



Resolution 1655 (2009)¹

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

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Migration – both internal and cross-border – is one of the oldest strategies for dealing with a degradation of environmental conditions. However, the increase in the magnitude and geographical scale of environmental transformation caused or exacerbated by both climate change and human activity have led many experts in academic circles and in the international community to refer to environmentally induced migration as a new type of phenomenon and a new challenge for the 21st century.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly recognises that natural disasters and environmental degradation will increasingly determine the nature of human mobility as well as its humanitarian and security dimensions, which will need to be urgently assessed.
3. It notes with concern the drastic estimates predicting unmanageable migration flows due to environmental problems. Already today, over 30 million people worldwide are displaced because of the increase in desertification, droughts, rising sea levels, industrial accidents, major infrastructure projects and extreme weather events, and this number is rising sharply. Alarming, this figure already exceeds the number of those forced to flee because of armed conflicts and persecution.
4. The people who are the most in danger belong to vulnerable groups in the least developed countries whose capacity to prevent, adapt to and reduce the effects of climate change is extremely poor. This includes those residing in low-lying coastal areas and areas of considerable overpopulation. Europe is not immune to the consequences of climate change and environmentally induced migration.
5. Environmentally induced migration can rarely be attributed to one cause. The cause-consequence relationships are increasingly complex and multifactorial. A growing number of people flee for multiple reasons including discrimination and human rights abuses, environmental degradation, competition for scarce resources and economic hardship caused by dysfunctional states. Some leave voluntarily and some flee because there is no other choice. Others may make the decision to move before they have no other choice but to flee. The different degrees of force and the complex set of influencing factors blur the traditional concepts of migration and displacement, creating confusion among the academic and international communities about whether to talk about “migration” or “displacement” in the case of people fleeing disasters and environmental degradation.
6. The interaction between the environment and migration is a two-way process: after sudden- or slow-onset environmental disasters that lead to both internal and cross-border movements of people, massive migration for environmental reasons may in turn affect environmental conditions both in areas of origin and destination and the transit routes in between, notably when large concentrations of people are forced to seek refuge in other ecologically fragile areas. The Assembly deems it urgent to develop a better understanding of the net impact of migration on the environment in areas of concern.

1. *Assembly debate* on 30 January 2009 (9th Sitting) (see [Doc. 11785](#), report of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population, rapporteur: Mrs Ackeoft; and [Doc. 11814](#), opinion of the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs, rapporteur: Mr Ivanov). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 30 January 2009 (9th Sitting). See also [Recommendation 1862 \(2009\)](#).



7. Migration can also lead to positive and proactive diversification and can be a development strategy that households, individuals and sometimes whole communities adopt to improve their lives and reduce risk and vulnerability. Mass migration can however have negative impacts, including escalating humanitarian crises, rapid urbanisation, associated slum growth and stagnant development.

8. One of the most fundamental issues in climate change and environmentally induced migration is that it is a global process, not a local crisis. Hence, it is the responsibility of the global community and not only that of local and national authorities to engage in proactive intervention. Adequate measures for prevention, adaptation and risk reduction need to be taken by the international community in order for “hotspot” countries to reduce their vulnerability to the impact of environmental disasters and manage the evolution of environmental processes.

9. Mass population flows, caused by scarcity of resources coupled with state mismanagement and poor governance, can lead to instability and provoke conflict situations. Such conflicts could result in increased refugee flows and internal population displacement and, more generally, could reduce global political stability and human security. The Assembly believes that, in order to avoid such negative scenarios, Europe should be at the forefront in addressing the growing and shared challenge of environmentally induced migration and displacement.

10. Vulnerable groups such as women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples in the poorest countries are exposed to cumulative challenges and require special consideration. The elderly leave their home areas and have few possibilities of adaptation. 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. The Assembly particularly observes that, due to traditional female roles and activities in many societies, women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men. It underlines the importance of recognising the gender-specific impact of climate change from the outset of policy setting.

11. The majority of migratory movements prompted by climate change and environmental degradation are expected to occur within countries, although increased cross-border movement of people will also occur. The Assembly maintains that all the affected persons, whether or not they leave their country, need to be properly protected as regards their human, social and economic rights. Furthermore, this protection should include reliance on effective support from the international community if national support is lacking or insufficient.

12. The Assembly is concerned about the lack of consensus within the international community as regards the applicable international legal terminology concerning human mobility associated with environmental disasters and degradation. The variety of terms used interchangeably today hinders much-needed progress on the recognition and legal protection of environmental migrants and displaced persons.

13. The difficulty arises from different approaches to the concept of “migration”, which itself lacks a universal definition. Humanitarian organisations advocate the need to maintain a distinction between cross-border migration and internal displacement, as well as voluntary and forced movements, in fear of undermining the existing categories they are mandated to protect. They argue that the definition of internally displaced persons as stipulated in the 1998 United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement already includes persons or groups who have been forced or compelled to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of, or in order to avoid, natural or man-made disasters.

14. Various agencies focusing on broader population and development issues, on the other hand, prefer to talk about “environmental migration” as an overarching concept which includes all persons who have an environmental factor as the major motivation for movement. They maintain that migration includes both international and internal, voluntary and forced categories of movement, and everything in between.

15. The Assembly welcomes the recent efforts undertaken by the informal United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee to establish commonly accepted terminology and concepts. From its own perspective, it sees the need to cover the full range of human mobility caused by environmental factors implying any length of time and degree of possibility of return, while upholding the universally adopted protection standards prescribed in international law and normative frameworks.

