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IOM International Organization for Migration

GREATER EFFORTS NEEDED TO TACKLE ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRATION BEYOND COPENHAGEN, SAYS IOM ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS' DAY

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GENEVA- 18 December 2009 – Greater efforts are needed beyond Copenhagen to tackle the complex issue of environmental and climate-induced migration, says the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as it marks International Migrants Day today.

As world leaders attend the final day of the UN's Climate Change Conference in the Danish capital to consider signing up to a global deal on climate change that may or not acknowledge its impact on migration and displacement, the reality is that climate change and environmental degradation are already triggering migration or displacement all over the planet. In particular, it is the world's poorest countries that are bearing the brunt.

Major gaps in knowledge and understanding exist on how best to deal with the many complex repercussions of environmental migration.

"No-one really knows just how many people are already migrating voluntarily or are forced to do so because of climate change or environmental degradation. What we now know is much of this migration is largely internal or cross-border and that it is a growing trend," says IOM Director General William Lacy Swing.

Growing migration pressures resulting from the effects of climate change add to the urgency of tackling existing challenges of migration management. "Ensuring effective protection of the human rights of all migrants, including environmental migrants, and provision of adequate assistance to vulnerable people on the move will continue to be one of the key priorities of IOM. Working together with our partner agencies in the Global Migration Group and beyond, we will also continue to work on reducing forced migration as much as possible, to ensure that when migration happens it is by choice," Mr. Swing added.

A recently published IOM report states that most migration already occurring as a result of environmental factors is internal. Several Asian countries, for example, are struggling to cope with

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the mass of rural-urban migration as recurrent floods destroy agricultural livelihoods and supplies and force people to move to over-stretched urban areas, with dramatic consequences for infrastructure, public services and health.

Slow-onset environmental degradation generates less attention than extreme climatic events such as floods and storms, yet globally 1.6 million people were affected by droughts between 1979 and 2008, more than double the number affected by storms, with Africa especially vulnerable.

Migration is already playing a significant role as a coping mechanism in these contexts. Mali, for example, is witness to internal migration from the country's north to its south and to regional migration towards coastal areas of West Africa as a spontaneous adaptation strategy to drought, alleviating stress on one fragile eco-system but transferring it to another.

While some National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs) produced by Least Developed Countries to adapt to climate change include references to migration, more can be done to strengthen the role of migration in the adaptation context.

“We all know that there is no single solution to the challenges of climate change. We need to use all the tools at our disposal, and migration is one of them. It has been recognized that migration can and does contribute to development in countries of origin and destination. Strengthening the link between migration and development and taking advantage of the benefits temporary and circular migration can bring to vulnerable communities needs to be part of the adaptation plans,” Mr. Swing stated.

The potential scale of future movements will require international support for those countries most affected by internal and immediate cross-border environmental migration as less and least-developed countries will not have the capacity or resources to manage or respond to such flows.

“Financial support to address the migration-related consequences of environmental degradation and climate change must not be to the detriment of development assistance which has already been hit by the economic crisis. Support has to be additional if developing countries are to build their resilience to the humanitarian impact,” Swing adds.

However, environmental migration will also be of increasing importance to the developed world, where policies to address the issue are conspicuous by their absence.

Citing future hotspots from several Asian, African, Central and Southern American countries with high emigration rates, significant socio-economic challenges and slow-onset climate-related disasters that impact on food security, a recently published IOM report argues the paucity of policies on environmental migration will mean the developed world will face equally difficult challenges in addressing the issue.

“Climate change, demographic trends and globalization all point to more migration in the future. This means that the well-being of even more people and communities will be subject to our ability to manage migration in a way that increases the benefits and opportunities and reduces suffering. The effects of climate change will be an increasingly important variable in this equation. We need to think ahead and plan for change; we need to come up with integrated solutions that link migration and climate change adaptation; and we need to be prepared to respond to the humanitarian challenges that climate change is already posing today,” Mr. Swing concluded.

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