Other Topics

Environmental Migration: A Challenge for Security Policy

Franziska Fabritius

It is generally well known that people may be forced to leave their homes due to violent conflict or a lack of economic prospects. But what about droughts, water shortages, and the impact of rising sea levels on islands and coastal areas? From a security policy perspective, it is advisable to take a closer look at migration movements that are directly or indirectly linked to climate change, the effects of which can be observed worldwide. After all, these effects have the potential to exacerbate current instabilities and to destabilise other countries and regions.

———

The oasis towns of southern Morocco are gradually disappearing.[1] Soil erosion, rising temperatures, and lack of rainfall are causing the surrounding desert to spread, and local people are already being deprived of their livelihoods. Meanwhile, hurricanes and cyclones are sinking entire regions beneath floodwaters, as occurred in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi in March 2019 in the wake of Cyclone Ida. Hundreds of thousands of people suddenly lost everything. These two examples highlight the impact of climate change on people in vulnerable regions, and the global threat to security and peace it poses, as well as its resultant migration flows.

Environmental migration can pose a security risk in the short or long term, in the countries of origin, transit, and destination. The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that climate change is closely interconnected with socio-economic factors. In the countries of origin of environmental migrants, it is mainly an issue of increasingly scarce resources. Gradual or sudden changes to the environment, such as a decline in sources of drinking water, soil degradation, increasing desertification, and habitat loss are intensifying competition between people. This makes it more likely that disputes will arise over resource distribution, or even violent clashes about existing resources. People decide to leave their home countries, or are forced to do so by circumstances. Others remain in their country but move elsewhere as internal migrants. However, environmental change is not the only reason why people decide to

migrate. It can be a combination of many factors, such as a lack of economic opportunities.

Internal Migration

Migration may occur within the country of origin (internal migration) or to neighbouring countries (cross-border or transnational migration). If long distances are covered, for example across continents, this is known as international migration. It is interesting to take a look at the figures for the last few years: in 2015, 8.6 million people fled violence and conflict. In the same period, the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) noted that there were more than twice as many displacements due to extreme weather events and environmental disasters (19.2 million people).[2] By 2016, the gap had grown still further, with 24.2 million people fleeing extreme weather events and environmental disasters and 6.9 million fleeing violence and conflict. These figures only refer to internal migrants as a subgroup of the 65 million refugees counted worldwide in 2015 and 2016.

Deep inequalities between regions are one reason why people decide to migrate and seek a new place to live. In North Africa, for example, nomadic tribes are abandoning the deserts and settling in inhabited areas or moving closer to the cities.[3] In Morocco, rural-urban migration is already occurring because of changes to the environment. This rural exodus occurring worldwide is likely to be exacerbated by climate change and its consequences, posing major challenges for

cities in the affected regions. Additional people results in additional pressure on urban infrastructure (housing, health care, jobs, schools, etc.) in these countries. These cities are often already being pushed to breaking point and unable to cope with these additional pressures.

Planned migrations are often determined by push and pull factors: those factors which attract migrants to a particular region, and those which deter them from staying in their home region. Unexpected environmental changes are not part of the equation, as hurricanes, heavy rain, and flooding leave no time for considered decisions about whether or not to migrate. People who leave their homes under such circumstances are simply seeking to survive and looking for shelter. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), today's environmental migration mainly constitutes of internal migration.[4] This trend is likely to intensify. For many people, cross-border migration is not an option due to their personal circumstances.[5]

Unlike war refugees, environmental migrants continue to have no legal recognition.

——

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is responsible for the worldwide census of refugees and migrants. However, this only counts people who have crossed a state border, because these are the only ones who can claim a degree of legal protection.[6] This practice has serious consequences for the care of the people affected. In the wake of a sudden natural disaster, they usually receive international emergency aid, but their long-term needs are not secured, particularly in light of ongoing climate change.

