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New report: Climate Change is detectable driver of migration

200 million people could be on the move due to climate change by 2050

Bonn, June 10th, 2009. Unless aggressive measures are taken to halt global warming, the consequences for human migration and displacement could reach a scope and scale that vastly exceed anything that has occurred before. Climate change is already contributing to migration and displacement. All major estimates project that the trend will rise to tens of millions of migrants in coming years. Within the next few decades, the consequences of climate change for human security efforts could be devastating. These are amongst the key findings of a new report entitled, “In Search of Shelter: Mapping the effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement”. The report was authored by UN University’s Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS), CARE International, and Columbia University’s Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN). It was released to the media today during the Bonn Climate Change Talks under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The exact number of people that will be on the move by mid-century is uncertain. The International Organisation of Migration (IOM) estimates that there may be 200 million environmentally-induced migrants by 2050. “While human migration and displacement is usually the result of multiple factors, the influence of climate change in people’s decision to give up their livelihoods and leave their homes is growing” says Dr. Charles Ehrhart, CARE International’s Climate Change Coordinator and one of the report’s authors.

Mexico and the Central American countries are already experiencing the negative impacts of climate change – both in terms of less rainfall and more extreme weather, such as hurricanes and floods. Rainfall in some areas is expected to decline by as much as 50 per cent by 2080, rendering many local livelihoods unviable and dramatically raising the risk of chronic hunger.

“The potential impacts of future sea level rise are at least as startling. In Vietnam’s densely populated Mekong River Delta, for example, a sea level rise of two meters would - assuming current populations densities - flood the homes of more than 14.2 million people and submerge half of the region’s agricultural land,” Ehrhart adds.

Most people will seek shelter in their own countries while others cross borders. Some displacement and migration may be prevented through the implementation of adaptation measures. However, poorer countries are under-equipped to support widespread adaptation. As a result, societies affected by climate change may find themselves locked into a downward spiral of ecological degradation, towards the bottom of which social safety nets collapse while tensions and violence rise. In this all-too-plausible worst-case scenario, large populations would be forced to migrate as a matter of immediate survival. Gendered roles, as well as cultural prescriptions and prohibitions, can make it impossible for women and female headed-households to migrate in response to environmental change – even when necessary to stay alive.

“New thinking and practical approaches are needed to address the threats that climate-related migration poses to human security and wellbeing,” says Dr. Koko Warner, Head of Section of the UN University’s Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) and lead author of the report.

People have always relied on long- and short-term migration as ways of dealing with climatic changes. The challenge is to better understand the dynamics of climate-related migration and displacement and incorporate human mobility into international and national plans for adapting to climate change.

The new report provides empirical evidence from a first-time, multi-continent survey, policy recommendations and an analysis of both the threats and potential solutions. Original maps show climate change impacts and population distribution patterns. “Migration needs to be recognised as a valuable, and sometimes necessary, response to the negative impacts of climate change. The policy decision we make today will determine whether

migration becomes a matter of choice amongst a range of adaptation options, or whether migration and displacement is the tragic proof of our collective failure to provide better alternatives,” Warner concludes.

The report was written by the UN University’s Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS), CARE International, and Columbia University’s Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN). It was funded by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the World Bank.

The maps are available for reproduction. You can download them as well as the report here (credit: “*Maps provided courtesy of CARE International and CIESIN at the Earth Institute of Columbia University*”):

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