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NINETY-FOURTH SESSION

DISCUSSION NOTE:

MIGRATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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INTRODUCTION

1. Environmental degradation and climate change pose significant challenges to human security and sustainable economic and human development. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), global warming is accelerating the degradation of drylands and other ecosystems prone to deforestation, salinization, soil erosion and desertification. In affected areas the globe over, both lives and productivity levels are increasingly at risk, with more and more devastating extreme events such as heat waves, floods and droughts taking place, and with sea levels rising along low-lying coastal areas.

2. As awareness grows of the issues at stake, a consensus is emerging on the need for a global strategy to study, plan for, adapt to and mitigate the processes and effects of environmental change. The movement of people and the implications for sound migration management will be key elements of this endeavour.

3. Gradual and sudden environmental changes are resulting in substantial human movement and displacement. The scale of the flows, both internal and cross-border, is expected to rise and have an unprecedented impact on lives and livelihoods. Such migration has positive and negative effects on both the local coping capacity and the environment in areas from which the migrants originate, as well as in their temporary or permanent destinations. Increased migration can contribute to further environmental degradation, but it can also be a coping mechanism and survival strategy for those who move. Adequately planning for and managing environmentally induced migration will be critical for human security.

4. What policy options exist for these purposes? And how do they relate to other policy fields? The clear need for further research and dialogue in this field notwithstanding, this discussion document outlines some of the possible scenarios in which environmental change and human security and mobility may interact with one another. It presents a framework for thinking about different policy responses with these scenarios in mind.

DEFINING ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRANTS

5. In the first instance, we need to define who we are talking about in order to develop appropriate policy responses and coping mechanisms. This task is complicated by the multi-directional associations between environmental change, human security, conflict and migration. In some cases, environmental change may lead directly to migration and vice versa; however, in many cases, these associations will be mediated by other important social, economic or political factors that determine an individual's vulnerability to environmental change or an area's capacity to cope with an influx or exodus of persons.

6. These challenges notwithstanding, IOM proposes the following definition: *“Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living*

¹ This document draws on IOM's programmatic, research and policy work, including relevant international seminars and reports prepared with partners on migration and the environment.

conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad”.

7. This working definition encompasses people who are displaced by natural disasters as well as those who choose to move because of deteriorating conditions. It also acknowledges that environmentally induced movement or displacement can be internal as well as international. This is noteworthy as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, by definition, do not address persons displaced across borders. The above definition further recognizes that environmentally induced migration can be a short-term or long-term phenomenon. In presenting this definition, the intent is not to ignore other intervening political, economic and social factors, but rather to focus policy on a key driver of human mobility that has all too often been overlooked. The intent is also to offer an alternative definition to “environmental refugees”, a term that UNHCR has stressed has no legal grounding in international refugee law.²

THE PROPENSITY TO MIGRATE IN RELATION TO ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE: FOUR SCENARIOS

8. The following scenarios involving environmentally induced migration are intended to further policymaking and development in this area.

Scenario A: Migration at less advanced stages of gradual environmental change

9. At the early stages of environmental degradation, farmers reap fewer crops, fishermen catch less fish and pastoralists find ever smaller pastures for their cattle. As earning capacity begins to decline, household members may turn to internal or cross-border migration for work and to generate supplementary income transfers through remittances. They often choose temporary or circular migration because they have cultural, social or historical ties to the area of origin and/or, if poor and less skilled, are unable to avail themselves of permanent migration opportunities.

10. Remittances help families to maintain their basic standards of living. Labour mobility may also have a positive impact on environmental restoration efforts by alleviating demographic pressure on scarce natural resources. On their return, migrants can use the savings and skills they have acquired to improve infrastructure and land-use practices and thereby address environmental degradation.

Scenario B: Migration at advanced stages of gradual environmental change

11. Persistent environmental degradation, which may or may not be exacerbated by climate change, may completely undermine local habitats and livelihoods. What were once temporary periods of natural resource scarcity may become more protracted or even permanent. Entire industries may collapse, leading to high unemployment and total loss of household income. Rising sea levels can present an imminent threat of displacement.

