Migration and environmental change: Assessing the developing European approach

By Andrew Geddes and Will Somerville

May 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Challenges associated with migration linked to environmental change are serious and require a coherent response from European policymakers.

In contrast to earlier academic work establishing a relatively simple link between environmental change and migration, recent developments in the evidence base show that the relationship between environmental change and migration is complex and multi-causal, creating other (still pressing) policy issues. In particular, migration resulting in part from environmental change will be largely concentrated in areas outside of Europe. Thus, *increased migration to Europe as a direct result of environmental change is very unlikely*.

Instead, other drivers of migration, especially economic inequality, will interact with environmental change to impel movement toward urban areas within regions. This produces counter-intuitive outcomes—for example, people's movement is likely to be *toward* and not *away from* environmental risk. One reason for this is that people will move—primarily for economic reasons—to coastal cities that offer job opportunities but are considered high risk for environmental change. As a consequence, the most pressing challenges associated with migration linked to environmental change are those of urban governance in fast-growing cities in parts of Asia and Africa.

Furthermore, environmental change may erode livelihoods and increase poverty (e.g., environmental change may reduce the length of the grazing season and hence earnings). Increased poverty *reduces the ability to migrate*, in effect 'trapping' certain population groups. Migration may be the best adaptation strategy for such communities but they may not have the resources to avail themselves of such a strategy.

A final key insight from a more holistic understanding of environmental change and migration is that it is very difficult to specify which people fall into the category of 'environmental migrants' or 'climate refugees'.

The implications for policy are far-reaching. Solutions to migration linked to environmental change do not lie with policies to reduce migration to Europe or to keep populations from moving—or with new or adapted legal protections, except in the most carefully circumscribed conditions.

In the European Union, the European Commission's policy response to migration linked to environmental change recognises this changing evidence base. The Commission's recent staff working document was published by the Directorate-General for Development and Cooperation (DG DEVCO) to accompany the Commission Communication 'An EU strategy on adaptation to climate change'.[1] The paper acknowledges that large-scale migration to Europe as a result of environmental change is highly unlikely. Its proposals suggest a more considered policy package, with an aim of integrating solutions to migration linked to environmental change within development strategies. This is sensible; however, the proposed actions are weak. Policymakers seeking robust solutions that meet the scale of the issues need to go further—above all, by seeking measures to reinforce and improve crisis coordination, support adaptation (including efforts to enhance good governance), and encourage migration where appropriate (e.g., as a form of adaptation that can help to sustain livelihoods in the places that people move to and also the places that they leave behind). This approach is likely to enjoy greater political and institutional support and higher public approval, and is based on an understanding of migration dynamics on the ground. It will also reduce the need for emergency responses to displacement later, making the case for action now compelling.

I. INTRODUCTION: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

In the 1990s scholars and experts predicted that there would be substantial migration as a result of environmental change. The starting assumption for such work was that environmental change could trigger mass migration. For example, early studies looked at areas likely to change with the effects of climate change (such as coastal areas that may be flooded by rising sea levels or areas that might be at risk of desertification) and then identified populations that might be forced to migrate from those areas, possibly to developed countries in Europe.

Estimates of how many people might move originated with the work of Norman Myers, who calculated a possible 25 million 'environmental refugees' in the 1990s; his later work extrapolates forward, suggesting some 200 million by 2050.[2]

The European policy response to these challenges a decade ago, if there was one at all, was defensive and was broadly aimed at reinforcing efforts to reduce immigration to Europe. Senior European policymakers also led calls for additional resources for foreign policy and security actors to prevent conflict that could result from such movement.[3]

> *Scholarship in the late 2000s questioned the starting assumption.*

However, scholarship in the late 2000s questioned the starting assumption. Experts critiqued the entire nexus between environmental change and migration,[4] disagreeing on concepts, causality, and likely patterns of movement. For example, the projections produced by Meyers are considered by many to be inaccurate (as are media claims about potential mass migration due to climate change ranging from 200 million to 1 billion people), but there is no consensus on future patterns. Similarly, the variety of terms used to describe people who move in part because of environmental change ('environmental migrants' and 'climate refugees', 'environment-induced displacees' or 'environmentally displaced persons', for instance) are contested. Consequently, there has been no agreement on legal and policy remedies to migration linked to environmental change, in part because the lack of a settled definition does not allow for legal remedies (as the target group cannot be delineated). In short, there is no clarity over who is affected, to what degree, and whether environmental change is responsible.