Moreover, environmental migrants have not yet been given legal recognition, and there is no compulsory recording. Migration or flight due to environmental or climate change is not covered by international or national legislation. Since 1951, the Geneva Convention on Refugees has regulated the legal status of refugees under international law, but this also offers no help, and in fact it completely excludes the protection of internal migrants. Today, environmental migrants are often lumped in with economic migrants, a practice that appears somewhat short-sighted. For the one part, it does not correspond to the facts, and for the other, it offers no prospect of the legal status of environmental migrants being clarified.[7]
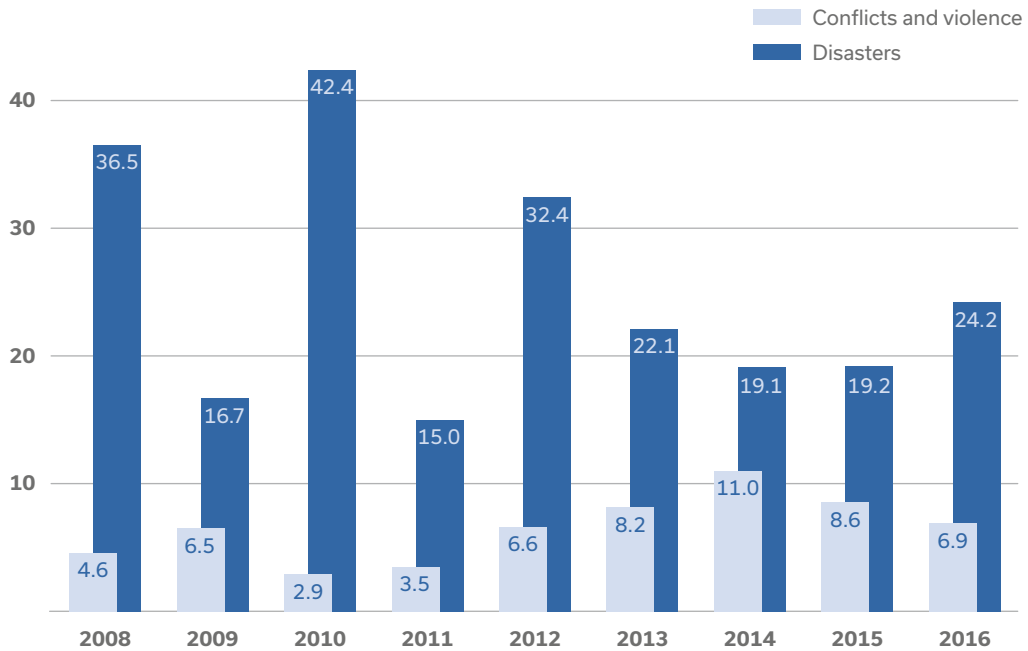
A solution is urgently needed in light of the fact that environmental migration is expected to increase in the coming decades. This means a binding approach under international law must be created for this new generation of refugees. They need to be provided with a legal status that is commensurate with their situation, otherwise there is potential for a significant risk to security in the broader sense of the word. The human dimension of security needs above all to be taken into account, that is ensuring the security of the individual, as well as ensuring public order and promoting a peaceful society.

Useful initial steps were taken in this direction when the Nansen Initiative was set up by Norway and Switzerland in 2012. It focusses on developing appropriate solutions to this issue, and is supported by funding from Germany and the EU, among others. Its agenda is currently being advanced by the Platform[8] on Disaster Displacement.[9] Another positive step is the inclusion of environmental factors and climate change as causes of migration in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, as agreed at the UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants on 19 September 2016.

One Cannot Know How Many There Will Be

Although we understand the challenge, we are not currently in a position to make an accurate assessment of the likely scale of environmental migration.[10] Most of the figures being bandied about are mere guesstimates, i.e. rough estimates or speculation.[11] This is mainly because

Fig. 1: Total Number of New Annual Displacements Since 2008 (in Millions)

Source: Own illustration based on IDMC / NRC 2017, n. 2.

there is no agreement on what constitutes a generally accepted definition of the phenomenon, nor upon the method for collecting figures and data. On top of this, the manifold causes of environmental migration make it difficult for experts to base their estimates on reliable research.[12] It seems likely that the figures suggested by Professor Norman Myers of Oxford University are the most accurate. In the early 2000s, he stated that if global warming continued, the world could expect to see around 200 million migrants by 2050 as a result of climate change.[13] In late 2017, the President of the Federal Intelligence Service, Bruno Kahl, said that the global scale of environmental migration would grow "dramatically" to reach the hundreds of millions.[14]

In light of the current political situation around the globe, it seems likely that migration is set to increase rather than decrease. The effects of climate change will only be clearly felt in the coming years and decades if decisive steps are not taken to tackle global warming.

Environmental Migration as a Security Risk

North Africa, the Sahel, the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, and South and East Asia are all particularly vulnerable to climate change and its impacts. Migration within and from these regions can also have a significant impact on neighbouring countries and continents.

The potential for conflict is exacerbated by internal migration or by unregulated movements of environmental migrants to transit and destination countries. The following are key questions in this respect:

1. Do countries have sufficient capacity to adequately meet the basic needs of migrants in terms of food, medical care, housing, jobs, etc. in their new place of residence?

