On the Frontlines of Climate Change: Migration in the Pacific Islands

Wednesday 2 December, 2015

PARIS, 2 DECEMBER 2015: At the COP21 Paris climate talks today, the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) presented the first nationally representative household survey conducted on climate change and migration in the Pacific. The survey, conducted by UNU-EHS and the EU-funded Pacific Climate Change and Migration project covered 6,852 individuals representing 852 households in Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu.

More than 70% of households in Kiribati and Tuvalu and 35% of households in Nauru reported family members would migrate if climate stressors, such as droughts, sea-level rise or floods worsened. However, only about a quarter of households have the financial means to support migration, leaving many households "trapped" in worsening environmental conditions.

"The results from this unprecedented survey show us empirically what we already know," says Right Honorable Enele Sosene Sopoaga, Prime Minister of Tuvalu, *"Pacific islanders are facing the brunt of climate change impacts and are increasingly finding themselves with few options."*

Incremental sea level rise, saltwater intrusion and drought are impacting people's decisions to migrate, both internally and internationally, the extensive survey found.

"In Paris, we call on world leaders to address climate change and human mobility in the new climate agreement," says Dr. Koko Warner, Senior Expert at UNU-EHS, *"This issue is not only a Pacific issue; it is a global issue. All countries will be affected by people on the move in relation to climate change, whether they are origin, transit, or destination countries."*

The survey found that 10% of people in Nauru and 15% of people in Tuvalu have already migrated internationally between 2005 and 2015. Based on survey findings, researchers also modelled future migration scenarios. Assuming a medium climate change scenario (such as in the IPCC 5 Assessment Report´s RCP 6, 2 degrees warming by 2100), by 2055 international migration trips for Kiribati and Tuvalu will increase by 35% and 100% respectively.

"For migration to help people adapt, it must be one of a wide array of choices that improve living conditions, not as a last resort," said Peter Craig-McQuaide, Head of Sustainable Energy and Climate Change Unit in EuropeAid. The survey found that remittances and more diversified income from migration could improve resilience to environmental stressors and the capacity to cope with future climate change impacts. *"However, for migration to be an option that improves people's lives rather than making them more vulnerable, countries need to account for human mobility in their domestic and regional policies to ensure that if people must move they can do so in safety and dignity,"* concludes Mr. Craig-McQuaide.

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About the Pacific Climate Change and Migration (PCCM) project
The survey was conducted under the UNESCAP PCCM project, which is funded by the European Union and jointly implemented by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The project aims to strengthen the Pacific Islands' national capacity to use migration as a way to adapt to climate change impacts.

About United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS)
UNU-EHS addresses the risk and vulnerability aspects of human security and the consequences of complex environmental hazards for sustainable development. Through applied research and education UNU-EHS puts climate vulnerable communities at the centre of the climate policy debate. The United Nations University (UNU) is a global think-tank and the academic arm of the UN. To learn more, please visit http://ehs.unu.edu/ .

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