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Environmentally induced migration and displacement: a 21st-century challenge

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs

Rapporteur: Mr Ivan Nikolaev IVANOV, Bulgaria

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. Mrs Acketoft's report on the need for international recognition and protection of "environmentally induced migrants" deals with a subject of great importance, which is currently the subject of very lively discussion in several Council of Europe member states. The Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs therefore congratulates the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population on bringing this subject before the Assembly, following thorough scrutiny and intense discussion.

2. The Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs draws attention to its own recent activity relating to the causes and effects of climate change, especially its report on global warming and ecological disasters. In [Resolution 1823 \(2008\)](#), the Assembly emphasised that climate change led to migratory movements by populations at risk of ecological disasters, such as storms, droughts, floods and other situations with catastrophic consequences for the environment and the population. The Assembly recommended that the Committee of Ministers invite Council of Europe member states to take account of climate change in their spatial planning, water management, land use and agricultural policies, in order to counter flood and drought risks. The Assembly also recommended that the Committee of Ministers invite member states to involve all political, economic and social players and develop local, regional and national capability with regard to dealing with emergencies and natural disasters, which are a major cause of ecologically induced migration.

3. The rapid rise in the number of ecological refugees over the past twenty years makes an urgent public debate necessary, followed by recognition of a legal definition of environmental migrants, which would make it possible to recognise their status and their rights.

4. The fact that climate change brings a major risk of a rise in environmentally induced migration makes it more necessary for developed countries to honour their commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions. This is a vital, albeit insufficient, commitment. There is a need to combine emission reductions with adaptation to climate change, so that environmentally induced migration may be reduced and international security increased.

5. The Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs nevertheless notes that the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population, in its report, emphasises the need to recognise the status of environmental migrants and to ensure their international protection. The Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs considers that the importance of the causes of environmentally induced migration justifies its intention of dealing, in the context of its own activities, with the issue of protection of the environment and measures against climate change.

1. See [Doc. 11785](#), tabled by the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population.



B. Committee's proposed amendments

Amendments to the draft resolution

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 3, after the words "sea-level rise" in the second sentence, add the following: "industrial accidents, major infrastructure projects".

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 4, replace the words "adapt to" with "prevent, adapt to and reduce".

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 10, after the first sentence, add the following:

"The elderly leave their home areas and have few possibilities of adapting. Children are cut off from their ethnic and cultural environments and, in many cases, from everyday communication in their mother tongues, which is an important factor in their upbringing and their understanding of the world."

Amendment D (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 24.6, after the word "development", add the following: "and energy".

Amendment E (to the draft resolution)

In paragraph 26, before "adaptation", add the following: "prevention and".

Amendments to the draft recommendation

Amendment F (to the draft recommendation)

In paragraph 6.3, add the following:

"Such a protocol would introduce the precautionary principle in the convention and would reflect the way the concept of "human rights" has evolved since the convention was drafted".

Amendment G (to the draft recommendation)

After paragraph 6.6, add the following sub-paragraph:

"adopt a recommendation calling on member states to develop in their spatial planning policies a common European approach to preventing and managing extreme climate events as the main cause of environmental migration".

Amendment H (to the draft recommendation)

After paragraph 6.8, add the following sub-paragraph:

"support, in co-operation with international and financial institutions, the development of programmes for helping the public to adapt to the inevitable effects of climate change so as to reduce migration flows resulting from environmental factors".

C. Explanatory memorandum, by Mr Ivan Ivanov

1. In the course of human history, there have been frequent migratory movements induced by recurrent causes, such as long-term changes in climate, natural disasters, demographic or economic crises, or even wars. Not only natural causes, but also politics and economics are responsible for population movements. Human beings move to places where conditions are kinder in order to survive when nature becomes too

restrictive. In such cases, migration is initiated and managed by a group, in order to preserve a balance between population size and natural resources. It is used as a way of regulating population surpluses, or as a “safety valve” when various kinds of tensions, including ecological tensions, arise.²

2. However, when the biophysical environment is destroyed or suffers lasting deterioration, migration may be transformed into enforced mobility, leading to a break, an interruption in the functioning of the group, rather than ensuring its continuity and reproduction. In the context of growing international awareness that the environment is at ever greater risk, a new category of forced migrants has recently appeared, known as “environmental refugees” or “environmental migrants”. Who are these new refugees?

3. The rapporteur adopted a working definition, one supplied in 2007 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM): “persons or groups of persons who, for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions are obliged to leave their homes or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad”.

4. Hitherto, climate change and environmental deterioration have not been politically or economically linked to migration. We are now finding that decisions to migrate do have an impact, although we cannot gauge the extent of the migration phenomenon.

