

## Event Report

### **The climate change & migration nexus in a global context. What role for the EU in protecting climate migrants? <sup>1</sup>**

*Climate change and environmental degradation have accelerated global migration flows and are continuously impacting the livelihood and mobility patterns of vulnerable populations across the world. As the scale of these interregional and cross-border flows continues to rise, the consequences for the life and survival of the most vulnerable communities are becoming devastating.*

The aim of the event was to present the First Atlas on Environmental Migration<sup>2</sup> to the Brussels audience and discuss how the EU could implement actions on climate change and migration through its legal tools and contribution to the global discourses on environment-induced migration. The atlas brings together for the first time existing knowledge, research and country-level case studies exploring the links between migration, environment and climate change and tries to raise awareness about these complex interrelations.

#### **The contribution of the atlas to the global discourses on environmental migration**

The Atlas manages in a creative way the simplification and visualization of the very complex interactions between environmental change and migration through interactive maps, graphics and images that are made accessible to policy makers and the general public. Although environmental factors have always driven migration, they were more or less unknown and hidden behind more obvious causes until the 1990s. The atlas outlines key challenges and opportunities for the affected populations and for policy making, existing governance mechanisms and gaps and provides policy recommendations for implementing action on environmental migration. It also integrates a number of cross-cutting topics including gender, health, development, agriculture and human rights. The publication explores environmental sudden and slow onset changes, such as earthquakes, storms, droughts, long term degradation, sea-level rise and ocean acidification, as a driver of migration. The atlas does not only take

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<sup>1</sup> The event entitled “The climate change & migration nexus in a global context. What role for the EU in protecting climate migrants?” took place on 23rd June 2016 and was organized jointly by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Guest speakers were: Dina IONESCO, Head of Migration, Environment and Climate Change, International Organization for Migration (IOM) (via Skype); Daria MOKHNACHEVA, Thematic Specialist, Migration, Environment and Climate Change Division, International Organization for Migration (IOM); Dr. François GEMENNE, Executive Director, Politics of the Earth, Sciences Po – Medialab/FNRS Senior Research Associate, Observatory of Environmental Migration – Ulg and Guigone CAMUS, Scientific Advisor, Ocean& Climate Platform. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union and the IOM.

<sup>2</sup> Atlas of Environmental Migration by Dina Ionesco, Daria Mokhnacheva and François Gemenne (Presses de Sciences Po and Routledge, 2016): <http://environmentalmigration.iom.int/projects/atlas-environmental-migration>

environmental factors into account, but it also tries to point out complex linkages between cultural, social, environmental and economic factors that lead to migration.

A key objective of the publication is to overcome the existing myths on environmental migration, such as the belief that climate-induced forms of migration occur mainly in the form of mass and international migration. In reality, masses will only be affected in the case of natural disasters, but not when slow onset degradation is taking place. Furthermore, the majority of these migrants move within their own territory or region. The policy forum raised awareness that environment-induced migration can no longer be ignored and that this topic needs to be addressed at international level as soon as possible.

The whole project started three years ago and turned out to be a long and complicated process. The biggest challenge was the lack of quantitative data that was necessary for producing the maps and statistics. The satisfying outcome is due the successful collaboration with a number of organizations such as Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, universities, governments, as well as public and private actors, who all contributed to gathering important data. The contribution of 140 different experts, the huge database with 500 different bibliographical resources, 150 case studies on local, regional and national level and cartographers that visualized these data makes the atlas a unique and valuable source for policy makers, students and the general public.

### **Policy and research gaps**

The lack of quantitative data has been identified as a major barrier in the research process. Since the number of people displaced by slow onset environmental changes cannot be foreseen, it is often difficult to convince policy makers about the existence of environmental migration and the need to act. Another gap is the lack of knowledge about the positive effects of migration and the possibilities for maximizing the social benefits with good integration policies. Moreover, a huge problem is the categorization of migrants into economic migrants, political migrants and environmental migrants. Since the different causes for migration are often interlinked, it is difficult to differentiate between the various forms of migration. Environmental migration, for instance, does not occur only because of environmental changes. The latter, however, can cause economical disruption, leading to misery, violence eruption and then to migration. Research should also examine those vulnerable populations, which mobility is restricted due to insufficient resources.

The speakers highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach that does not discriminate among different forms of migration. It is essential to involve further local researchers in order to get rid of the hegemony of western concepts on migration and the dominance of European perspective on this phenomenon.

