



Working Group 11:

DISPLACEMENT & MIGRATION

Extract from:

Planetary Security:

Peace and Cooperation in
Times of Climate Change and
Global Environmental Challenges

Conference Report

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WORKING GROUP 11

DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION

Environmental migration including climate change induced displacement within countries and migration to neighbouring countries and beyond is a complex matter. Even disaster-induced displacement is multi-causal. Environmental migration is a multifaceted phenomenon that cuts across different policy areas, including but not limited to: migration, development, climate change and environment, humanitarian assistance, human rights and security. This Working Group took into account such complexities and related fragmented legal framework issues and discussed options for future policy action to address environmental migration, which could be based around a strategic framework aimed at minimising forced environmental migration, planning for and responding to environmental migration, and facilitating voluntary migration as an adaptive response.

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1. CHALLENGES

From the early hunter-gatherer communities to the agricultural societies, migration has always been used as a strategy for survival throughout history, especially in the face of environmental change. Today, the effects of climate change are expected to increase “environmental migration” globally. A key distinction is to be made between population displacement resulting from rapid-onset natural disasters such as floods and storms (clearly forced movement) and migration resulting from slow processes such as drought, desertification and soil degradation linked to changing rainfall patterns, and the resulting scarcity of productive agricultural land.

Migration and displacement due to slow-onset phenomena is already becoming a major challenge in Africa, having pushed an estimated ten million people on the road over the last two decades. Estimates say that Chad and Niger could potentially lose their entire rain-fed agriculture by 2100 due to changing rainfall patterns and degraded land, while in Mali cereal harvests could decline by 30 percent. Desertification is likely to cause the largest share of (forced) migration in Africa over the long-term, both rural-rural and rural-urban. In Asia, sea level rise and glacial melt already profile themselves as challenges for the region’s stability, threatening to push dozens of millions of people on the road in the next 100 years.

Most analysts predict that the majority of environmental migration will be internal or to bordering countries. Those most vulnerable to environmental and climatic factors may actually be those who are unable to use migration as an adaptation strategy.

Large-scale migration can potentially have destabilising effects but must be considered in parallel with contextual factors in the receiving area. Conflict may arise when migrants, particularly those of a different nationality or ethnicity, move quickly or in large numbers to areas already suffering from tensions over access to scarce resources and where coping mechanisms are absent. The situation on the Indian-Bangladesh border, where India is building a fence to prevent mass migratory movements of Bangladeshi across the Indian border illustrates the failure of the international community and the two parties to set up appropriate adaptation mechanisms to the threat of rising sea levels.

Concerted action is needed at all levels, on the one hand to minimise forced migration, and on the other hand to manage migration flows, including the facilitation of migration as an adaptation strategy. As world population grows and natural hazards increase in frequency and intensity, one can see that the lack of planning to deal with large-scale migration flows will cause the worsening of human suffering and may spark conflict in receiving areas.

2. RESPONSES

First introduced in the 1970s by Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute, the concept of environmental migrant is now entered into common usage. A distinction is made between forced environmental migrant and environmentally motivated migrants. The first can be described as a person that “has” to leave his/her place of normal residence because of an environmental stressor whereas the second is a person who “may” decide to move because of an environmental stressor.

Though no internationally accepted definition for persons moving for environmental reasons exists⁴⁹ and many contested figures have been put forward to estimate the flows of environmental refugees in the course of this century - up to 300 million environmental refugees in 2050, the question of environmental refugees is already a hot topic and requires to be properly addressed.

The draft negotiating text proposed in the 20th Conference of the Parties Lima (COP20) includes a small section on addressing better understanding of how climate change impacts human migration and displacement. The text proposes that the Warsaw International Mechanism established at COP19 shall serve the final agreement and be fully operationalised to support the implementation of the commitments related to loss and damage, including establishing a climate change displacement coordination facility that “assists in providing organised migration and planned relocation”.

A 2015 estimate by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reveals 184 million people have been displaced by sudden onset and slow onset disasters between 2008 and 2014 (averaging at 26 million per year), more than those fleeing from conflict. In 2014, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that over 15 million became refugees, asylum seekers or internally displaced as a result of war and civil strife. Despite this, there is no protective legal framework for those displaced by natural events, in contrast with those fleeing conflict. Migration induced by natural disasters and climate change can only be addressed by coordinating inputs from various policy actors, as there is no organisation with a specific focus or mandate.

