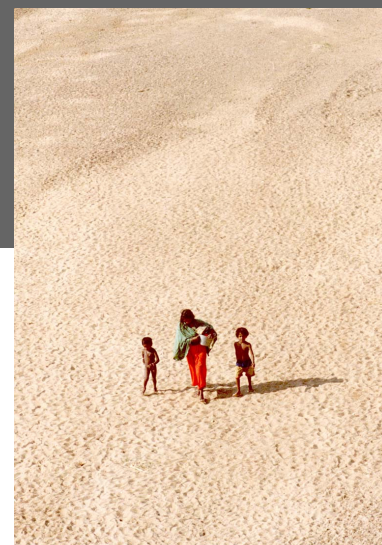


# Migration and desertification

No one can deny the terrible similarities between those running from the threat of guns and those fleeing creeping desertification, water shortages, floods and hurricanes.<sup>1</sup>



International policy and decision makers now recognize that the link between environmental change and migration has grave consequences for human security. The paradigm of security has shifted away from purely state-centered models to a model that encompasses the greater idea of human development as freedom. The new model implies greater international awareness of the importance of sustainable development for all people – including an intact environment and the ability of all people to enjoy good health and respectable work.

## Environmentally-induced migration

With the exception of an immediate and life-threatening situation, the decision to migrate is often made in the context of a variety of “push” and “pull” factors. Rarely is the decision to migrate made due to a single reason. Among the root causes of migration are: 1) Economic factors, 2) Social factors, 3) Degraded security conditions, and 4) Environmental factors

There is no consensus yet on defining the issue of environmentally induced migration. What is commonly agreed on is that ecosystem changes, be they physical, chemical and/or biological changes in nature, can impair or render the ecosystem unsuitable to support human life, forcing inhabitants to leave the land. To this date, however, no international agreement has been reached to provide a status for environmental migrants. What is certain is that millions are affected.

## Hundreds of millions face consequences of desertification

Various studies have been made that global environmental change could drive anywhere from 50 to almost 700 million people to migrate by 2050.

These studies underscore the complexity of the multi-causal relationship between coupled social-ecological systems and human mobility, yet they have fueled the debate about “environmentally induced migration”. The environmental signal in migration patterns may grow as the impacts of climatic and societal change become more apparent, and this is especially true for people living in drylands.

Desertification is land degradation in drylands, resulting from various factors including climatic variations and human activities. Some 41% of the Earth’s land surface is classified as drylands. They are home to an estimated two billion people who experience relatively low human well-being and development indicators, such as high infant mortality and low GNP per capita.

The cause-and-effect relationship between desertification and migration has only recently been recognized by different stakeholders, and empirical evidence is becoming available from UN, intergovernmental, research and policy institutes. For example, land degradation has been indicated as an important contributing factor to rural-urban migration in Mexico and to Mexico-U.S. migration streams where 700,000 to 900,000 migrate from Mexico’s drylands annually (Source: FAO). Studies from Africa, including Egypt, Morocco, Niger, Mali,

<sup>1</sup> Konrad Osterwalder, Rector, the United Nations University



and Burkina Faso indicate that land degradation and desertification contribute to human mobility, and worsening living conditions for both those who leave and those who remain behind (Source: UNU-EHS).



## The UNCCD and the 10-year Strategy

One pillar of the UNCCD's new 10-year Strategy directly addresses desertification and migration. New enabling environments to promote successful solutions to combat desertification are to be nurtured. In addition, the status of environmental or ecological migrants must be upgraded and they must be extended the same rights of protection as refugees who may have been forced to flee lands for reasons other than the environment.

The UNCCD is using its fields of competence to tackle DLDD and migration in a number of ways:

- **Knowledge of interaction between DLDD and migration.** The design and the promotion of a policy on migration also require social, environmental, political and cultural interactions of populations affected by land degradation - generally among the poorest in the developing world. The community and institutional development in these regions is a priority for adaptation to living conditions and to reduce the negative trends of migration of youth due to a lack of economic opportunities and environmental disadvantages.
- **Promotion of partnerships and investment from developed countries.** Developed countries that are generally recipients of environmentally-induced migration could increase efforts to implement policies and measures that promote partnerships and investments in drylands of affected countries as well as environmental

sustainability of vulnerable ecosystems. By doing so, the living conditions of affected populations would be improved.

- **Proper risk management.** The UNCCD is seeking to work with those UN agencies responsible for the issue of risk to place proper attention to the effects of drought at the regional and global levels. The current impacts of climate change, water and wind erosion, soil fertility loss and water scarcity affect all parts of the world. When it happens in degraded drylands of developing countries, the pressure for inhabitants to flee rises, with a high percentage migrating to cities, the agricultural frontier, or to other countries, primarily in the North.
- **Recognition and use of traditional sustainable technologies.** The implementation and use of sustainable traditional practices and technologies can be promoted locally through National Action Programs (NAPs) to combat desertification and drought.
- **Links between desertification and human rights.** A joint publication of the UNCCD and of the special UN Rapporteur for the Right to Food released in 2008, established how an entitlement-based approach to combating DLDD is an essential contribution to ensuring the human rights of lower income groups living in ecosystems threatened by the combined effect of overexploitation and climate change.

In line with the Millennium Development Goals and several other relevant international initiatives, the UNCCD aims at reducing poverty in drylands with concrete and feasible actions on DLDD. This shall be done not only by conducting further research but also by developing and replicating good practices. To further this work, UNCCD and the United Nations University Institute on Environment and Human Security have teamed up to further their joint research on the linkages between human mobility and desertification, both to solidify the empirical base and encourage greater policy dialogue.

With the combined, coordinated efforts of the UNCCD, other UN agencies and civil society organizations, the fight to stop desertification and land degradation can succeed so that the statement "The right of freedom of movement is the right to choose to stay" has true meaning.

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