CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISPLACEMENT

Foreword
Achim Steiner

Human migration, forced or otherwise, will undoubtedly be one of the most significant consequences of environmental degradation and climate change in decades to come. Many experts argue that large numbers of people are already on the move, with millions more expected to follow as evidence of climate change mounts.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and UNEP’s Global Environment Outlook have recently delivered sobering assessments of the physical and environmental impacts of climate change. For example, sea-level rise and unsustainable human development are contributing to the loss of coastal wetlands and mangroves and increased damage from coastal flooding. Millions of people are projected to be flooded annually by the 2080s due to sea-level rise. Densely-populated and low-lying areas where adaptive capacity is relatively low and which already face other challenges, such as tropical storms, are especially at risk.

Current knowledge about the social consequences we should expect from these processes is still quite sparse. Targeted research and assessment are of course essential to achieve a better understanding of the issue but we cannot afford to wait. It is critical that we start immediately to translate existing knowledge into humanitarian policies and practices.

In this context, UNEP, the International Organization for Migration, the UN University and other international organisations have formed the Migration and Environment Alliance. This Alliance will provide a forum and catalyst for new projects and ideas related to environment-driven migration to advance an integrated and coordinated approach to this challenging cross-sectoral issue.

Sound environmental management and climate change adaptation can help mitigate the causes of migration. Equally, early action and planning mean that the environmental migration processes already under way can be better managed.

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The need for collaboration
John Holmes

The global demand for humanitarian assistance, which is already considerable, is likely to grow in the coming decade, and to see a major increase in our lifetimes. The biggest single cause will be climate change and the increased incidence and severity of extreme weather events associated with it.

Indeed, we are beginning to feel the effects. What we are already witnessing is not an aberration but rather a ‘curtain raiser’ on the future. These events are what I call the ‘new normal’. The number of recorded disasters has doubled from approximately 200 to over 400 per year over the past two decades. Nine of out every 10 disasters are now climate-related. Last year, my office at the UN issued an unprecedented 15 funding appeals for sudden natural disasters, five more than the previous annual record. 14 of them were climate-related.

Compounding the challenges of climate change are the recent dramatic trends in soaring food and fuel prices, which are poised to have a major impact on hunger and poverty across the world and are having an immediate impact on the cost of humanitarian operations. We have to ask the question: are we properly prepared for this?

We have the means to tackle all these issues, if we have the will. What we need to do above all is to start investing in the concrete, practical risk-reduction measures that can help save lives and livelihoods. It is going to take all of our combined efforts to prepare for and mitigate their effects. To that end, we must build on and develop lasting and substantive partnerships across all nations and sectors.

In an era defined by a changing climate and the ever-present menace of conflict, no single humanitarian agency or set of agencies can cover all humanitarian needs. Only by working together can we further our ability to alleviate suffering, and help to restore a measure of hope and humanity to a world sorely in need of both.

John Holmes is Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. This article is extracted from a speech given at the 2008 Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development Conference and Exhibition. The full text is available at www.dihad.org.