Since October 2012 the Nansen Initiative (managed by Switzerland and Norway) has carried out research and organised consultations in various parts of the world. The focus has been on cross-border movements resulting from natural disasters and climate change.

Conclusions of the work carried out under the Initiative are summarised in a document titled ‘Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change’. The Agenda compiles a set of practices regarding effective responses to protect those affected by cross-border disaster displacement and identifies three priority areas for action: developing knowledge about displacement, enhancing humanitarian protection and strengthening the management of disaster risk displacement in countries of origin. The Global Consultation, which took place in Geneva on 12-13 October 2015 was the final major event of the Nansen Initiative, which will come to an end in December. While UNHCR and IOM are the two main bodies carrying out activities relevant to the concerns that were addressed by the Nansen Initiative, the work completed will be a

⁴⁹ Terms such as “environmental refugee” or “climate change refugee” have no legal basis in international refugee law



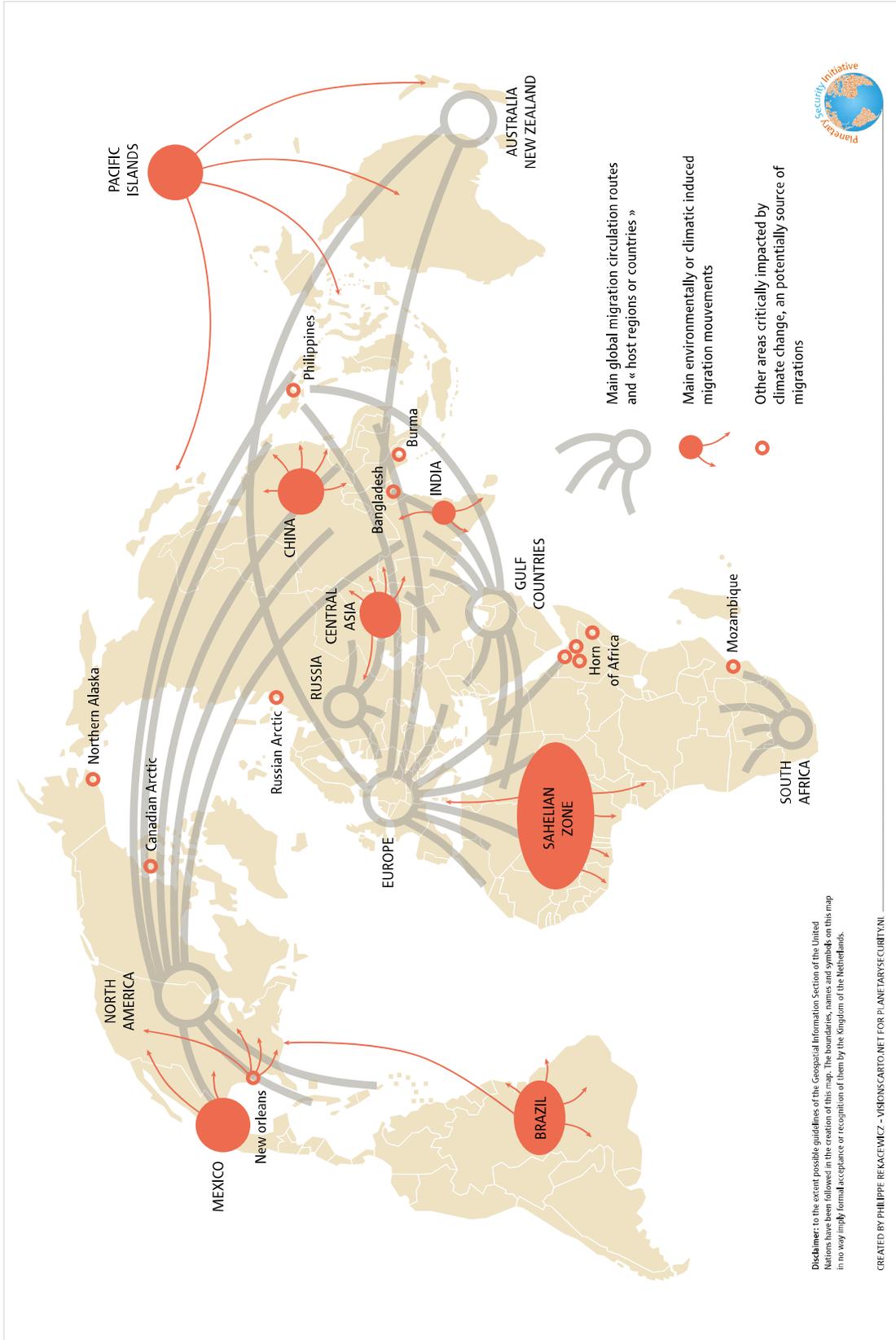
Bram van Ojik

guide for further decisions by all bodies active in the field. It is unlikely that any single agency would be mandated by its Member States to take on responsibilities with such a massive scope. Over 100 states, as well as many UN agencies and other Intergovernmental bodies were represented at the Global Consultation.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 adopted in 2015 brings increased recognition to the importance of human mobility in the context of disasters, both in terms of reducing vulnerability and building resilience. At the global and regional level, it seeks to promote, amongst others, transboundary cooperation to build resilience and reduce disaster risk in the event of displacement risk. At the national and local levels, it also seeks to promote regular disaster preparedness, response and recovery exercises, with a view to ensuring rapid and effective response to disasters and related displacement.

