

Environmental Degradation, Climate Change and Migration: from Research to Policy-Making

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In recent months, the migratory impacts of environmental degradation and climate change have gained increased worldwide attention. Several concrete steps to address these challenges have been taken, including the publication of the long-awaited European Commission (EC) Staff Working Document on Climate Change, Environmental Degradation and Migration in April 2013¹, the acknowledgement of the need for further understanding about human mobility and displacement by the 18th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Doha in December 2012² and the launch of the Nansen Initiative in October 2012³. Discussions surrounding the inclusion of existing research results in evidence-based policy-making have therefore become pressing.

Building upon this momentum, in January 2013, a Policy Forum entitled “Climate change, the environment and migration: from research to policy-making” was jointly organised by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel’s (VUB) Institute for European Studies, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the Greens/European Free Alliance to explore current research methodologies and findings, and actively contribute to the development of a research agenda relevant for policy-makers.

As a follow-up to this event, and in response to the publication of the EC Staff Working Document, this policy brief critically outlines current themes and issues that surround this global phenomenon, specifically the findings of current international research which frame the discussions on terminology and current legal, political and institutional conceptual debates. While researchers have been exploring the link between environmental degradation, climate change and migration for decades, it is only in recent years that it has made its way into the discourse of policy-makers⁴. Translating

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research into policy in this field remains a tough task. To tackle this challenge, several proposals were put forward during the policy forum of January 2013. Firstly, there is a need for tailored and actionable research outputs that take into account political pressures and realities on the ground. Secondly, migration and climate policies would be clearly boosted through the elaboration of a common policy-oriented research agenda of which elements



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1. Tailoring Research Outputs

Reports, such as the EACH-FOR report⁵ and the COST Action IS1101 “Climate Change and Migration: knowledge, law and policy, and theory”⁶, have been put forward as good practices to try and address the situation through the promotion of applied multidisciplinary research, as well as research method harmonisation. The context-specific nature of the relationship between migration, the environment and climate change demands that research design be systematically tailored to specific national and sub-national policy needs. There are certainly communication channels that can be used to inform academia of major policy questions that precisely define the needs and expectations of policy-makers. The EC Staff Working Document is very welcome in this regard as it provides directions for a concrete policy-oriented research agenda that covers both conceptual and policy levels. That being said, it is important that research remains objective and does not specifically support the position of policy-makers on such a politically sensitive topic.

In addition, research projects should be conceived as a platform of broad engagement and involve policy-makers (specifically those in countries most prone to environmental degradation) from the project outset rather than disseminating results at the end of a project. This involvement is an effective way for policy-makers to take ownership of the research. A good example in this vein is the “Migration and Global Environmental Change” report published in October 2011 by Foresight, the UK Government Office for Science⁷.

Finally, concerning the type of data to be disseminated to policy-makers, the policy forum pointed out that researchers in the field of environmental degradation, climate change and migration must continue to ensure that recommendations are actionable and clear to all those concerned. Evidence-based recommen-

dations must provide the necessary information to differentiate between various policy options, both in terms of in situ assistance and international protection. However, researchers must be able to present any underlying assumptions in their research models and should not sell simulated outcomes as certain predictions⁸.

2. Setting a common policy-oriented research agenda

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in research in the field of environmental degradation, climate change and migration⁹. However, many actors in this field do not follow a common policy-oriented research agenda.

At conceptual level, the issue of terminology and the difficulty of segregating these terms still hinders the adoption of policy measures. Several concepts and definitions have been put forward, with the most common being ‘environmental refugee’¹⁰, ‘environmental migrant’¹¹ and ‘environmentally-induced migrant’¹². As environmental changes are mainly context-specific, it remains to be seen whether a single definition is sufficient for a plethora of different scenarios. Furthermore, some terminologies have strong political and legal impacts behind them, such as the term ‘refugee’, the use of which in the context of environmental change is strongly rejected by a number of actors, including UNHCR¹³. It is interesting to note that the EC Staff Working Document takes no strong stance on the terminology issue. The document puts forward the distinction between migration and displacement in the context of environmental change whilst acknowledging that it will be difficult to apply to individual cases.

