

Press release

UN University Calls on Countries to Prepare for Human Mobility as Climate Change Unfolds

Lima, 9 December 2014 – As the international community debates the shape of a new climate agreement at COP 20, United Nations University calls on governments to prepare for human mobility in response to climate stressors. Between 2008 and 2012, 144 million people globally left their homes in the face of threats like hurricanes, cyclones, and floods. Yet, people who are compelled to move rarely receive sufficient assistance during their journey or at their destination point.

“From sea level rise in the Pacific island states to persistent droughts in the Horn of Africa, climate stressors are forcing people from their homes and countries need to be prepared,” states Dr. Koko Warner, senior scientist at the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Migration (UNU-EHS). “People will move. It is up to countries and the global community to ensure they move with as much safety and dignity as possible. To bridge the human security gap, countries should account for human mobility in their national adaptation planning.”

The national adaptation planning process helps governments identify their development needs in relation to climate impacts. It is an opportunity to ensure that important aspects of vulnerability—such as migration, displacement, and planned relocation—are addressed.

Many regions of the world may not be able to provide safe living and working environments for people, and countries need to be ready for people moving towards and away from them. A recent UNU-EHS policy brief concluded that national adaptation planning provides a basis for ensuring that moving remains a choice among other viable options for climate vulnerable people. It could also pre-empt the possibility of tensions arising between countries, as people begin crossing borders.

“There are challenges but also potential opportunities when it comes to migration in the context of climate change, provided countries are prepared. Voluntary migration could improve the food and livelihood security of households and could be one way to manage climate risks,” says Diego Beltrand, Regional Director for Southern America from the International Organization for Migration (IOM). “Hence, IOM focuses on supporting governments at national, regional and international levels to integrate migration into their adaptation strategies, by developing new evidence, training tools, guidelines and activities linking climate adaptation and migration”.

In the Republic of Kiribati, a low-lying island state in the Pacific region vulnerable to sea level rise and coastal erosion, the government has provided vocational training to citizens to ensure they are competitive on the global labour market if they choose to leave. This is an example of a country trying to minimize negative, expected effects of climate change induced migration by giving their people options.

Current research at UNU-EHS analysed displacement patterns and trends in the Horn of Africa, focusing on Somalis and Ethiopians in Kenya, Yemen and Egypt who were compelled to flee from intense drought and climate stressors. The study found that many had no other reasonable options for survival than to leave their homes, often without legal documents and money. Once they arrived at their destinations

the support they received varied and many were denied access to basic services and had no opportunity to secure livelihoods, making them even more vulnerable than before they fled their homes.

“When people move because they have few realistic alternatives, what is at risk is not only their safety but their human rights,” said Marine Franck, Climate Change Officer at UNHCR. “In those cases where displacement in response to climate stressors cannot be avoided, durable solutions for livelihoods, safety, and dignity of moving people are needed. National Adaptation Plans are an essential element to anticipating, preparing for and assisting vulnerable populations who are or may be on the move in relation to climate change.”

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About UNU-EHS

The United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) addresses the risk and vulnerability aspects of human security and the consequences of complex environmental hazards for sustainable development. Through applied research and education UNU-EHS puts climate vulnerable communities at the centre of the climate policy debate. The United Nations University (UNU) is a global think-tank and the academic arm of the UN.

To download the National Adaptation Plan policy brief: <http://ehs.unu.edu/file/get/11800.pdf>

To download the climate migration in the Horn of Africa report: <http://ehs.unu.edu/file/get/11763.pdf>

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