3. FURTHER READING

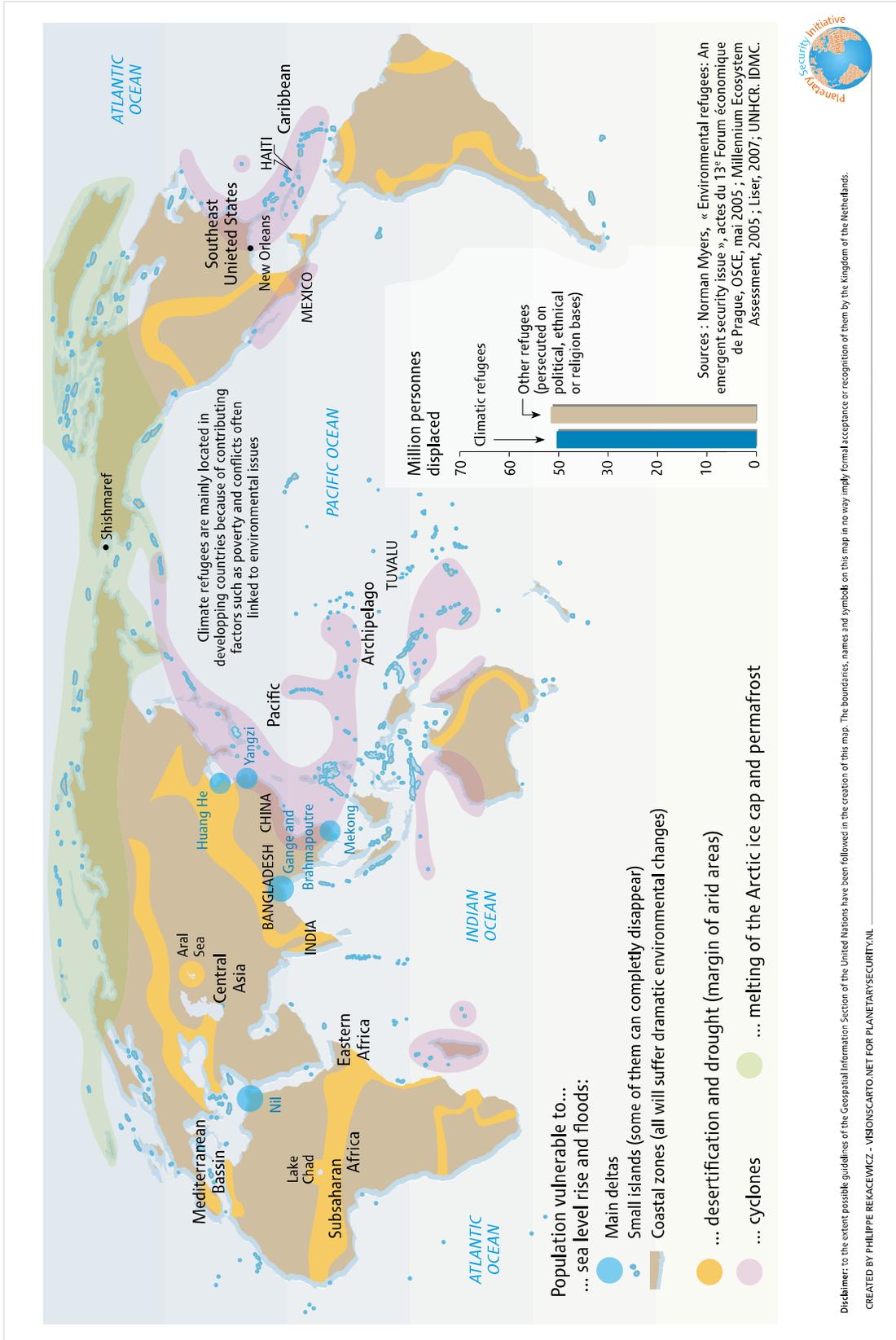