² While the 1951 Refugee Convention does not refer to environmental factors, refugee status may apply in exceptional circumstances if the ecosystem services that sustain a group’s livelihoods are deliberately destroyed by the State as a form of persecution against a particular group.

12. As a result, households that previously engaged in temporary or circular labour mobility may reach a tipping point where the costs of return migration outweigh the value of maintaining ever declining means of local livelihood. In this situation, a shift from circular to permanent migration could occur and be detrimental to social networks, socio-economic status, lifestyle and access to public services. With limited legal migration options, the vast majority of such movement is likely to be irregular.

Scenario C: Migration due to extreme environmental events

13. Perhaps the most familiar scenario is that of large-scale human displacement in the wake of natural and industrial disasters. While not always environmentally induced, devastating tsunamis, earthquakes and floods have left millions without shelter and basic services. In some cases, entire areas have been irrevocably damaged, making return infeasible.

14. In the worst cases, early warning systems and response plans may be non-existent or ineffective, leaving governments virtually helpless to prevent mass internal or cross-border displacement or to arrange for adequate collective centres and camps. Logistical concerns, such as procuring and distributing drinking water, can be immensely challenging, even for most developed States. In addition, the sheer volume of technical, logistical and financial resources required to ensure sustainable returns can be overwhelming as governments engage in transportation, livelihood regeneration and “building back better” so that, for instance, housing and coastal dykes are more robust.

Scenario D: Migration due to large-scale development and land conservation

15. The construction of major infrastructure works, such as dams, may involve the temporary or permanent relocation of communities. By redirecting traditional resource flows, such projects can alter human settlement and mobility and health outcome patterns. Indigenous persons and others may also be prompted to migrate by the adverse public health and environmental effects of some extractive industries. Efforts to settle nomadic populations or to conserve land have also resulted in resettlement programmes or spontaneous movements and poor population health outcomes.

THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON THE ENVIRONMENT: TWO SCENARIOS

16. Just as environmental factors affect the movement of people, so too can movement have an impact on the environment.

Scenario E: Migration’s impact on the environment in areas of destination

17. Situations of sudden mass displacement can have substantial environmental repercussions on the migrant host area. In the past, swathes of land have been deforested to set up camps or settlements. Displaced persons themselves may resort to unsustainable resource management in order to make ends meet in extraordinary and protracted circumstances. Some development and land conservation initiatives have had similar environmental effects as resettled populations that are poorly equipped with alternative livelihoods or who have been settled in unworkable areas overexploit natural resources.

18. While perhaps not as visible, a more gradual influx of environmental migrants into towns or cities with low absorption capacity can accelerate urbanization and have debilitating environmental implications. For regional and local authorities, this scenario only complicates preparations for 2008, when it is anticipated that a majority of the world's population will reside in urban rather than rural areas for the first time.

19. Where affordable housing and sound sanitation are unavailable, migrants may take to felling trees and procuring coastal sands for construction material, and to consuming contaminated water and food supplies. Migrant homes are often precariously built, in contravention of building codes, and situated on floodplains or sparsely forested hillsides, or next to mangrove swamps and tidal flats. Such coping tactics not only accelerate deforestation and soil erosion, they also limit the water drainage capacity of increasingly covered surface areas and the population's ability to access safe, clean water, resulting in further public health deterioration. As a result, once innocuous rainfalls may lead to serious floods and mudslides, large-scale contamination of critical water and food supplies and rapid deterioration of public health. For delta regions, small island States and other coastal areas, this situation can further heighten vulnerability to a rise in sea level. Even where urban planning has anticipated migratory inflows, irregular migration may still strain infrastructure and services.

Scenario F: Migration's impact on the environment in areas of origin

20. The effects of migration on the resilience of ecosystems in areas of origin varies depending on the nature and scale of migratory flows and on the original state of environmental degradation. Mobility may ease population density in relation to available resources and resource-management patterns; however, large-scale permanent movements can leave communities of origin without the resources to combat further environmental degradation. In the aftermath of disaster-induced displacement, large-scale returns can also challenge environmental management in areas of origin. This challenge grows more acute when reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts do not keep pace with returns.