There is, however, a growing consensus that migration linked to environmental change needs to be located in the context of the broader range of factors that drive migration.[5] There are two particularly important insights from integrating well-known migration dynamics with the study of migration linked to environmental change. First, the basic role played by socioeconomic inequalities in driving migration from rural to urban areas has not been properly factored in: much of this movement is *toward* and not *away from* environmental risk and is particularly associated with growing cities in parts of Asia and Africa.[6] These are challenges linked to development and urbanisation, not migration, and the European Union could play an important role in alleviating them.

> *The European Union could play an important role in ensuring that promoting migration is a valid and important element of policy solutions.*

Second, climate change may reduce the ability to live a productive life and consequently people may lack the resources to move. In other words, environmental changes may erode social, physical, and financial resources and thus leave people trapped when migration may be the best strategy for increasing their life chances. Again, the European Union could play an important role in ensuring that promoting migration—as part of an integrated, development-orientated response—is a valid and important element of policy solutions.

A. European policy responses, 1997-2013

The European Union holds substantial regulatory powers over the environment and increasing powers over migration. The complex, multi-polar, and multi-faceted governance regime in Europe on migration and the environment thus holds significant potential for policy developments on migration linked to environmental change.

In practice, there has only been limited discussion of links between environmental change and migration in the European Union and very little policy development. The European Commission made its first mention of migration linked to environmental change in a green paper about adaptation to climate change in 2007. A year later on March 14, 2008, High Representative Javier Solana delivered a paper to the Council entitled `Climate Change and International Security'. In it, he set out thinking on how climate change may cross over into other governance areas including migration.[7]

The picture painted by Solana and other security and foreign policy actors was largely negative. There would be risks—migration resulting from environmental change would lead to resource pressures and then to conflict as groups fought over water and other essential resources. Most security assessments by European governments and institutions share such concerns, placing climate change high on their list of risk variables that are associated with increasing instability, especially in Africa. (The analysis is shared by other governments, including the United States.) Some analysts have gone as far as estimating the numbers of deaths in armed conflict 'caused' by climate change.[8]

However, outside of security assessments, neither foreign policy and security actors, nor Home Affairs actors have taken the policy agenda forward. The Action Plan on implementation of the Stockholm Programme (2010-15) promised that the European Commission would produce a Communication (analogous to a white paper) on the effects of climate change on international migration, including its potential effects on immigration to the European Union. In fact, the work was eventually folded into a broader communication on the Global Approach on Migration and Mobility,[9] and little attention was paid to it. The Council and European Parliament have similarly not prioritised the issue. Among Member States, few governments have shown interest. In the European Parliament, the issue has only been raised in the margins, typically by Green political parties.

In sum, decisionmakers have responded to concerns about migration linked to environmental change reactively, generally avoiding the issue, and wherever possible reducing its priority within international discussions. Where governments have been forced into a policy decision (such as occasions when a natural disaster has led directly to migration), policymakers have placed their responses within a framework of 'one-off efforts' to deal with natural disasters and have carefully avoided setting precedents, while also emphasising the goal of reducing the supposed threat of mass movement to their countries.

Decisionmakers have responded to concerns about migration linked to environmental change reactively.

The Commission's recent decision for DG DEVCO (rather than DG HOME) to publish a staff working paper on the subject, tied to the EU Adaptation Strategy, indicates a new dimension to policy development. It confirms the issue's low priority (if there were high political salience attached, it is unlikely the Commission or Member States would countenance a shift in departmental responsibilities) but also offers real potential that the issue may be addressed holistically within development strategies, which accords better with the reality of the phenomenon.

II. POLICY RESPONSES TO MIGRATION LINKED TO ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE: SUMMARISING THE SPECTRUM OF PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Policy responses to migration linked to environmental change can be broadly divided into three spheres: first, potential new legal protections that could apply to people affected by environmental change; second, crisis co-ordination measures for natural disasters or other immediate (rapid-onset) instances of environmental change; and, third, adaptation responses that reduce the vulnerability of developing countries to environmental change, which includes any harmful impacts of migration linked to environmental change (both slow- and rapid-onset environmental change, but primarily the former).

A. Legal protections

Several analysts and advocates have proposed new legal protection measures (some of which suggest a new status for climate refugees). There are at least four substantive proposals involving new protections or adaptations of existing laws that have been subject to policy discussion in recent years.[10] They include a new protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC),[11] new UN Guidelines for Environmental Migrants (similar to the guidelines developed for internally displaced people, IDPs), and two regional protection proposals.[12] There is also the possibility of changes to existing legal frameworks. The argument here is that some human rights, humanitarian, and refugee laws may be applicable to particular groups of 'environmental migrants'.[13]

There is little support among migration actors embedded in the governance structure for a new legal status.