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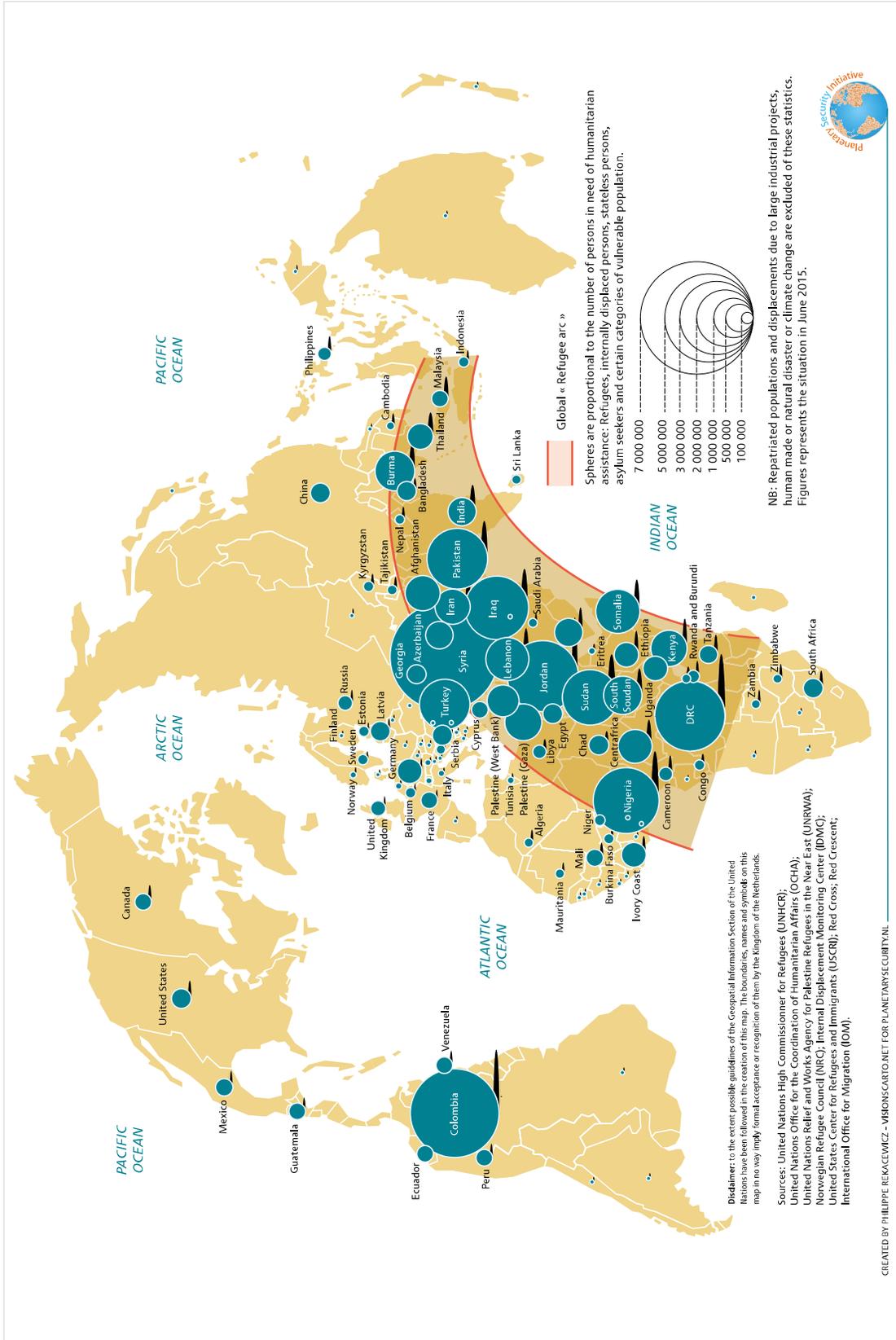


