



PROACT NETWORK

POPULATION MOVEMENT IN A

CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

POLICY PAPER

2008

Population movement¹ induced by environmental factors is not recognised in national or international legal instruments. Cases of people migrating or being displaced on account of environmental stress and climate change are, however, being recorded, while a growing number² of areas are also being identified as vulnerable and at risk. ProAct Network believes that a multifaceted approach needs to be urgently developed to both accommodate and mitigate future flows of people and reduce the impacts of population movement on the environment, as well as societies. Humanitarian and environmental organisations will increasingly be affected by environment-related population movement whether they work in the areas of disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, disaster recovery, development support, poverty reduction or conservation. Solutions need to be found that integrate livelihood resilience and sustainable resource management with both policy and practice in cases of migration and displacement, which allow these different actors to work more closely together.

¹ ProAct's use of the terminology population movement in this paper is not intended to gloss over the ongoing attempts to refine international legal instruments and terminology nor disregard the different schools of thought on the matter and does not wish take a position on these matters. What remains clear, however, is closer cooperation will be required from organisations which may share different terminologies and approaches if the challenges posed by population movement in a changing climate are to be met.

² ProAct has chosen not to cite any figures related to present and future population movement as a result of climate change in this paper as the lack of conceptual clarity on this issue has resulted in a wide variance on the numbers (from tens of millions up to one billion) and estimates accepted by the majority of stakeholders have not yet been developed

1. INTRODUCTION

This policy paper outlines the basis of ProAct's concern regarding population movement as a result of changing environmental factors, highlighting the part that climate change contributes to the causes and consequences of this growing humanitarian issue, as well as the gaps in institutional support. The principles underpinning ProAct's approach are described with a view to developing and sustaining effective partnerships with at risk communities and other organisations to address the practical implications of environment-related population movement. This paper reflects a humanitarian and environmental perspective and recognises ongoing work by other institutions on issues relating to terminology, legal status and the actual number of people who already are, or may become, affected by climate change and does not wish to duplicate this.

2. THE BASIS OF PROACT'S CONCERN

2.1 Environmentally induced population movement: an old phenomenon but a new and growing concern

Population movement has a long history of being an adaptive mechanism for populations seeking protection and a better quality of life. Cases of environmental migration and displacement have also been identified where people have either voluntarily escaped or been forced to flee



from degraded and unviable environmental conditions or from disasters triggered by natural hazards such as earthquakes, volcanoes and, more recently, extreme climate-related disasters. Development projects such as dam construction, poorly sited housing in floodplains and inappropriate agricultural schemes also contribute to population movement linked to environmental factors.

Climate change has become one of the main factors of both sudden and gradual environmental change, and is increasing the risk and rate of environmental migration and displacement. Global temperature has risen as a result of contemporary greenhouse gas emissions, disrupting local weather patterns, disturbing livelihood practices and increasing weather-related hazards in frequency and intensity. Melting ice caps are causing a sea-level rise that threatens homes and livelihoods through coastal flooding. Climate change is also increasing vulnerability by weakening or even destroying livelihoods and protective ecosystems, as well as by accelerating land degradation and erosion. These effects also contribute to decreasing the adaptive, coping and recovering capacity of populations who may be periodically or constantly faced with disasters and environmental degradation.

Regardless of current emission reductions, climate change impacts will continue to adversely affect hundreds of millions of people. It is projected that migration or displacement may be an adaptation mechanism in some cases or a last resort solution for many of the most vulnerable affected populations. This would particularly affect Small Island or Developing States facing inundation as a result of sea-level rise, which might not have the resources to invest in coastal barriers, or where the communities will not be able to buy land elsewhere.

While awareness of these issues is growing, it is important to understand that environmental change is rarely the sole push factor in environment-related population movement. As impacts become more severe, however, this is likely to change, and the environment will become in some cases the determining factor to migration or displacement decisions.