INTERACTION BETWEEN MIGRATION, ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE, HUMAN SECURITY AND CONFLICT: TWO SCENARIOS

21. Environmental change and migration can pose immense challenges to human security and peace. Failure to meet these challenges may in turn lead to migration.

Scenario G: Human security challenges of environmental change and migration

22. For migrants and their families, extreme environmental events and gradual changes in habitat have enormous human security implications. The risks to public health alone are dire and can include direct impacts such as heat stress, injuries, air pollution and cancer, plus ecosystem-mediated impacts such as increased risk of infectious diseases, malnutrition, vector-, food- and water-borne diseases.

23. Natural and industrial disasters can cause substantial damage and destruction to basic infrastructure and services. They also tend to result in prolonged family separations and disruptions to health care and education services. In the absence of a safe learning environment, displaced children and youth become more vulnerable to human trafficking, sexual and gender-based violence and enlistment in criminal activities.

24. For those migrating to escape gradual environmental degradation, income often drops markedly just as food insecurity and public health risks grow. Where gender inequality exists, rural women unable to use migration as an adaptation strategy may overexploit natural resources to meet their basic needs. Those who do migrate may find themselves in an irregular or undocumented situation, vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking. With the loss of human capital that can accompany such outward migration, the communities left behind can find it difficult to keep their schools and health clinics open. These constraints on coping capacity can in turn lead to further migration.

25. In all of the above cases, the poor are typically the most vulnerable. They bear a disproportionate share of the burden because of their relatively limited coping capacity and tenuous property rights. This vulnerability is especially evident in the Least Developed Countries, where population growth rates are highest, compounding environmental pressure on scarce natural resources and strained public services.

Scenario H: Conflict potential of environment change and migration

26. The human security of environmental migrants can also be undermined by conflict. On the one hand, environmentally generated conflicts can lead to human displacement. Reductions in arable land, drinking water or fishable seas can give rise to territorial disputes, or conflicting claims to rights to use resources. Tension can mount when the grievances of environmentally vulnerable communities go unanswered. This sense of alienation can deepen if alterations to the habitat are seen to have been caused by others. Similar grievances can erupt in cases of stark cross-border resource disparities.

27. At the same time, mass environmentally induced migration, if inadequately managed, can fuel conflict. Dealing with movements of such magnitude is trying for even the best equipped of States. For many, however, these flows far exceed coping capacity, potentially generating tension. Communities hosting displaced persons may resent the ensuing property damage, property claim disputes or overuse of local resources and the burden on their publicly funded health and social systems. Even gradual environmental migration to urban centres can have a negative affect on social cohesion.

POSSIBLE POLICY RESPONSES TO ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRATION

(a) Migration and development

28. The most cost-effective and humane policy options involve obviating the need for environmental migration by intervening at the earliest stage possible. Sustainable development assistance is required to strengthen the coping capacity of communities affected by environmental degradation. Programmes need to engage the most vulnerable.

29. Community stabilization initiatives can be enhanced when diasporas and returning migrants are fully involved. Dialogue, networking, assistance and incentives can be used to channel the human and financial resources of migrants toward targeted efforts to prevent further environmental degradation in the migrant-sending area.

30. To avoid a decline in basic services in areas prone to environmental degradation and “brain drain”, improvements are needed in health interventions and human resource development planning. International recruitment codes should be explored for professionals from sectors under stress, and incentives designed to encourage the retention or return of healthcare workers and teachers. On-site recruitment and training of professionals might also work in favour of sustainable deployments.

31. A further policy issue is to ensure that urban authorities adequately plan for anticipated inflows of environmentally induced migrants. Unregulated construction and resource use by migrants can be reduced by expanding housing, transportation and other basic services in advance, thereby limiting the negative impact on the environment.