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4. ANALYSIS

The approach in the field of environmental migration, despite 10 to 15 years of studies, remains mainly empirical. The focus on “environmental refugees” is very recent and has only emerged with the raising of public awareness on global warming. Unlike the political or economical refugees flux, it is still very difficult to get an idea of the number of people directly or indirectly affected by environmental changes whether it came from the slow inset degradation or very sudden and spectacular events. This is also the case for the number of people that have already been obliged to move out of their homes and who are likely to move in the near future.

However, the current studies concern almost exclusively selected population living in areas prone to disasters – or very vulnerable to climate change – located in the “global south”. For the moment, this kind of migration is primarily internal, with very little amount people being forced to move across borders. As a result of this, the challenge remains as to the legal status they should hold. In addition, the causality of their move is relatively indirect (slow or rapid environmental event -> stress on food production -> threat on livelihood security -> migration), which makes it more difficult to qualify them as “forced displaced persons” or “refugees” or even “economic migrants”.

There is also difficulties in defining the term “environmental refugee” as there are some cases that do not correspond to any of the existing categories, like for example people displaced by great industrial development projects (India, China), Mexican peasants affected by the massive arrival of American subsidised corn and subsequently forced to migrate to find jobs elsewhere, or farmers in the Amazon who have been threatened to death by armed groups and then forced to leave their homes.

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5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Climatic stress induces migration especially when people are deeply dependent on rain-fed or irrigated agriculture. As the numbers are unpredictable, states and internationally mandated organisations have difficulties in planning ahead the needs triggered by large migration movements. So generally speaking, internal migration could be seen as a problem (or a burden) for countries with relatively scarce economic resources and weak infrastructures. However, countries can plan for migration by anticipation within the context of adaptation strategies to climate change. In the Sahel region, migrations within the sub-region have been pretty predictable for four consecutive decades as the precipitation system there has been very irregular and continuously decreasing. Peasants used to migrate during very dry years (when they could not cultivate) to find income on the coast for example, and come back after a few months. This modus operandi makes them more resilient in cases of brutal climate events.

With the improvement of climate trend forecasts, it is now possible to implement a proactive migration system (people leaving before the “disaster” – either slow or rapid – occurs) allowing population to resettle in much better conditions. Otherwise, migration would happen in a distressed way, during or right after the climate event, which often implies resettlement in disastrous living conditions.

Distressed forms of migrations have forced authorities and internationally mandated organisations to resettle populations (often a few dozens or hundreds of thousands people at any given time) in chaotic conditions – in areas where they can possibly enter into conflicts with the local population and environmental degradation can occur, where there is an inability to provide for basic environmental services in large numbers.

This is a fundamental question, which needs to be addressed, as 85 to 90 percent of migrants, and refugees remain relatively close from their point of origin, with a vast majority resettling in neighbouring countries (who are not at war themselves) when possible. Contrary to the spectacular 2015 media coverage on the increase in refugee flux towards Europe, only a tiny part of this population is actually trying to reach developed and wealthy countries. In fact, this population represents less than 0.5 percent of the total European population, and less than 1 percent of the total number of world refugees and displaced persons. This means that developed countries have the capacity and the infrastructures to host and manage the permanent or temporary resettlement of a population of circa one million vulnerable persons, badly in need of legal protection.

The problem in developed countries is not so much the lack of means or management systems (which they have) but more to confront – in the context of their democratic governance – the resistance of public opinions and the politicians that represent them.

Developed countries should however more positively support migration trends by anticipation, within the context of their contribution to the global adaptation to climate change. They should face the growing influx of migration around the world, whether it be politically, economically or environmentally induced, both by allowing in and out movements within their territories, and helping countries with scarce resources financially and technically to better host larger numbers of migrants or refugees in the global south.

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