16. The Assembly observes that whereas there exists a large body of well-established international, regional and national legal instruments, conventions and norms to protect the rights of people forcibly displaced by conflict and persecution, and to some extent by natural disasters or conflicts over resources, many gaps remain in the existing protection framework. Particularly for those considered to have moved due

to gradual environmental degradation, there may be normative and operational protection gaps, nationally and internationally. In addition, when it comes to the small island states that risk becoming submerged, there may be a serious gap in the existing international treaties on statelessness.

17. Whereas these gaps need to be more thoroughly researched, and while emphasising the need to recognise existing protection instruments (for example, for environmentally displaced persons under the Guiding Principles), the Assembly observes that there is no legal framework or defined policy that would cover the full scope of environmentally induced migration in the widest sense of the term. It therefore calls upon international organisations active in this field to consider the elaboration of a specific framework for the recognition and protection of environmental migrants, either in a separate convention or as part of multilateral environmental treaties, or both.

18. Alternatively, the Assembly encourages the respective United Nations agencies to consider extending the Guiding Principles to include persons displaced by gradual environmental degradation, while in parallel creating a similar synthesis, in the form of principles, of existing international law on external displacement.

19. In this context, and in particular with reference to its [Recommendation 1631 \(2003\)](#) on internal displacement in Europe, the Assembly expresses its continued support of the humanitarian action and normative frameworks developed over the last decade to protect internally displaced persons through the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Ten years after the adoption of this unique source of guidance for providing assistance and protection to these people, it is time to question whether the moment has come to enhance its impact not only by ensuring that its principles are enshrined in national legislation but also by creating a binding instrument, as is presently being done by the African Union.

20. The Assembly remains concerned by the fact that there is not a single international organisation today that explicitly focuses on the problems and protection of people moving or having to move their places of habitual residence mainly or exclusively for environmental reasons. It recognises the leading role that the United Nations agencies, particularly the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (for example in the humanitarian protection cluster), have to play in providing protection and humanitarian assistance to those fleeing environmental disasters.

21. In addition to humanitarian action, the Assembly encourages the establishment of an effective co-ordination structure that would pull the various international agencies and stakeholders together. To this end, it suggests that a co-ordinating commission for environmental migration be created with a mission to co-ordinate the work of international organisations that focus on different aspects of the problem of environmentally induced migration, including through risk reduction, humanitarian response, adaptation and development.

22. The Assembly regrets that, when natural disasters occur, consequent environmental displacement and migration do not figure in disaster statistics. In the absence of an overarching organisation to collect and assemble statistics on non-conflict displacement, it urges the international humanitarian community and all countries that fall victim to natural disasters to include – to the extent possible – the internally displaced and cross-border migrants in disaster statistics.

23. The adaptation policies aimed at the protection of health and livelihoods of developing countries' populations are essential in dealing with the consequences of climate change that have become unavoidable. Such policies must be strengthened and supported through international development assistance.

24. In the light of the above, the Assembly calls upon its member states to:

24.1. support the adoption of a clearly defined and inclusive working definition that covers all forms of movement, from voluntary to forced, and includes the full range of human mobility caused by environmental factors to be applied by state institutions and humanitarian organisations involved in the assistance to and effective protection of those concerned; this definition should be consistent with international and regional standards and recognise the different protection needs and rights of those affected;

24.2. take adequate measures to reduce the vulnerability of developing countries to the impacts of environmental disasters and manage the evolution of environmental processes;

24.3. undertake a comprehensive study, including primary data collection, and develop policies assessing the complex interaction of environmental change, migration, displacement and conflict;

24.4. contribute, through active participation in the work of the international organisations dealing with this issue, to the investigation of existing gaps in law and protection mechanisms with a view to the eventual elaboration of a new international convention providing internationally assured protection to people displaced because of environmental degradation and natural and man-made disasters when return is impossible;

24.5. pre-empt the work at international level by elaborating national legislation that would recognise environmental migrants and their protection needs not only through the principle of *non-refoulement* under Articles 2 and 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), but also through subsidiary protection, for example granting them a status of temporary humanitarian resident or a permanent status in case of impossibility of return;

24.6. promote multidisciplinary research involving climate science, geography, migration, development and energy studies, disaster studies, environmental studies, social cohesion and health with a view to improved understanding and recognition of the links between the movement of people and environmental factors;

24.7. promote policy coherence at national and international levels among migration, development and humanitarian policies and adaptation policies to climate change, including by supporting the inclusion of migration and displacement consequences of climate change in the successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC);

24.8. take into account a gender perspective when elaborating national and international policies and protection frameworks on environmentally induced migration.

25. The Assembly further calls upon the European Union to take the above into consideration when elaborating its comprehensive immigration policy strategy. This strategy is needed at European, regional, national and local levels. It should improve risk anticipation and management and disaster response, offer adequate protection to the victims of climate and environmental disruptions and provide instruments for compensation and resettlement. It should also encourage awareness raising for the populations and authorities concerned.

26. In particular, the Assembly encourages the European Union to use the ongoing amendment process outlined in its Policy Plan on Asylum for better addressing the protection gap in cross-border environmental displacement. Finnish and Swedish legislation and case law should be examined to see whether they could serve as examples of best practice or even models for a new sub-paragraph explicitly recognising cross-border environmentally displaced persons in Europe.

27. The Assembly further calls upon the European Union to create an appropriate system of funding, at European level, to support prevention and adaptation strategies, development and migration management projects, as well as improved humanitarian response.

28. The Assembly is convinced that the time to address the dangerous degradation of the environment, including climate change, is now. Action for this must be co-ordinated and swift: policy makers, the scientific community, civil society and other actors – at both national and international levels – must seek common solutions for those people who are currently, or who may soon be, forced to migrate in order to seek safe and sustainable existences.