



People leave their homes to escape the floods in Gonaives, Haiti. © IOM 2008- MHT0178 (Photo: Nuno Nunes)

Environment, climate change and migration: IOM's approach and activities

IOM is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental body, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration, advance understanding of migration issues, encourage social and economic development through migration, and work towards effective respect of the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

The environment has always been a driver of migration, as people flee to survive natural disasters or, faced with harsh and deteriorating environmental conditions, move to seek opportunities elsewhere. Climate change is expected to exacerbate sudden- and slow-onset disasters and gradual environmental degradation. Through these impacts, climate change is already influencing migration around the world.

IOM applies its comprehensive migration management approach to the linkages between migration, climate change and the environment. Sustainable development is recognized as an integral part of this approach, implemented through disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation measures. Through its activities, IOM helps to reduce the vulnerability of populations exposed to environmental risk factors, assists populations on the move as a result of disasters and environmental change, and builds the capacities of governments and other actors to face the challenge of environmental migration. Since 2000, more than 500 projects have been funded as part of IOM's response to environmental migration.



IOM International Organization for Migration

How will climate change affect the movement of people?

From IOM's perspective, most migration scenarios involve a range of factors, and it is sometimes difficult to separate environmental from political, social, economic and other aspects. Environmental migration is a multicausal phenomenon, yet one in which environmental drivers play a significant and increasingly determinative role.

Climate change could affect the movement of people in the following ways:

- Greater frequency and intensity of sudden- and slow-onset weather-related natural disasters entail a higher risk of humanitarian emergencies and related population movements.
- The adverse consequences of increased warming, climate variability and other effects of climate change for livelihoods, public health, food security and water availability can exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities and contribute to migration.
- Rising sea levels may make coastal areas and low-lying islands uninhabitable.
- Competition over shrinking natural resources may lead to tensions and potentially to conflict and, in turn, to forced migration.

Migration can be a survival strategy, especially in case of natural disaster. Migration can also be an adaptation strategy as it is, and always has been, an integral part of the interaction between humans and their environment. Migration helps people manage risks, diversify livelihoods and cope with environmental changes affecting their ways of life. For example, temporary migration and remittances can open up alternative sources of income and

reduce reliance on the environment for subsistence. In general, environmental migration can involve cases of both forced and voluntary movement, but in most instances environmental migration cannot be readily classified as one or the other.

IOM's working definition of environmental migrants

"Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living 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."

This definition attempts to capture the complexity of the issue, without having normative implications.

Who will be affected? Who will move, and where will they go?

Marginalized sectors of society, groups dependent on agriculture and populations in least developed countries, low-lying islands and coastal areas are most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. However, owing to their lack of resources, the poorest and most severely affected groups are often least able to move out of harm's way. Evidence suggests that environmental migration is likely to be mainly internal, with a smaller proportion taking place between neighbouring countries, and even smaller numbers migrating long distances. Moves may be temporary or permanent depending on the type of environmental trigger.

IOM highlights

- The IOM publication *Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Assessing the Evidence* becomes a key reference work (2009).
- IOM published a *Compendium of IOM's Activities in Migration, Climate Change and the Environment*, describing IOM projects in 28 countries and four subregions (2009).
- IOM and partners from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee submitted a joint letter to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to draw the attention to the humanitarian consequences of climate change (2009) www.iom.int/climateandmigration.
- IOM brought together governments and partners from 80 countries for an International Dialogue on Migration workshop on the theme of "Climate change, environmental degradation and migration" (March 2011) www.iom.int/idmclimatechange/lang/en.

IOM's approach to migration, climate change and the environment

IOM's central objectives in managing environmental migration are:

- To prevent forced migration resulting from environmental factors to the extent possible;
- To provide assistance and protection to affected populations where forced migration does occur, and to seek durable solutions to their situation;
- To facilitate migration as a climate change adaptation strategy.

IOM's work encompasses operational, policy and research dimensions. Gender, human rights and health considerations cut across all programmatic activities.

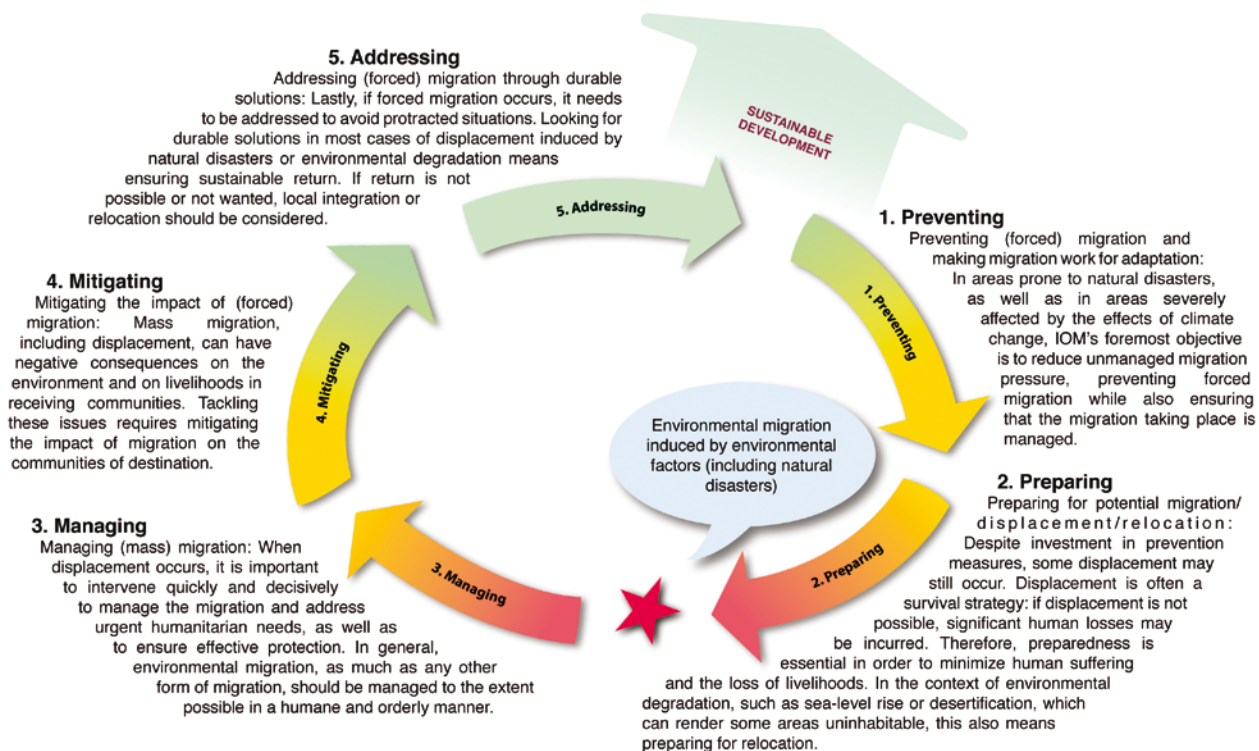
- **Operations:** IOM provides assistance and protection for populations affected by