5. The number of ecological refugees in the world is differently assessed by different sources, but cautious estimates are that there almost 10 million. In 1999, the International Red Cross put forward a figure of 25 million. Even more worryingly, projections based on the low estimates show that this number might rise to 25 million by 2010, then soar to 150 million by 2050 (figures estimated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC). In this context, migratory movements of ecological refugees could become one of the greatest demographic challenges of the 21st century.

6. The figures put forward for the number of environmental refugees are so worrying that Professor Norman Myers, of Oxford University, says that ecological migration is becoming a major geopolitical factor internationally. In his view, there could be 200 million environmental migrants in 2050. This forecast was corroborated last October by the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change. Deterioration of the environment would then become the main cause of forced displacement, overtaking the traditional religious, political or ethnic grounds.

7. According to Janos Bogardi, Director of the UN University Institute for the Environment and Human Security, “there are well-founded fears that the number of people fleeing untenable environmental conditions may grow exponentially as the world experiences the effects of climate change and other phenomena”.

8. One of the main problems posed by this category of persons is that most of them come from poor countries which are still developing and very much depend on agriculture. In practice, over 90% of all the deaths ascribable to natural disasters occur in developing countries. In the absence of any legal mechanism to protect them, ecological refugees are very likely to be regarded as economic migrants in future.

9. The Chairman of the IPCC, Rajendra Pachauri, cites as evidence of this the numerous disturbances affecting the planet as a result of global warming, driving whole peoples to leave their own countries. In the wake of political, economic and ecological refugees come the climate change refugees. It is they who, tomorrow, will be at the heart of the issues raised by global warming. The corollary of this will be the very sensitive question of their status.

10. Environmental migrants may be divided into four categories, often partly determined by climate change. They migrate because of:

- soil degradation, rising water levels and desertification, brought about by increasing emissions of greenhouse gases;
- one-off natural disasters;
- industrial disasters;
- major infrastructure and industrial development projects.

11. Greenhouse gases have a particularly harmful influence on the climate in several respects. The rise in temperature is the initial effect, which is central to the problems created by climate change on earth. Alaska faces the problem of the melting of its Arctic permafrost, while the very existence of the Oceanian islands is

2. Michel Picouet and Hervé Domenach, *Les migrations*, PUF, Paris, 1995.

threatened by rising sea levels. The increase in temperature, which is estimated to average between 1.4°C and 5.8°C by the end of the 21st century, is also expected to bring about a rise in sea levels of the order of 88 centimetres. By 2080, up to 20% of the world's coastal wetlands may therefore have been submerged.

12. As the seawater rises, we need to remember that almost 500 million people live within five kilometres of the coast, and nearly 350 million live less than five metres above sea level, or even below sea level. A first, and tragic, example of a resultant enforced migratory movement is occurring at the very heart of Polynesia. Surrounded by turquoise seas a few kilometres away from the equator, the Tuvalu archipelago, comprising a small number of islets with a total area of 26 square metres, and with a population of 11 000, will have completely disappeared under the water by 2050. At the very least, the islets and atolls may become completely uninhabitable as the arable lands become chronically flooded and the ground water becomes saline. Residents are therefore being obliged to find somewhere else to live. But that somewhere else does not yet exist: the neighbouring countries (Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, etc.) are accepting only a very few refugees, imposing extremely severe conditions for admission.

13. The inhabitants of Carteret atoll, regarded as the world's first official eco-refugees, were forced to migrate as the sea level rose, the rise being thought to be a consequence of global warming. Ten families were evacuated by the government of Papua New Guinea in 2005.

14. In Asia, in 2005, half of the island of Bhola, in Bangladesh, disappeared under floodwater, leaving around half a million people homeless. Large numbers of villagers are leaving their homes to join the poverty-stricken hordes living around the edges of cities. Soil salination and pressure on the Sundarbans mangrove forest in the south-west of Bangladesh are leading thousands of families to move to the shanty towns of Dacca, where they scrape a living doing jobs such as driving rickshaws. By 2050, 15 million Bangladeshis will be seeking shelter outside their country's borders, but where will they go? The country's neighbours, India and Burma, are unwilling to take them in. Serious geopolitical tensions are already to be feared in the region in the decades ahead. If the 88 centimetre rise in sea levels predicted by various models actually occurs, 20% of the territory of Bangladesh will be under water, and over 20 million residents will be displaced.

15. In Europe, the Netherlands has been very much concerned by the rise in temperatures since the days when dykes and polders were created, and has recently invested in technologies to provide some homes with floatability, so that residents do not have to join the ranks of climate change refugees. The French coastal town of Rivesaltes has built special dykes to prevent sharks from becoming a danger to the population when water levels rise.