At policy level, three issues deserve attention from researchers. Firstly, it is becoming increasingly important to find the ‘right’ framework to deal with environmental change and the migratory consequences. The first step in this regard would be to review the current conventions, such as the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, or protection schemes, including complementary and temporary protection mechanisms, and assess the need for new measures that better suit the present situation. The use of the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees was distinctly rejected given that environmental degradation is not included as grounds for persecution. The same approach is taken by the recent EC Staff Working Document which is extremely cautious on the protection issue. The paper stresses that a number of existing instruments could be relevant in the context of environmentally induced migration and

displacement, including some EU instruments. It is particularly interesting to note that there may be room for the utilisation of the 2001 Temporary Protection Directive¹⁴. However, the EC concludes that it remains to be seen whether a new protection scheme is necessary. The EC paper also welcomes the Nansen Initiative as a significant step towards bridging protection gaps.

Secondly, the need to promote migration as an adaptation strategy to environmental change in certain contexts was unanimously recognised¹⁵. It is also a clear requirement from the EC that dedicates four pages to this specific issue in its Staff Working Document. However, further research should be conducted to identify where and how to implement this option in practice.

Thirdly, it is increasingly important to identify parts of the world that will become uninhabitable in the next few decades. This should be completed by the development of specific guidelines on population relocation within the framework of global environmental change¹⁶. The EC Staff Working Document also addresses the issue of relocation but only as a last resort solution. The paper points out that experience amassed within the framework of the Regional Protection Programmes (RPP)¹⁷ could be useful in this regard.

3. Developing communication tools

As previously mentioned, there is a general consensus that the amount of research on migration, environmental degradation and climate change is now quite substantial. In order to move from the standard conclusion that “further research is needed” to develop evidence-based policies in this field, a three-step approach to improve the transfer of research results to policy-makers emerged from the policy forum.

The first step would be to launch a broad dialogue between policy-makers and researchers that involves all the relevant stakeholders (including Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, Development, Environment, etc). Several milestones have been reached in recent years in order to develop such a dialogue, for example the Nansen Conference – now followed by the Nansen Initiative – the Foresight report, the Asia Pacific Migration and Environment Network (APMEN)¹⁸ and the EC public consultation in 2011. Such a dialogue would need to take place on a regular basis to keep up to date with an ever-changing phenomenon.

The second step to be taken in the short term would be to create a

global online clearing house which collects and classifies existing research results. Some attempts to launch such a database have been made, such as the Climate Change, Environment and Migration Alliance (CEEMA)¹⁹. At present, results remain dispersed.

Finally, in the long run, environmental migration data must be mainstreamed. An idea could be to integrate them into national migration profiles with policy-makers trained to apply them. This would contribute to awareness-raising of this complex issue and highlight its cross-cutting nature.

Conclusion

As highlighted in this policy brief, improving research communication between researchers and policy-makers in the field of migration, environmental degradation and climate change is critical. Efforts to strengthen communication among researchers must be complemented by efforts to strengthen the institutional capacity of policy agencies to take up results and recommendations from research. This includes enhancing individual capacities and skills, as well as developing institutional channels, procedures and incentive structures to promote a process of evidence-informed policy-making that addresses migration in the context of environmental change.

Notes

¹European Commission: Staff Working Document on Climate Change, Environmental Degradation and Migration, Accompanying the Communication “An EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change”, 16 April 2013, SWD(2013)138final

² See <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2012/cop18/eng/I04r01.pdf>

³The Nansen Initiative, launched in October 2012 by Norway and Switzerland, is a three-year initiative that aims to find common solutions to the challenges posed by those displaced across borders as a result of environmental change and extreme weather events. More information is available at: www.nanseninitiative.org

⁴See, for example, the report on “Migration and Global Environmental Change” funded by Foresight, the UK Government Office for Science, from 2009 to 2011, and, more recently, the EC Staff Working Document published in April 2013.

