. Richard Taylor (Stockholm Environmental Institute) outlined a model in which historical records of vulnerability in hotspots could help to understand the future risks of humanitarian crises from changing environmental variables. Lezlie Morniere (University of Arizona) presented a study on the relationships between various factors which drive migration to reveal important historical patterns that can contribute to early warning and facilitate disaster risk management. Koko Warner, Franck Laczko (IOM), Francois Gemenne, Oscar Alvarez Gila (University of Oxford) and Virginia Lopez de Maturana (University of Basque Country) introduced the EACH-FOR research project of 22 case studies, where qualitative research conducted via interviews has attempted to assess how people make the choice to migrate or to stay. Petra Tschakert's (Pennsylvania State University) study looked at similar questions as well as the triggers behind the psychological factors contributing to the decision to migrate or to stay.

Quantitative research was seen to be useful particularly in contributing to a learning process of the methodological issues that are confronted whilst conducting such study. Similarly, they can be a source for identifying ethnographic research opportunities as noted by James Morrissey. But Professor Piguet reminded participants that quantitative predictions are impossible due to a number of

methodological issues which generate inaccuracies in the search for solid answers to questions about environment-induced migration.

Regardless of the methodological issues, participants remained highly sceptical of the possibilities of deriving effective policies on the bases of current research. Although valuable methods exist, Simon Addison pointed out the difficulty in reconciling the predictions of climate change with the paucity of responses at the local level. Francois Gemenne also emphasized the fundamental role of the state in who may migrate.

In terms of the need for more local level understanding, micro-level cases study was seen as the best way for creating useful knowledge and understanding. However, the challenge was to build wider generalisations, as confirmed by the EACH-FOR study. This programme encountered methodological issues, for example in terminology, where the meaning of 'environment' varies linguistically and culturally requiring new approaches of enquiry. Tom Downing (Stockholm Environmental Institute) also proposed multi-level analysis bringing in the relationship of the micro and macro-level.

However, research and policy can be seen to create negative impacts on the community under study. Francois Gemenne noted that research might induce a form of *solastagia* where a community is labelled as having environmental problems which did not exist from their own experience and perceptions. This may cause negative or inappropriate responses by the communities and may undermine their own adaptive capacities. Peter Rudiak-Gould (ISCA) reminded participants of similar harm in the Marshall Islands - an image of the islands as 'doomed to sink' leading the residents to feel their homes and culture have been written off. This has produced a lack of interest in development, adaptation or projects to fight environmental degradation.

Conclusions from Workshop Conveners

Roger Zetter concluded with three reflections on the workshop:

- A clear concern raised at the workshop related to 1) how the research community has so far constructed its 'policy messages', and 2) how research evidence has so far been interpreted by policy makers. Is there a danger that evidence-based policy making was being replaced by policy-based evidence making? The research community needs to exercise more caution in presenting claims about the relationship between environmental change and migration, and to find ways of presenting the complexity of the relationships that are accessible and meaningful to policy makers.
- He emphasized the challenge of constructing appropriate methodologies and analytical approaches. These need to encompass a wide scale from the micro-level analysis of livelihood, adaptation and migration strategies in relation to

environmental and other variables, to the macro-level analysis of governance structures, institutional capacities and responses.

- How we construct the problem, and thus the label environmental migrant, is a crucial conceptual challenge both in and of itself, and because of the way it drives and is driven by policy making agendas.

For more information on this workshop, please contact Simon Addison at the Refugee Studies Centre (simon.addison@qeh.ox.ac.uk)