16. In other countries, the threat comes, not from the water, but more from a lack of water. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, a combination of deforestation and rising temperatures is speeding up desertification, threatening several million more people. Some Fulah herders from Mali and Burkina Faso took refuge in Ghana as early as 1983 and 1984, when drought struck their country and the desert expanded. The process was repeated in the years that followed. In 1992-93, some Mozambican farmers fled to Zambia, and some Soninke had to leave the Kayes region of Mali.

17. In the Sahel, disturbed weather patterns are causing serious food crises. Floods alternate with drought, disrupting the crop sowing and harvest cycle. In 2005 and 2007, poor rainy seasons worsened the cereal shortfall in Burkina Faso and Niger, driving young people to leave their villages in order to reduce the numbers of mouths to be fed and to earn a little money in the towns. A charity called *Secours populaire* carried out several emergency projects in the Sahel region. In Niger, for instance, it provided assistance with the digging of semi-circular wells, which enable water loss to be prevented. When heavy rain falls, the rainwater irrigates the earth deep down, instead of lying on the surface. In Burkina Faso, reforestation and irrigation projects are under way.

18. Recent events in Burma and China have resulted in thousands of deaths and made hundreds of thousands of people homeless. We are all aware of the seriousness of the situation. The 2004 tsunami displaced over 2 million people, while Hurricane Katrina forced 1.5 million people to leave their homes, 500 000 of whom have not gone back.

19. In January and February 2001, thousands of people were driven out of their homes by powerful earthquakes in El Salvador, which caused lethal landslides on mountain slopes that had been cleared so as to be used for subsistence agriculture.

20. The tsunami which hit the coast of Papua New Guinea in 1998 caused thousands of deaths because homes had been built along the coast and around the lagoons. When the Yangtze River caused widespread flooding in China, the disaster was all the greater for the deforestation and erosion that were the consequences of overdevelopment for housing along the river banks.

21. On 26 April 1986, reactor No. 4 at Chernobyl nuclear power station in Ukraine exploded, releasing huge quantities of radioactive particles into the air. In just a few days, the wind had carried the radioactive cloud across 40% of Europe, and fallout had contaminated extensive areas of Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation. More than twenty years after the greatest civil nuclear disaster in history, 5 million people are still exposed to higher than normal radiation in the former Soviet republics. According to the World Health Organization, almost 270 000 of them are still living in regions which the authorities, at the time of the accident, classified as “strictly controlled zones”.
22. Another example from China is the giant Three Gorges dam, which came into service in June 2006 at the end of an epic building project which had lasted thirteen years. Two kilometres long and 185 metres high, it regulates the flow of the world’s third-longest river, the Yangtze, in a central area of the country. A great technical feat with appalling human and ecological consequences, the Three Gorges dam has flooded 13 towns and 4 500 villages, swallowed up 162 archaeological sites, including some of the most important ones in China, and seen almost 2 million people, who had been living in areas which were to be flooded, displaced by force and rehoused in newly built towns. They received no compensation, some NGOs claiming that the funds earmarked to compensate villagers had been misappropriated. Lastly, biologists say that over 10 000 plant and animal species, some of them endemic – as in the case of the Chinese sturgeon – are under threat now that the dam is in service.
23. Following natural disasters, rebuilding operations almost always disadvantage the poorest people and benefit the major multinationals, rather than local industry. In Sri Lanka, property developers have, for example, built tourist complexes in locations previously used by local fishermen. And such disasters, for those who stay put, give rise to tensions between populations competing for natural resources. As Christian Aid says, “a world of many more Darfurs is the increasingly likely nightmare scenario”.
24. Refugees often pose a threat to the areas where they are staying. The 1994 Rwanda crisis brought over 600 000 people into the north-western part of the United Republic of Tanzania, where they caused considerable environmental damage by cutting wood to burn and to make posts with, poaching game and planting crops.
25. In Vietnam, moving people two kilometres from their place of residence causes highly complex social problems relating to employment, family culture and local culture. We should not think in terms of individuals, but of population groups.
26. Anyone who faces possible death is granted political asylum. Some countries are more capable than others of coping with ecological disasters. And there are countries with which it is difficult to reach agreement. One example is Burma, which, it has to be said, would rather let its people die than let them leave.
27. These population movements are only just beginning. Everything points to continuing deterioration of the global climate. The greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets set in Kyoto, which are extremely low as it is, seem very unlikely to be achieved. Consequently, more disaster situations are to be expected. The experts are predicting population movements mainly within the South, as well as tensions affecting Pacific and Indian Ocean islands, such as the Maldives. But the problems that these population movements cause require international regulation and responsibility.
28. No regions are safe from change, although Europe will surely remain an inhabitable region. Are we aware of the extent of the problem? And do we realise what responsibility we bear, we whose lives are relatively safe? We must limit the extent of the climate changes that are under way. But the question of our overall responsibility is far wider: since we are primarily responsible for climate change (for it is we who produce the most greenhouse gases), is it not our responsibility to deal with the damage ultimately suffered by the poorest populations? Clearly, there is also a political question here: what assistance should we offer, what reception should we give to “ecological refugees”?
29. As stated in the Limoges Declaration, nothing could be more dangerous than to give the impression that there is nothing we can do. The very least that we can do to demonstrate our solidarity with these peoples who are in danger is to inform people about this urgent situation and about human responsibility for global warming.
30. In some western countries, the debate about climate change refugees is vitiated by current tensions about immigration policies. These are countries where the distribution of this new immigration burden, as well as recognition of their responsibility for global warming, has enormous implications.