disasters and other environmental hazards and supports communities through disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and migration and development initiatives. This role is reinforced by IOM's participation in the international community's system for humanitarian response.

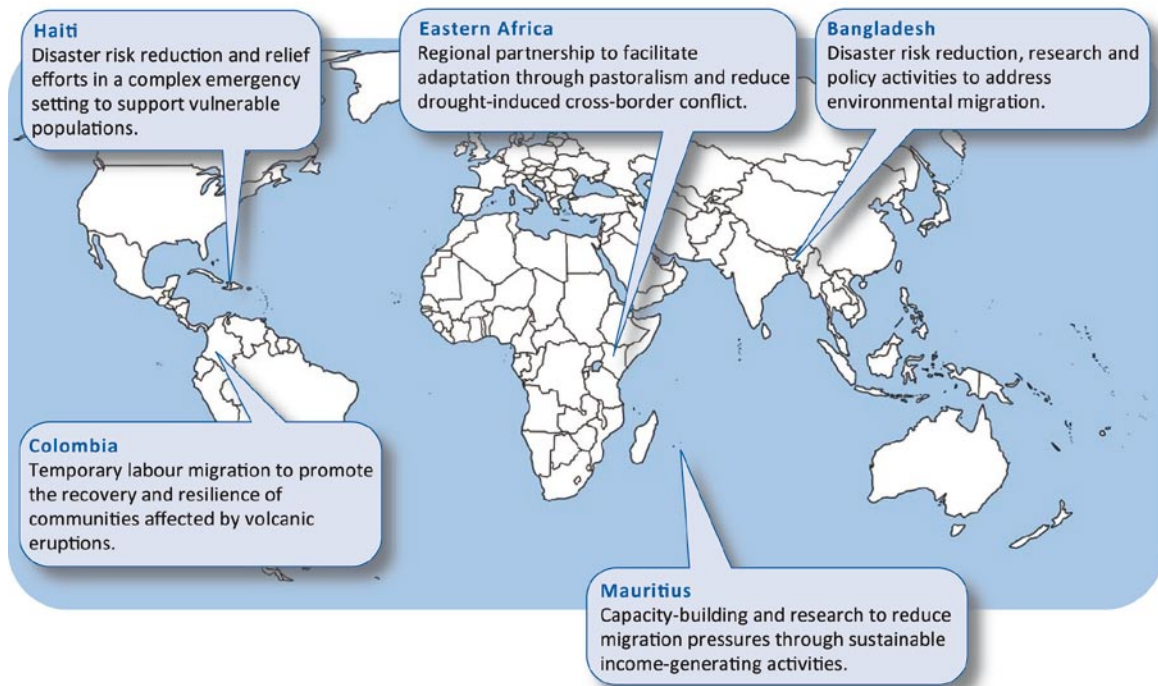
- **Policy:** IOM promotes policy dialogue and capacity-building to create coherent national, regional and international strategies in response to environmental migration, for example through the IOM International Dialogue on Migration, the Global Forum on Migration and Development or United Nations climate change negotiations.
- **Research:** IOM has pioneered research since the early 1990s to improve understanding of environmental migration, develop research capacities and strengthen exchanges between research and policy communities.

IOM: Managing environmental migration

In line with IOM's objectives for a comprehensive approach to environmental migration, the migration management cycle illustrates the types of programmatic intervention for each of the different phases.



Selected examples of IOM activities



The way ahead for IOM and the international community

As the world's leading migration agency, IOM keeps abreast of issues that will have serious consequences for millions of migrants and their countries and communities in the near and distant future. Together with its partners, IOM will continue to address environmental migration and support States in this endeavour, pursuing the following priority areas of action:

- Build the capacities of all stakeholders, including local communities, to anticipate and respond to environmental changes and their implications for human mobility.
- Bolster humanitarian action to ensure assistance and protection for environmental migrants.
- Recognize and realize the potential of migration as a climate change adaptation

strategy, above all through its contribution to sustainable development.

- Develop policy coherence at national, regional and international levels by mainstreaming environmental and climate change considerations into migration management policies and practice, and vice versa.
- Strengthen linkages with other policy domains, especially disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and sustainable development to reduce vulnerability in the long term.
- Plan for orderly relocation where necessary, sensitive to local contexts.

For more information, please visit:
www.iom.int/envmig.