However, such an approach is unlikely to succeed for various reasons. In particular, there are substantial insti-

tutional and political barriers that would militate against such protections ever being adopted. To take institutional barriers first: there is little support among migration actors embedded in the governance structure for a new legal status. Any mention of 'climate refugees' is opposed by those responsible for refugee protection (e.g., the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] at an international level) and has not been seriously considered or proposed by international agencies working on migration. For instance, the Global Migration Group (GMG, comprised of 14 agencies) does not include environmental agencies supportive of new protections and does not discuss 'environmental migration' at any substantive level. At the European level, developments in migration policy have largely been achieved through intergovernmental cooperation (with the partial exception of the development of asylum policy).[14] Given that the adoption of such protections would have far-reaching legal and financial ramifications for European governments, Member States would likely oppose them, preventing action. Furthermore, the current policy cycle on asylum and immigration reforms is also coming to a close, with the Commission and Member States calling for a focus on implementation (and not a new departure).

Similarly, there is no major political or public opinion support. The subject is a non-issue among political parties, except for Green and far-right parties. The politics of migration linked to environmental change (subject to the caveat that there is remarkably little serious comment or thinking on the issue) will be shaped by three major forces: first, the electoral success (or otherwise) of Green and far-right parties and/or whether supportive measures are introduced in other parties (most likely among the liberal left); second, how public opinion develops on this issue in the years ahead—whether it is framed around protection or whether overpopulation, environmental degradation, or any other negative narrative takes precedence instead; and, third, whether there are major external events—such as an environmental change or a unilateral decision by a major country vis-à-vis migration linked to environmental change—that alters the calculus significantly.

The subject is a non-issue among political parties, except for Green and far-right parties.

In sum, there is only limited potential for legal protections or new interpretations of existing law. There may be room for some exceptions, such as for Small Island Developing States or for the use of temporary protection in response to a particular natural disaster (i.e., involving relatively small populations that are clearly identified to be at risk, and/or to events that force decision makers to react).

B.   Crisis coordination and responses

There is near-universal consensus that improved crisis coordination and crisis response would improve the ability of governments to react to short-term environmental change (such as natural disasters), and hence to any migration that emerges as a consequence. In particular, there is strong support for general and strategic capacity building.

This type of intervention would most likely occur through humanitarian bodies. For example, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) work within the UN system. In addition, there is a series of regional bodies around the world.[15] In the European Union, an emergency response framework—including crisis-alert schemes, coordination plans, and disaster management plans—already exists for rapid-onset events and is referenced by European migration policymakers. Furthermore, Member States have pledged to deploy more resources, more consistently, toward crisis management. For instance, there is now an agreement to voluntarily pool resources and an agreement to create a European Emergency Response Centre.[16]

However, there are significant gaps in the framework and opportunities to improve policy coherence, especially in relation to the movement of people.

C.   Adaptation responses

Adaptation responses refer to a wide range of interventions (policies, tools, and projects) that reduce the vulnerability of people (especially those in developing countries who have less resources to adapt) to environmental change writ large. In international development policy, the intersection between adaptation responses and migration linked to environmental change tends to be found within the National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs), although there are implicit connections within countries' poverty reduction strategies.

The consideration of migration within these development strategies tends to be brief. Poverty reduction strategies highlight the importance of remittances. NAPAs tend to include brief summaries of patterns of migration, concerns over natural disasters leading to people movement, and references to people's displacement as a result of development projects. The adaptation policies and projects within these strategies implicitly or explicitly aim at *reducing* the pressures in particular geographical areas in order to decrease outmigration from those areas. The understanding of migration corridors, rural-urban linkages, and the effects of new migration on rapidly growing urban areas,

particularly in parts of Asia and Africa, is regrettably not included within NAPAs in any detail. The greater omission is of strategic thinking that might seek to *support migration as a form of adaptation*. This might take the form of schemes that facilitate movement or the transmission of resources linked to migration. However, at present such schemes are not a major part of the planning process, nor are they pushed by analysts, officials, and donors working on these issues.

In the European Union, an additional, important mechanism is the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility and, especially, the development pillar. There is again little policy development that incorporates how migration dynamics, especially rural-urban flows, might impact governance, nor is there explicit support for migration as an adaptation strategy.

