



© Ront Bintang/Reuters

# Managing climate-driven migration

*The effect of climate change on migration is complex, both forcing displacement and limiting people's ability to move. Only by embedding action on migration into climate policy will the international community be able to prevent the issue blighting the lives of millions of people*

By **William Lacy Swing**, Director General, International Organization for Migration

**W**e live in the era of greatest human movement in recorded history. One in every seven people is a migrant and more people are moving today in the context of climate change. The consequences of climate change further highlight how, if well governed, migration is inevitable, necessary and even desirable.

Three points are worth noting. First, trends show that migration will rise due to climate change, and that many more people will be vulnerable if they cannot move. Second, there are significant

▲ A Rohingya migrant at a temporary shelter in Aceh, Indonesia, talks on the phone with a relative in Malaysia



© Rogan Ward/Reuters

accomplishments around the world to make environmentally related migration dignified, orderly and humane. And third, all actors need to promote a coherent, coordinated, effective and sustained approach to climate change-related mobility by integrating migration concerns into climate change, disaster risk reduction, response and development policies at all levels.

### Migration trends

Of the one billion migrants on the planet, 232 million are international migrants. Nearly three-quarters – 740 million – are internal migrants. People move for a variety of reasons, influenced by economic, social, political, environmental and demographic conditions.

However, there are a growing number of people displaced by conflict and natural disasters. An estimated 50 million are currently displaced by conflict, the highest number since World War II, of which

16.7 million are refugees<sup>1</sup> and 33.3 million internally displaced people.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, the number of people displaced by natural disasters has grown: an average of 27 million people each year between 2008 and 2013 were displaced, with significant differences from year to year, but with no fewer than 15 million every year.<sup>3</sup> We should also be concerned about the growing numbers of people who would need to be mobile to adapt and be resilient to climate change, but who do not have the resources. This puts them at greater risk.

Climate change affects migration flows by influencing factors that drive population movement. First, greater frequency and intensity of weather-related disasters, both sudden and slow onset, lead to humanitarian emergencies and increased movement. Second, rising sea levels make coastal areas and low-lying islands uninhabitable, resulting in migration and displacement. Third, competition over shrinking natural resources exacerbates tensions that fuel

conflict and displacement. Fourth, climate variability affects livelihoods, food security and water availability, which lead affected populations to seek alternative sources of income in other locations.

Least developed countries will be most affected as they have fewer resources to adapt. The same is true for populations of low-lying islands, whose challenges were addressed at the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States and at the UN Climate Summit held in New York in September 2014. Over 75 million people live just one metre or less above sea level, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports that much of this coastal land may be under water within the lifetimes of people alive today, placing this population at significant risk of mass displacement.

In addition to these pressures, environmental change can alter other factors that influence migratory patterns, making it difficult to isolate the





▲ Malawian nationals queue to register at a camp for those affected by anti-immigrant violence in Durban, South Africa in April 2015

environment as the primary driver. Because people often associate climate change with forced migration, it seems counter-intuitive that changing environmental conditions also diminish levels of 'outmigration' by reducing household incomes and trapping people who lack the resources to move. This creates a vicious cycle that makes them even more vulnerable.

Climate change therefore makes tens of millions of people a year vulnerable in complex ways, both by forcing displacement and limiting people's ability to use mobility to adapt. This makes it hard to apply the traditional distinctions between forced and voluntary, and temporary and permanent migration. It also makes it difficult to project the numbers of climate-vulnerable people. Current forecasts for the number of climate-induced migrants by 2050 vary between 25

million and one billion, depending on various climate scenarios, the adaptation measures taken and other political and demographic factors.<sup>4</sup> This estimate of vulnerable people would rise if one were to take into account those who cannot move but need to.

### Progress to date

There has been important progress in improving data collection and the integration of migration concerns into relevant policies – both areas that are closely linked. Improving data collection is crucial to evidence-based policies, and the key to good data is partnership.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) remains committed to furthering its research initiatives while focusing actions on the populations of greatest concern, given the challenges of identifying what drives movement with limited availability of robust data. For example, to strengthen knowledge and information-sharing with new evidence on migration and the environment, IOM has launched a three-year project called Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Evidence for Policy.

Funded by the European Union, the project aims to address the lack of comparable data on displaced populations. It has developed a cross-country comparative analysis of six pilot countries: Dominican Republic, Haiti, Kenya, Mauritius, Papua New Guinea and Viet Nam. The surveys of internal migrants' places of origin and destination inform policy on how human mobility promotes resilience and the ability to cope with environmental change. Lessons identified and good practices will be based on the types of mobility (migration, displacement, planned relocation), rather than the country specificities, thereby providing comparative insights for other countries with similar migrant populations and environmental contexts.

Another good example of partnership in data collection and analysis is the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) annual report. This combines national data on displacement caused by natural disasters with data from IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix, which supports national

and local partners and collects information in a series of snapshots to show trend direction, numbers and conditions of displaced people.

Having good data will allow practitioners to plan for climate-induced mobility. Mobility can sometimes be the only safe option for those whose lives are affected by environmental change. Unplanned movements of this nature can reduce access to services and livelihoods for people unfamiliar with the environment they are moving through or settling in.

As a response, a number of IOM's Member States have institutionalised the use of labour migration as a tool for climate change adaptation, risk reduction and recovery. Colombia and Spain, for example, have facilitated temporary and circular labour migration of workers from regions hit by disasters in Colombia. New Zealand has established the Pacific Access Category for nationals of Kiribati, Tuvalu and Tonga, as well as the Recognised Seasonal Employers scheme for short-term work for Pacific islanders in the horticulture industry. IOM promotes and facilitates the use of these kinds of initiatives for more countries by working at a regional level through regional consultative processes on migration, which offer a privileged space for informal inter-state discussions and consensus for action.

