

Climate Change, Social Stress and Violent Conflict
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Abstract

Climate-induced migration as a security risk and a threat for conflict in Mexico

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The paper explores the complexity of climate change-induced desertification, land degradation and drought (DLDD) together with worsening socio-economic conditions as a driver for environmental forced migration (EFM) in relation to human, gender and environmental (HUGE) security. These triggers get worsen due to the US immigration policy, where fans, drones, Border Patrol and infrared surveillance systems have forced migrants to cross the dangerous desert of Arizona or to ally with human traffickers related to transnational organized crime. Prostitution, public insecurity, crime, arms, HIV-AIDS, money laundering and drugs impact in both countries, but armed violence is affecting Mexico more due to its weak legal system, poverty, corruption and the penetration of the police and military by criminals. This insecurity has forced both countries to jointly combat this social cancer in the framework of the Merida agreement.

Methods: A combined approach of demographic studies, deep interviews, participative observation, life histories, police data, political and intelligence cooperation between USA and Mexico, newspaper reports, focus groups and free association are the techniques for analyzing EFM, the coping mechanisms developed to mitigate the threats and the impact on the destruction of social networks and the increase of social vulnerability, together with the emerging violence among competing crime gangs that have created a war of low intensity with loss of governance along the Mexican border (in 2008 1,600 executions occurred only in the small border city of Juárez and more than 8,000 in Mexico during the first two and half years of the government of Calderón).

Results: The impacts of DLDD combined with socio-economic factors (rising costs of agricultural inputs, declining prices for food crops, price hikes of the basic food basket) and political neglect (uncontrolled import of subsidized maize without customs) forced poor families in rural areas to migrate to the USA or to plant illegal crops. The demand for cheap labour, drugs and pornography in the USA are drivers of this illegal migration. The complex linkage among physical, socio-economic and political factors has increased the unauthorized migration to the USA and forced migrants to ally with transnational criminal gangs. Thus, 'environmental-forced' migration is a complex, multi-causal and interactive phenomenon with often negative outcomes that can destroy the HUGE security of families and communities, and increase the social vulnerability of women, who must work in the fields, care for their children and maintain the extended family, while they expect the remittances. If these developments are triggered by poverty, public insecurity, low legal reinforcement and crime entire villages must flee from physical violence. Thus, it is impossible to distinguish clearly between EFM and socio-economic migration, but both have created xenophobia against Latinos in the USA.

Conclusions: Environmental 'forced' migration is a complex, multi-causal and interactive process, with non-linear outcomes that can affect lives, families, communities and countries, as the Mexican case illustrates, and increases social vulnerability of women. Growing US prosecution of migrants and the infiltration of crime into the Mexican government increased the insecurity and transformed the northern border into a war of low intensity. Cooperation against organized crime has forced both governments to share intelligence, combat the illegal arms and drugs trade and coordinate their policy against these powerful gangs. But adaptation to CC and development activities would improve the livelihoods and environmental services in affected areas creating jobs for young people. A strong social and environmental development policy in Mexico would better counter this criminal behaviour and prevent EFM, drug dependence and family disintegration. It would open a potential for a peaceful living together of both countries