There are complex and often cyclic relationships – some of which are not yet fully clarified – between climate change hazards, environmental degradation, population growth, poverty, development deficiency and human insecurity. Often, when these factors coincide, they reinforce each other. Population growth and rapid unplanned development -- particularly in urban areas – places additional pressure on natural resources, livelihoods and services. The pressures of northern consumption and trades can also influence the practices and schemes of developing countries, and negatively affect local human

security. Over-exploitation, coupled with the use of unsustainable practices, accelerates resource degradation causing more vulnerability and poverty. The socio-economic situation of many developing countries reduces their ability to cope and respond to climate change. If vulnerable communities and governments are not assisted to meet the extra challenges posed by climate change, environmentally induced population movement is likely to become a humanitarian crisis.

2.2 The impacts of population movement on the environment

Lessons are being learned from the mass population movement that have occurred in the past 20 years. Many of the impacts are connected to the environment and are likely to become more severe with climate change and the risk of growing flows of migrants and displaced persons. In addition to a deteriorating situation at the place of origin, population movement also puts pressure on resources and ecosystems in the receiving areas as well, some of which might already be stressed by climate change and have limited capacity – and willingness from the host population – to accept additional people. This could lead to further human insecurity such as epidemics, food insecurity, water scarcity and pressure for grazing land for livestock, some of which may end with conflict. Even short-term, temporary migration or displacement can cause severe impacts and conflict in the receiving areas as well as on their return, for example if there is pre-existing ethnic tension, political instability, with land grabbing and loss of property, or when victims surrender to human trafficking. These social and environmental effects increase the risk of recurrent population movement and a downward spiral of conflict.

An additional concern is rural to urban population movement. As of 2005, some 3.2 billion people were living in cities but this number is expected to increase to more than 5 billion in the next 25 years. There has been a discernible decrease of rural activities, a loss of capacity and skilled labour and a decline in productivity, leaving community members who may have remained in a more vulnerable situation. In addition, rural to urban population movement is often permanent and the receiving cities, which are often already strained, do not have adapted services and infrastructures to receive uncontrolled flows of people. Urban expansion is increasing poverty, while unplanned settlements are forcing people to live in unsafe environments, which are more and more vulnerable to disasters and will possibly promote further population movement.



Seasonal population movement is becoming an essential part of some communities' structure, despite the many accompanying negative psychological and social effects like ageing populations or the loss of traditional practices and customs. Remaining family members often have to diversify their income with unsustainable practices, such as deforestation, that contribute further to degrading their quality of life. As climatic conditions worsen these temporary migrants may leave for longer periods of time: an increasing number may not return and eventually the families follow.

2.3 Limited institutional support

There are two main points in the conceptual debate about environmentally induced population movement. First, recognition of the environment as a push factor makes it hard to define and quantify environmental migrants or displaced persons. Some even forcibly question their existence. This lack of conceptual clarity to the debate has, in part, resulted in a wide variance on the numbers of people predicted to be affected by environmental change by the middle of this century. On top of this, there still needs to be common understanding on the types of migrants or displaced persons: the following concerns will have to be addressed -- slow or sudden movements; temporary, seasonal or permanent settlements; internal or cross border; forced or voluntary; a last resort survival or an adaptation mechanism?

A second problem relates to the lack of a responsible authority that would provide such migrants or displaced persons with protection or assistance. While waiting for an appropriate conceptual model to be developed, there is currently no institutionalised way of dealing with environmentally induced population movement. This seriously restricts any possibilities for agencies and governments to engage in a meaningful and well-co-ordinated manner, without putting people in worse situations with further social and environmental impacts, particularly as thus far the policy dialogue has been mostly focused on the definitional aspects and has not paid sufficient attention to the practicalities of providing assistance or listening to and learning from those communities forced to move as a result of environmental change.

3. THE PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING PROACT'S APPROACH

3.1 Encouraging a holistic approach with multi-sectoral and multi-level planning

Climate change is a cause and consequence aggravator and is linked to many other migration or displacement factors and impacts. Long- and short-term support must take into account the fragility of the environment to climate change and our dependence on it, while also understanding how it is related to other economic and social factors and impacts.

In order to overcome the complexity of the causes and consequences of environment related population movement, a multi-sectoral and multi-level approach is fundamental. Environmental changes are being studied, and increasingly understood, practical solutions can be found to manage many of these changes but greater co-operation is required between different sectors and lessons already learned need to be shared. Working relationships between actors in all fields – environmental as well as social – are necessary to ensure better communication and co-operation. Multi-level approaches involving different stakeholder groups such as local people, private companies, local and national governments, academic institutions, non-governmental organisations and donor agencies are needed to enhance the sustainability and the scale of projects, reducing the risks of conflicts and encouraging solutions that aim to make migration or displacement a positive input to societies.