2. Could the influx of migrants lead to ethnic or religious tensions in transit and destination countries?

3. How likely is it that parallel societies will develop in the transit or host country?

4. What is the host country willing and able to do with regard to granting migrants the right of residence and basic rights?

5. Can government bodies in the countries of origin, transit, and destination meet this new challenge within a reasonable timeframe and with adequate resources, if such resources are even available?

6. Is the political system in the transit or destination country sufficiently stable to deal with a large influx of migrants (possibly within a short period of time)?[15]

Whether migration ends up being a destabilising or stabilising factor largely depends on the political situation in the countries of origin and destination. If entire regions become uninhabitable and their inhabitants have to move elsewhere, this will be on a scale that we have never seen before. This is where environmental migration has to be considered from a security perspective. In particular, migratory flows involving "mass and sudden cross-border migration"[16] would trigger a reaction in the host countries concerned and place a severe burden on their local infrastructure and supply systems. In general, people in host countries are prepared to accept the short-term admission of migrants, viewing the provision of emergency aid as a humanitarian duty. However, the situation is different when it comes to accepting migrants on a long-term or permanent basis. This is where the focus is likely to shift towards a mindset of competition between migrants and the local population, particularly with regard to the availability of resources in the host country, such as water, food, energy, housing, and jobs. These cannot simply be expanded *ad infinitum*, so it would be necessary to share out the existing resources. It is hard to imagine that the local population will accept a drop in their own standard of living. As such, this could potentially lead to conflict between the different social groups, or indeed to demarcation from each other.

Uncontrolled mass migration can also pose a threat to external security for the respective countries of origin, transit, and destination. If a state is unable to control or regulate the influx of migrants and thus loses control over its external borders, it loses its territorial sovereignty. This has a considerable impact on its own stability and on the stability of the neighbouring region or federation of states to which it belongs.[17] Further tensions can also be exacerbated if divisions emerge in society. These might involve the following: migrants who increasingly align themselves with their network or religion; militant extremist groups that seek to mobilise migrants for their own ends; and refugees and asylum seekers who are specifically smuggled in to carry out violent actions in transit or destination states.[18] Furthermore, right-wing and xenophobic groups in the indigenous population may win increasing numbers of supporters. All these trends may lead to an erosion of the host state's democratic structures. If the political system is undermined to the point where a country is no longer able to act, this would pose a major security risk both for the host country and the international system.

Fragile states are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change.
—

Other country-specific factors that intensify conflict in both the countries of origin and destination also have to be considered. These include economic output, raw material resources, population size and expected population growth, and the natural environment. In addition, if there is already conflict in the immediate vicinity of states affected by environmental change, the risks of contagion and destabilisation are high. It has been shown that environmental migration can trigger a real chain reaction. It fits into the dense web of "undesirable socio-economic trends such as overpopulation, poverty, [...] famine, political instability and ethnopolitical tensions"[19], the negative impacts of which are often exacerbated by environmental change.

Uncertain future: Whether migration ends up being a destabilising or stabilising factor largely depends on the political situation in the countries of origin and destination. Source: © Guglielmo Mangiapane, Reuters.

As a result, efforts in the area of environmental and climate policy must also be understood and advanced in the sense of preventive security policy. A collapse of, or non-compliance with, climate change agreements would have a major impact on international security and stability.

Recommended Action and Future Prospects

One thing is certain – environmental migration is set to increase. It is similarly clear that environmental migration poses considerable security challenges, which can have global impacts,

be they direct or indirect. This kind of migration initially destabilises the countries of origin. In the case of cross-border migration, this instability can spread to neighbouring countries, or to entire regions. Fragile states are at particular risk of destabilisation when faced with the effects of climate change and the resulting environmental migration.

The events of 2015/2016, involving partly uncontrolled migration to Europe in general and Germany in particular, drew the attention of the public and of politicians to the consequences

Africa, and the Middle East, are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Germany and the EU could conceivably continue to pursue their current path of combatting the acute effects of displacement and migration and their causes, for example within the framework of the three special initiatives of the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The aim should be to create opportunities at the local level by focussing on the economy, trade, education, and employment. This includes encouraging private sector investment in their own countries and the creation of incentives for foreign investment in the region. At this stage, it would be short-sighted to concentrate solely on increasing incomes, as this would probably only fuel migration further. As things stand, cross-border migration is not an option for many people because they cannot afford it. Therefore, the focus must also be on improving people's lives in the affected regions as a whole (e. g. health care, schooling, housing) in order to prevent emigration. Training programmes are vital for harnessing the potential of the local workforce. There is also an urgent need for educational programmes for the entire population of the regions concerned, in order to raise awareness and increase their understanding of the situation. Many people in the region work in agriculture, and they need to be supported with adaptation measures to climate change, such as through introducing them to new methods of cultivation or by providing them with more resilient seeds. This would provide small-scale farmers with long-term income prospects.

of mass migration. In order to avoid a similar scenario in the future, the international community, and more specifically Germany and the EU, should intensify their support to the regions concerned. This could help to prevent the destabilisation of these regions and counter another massive flow of migrants to Europe. With regard to the climate change – migration – security nexus, this means there must be a much stronger focus on prevention.