⁵ The “Environmental Change and Forced Migration Scenarios” (EACH-FOR) was a two-year EC research project funded within the Sixth Framework Programme (Priority 8.1 - Policy-oriented research). The project ended in May 2009. It focused on the trends of multiple environmental problems and the associated socio-political and demographical aspects of a large number of regions and countries. More information is available at <http://www.each-for.eu>

⁶This action organised a workshop in October 2012 on methods used to conduct research in this field. It identified good practices and research gaps. In cooperation with UNU-EHS, this COST Action will also organise a summer training school focusing on field research methods in environmentally-induced migration that will be held 8-12 July 2013 in Bonn. For more information please visit the Action website at <http://www.climate-migration.eu/>

⁷This two-year research project explored global patterns and the impact of migration arising from environmental change and the challenges that could result from changing migration patterns over the next fifty years. Foresight: “Migration and Global Environmental Change” (2011), Final Project Report, the UK Government Office for Sci-

ence, London. (More information is available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.bis.gov.uk/foresight/our-work/projects/current-projects/global-migration>)

⁸In recent years, inflated figures on the number of migrants that result from environmental degradation have been circulated. For example, the report entitled "Human Tide: The Real Migration Crisis" produced by Christian Aid in 2007 predicted that there would be 1 billion people forced from their homes by 2050. While such reports aim perhaps to push this topic to the top of the political agenda, these results are counterproductive and can support policies driven by security pressures and not by humanitarian concerns. For a review of estimates and methodologies: Gemenne, F.: "Why the numbers don't add up: A review of estimates and predictions of people displaced by environmental changes". *Global Environ. Change* (2011), <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/foresight/docs/migration/modelling/11-1188-mr7-why-the-numbers-dont-add-up-estimates-of-people-displaced.pdf>

⁹The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the University of Neuchâtel recently published a comprehensive collection of resources on migration, the environment and climate change. This database is accessible at: http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/People%20on%20the%20Move%20in%20a%20Changing%20Climate_17Dec2012.pdf

¹⁰This concept has especially been used at the early stages of the reflection. See for example El Hinnawi Essam: "Environmental Refugees", Nairobi: UNEP, 1985.

¹¹This concept is widely used, including by IOM. See IOM, Discussion note: Migration and the Environment, Ninety-fourth session, MC/INF/288, 2007

¹²This recent concept was used, for example, in the Draft Convention prepared by CRIDEAU (the Interdisciplinary Centre of Research on Environmental Planning and Urban Law) and the CRDP (Centre of Research on Persons' Rights), thematic teams of the OMJ (Institutional and Judicial Mutations Observatory), from the Faculty of Law and Economic Science, University of Limoges, with the support of the CIDCE (International Centre of Comparative Environmental Law), published in the *Revue européenne de droit de l'environnement*, No 4-2008.

¹³The term 'refugee' has indeed a specific legal meaning in the context of the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. According to this Convention "a refugee is a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."

¹⁴Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof, OJ L 212, 7.8.2001, p. 12.

¹⁵In this sense, see for example the Foresight report, op. cit.

¹⁶On the usefulness of past relocation experiences within the context of climate change, see: FERRIS Elizabeth: "Protection and Planned Relocations in the Context of Climate Change", UN High Commissioner for Refugees, August 2012, PPLA/2012/04,

available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/5023774e2.html>

¹⁷Commission Communication of 1 September 2005 on "Regional Protection Programmes" COM(2005) 388 final.

¹⁸APMEN was initiated in 2012 by IOM and the Asian Development Bank. It is an online information-sharing platform dedicated to migration, environment and climate change issues in the Asia Pacific region. More information is available at: <http://www.apmen.iom.int/en/>

¹⁹This multi-stakeholder global partnership, created in 2008 by IOM, the Munich Re Foundation, UNU-EHS, UNEP, OCHA, DRC and WWF, aims at bringing together actors representing a range of perspectives including environment, migration, development and humanitarian assistance. More information is available at: <http://www.ccema-portal.org/>



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