Although ProAct supports the need of conceptual clarity regarding environmentally induced population movement – as well as institutional and legal recognition – guidance and tools that cover preparedness, prevention as well as response are now urgently needed to cope with current and pending situations. The challenges need to be approached in a holistic manner, from understanding and treating the causes, to attempting to mitigate or aid in some cases population flows, and dealing with actual impacts and recurrences. In many of these cases, the most vulnerable families or communities will not have the capacity to move, will not have an insurance contributing to a preference to protect property and will therefore remain in extremely exposed situations. The absence of policy instruments must not lead to a neglect of what can be done now to prevent, react and respond to the problem. Environmental migration and displacement must be integrated and understood when planning development, disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and disaster recovery projects.

3.2 Finding sustainable solutions at the local level

ProAct believes that solutions implemented at *the local level stand the highest chances of being successful and sustainable*. Community-based projects ensure that the more vulnerable people are being aided and that solutions will take account of the local context of the problem. Local level governance and community empowerment are important for long-term results. Projects dealing with environmentally induced population movement should therefore include essential components such as awareness raising, capacity building, communication, co-operation and resource sharing.

Long-term solutions will be costly and need to be able to adapt to and mitigate the continuously changing environmental and social situation. Short-term solutions must be sustainable and should aim to reduce future long-term impacts on the environment, economies and societies. *Sustainable development is key* to reducing the risk of sudden – as well as slow onset – disasters, which can stimulate migration and displacement.

The use of soft engineering solutions, natural buffers and ecosystem services is proving to be effective for climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction for sudden, recurrent and especially slow onset hazards. ProAct advocates the use of these practices as a viable and flexible alternative that also have multiple benefits for vulnerable communities.

Environmental resilience, livelihood support and poverty reduction measures are essential areas of assistance to reduce vulnerability. Due to the close dependence of most rural communities on the environment, climate change adapted resource management and sustainable and secure livelihood practices are basic and necessary measures to prevent population movement. They can also help mitigate the risk of environmental and social impacts of migrants and displaced persons that could lead to conflict within the receiving areas.

Traditional practices are still yet to be further researched and shared, but have the potential to be effective adaptation and coping solutions for vulnerable communities given that there is appropriate development support to conserve these practices and structures. Local scale livelihoods are often more sustainable than national schemes and must be protected to ensure local subsistence.

3.3 Gathering and sharing knowledge

Recording lessons learned and gathering best practices from a wide range of field situations is essential, especially given the paucity of information currently available on this subject.

It is important that the environmental situation and risk assessments and predictions related to current changes are well communicated at all levels of society. Equally, there is a clear need for an improved understanding and better communications about climate change and its potential impacts – and what this means for civil society – between decision-makers, planners and communities.

Only with a well-informed knowledge base can peoples' needs be understood and meaningful solutions be implemented, such as concrete and simple guidance to respond and cope with the changes, a large number of which must be community-based projects.

4. KEY AREAS OF PROACT'S WORK

ProAct's expertise in this arena is in relation to environmental management, rehabilitation and livelihood recovery related to population displacement following natural disasters and conflict as well as conflict prevention with regards access and use of natural resources. Additional capacity concerns the use of environmental management for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

ProAct is currently expanding these activities in support of environmentally induced population movements through services such as:

★ Institutional support:

Development of principles and technical advice including training materials, tools and guidance for organisations whose activities are likely to become concerned with environment-related population movement.

★ Environmental demonstration projects:

Development of community-based partnerships and pilot projects related to disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, livelihood resilience and sustainable resource management, including local institutional capacity building and technology transfer.

★ Networking and knowledge management

Building an intersectoral platform for humanitarian and environmental agencies that encourages dialogue, common understanding and principles, as well as sharing lessons learnt and approaches in view of facilitating joint response on this issue and help ensure that the voices of those working with the practical consequences of environmentally induced population movement are heard in the ongoing global policy development.