(b) Facilitating migration

32. At less advanced stages of environmental degradation, bilateral agreements could be designed for the recruitment of set quotas of temporary migrant workers from environmentally vulnerable communities. This said, legal channels for international labour migration are limited, and ensuring that inhabitants of environmentally vulnerable areas enjoy priority access to such channels has not typically been an objective of bilateral or national schemes. Even where labour mobility has been liberalized, single heads of household may not be able to leave less able family members behind. Some areas can be so marginalized and remote that cross-border migration is financially or logistically infeasible. For such communities, information on existing labour mobility options may be hard to come by. These challenges will have to be effectively overcome if temporary and circular labour mobility is to facilitate risk diversification.

(c) Forced migration

33. At irreversible stages of environmental change, permanent migration can be better managed and sustainable resettlement schemes carried out incrementally. Such initiatives should aim for a gradual rather than mass retrenchment of workers from affected industries and ensure that economic and labour market restructuring - including skills training - allow for their swift absorption in areas of resettlement. Where internal resettlement options are not feasible, it may be warranted to explore bilateral arrangements. In all cases, effective migrant integration policies and spatial planning arrangements are essential.

34. Mitigating forced displacement also calls for improved disaster preparedness and management. Effective early warning systems, well-informed populations, and ready shelter and humanitarian assistance are crucial. Relief efforts need to be coordinated with the host community, and be comprehensive and sensitive to considerations of age, gender and vulnerability. To avoid damaging host areas, environmental impact assessments should be mainstreamed into camp set-up, maintenance and closure operations.

35. While the majority of disaster-induced displacement occurs within States, in the many cases where it does not, States could consider granting permission for temporary stay. Where return is feasible, bilateral repatriation or readmission agreements can be useful. Sustainable returns will also require comprehensive reintegration initiatives, coupled with timely reconstruction and rehabilitation, including of health and education services. Where return is not viable, it may be necessary to explore arrangements for permanent stay abroad.

36. To lower the risk of conflict, traditional conflict prevention and mediation policies will need to be revisited, bearing in mind environmental change and migration. As part of this process, some issues that merit closer attention include property dispute settlement, compensation, integration and the needs of communities hosting displaced persons.

(d) Regulating migration

37. Existing migration management systems may have to be improved to address added flows of environmental migrants. Capacity building is essential if such systems are to limit irregular migration, including human trafficking and smuggling. In so doing, countries of origin could encourage host States to admit environmental migrants, whether as part of labour migration schemes, resettlement programmes or humanitarian assistance initiatives.

CROSS-CUTTING ACTIVITIES

38. For the design of cost-effective environmental migration management strategies, a dedicated research agenda is clearly needed, followed by sustained research and dialogue. Environmental impact assessments should also be conducted in conjunction with environmental migration profiling. As existing scientific models to project environmental migration tend to generate figures that vary by a factor of twenty, they should be supplemented with statistics generated by the migration community and by surveys of environmental migrants and their communities of origin and destination.

39. As advances are made in the areas of research and policy, timely capacity building for governments and other relevant stakeholders will be critical to the development and implementation of effective environmental migration management strategies.

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

40. ***Proactive policy and early action:*** As the above scenarios indicate, early planning and action are essential to orderly and humane environmental migration management and can, in some cases, limit mass or forced migration and its impact on human security. A proactive approach can also mitigate the adverse environmental impact of unmanaged mobility.

41. ***Comprehensive and coherent policies:*** As many States will face multiple environmental migration scenarios simultaneously, comprehensive and evidence-based policy, as well as sufficient budgetary support for long-term planning, is needed. Such policies should seek a balance between migration control and facilitation. They should also be informed by inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral dialogue and structures to ensure policy coherence.

42. ***Bilateral and regional cooperation:*** As migration and environmental processes are transnational phenomena, gains can be achieved through inter-State cooperation in relevant policy areas. In fostering such cooperation, regional consultative processes on migration could provide useful forums for dialogue, research and capacity building.

43. ***Multi-stakeholder partnerships:*** Benefits can also come from strengthening inter-agency cooperation and partnerships among public and private sector actors, non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations, trade unions, individual migrants and diaspora associations.

CONCLUSION

44. Effective management of environmental migration is essential to ensuring human security, health and well-being and to facilitating sustainable development. With more informed action and multi-stakeholder cooperation, societies around the world will be better able to achieve these objectives.