Regions in the vicinity of Germany and the European Union, such as North Africa, sub-Saharan

However, steps to protect the environment and adapt to climate change have to go far beyond the agricultural sector. Funding, technology, and expertise in the field of renewable energies, water supply, coastal protection, etc. will be required to support the affected regions, as stated in the final reports of the UN climate conferences. Germany and the EU need to come up with realistic action plans and implement them promptly and comprehensively. This kind of preventative action will strengthen the resilience of affected populations, countries, and political institutions. In

host countries, it is vital to take targeted action that cuts across policy fields in order to counteract the destabilising effects of a mass influx of environmental migrants. To this end, the instruments of development cooperation and economic, climate, and security policy must be linked together.

In all such efforts to support the economy and protect the environment, it is important not to neglect the fact that countries in the region are required to comply with international law, such as human rights legislation. It is also important to support the opening up of political systems in the region, as this plays a key role in stabilising the region and, in turn, helps to curtail the potential for security problems. Some dictatorial regimes lack the will to restrict emigration from their countries and effectively counter security risks in this way. They often view emigration as a way of mitigating domestic problems, such as high youth unemployment, while reaping the benefits of remittances that migrants send back to their home countries. Worldwide private money transfers by migrants and refugees to their home countries now far exceed global state development aid.[20]

In addition to the approaches described above, it is also important to expand research into environmental migration. This is the only way to gain a better understanding of the impact of and challenges posed by environmental migration, along with more clarity about its scale. Only when we understand what we need to prepare for can we develop targeted strategies for the countries of origin, transit, and destination. Existing platforms and databases relating to climate events should be involved much more in prevention work. For example, the FEWS NET early warning system could be used to predict possible droughts, so that the impact of an incipient drought on the local population could be mitigated. This kind of action, along with prevention in general, would cost the international community much less than responding to natural catastrophes after the event. If climate change continues to advance as expected, the international community must recognise

environmental migration as an adaptation strategy. The people affected should be provided with an appropriate and orderly system to help them adapt to climate change. This should include setting up legal structures and providing opportunities for legal cross-border migration. If migration is to be an effective adaptation strategy to climate change and other environmental changes, the global migration process has to work in a structured manner.

In the short term, German and European leaders should focus on prevention and adopt a more networked approach in view of Africa's demographic development, the consequences of climate change, and growing migratory pressures. This approach should combine development policy, and humanitarian, economic, diplomatic, and security aspects in order to deal with security risks at source. Quite apart from environmental migration, the advance of globalisation, and the growing inter-connectedness of so much of the world, along with the ever-growing flood of available information all provide for an increased mobility of people. Governments need to pay heed to these changes and take them into account when drawing up specific legislation. For example – particularly for Germany –, this might include a modern situation-oriented immigration law with a range of transfer options enabling the profitable usage of the potential created by migration in order to benefit the migrant's host country. In times of globalisation, we are all aware of the devastating effects – particularly for the economy – of adopting an anti-immigration policy.[21] However, every action is not only determined by the way in which it is carried out, but also by the question of legitimacy. We cannot ignore that fact that society's values and interests are often diametrically opposed on issues such as climate, migration, and security. Faced with these differing opinions, it is vital to involve the public in the decision-making process if potential actions are to succeed. Involving the public in the processes of political decision-making processes, whether in Germany or in another country, strengthens the legitimacy of these decisions and leads to

greater social acceptance. This involvement is essential in light of the challenges we face in the 21st century.

This article is based on the author's dissertation "Umweltmigration als sicherheitspolitische Herausforderung: Szenarioanalyse am Beispiel einer möglichen Klimaflucht aus Nordafrika" [Environmental migration as a challenge for security policy: a study of scenarios using the example of potential climate-related migration from North Africa], published by Springer VS in February 2019.

– translated from German –

Dr. Franziska Fabritius is Research Assistant at the Regional Programme Energy Security and Climate Change Middle East and North Africa (KAS – REMENA) of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Rabat, Morocco.