Until recently, such measures were often conceived within the network of actors that viewed migration as a threat and where the imperative was to reduce particular flows: proposed measures would be benchmarked against whether they would reduce (or were perceived to reduce) migration flows. The move to a different network of actors is thus an opportunity to properly integrate migration-sensitive adaptation strategies and projects. Also, a more well-rounded, development-led approach is likely to enjoy greater political and institutional support.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy memo presents the case for a new logic behind policy interventions responding to migration linked to environmental change, based on a better understanding of the evidence. That evidence suggests that:

► Increased migration to Europe as a direct result of environmental change is unlikely.

► Those affected by environmental change are more likely to migrate to urban areas where economic opportunities are greater but where there are *increased* risks of negative climate or environmental change.

► Some populations affected by environmental change may find it difficult to move (and may become, in effect, trapped) even though migration is their best strategy to improve their life chances.

► The increased risk of conflict as a result of environmental change is unproven. In fact, the reverse may be the case (where conflict over scarce

resources could be increased by an inability to migrate).

The European Union's policy response to migration linked to environmental change has evolved. The Commission's recent staff working document[17] clearly shows that European institutions have grasped the above insights and have evolved on the issue. This welcome work, however, does not mean that European responses have moved away from institutional inertia. The seeds of a more considered response — that aligns policy solutions within the development field to an understanding of the dynamics of migration—are in place, but the actual proposed actions are very weak.

A number of policy solutions have been suggested by a range of actors, including: new legal rights, better crisis response mechanisms, and improved adaptation policies.

The political and institutional barriers to new legal rights are formidable and a major breakthrough in rights seems highly unlikely. However, there may be (limited) potential in carefully circumscribed cases, such as for Small Island Developing States or for temporary status in the event of a sudden natural disaster.[18] There are also useful efforts underway to help formulate these rights in a meaningful way. The Nansen Initiative in particular seeks to encourage a productive dialogue on how to protect people displaced by natural disasters. In parallel, there is significant work under way to develop improved crisis coordination and disaster management. Gaps remain, however, and improved coherence is an aim rather the reality. The direction of travel on policy change in regard to *fast-onset climate change* is relatively clear and could be accelerated.

The political and institutional barriers to new legal rights are formidable and a major breakthrough in rights seems highly unlikely.

For slow-onset climate change, the approach most likely to succeed in the longer term is one that works within the existing policy trajectory of incremental, relatively minor, change. Projects and strategies that support adaptation strategies therefore remain the most viable set of policy responses. There is substantial potential for the European Union to support adaptation responses in developing countries; e.g., through efforts to enhance political stability, develop forms of good governance that support economic and urban development, improve infrastructure resilience, by supporting urban governance in the large cities that many migrants are likely to move to, and encourage migration as a form of adaptation that can help to sustain livelihoods in the places that people move to and also the places that they leave behind.

This analysis could be incorporated in a range of European policy approaches, starting with the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility. This might also include influencing (from a European perspective) the thinking on the next round of the Millennium Development Goals from 2015, which are likely to include milestones for reducing the impact of climate change.

The analysis above suggests three recommendations for EU decision makers. These involve making a commitment to:

1. Consider granting relief (via the temporary protection directive) for rapid-onset natural disasters as appropriate, moving beyond the current (largely untested) ad hoc provision.

2. Include migration resulting from rapid-onset natural disasters within crisis-coordination policy frameworks at regional and international levels, and to consolidate and build on joint European work on rapid crisis response.

3. Incorporate migration within key development strategies. This might encompass European inputs into NAPAs, Poverty Reduction Strategies, and the migration and development pillar of the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility—and, where appropriate, thinking on the 2015 Millennium Development Goals. The clear aim should be to *build resilience* in affected communities using existing, well-informed development models. EU actors would do well to send a clear signal—in rhetoric and policy recommendations—that adaptation strategies should consider and encourage people to move.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ENDNOTES

