

The Foresight Global Environmental Migration Project

Examining the impact of environmental change on human migration

Foresight Staff

How can we best understand global migration arising from environmental change to help those who move, those in host areas and those who stay behind, and what are the policy implications? The Foresight Global Environmental Migration Project is working with leading experts and organisations from around the world to address this question.

The Global Environmental Migration Project is part of the Foresight Programme (see Box) and was commissioned by the United Kingdom's Government Chief Scientific Adviser. It is assessing how a broad range of environmental factors could, in interaction with other socio-economic drivers of change, influence the world's patterns of migration by 2060, and the policy implications. The project looks at both international migration and internal migration and the relationship of these with global systemic changes in the environment – including climate change, land degradation, and deforestation. The project also explores temporal features of environmentally driven migration. For example, how much change will take place in the nearer term, say by 2030?

The project focuses on three broad ecological regions where the interplay of environmental and non-environmental drivers of migration is likely to be most pronounced and uncertain in the next 20 to 50 years:

Foresight Programme

Foresight is part of the United Kingdom's Government Office for Science. It advises government about how to ensure that today's discussions are robust in view of an uncertain future. It draws on valid, well-tested, peer-reviewed scientific knowledge to inform those responsible for developing policy and strategy in government, thus helping to improve how science and technology benefit governments and society.

mountains, dryland margins, and low-elevation coastal zones (including small islands). These are also regions that support human populations that may be particularly vulnerable to climate change. The project also has a focus on the Mediterranean region, a single geo-political region combining the above three ecosystems.

For each region the project has commissioned evidence reviews that quantify changes in ecosystem services and exposure to hazards that will be relevant to migration over the next 50 years. These regional reviews will be an essential base for the project's final report analysing future environment-related migration and the policy challenges and opportunities it may present. ICIMOD is leading the review of environmental and non-environmental drivers of migration in mountain regions.

The mountain case

Both migration and environmental change are high-profile and controversial issues of significant importance in mountains. Mountain regions present a set of specific circumstances which include:

- communities relying heavily on ecosystem services and natural resources to provide livelihoods;
- substantial seasonal climatic variability, making seasonal migration a traditional way of life;
- inaccessibility, fragility, diversity, and marginality;
- frequently a geo-political location crossing State borders.

Mountain regions face policy challenges in terms of attaining a form of sustainable development that takes the fragility of mountains into account and conserves biodiversity, maintains mountain ecosystem services (in the interest of downstream ecosystems), and supports employment. Understanding how migration, and especially environmental migration, is linked with these existing policy challenges is complex yet crucial for global policy makers; it will require cooperation across a wide range of sectors, between science and policy, and between mountain and lowland communities. Cooperation will also be required between scientists and researchers across the globe to identify gaps in the current research base and to fill these collaboratively.

Joint Foresight-ICIMOD workshop

As part of the Global Environmental Migration Project, the Foresight Programme and ICIMOD jointly held an international workshop to consider the future impact of environmental change on human migration within, out of, and into mountain regions. The Mountain Regions Workshop, held from 28 February to 1 March 2011 at ICIMOD Headquarters in Nepal, brought together leading academics and policy makers from mountain regions to look at the project's global analysis and emerging findings.

Expected outcome

The final report and the evidence base underpinning it (including the report of the above workshop and the peer-reviewed regional reports) are to be published in autumn 2011. They will be presented to the project's international stakeholder community which includes United Nations agencies, regional bodies in Europe, Africa, and Asia, and other international organisations. The project's ambition is to catalyse action for reducing risk and vulnerability and enhancing choice, providing more options to vulnerable populations. The work done in conjunction with ICIMOD will ensure that the final report represents the state of the art in research on environmental change and migration in mountain regions and highlights the most important issues for global stakeholders.