Furthermore, the growth in the number of migrants around the world emphasises the need to include migrants and mobility in humanitarian response mechanisms. In the 2011 floods that affected Bangkok and one fifth of Thailand, at least 600,000 migrant workers from Myanmar were trapped in affected areas and faced challenges in accessing information and assistance.

Helping these migrant populations required concerted action from the authorities. In response to a widely perceived gap, IOM and its partners have developed tools such as the Comprehensive Guide for Planning Mass Evacuations in Natural Disasters,<sup>5</sup> which provides a template to use and adapt in developing effective national evacuation plans. One notable initiative for emergency response is the state-led Migrants in Countries in Crisis. Launched in 2014, this aims to

develop guiding principles and effective practices to improve the ability of states and other actors to be prepared to alleviate the suffering and protect the dignity and rights of migrants caught in countries during acute crises, including natural disasters.<sup>6</sup>

### The road ahead

The key to coordinated, coherent, effective and sustainable action on climate change-related mobility is the integration of migration concerns into climate change, risk reduction, preparedness, response and development policies at all levels – global, regional and national. We need to create strong partnerships, reduce mobility-related vulnerabilities and build capacity for mobility to strengthen resilience.

#### 1. Partnerships for preparedness to minimise forced migration

Preparedness undertaken in partnership with local and national authorities is crucial to minimise forced migration that can occur in the context of environmental degradation and climate change. Infrastructure capacity must be reinforced in areas likely to be affected by sudden-onset events, including rehabilitation of coastal storm defence systems or construction of water-harvesting structures such as shallow wells.

Livelihoods need to be strengthened and diversified in ways that encourage resilience, such as introducing drought-resistant crops or promoting conservation to avoid coping responses that negatively affect livelihoods in the long term. IOM likewise seeks to promote temporary and circular labour migration schemes to prevent the loss of livelihood associated with environmental degradation and natural hazards by facilitating institutional arrangements, transportation and access to labour markets. This has allowed affected communities to pursue structured and supported ways to find alternative incomes.

#### 2. Reducing the vulnerability of migrants when movement does occur

Moving can be the only option for affected communities in situations where forced migration is not preventable. The IPCC, in

its Fifth Assessment Report, acknowledged that migration can be an adaptation strategy to cope with climate change, where “expanding opportunities for mobility can reduce vulnerability for such populations”.<sup>7</sup>

Disaster preparedness measures, including well-planned evacuation frameworks, are needed at all levels to reduce loss of life and negative impacts on the affected populations. Planned relocation reduces the exposure of vulnerable populations in slow-onset situations, although it can be a complex process with multiple implications on aggregate risk levels. Experiences and

### *Sudden and unplanned mobility will continue, and we must be prepared to respond with humanitarian assistance in a way that protects the rights of migrants*

success stories demonstrate that adequate participation of concerned households in the decision-making process, as well as long-term support for their livelihood options, is essential in designing and implementing relocation plans that can effectively reduce risk.

Sudden and unplanned mobility will continue, and we must be prepared to respond with humanitarian assistance in a way that protects the rights of migrants, meets their basic needs and avoids straining host communities. In this regard, it is essential to build local institutions’ capacities to provide basic services to mobile populations.

#### 3. Strengthening human mobility as a strategy for resilience and adaptation

It is essential to build capacity in a coordinated manner that will enable those at risk to use mobility to adjust to change and build resilience. Action is required at different levels. At country level, national adaptation plans, the UN Development

Assistance Framework and local development plans should include migration issues in support of making internal and international migration a positive and safe choice and reducing displacement and ‘desperation migration’ drivers.<sup>8</sup>

At the international level, coherence across policy domains will allow stakeholders to overcome important silos. This will involve mainstreaming migration across all policy levels that address climate change and forced displacement.

The interconnected nature of peace, development, environment and human rights requires us to integrate migration concerns into a comprehensive rights-based approach. Anything less will neglect the rights of more than one billion migrants and the billions more whose lives and livelihoods they benefit. The Hyogo Framework for Action II (on disaster risk reduction), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change meeting in December, the Sustainable Development Goals due to be agreed this autumn and the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit are all opportunities we must seize.

Climate change will continue to influence migratory patterns. While stakeholders have begun to respond to its challenges with concrete actions, more needs to be done. Moving forward, we must undertake coherent and comprehensive responses to the changes and crises we all face to make human mobility a positive, informed and safe option for resilience and adaptation that benefits all. ●

1 UNHCR Statistical Yearbook (2013), 13th edition.

2 IDMC see: [www.internal-displacement.org/about-us/idmc-media-centre](http://www.internal-displacement.org/about-us/idmc-media-centre)

3 Ibid.

4 See: IOM Outlook on Migration, Environment and Climate Change for more information on projections – [http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/MECC\\_Outlook.pdf](http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/MECC_Outlook.pdf)

5 See: [www.globalccmcluster.org/system/files/publications/MEND\\_download.pdf](http://www.globalccmcluster.org/system/files/publications/MEND_download.pdf)

6 See: <http://tinyurl.com/IOM-MICIC>

7 IPCC WGII (2014), p.20.

8 Melde, S. and S. Lee (2014), “Guidelines for integrating migration into the National Adaptation Planning process”, UNU–EHS–Nansen Initiative Joint Policy Brief 2, Integrating Human Mobility Issues within the National Adaptation Plans. [www.environmentalmigration.iom.int/integrating-human-mobility-issues-within-national-adaptation-plans](http://www.environmentalmigration.iom.int/integrating-human-mobility-issues-within-national-adaptation-plans)