1   European Commission, *Climate change, environmental degradation, and migration* (European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document, 2013), http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/13/st08/st08556-ad09.en13.pdf.
2   Norman Myers, 'Environmental Refugees', *Population and the Environment* 19 (1997): 167–82.
3   European Commission, *Climate Change and International Security*, S113/08 (Brussels: European Commission, 2008), www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/reports/99387.pdf.
4   Olivia Dun and Francois Gemenne, 'Defining Environmental Migration', *Forced Migration Review* 31 (2008): 10-11; International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Assessing the Evidence* (Geneva: IOM, 2009), http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/migration_and_environment.pdf.
5   Foresight, Migration and Global Environmental Change: Future Challenges and Opportunities (London: Government Office for Science, 2011), www.bis.gov.uk/assets/foresight/docs/migration/11-1116-migration-and-global-environmental-change.pdf.
6   Foresight, *Migration and Global Environmental Change*.
7   European Commission, *Climate Change and International Security*.
8   The National Academy of Sciences posited that climate change would spur greater conflict in Africa: a precise figure of 459,000 battle deaths by 2030 was predicted in 2009. Marshall Burke, Edward Miguel, Shanker Satyanath, John A. Dykema, and David B. Lobell, *Warming Increases the Risk of Civil War in Africa*, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 106 (2009): 20670–74, www.pnas.org/content/early/2009/11/20/0907998106.full.pdf+html.
9   European Commission, *The Global Approach to Migration and Mobility,* COM (2011) 743 final (Brussels: European Commission, 2011), http://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/intro/docs/1_EN_ACT_part1_v9.pdf.
10   Will Somerville, "The Politics and Policies of Environmental Migration" in I*mproving the Governance of International Migration*, eds. Bertelsmann Stiftung and Migration Policy Institute (Berlin and Washington, DC: Bertelsmann Stiftung and Migration Policy Institute, 119-47).
11   Protocol on the Recognition, Protection, and Resettlement of Climate Refugees to UNFCCC.
12   There have been proposals for a protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights and a European Framework Convention for the Status and Rights of Environmental Migrants (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, 2008).
13   Proponents claim that rapid-onset events (such as hurricanes and volcanic eruptions) that cause mass displacement could fall under international jurisprudence on refugees, such as the Cartagena Declaration or the 1969 African Charter. The Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons (the Kampala Convention), adopted by the African Union in October 2009, directly references climate change and is thus a case in point. There are also potential legal

developments under international human-rights law, the most important connected to the notion of non-refoulement, which would prevent persons from being returned home to face extreme environmental degradation.

14   For a full review, see Andrew Geddes and Will Somerville, "Migration and Environmental Change in International Governance: The Case of the European Union," *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 30, no. 6 (2012): 1015–28.

15   There are other regional disaster coordination bodies, often with overlapping mandates; for example, in Asia, the main body for coordinating responses is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has three relevant committees. There is also the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and more widely in Asia, the Asia Disaster Preparedness Centre in Bangkok and the Asia Disaster Reduction Centre in Kobe.

16   European Council, "Council Conclusions on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council — Toward a Stronger European Disaster Response: The Role of Civil Protection and Humanitarian Assistance," 3060th General Affairs Council meeting, Brussels, December 14, 2010, www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/genaff/118460.pdf.

17   European Commission, *Climate change, environmental degradation, and migration*.

18   For an accurate and realistic view of the potential for European developments, see Michael D. Cooper, "Migration and Disaster-Induced Displacement: European Policy, Practice and Perspective" (CGD Working Paper 308, Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2012), www.cgdev.org/files/1426605_file_Cooper_disaster_displacement_FINAL.pdf.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrew Geddes is Professor of Politics at the University of Sheffield. During academic year 2012-13 he is a Robert Schuman Fellow at the Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy. He has published extensively on the politics of international migration. Between 2009-11 he was a member of the Lead Expert Group that oversaw the report *Migration and Global Environmental Change: Future Challenges and Opportunities* for the UK Government Office for Science.

Will Somerville joined the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) as a Senior Policy Analyst in 2006 and now works part-time in the International Program. He is also the Program Director (UK) for Unbound Philanthropy, a private foundation based in New York. Prior to joining MPI, Mr Somerville worked at the Commission for Racial Equality, the UK Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office, and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). He has authored over 60 policy papers, chapters, and journal articles. His most recent book is *Immigration under New Labour* (2007, Policy Press). He holds a master's degree (with distinction) in Social Policy from the London School of Economics and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA).

Migration Policy Institute Europe, established in Brussels in 2011, is a nonprofit, independent research institute that aims to provide a better understanding of migration in Europe and thus promote effective policymaking. Building upon the experience and resources of the Migration Policy Institute, which operates internationally, MPI Europe provides authoritative research and practical policy design to governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders who seek more effective management of immigration, immigrant integration, and asylum systems as well as successful outcomes for newcomers, families of immigrant background, and receiving communities throughout Europe. MPI Europe also provides a forum for the exchange of information on migration and immigrant integration practices within the European Union and Europe more generally.

www.MPIEurope.org