

Talking points for the Global Compact consultation

Panel 3: Adverse effects of climate change and natural disasters as drivers of migration

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Mr Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thanks for having me on the panel today. I will articulate my intervention in seven points – one minute for each.

First, I'd like to say how important it is that the Global Compact addresses migration driven by climate change and natural disasters. For a long time, such migration has been forgotten in the governance of migration, or presented as a future, distant threat that could and should be avoided. It is extremely important to realize that we're dealing here with a pressing reality already: climate change and natural disasters are already major drivers of migration, on a worldwide scale. We are not dealing with something new either: environmental conditions have always been key factors that affected the distribution of population on the planet – and this will be more important than ever as a result of climate change. Therefore it is important to re-embed environmental factors in our understanding of migration dynamics. That's why it is important that we address this issue in this very setting, and not only in negotiations on climate change or disaster risk reduction.

Yet such migration is multifold: some movements occur on very short distances, while others take place internationally. Some are prepared well in advance, others are brutal and rushed, such as those following a disaster. Some migrants return home eventually, others not. This means that it is often impossible to encapsulate the diversity of migration movements with just one migration category. When we talk of 'environmental migration' at large, we actually talk of very different types of migration. The same environmental change can induce very different types of migration, and

similar migration patterns can be associated with very different environmental changes. This means that the policy responses we can provide, for them to be efficient and meaningful, will often need to be tailored to each particular context.

Furthermore, different drivers of migration intermingle with each other, and it is often impossible to allocate people to discrete migration categories according to the motive of their migration. Environmental disruptions are not just direct drivers of migration; they also affect the economic and political drivers of migration. Resource scarcity can lead to competition or conflict, leading to displacement. Climate change will also deteriorate the health conditions of many regions of the planet, which can also lead to migration and displacement. Or when people depend directly on agriculture for their livelihood, any change in temperature or rainfall has an impact on their economic conditions. For many people, environmental factors are equivalent to economic factors. What we observe on the ground is that people migrate through fragmented journeys, where migration drivers add up to each other. Very often, delineating migration categories on the basis of the cause of migration is a difficult endeavor, and often a political construction that hardly matches empirical realities.

Similarly, even though most migration driven by climate change and natural disaster occur on relatively short distances, we shouldn't set internal and international migration apart from each other. What we observe is that international migration is often a continuation of internal migration. Our research shows, for example in Senegal, that migrants leave rural areas because of soil degradation and desertification. They move to cities, where they have difficulties accessing the job market or health services. Some of them will then continue their journey to Mauritania or Niger, and sometimes to Europe.

At the same time that an increasing number of people find themselves forced to move as a result of environmental disruptions, others find themselves forced to stay. Typically, the most vulnerable populations – the poorest, the eldest, the least educated – find themselves unable to relocate to a safer location when they are being faced with an environmental disruption. It is logical that the Global Compact would focus on migration. But we shouldn't forget those who cannot migrate, and are often affected by

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migration. Increasingly, as temperatures will soar, an increasing number of regions will become uninhabitable – because of excessive temperatures, continuous floods, or a land that has become impossible to cultivate. Addressing the needs of those who cannot migrate, possibly through relocation, is therefore a pressing issue.

Sixth, perceptions matter a lot. The research we have conducted at the Hugo Observatory at the University of Liège, often in collaboration with other organizations such as PDD or IOM, shows that the decision to migrate is often based on perceptions of changes, rather than on actual changes. People might be under the impression that it rains less than before, whereas it actually rains more. To understand these migration dynamics, it is therefore crucial to account for the subjective perceptions of environmental changes, and not these changes themselves. It is one of the key reasons why it is so difficult to forecast the number of people who will be migrating in the future as a result of deteriorating environmental conditions.

Finally, migration can also provide opportunities for adaptation and development. It does not always signal a failure to migrate, but can also be mobilized as an adaptation strategy. This is why it is very important to consider the effects – and not just the causes – of migration. Research conducted in the framework of the MECLEP project for example, conducted with IOM, shows how remittances sent by migrants affect the resilience of the communities of origin. Even in places that are really at the forefront of the impacts of climate change, such as small island states, migration can boost resilience and provide adaptation opportunities.

Thank you.

Delivered in New York on 23 May 2017.