### **Interlinkages between conflict and climate change**

During the past years, the relation between climate change and conflicts has drawn more and more attention, and even the Syrian war is often attributed to environmental root causes by some researchers. IOM already tries to work on different scenarios and models about the possible impact of climate change on certain populations and the possibility for a conflict rise, for example, by measuring

the effects of changing precipitation periods and how the local population could adapt. Conflicts can arise especially among nomadic people, who are forced to change their regular mobility route for climate-related reasons and then enter into competition with other populations for essential necessities such as access to water and food. This complex issue requires early planning of adaptation strategies, so that migration is not used as a last resort.

### **Climate change impacts on the Ocean and the case of Tabiteuea Island**

The ocean is directly linked to our atmosphere and, therefore, to our climate. Oceans have absorbed 93% of the excess heat created by human beings since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With 50% of our oxygen production, they are the lung of our planet. Climate change affects the cycle of water and produces ocean acidification, coastal erosion, extreme weather events and sea level rising, which have extreme consequences on biodiversity and human beings living in coastal regions, especially for those inhabiting islands. The population of Tabiteuea Island, part of the Republic of Kiribati in the Pacific Ocean, lives mainly from marine resources. The local people noticed that water temperature has risen and the fish has been migrating or disappearing in the past year. This phenomenon does not only cause a lack of food supply but can also affect the knowledge of technical fishing methods and myths linked to the ocean. This knowledge is usually transmitted from generation to generation by oral narratives that are as precious as land. The loss of cultural heritage can deeply interrupt the inhabitants' identity. Climate change also limits their access to drinking water, affects food security and diminishes the quality and quantity of vegetal materials needed for arts, craft food, medicine and agriculture. Thus, environmental transformation impacts also social cohesion. The people in Tabiteuea also feel the rising sea level and the increasing frequency of invasive waves. These environmental effects are inducing coastal erosion and soil salinization, which are causing forced displacement of houses and families and the loss of land. Losing a small part of land means the disappearance of local history and the memory of the ancestors. This raises questions about how to preserve this material and immaterial heritage when people stay or leave. Which kind of support could local inhabitants obtain, if their islands get flooded or disappear? The panelists concluded that these questions have to be finally addressed at European and international policy level and cannot be ignored any longer.

### **Integration of environmental migration in political debates**

Although the links between climate change and migration are complex and difficult to identify, there has been an increasing recognition among researchers and policy-makers during the past years about the importance of environmental factors as an additional trigger for displacement and migration. The European Commission adopted a global approach to migration and mobility in 2011 and published working and research papers on climate change, environmental degradation, and migration in 2013 and 2015. In addition to funding projects on climate change and environmental adaptation, the Commission also proposed to create a Trust Fund to contribute to tackle the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement in Africa. Although the Paris agreement includes a reference to human rights, migrants and vulnerable communities in the preamble, no concrete measures and policies have been proposed so far.

Prior to COP21, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) addressed also the topic of human mobility. In addition, policy-makers adopted new UNHCR Environmental Guidelines to ensure that environmental considerations are taken into account in UNHCR's work with refugees. Environmental factors for migration were also among the topics at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016. The subject of climate-induced displacement will be also put at the agenda of the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants in September 2016 in New York that will look at the root causes of migration.

The review of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage during COP22 should be seized as an important momentum to recognize loss and damage as a core element of climate action and develop long-term financial and legal instruments within the climate framework.

### **Recommendations for policy makers**

The atlas provides important information that could be used as a good starting point for a broader discussion on how the EU could implement actions on climate change through its legal tools. The EU should integrate the policy recommendations formulated in the atlas in its water, agricultural, energy and development policies. There is also a lack of coordination between these different policies to enable policy-makers to address environmental migration as a complex and interdisciplinary issue. For example, human mobility policy should be integrated further in climate change policy. The European Commission could also create a special unit to tackle issues related to environmental migration and human mobility.

Regarding environmental migration, two options of aid are possible: helping people to stay or helping people to move. For supporting affected people to remain in their country, developing adequate adaptation strategies is essential. The atlas mentions the importance of EU funds for implementing national adaptation plans. Many local people are interested in engaging in long-term green projects at home, such as new agricultural cooperatives and promoting renewable energies. In addition to funding, building specific skills and training are also essential to bring these green concepts to realization. The second strategy to avoid environmental damages is through creating safe mobility and migration routes. In order to facilitate migration, one could also create additional legal channels for labour migration and improved mobility for vulnerable populations that have been displaced by environmental disasters. Many times money transfers from migrants towards their home country help finance adaptation measures to improve local resilience against climate change. Destination countries also benefit from migrants not only because of their working capacity, but also as a factor of cultural enrichment.

The publication tries to spread these positive messages. The authors of the atlas are in favour of dismantling the negative stereotypes associated with migration, especially in Europe, and call for improving integration policies to make sure that migration is successful when it occurs. A positive view on migration could increase the acceptance of migrants in the hosting country and facilitate their integration.