1   Thelen, Raphael 2019: Folgen des Klimawandels: Gestern ein Paradies, heute verdorrt, morgen unbewohnbar, Spiegel Online, 7 Jun 2019, in: https://bit.ly/2XF282P [19 Jun 2019].

2   IDMC / Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) 2017: GRID 2017: Global Report on Internal Displacement, May 2017, p. 9, in: https://bit.ly/2rOSQRI [19 Jun 2019].

3   Ionesco, Dina / Mokhnacheva, Daria / Gemenne, François 2017: Atlas der Umweltmigration, München, p. 88.

4   Schraven, Benjamin / Bauer, Steffen 2013: Die neuen Flüchtlinge, Zeit Online, 10 Mar 2013, in: https://bit.ly/2Roxzw2 [19 Jun 2019].

5   Bailey, Rob / Green, Gemma 2016: Should Europe Be Concerned About Climate Refugees?, Chatham House, 23 May 2016, in: https://bit.ly/1TRjcJ3 [19 Jun 2019].

6   Nuscheler, Franz 2004: Internationale Migration: Flucht und Asyl, Wiesbaden, p. 51.

7   Ibid., p. 112.

8   The Platform on Disaster Displacement, the successor mechanism to the Nansen Initiative, has been set up to implement the protection agenda that was drawn up. Cf. Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs 2017: Platform on Disaster Displacement, in: https://bit.ly/2ZyVxaC [19 Jun 2019].

9   Cf. Schraven, Benjamin / Bauer, Steffen 2013: Neue Schutzinitiative für "Umweltflüchtlinge": Gut, aber noch nicht ausreichend, Die aktuelle Kolumne, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2 Mar 2013, p. 2, in: https://bit.ly/2IsnFXw [19 Jun 2019].

10   According to NRC and IDMC, between 2008 and 2016 an average of 25.3 million people were forced to flee their homes each year as a result of environmental and climate change. Cf. IDMC / NRC 2017, n. 2, p. 31. In other words: "Between 2008 and 2012, four of the five main disasters that led to mass displacement were hydrological events." Cf. Ionesco / Mokhnacheva / Gemenne 2017, n. 3, p. 58.

11   Cf. Müller, Bettina / Haase, Marianne / Kreienbrink, Axel et al. 2012: Klimamigration: Definitionen, Ausmaß und politische Instrumente in der Diskussion, BAMF Working Paper, No. 45, p. 5, in: https://bit.ly/2Ztm6hs [19 Jun 2019].

12   German Bundestag, 18th legislative period 2014: printed paper 18/1509, Response of the Federal Government to the minor interpellation of representatives Eva Bulling-Schröter, Karin Binder, Annette Groth, other representatives and the parliamentary group DIE LINKE, printed paper 18/1301, Commitment of the Federal Government to more rights for climate refugees, 20 May 2014, p. 7 f., in: https://bit.ly/2XWYhOI [19 Jun 2019].

13   Myers, Norman 2001: Environmental refugees: a growing phenomenon of the 21st century, The Royal Society (ed.), Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, No. 1420, 19 Oct 2001, p. 609, in: https://bit.ly/2H1FVnk [19 Jun 2019].

14   Cf. Kornelius, Stefan 2017: BND: Russland ist potenzielle Gefahr", Süddeutsche Zeitung, 14 Nov 2017, in: https://sz.de/1.3750080 [19 Jun 2019].

15   German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) 2008: Welt im Wandel: Sicherheitsrisiko Klimawandel, p. 129 f.

16   Cf. Angenendt, Steffen 2010: Instabilität durch krisenbedingte Wanderungsbewegungen, in: Braml, Josef / Risse, Thomas / Sandschneider, Eberhard (eds.): Einsatz für den Frieden: Sicherheit und Entwicklung in Räumen begrenzter Staatlichkeit, DGAP-Jahrbuch Internationale Politik, Vol. 28, German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), Munich, p. 56.

17   Ibid., p. 60.

18   Ibid.

19   Cf. Carius, Alexander / Imbusch, Kerstin 1998: Umwelt und Sicherheit in der internationalen Politik – eine Einführung, in: Carius, Alexander / Lietzmann, Kurt M. (eds.): Umwelt und Sicherheit: Herausforderungen für die internationale Politik, Heidelberg / Berlin, p. 14.

20   Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2018: Höher als Entwicklungshilfe: Migranten überweisen 17,7 Milliarden aus Deutschland, 1 Jul 2018, in: https://faz.net/-gpg-9bu1o [19 Jun 2019].

21   Goldin, Ian / Kutarna, Chris 2016: Die zweite Renaissance: Warum die Menschheit vor dem Wendepunkt steht, Munich, p. 349 f.