

Plenary 8: The Environment's Impact on Migration

Environmental Change: A Driving Force for Migration

Migration as a response to climate change, environmental degradation and natural disasters

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The consequences of climate change, including changes in the frequency and violence of extreme weather events and changing precipitation patterns are expected to have large impacts on peoples' livelihoods, especially in poor rural societies. Natural disasters in recent years have heightened the discussions and strengthened the growing awareness of the nexus between climate change and migration. In this plenary, the links between environmental change and migration were investigated in more detail. In addition, an example of how policy deals with this issue in New Zealand was introduced. Finally, several policy options were proposed to tackle the challenges of the environment's impact on migration.

Environmental change in terms of climate change, drought, desertification, extreme weather events, or soil degradation, has a great impact on societies regarding access to water, agricultural production, food shortage, poverty, and conflict. Therefore, environmental change is considered a driving force for migration. The so-called 'environmental migrants' or 'environmental refugees', affected by the environmental change, are forced to leave their home as an adaptive response. However, not everyone is able or can afford to move even though living in an area affected by environmental threats.

But what are the main reasons for migration? After hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, 200,000 people decided to migrate whereas 250,000 people remained living in their original habitat despite the impaired environment. A related study revealed three main factors describing peoples' "moving" or "staying"-behaviour:

1. A household's economic situation, especially factors like land tenure and transferability of savings.

2. The tie to local social networks and community institutions.
3. The nature of a household's culture and physical attributes.

The study showed that young, healthy, skilled, educated middle class families with family ties outside their community were more likely to migrate. But elder people and people owning land and fixed assets were less likely to migrate.

Participants addressed the need for further research to explore the interlinkages between environmental changes and migration reasons empirically in a way that generates conclusive results. Improving the understanding of these interlinkages could also help to develop new policy strategies that not only passively respond to migration caused by natural disasters. But it is also important look for proactive solutions when natural disasters are predicted.

In New Zealand, adaptation was the primary government focus in dealing with environmental impacts. However, it remains to be seen how effective these adaptive measures are.

Chian-Woei Shyu

Facts and Figures

- Forecast of the magnitude of climate change: by 2010 the temperature will have risen in average by 2 to 6 degrees.
- Possible consequences: rise of sea level, melting of glacier, and more extreme weather events (the energy of hurricanes correlated with ocean temperature).