31. Since 1992, a definition of the duties of developed countries has existed in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, adopted in Rio. Article 4.4, for instance, states that “The developed country Parties [...] shall also assist the developing country parties that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change in meeting costs of adaptation to those adverse effects”.

32. The first of the measures to take will be definition of a status for these displaced persons. There is to date no legally defined status for ecological refugees in international law, for which this new refugee category throws up new challenges. The UN is nevertheless calling for recognition of a legal status for environmental refugees, in a form similar to that of political refugees. Such recognition also implies the setting up of funds specifically dedicated to this category of persons. Experts are calling for an international fund to be set up on the same principle as the IOPC (International Oil Pollution Compensation) Funds, with sufficient resources to deal with large-scale ecological disasters.

33. The existence of ecological refugees has significant economic, sociocultural and political consequences. Developed countries currently spend US\$8 billion a year assisting refugees, which is one seventh of the foreign aid given to developing countries.

34. In Mozambique, the government is moving populations whose homes have been repeatedly flooded into camps financed by the authorities and, even more so, by international aid. Outside assistance raises a question. If it is necessary, is it a lasting solution for persons displaced following natural disasters?

35. The economic and ecological repercussions of climate change are taking on worrying proportions, and the European Union, which has already played a leading political role in this field, needs to step up its efforts to combat climate change.

36. In February 2008, the UN General Assembly expressed the view that climate change influenced peace and security, including international migration, thus interlinking security and the environment, climate change and population movements.

37. The effects of climate change will lead us to give states more assistance to reduce the risks of, and prepare for, disasters. Measures to limit the risks of disasters relate to spatial planning, the management of national resources, factory locations and development. Many factors are involved, and we need to find solutions.

38. The greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets set in the Kyoto Protocol, which are extremely low as it is, are unlikely to be enough to keep climate change in check, and in any case seem highly unlikely to be met. Equatorial deforestation, particularly in Borneo and Amazonia, further increases the harmful effects on the climate of the causes already mentioned. Reforestation of the abandoned regions that have become deserts will be necessary in order to achieve the objective set at the Bali Conference, namely to restore the areas occupied by forests to their 1990 levels, and the decision taken in Bali to bring tropical forest destruction to an end, especially in Brazil and Indonesia, will also have to be implemented.

39. We welcome certain countries' efforts to reverse the deforestation trend and to carry out various reforestation projects. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), more than a billion trees were planted in 2007, especially in Ethiopia (700 million), Mexico (217 million), etc. Thailand also successfully increased its forest areas by 10%, achieving its current total of 26% of its territory.

40. Although global warming seems inevitable, human energies need to be harnessed to reduce the speed of the warming process and, as far as possible, to minimise the effects of these changes, with reductions in greenhouse gas emissions to the fore. In order to achieve this major objective, a reduction is necessary in the amounts of electricity and heat generated from polluting fossil fuels (coal, oil and gas). The polluting countries are reluctant to pay, despite the industrialised countries' responsibility for global warming having been officially recorded in the treaties on the basis of the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”.

41. Encouragement must be given to the production of energy from renewable sources, mainly hydroelectric, wind, geothermal and tidal energy, as well as the use of biomass. Another stage in this policy is an increase in energy efficiency through a reduction in the amount of energy wasted, and through optimisation of the energy consumption of industrial plants, the construction industry and urban transport.

42. Finally, we welcome the decision taken by the European Union, the United States and Japan to set up a centre to manage and co-ordinate the fight against climate change. Only the combined efforts of every country in the world will make success possible and ensure sustainable development for humankind both now and in the future.

Reporting committee: Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population.

Committee for opinion: Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs.

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Secretariat of the committee: Mrs Nollinger, Mr Torcătoriu, Mrs Karanjac.