

# **Environmental Change Hits Home**

## **ESF-Bielefeld Conference Series on 'Environmental Degradation and Forced Migration'**

*by Ivanka Angelova\*, Communications Officer for the ESF Conferences*

A new conference series on environmental degradation and forced migration will explore the causal relationship between the two phenomena, their correlation to political conflict, and their repercussions. The series, organised by the ESF and Bielefeld University, will start in 2010, with three consecutive biennial conferences.

The occurrence of environmentally-induced migration is not new: it can be traced back to ancient history. The anthropogenic causes of environmental change, however, add unprecedented elements to recent incidents, resulting in altered migration patterns. This novel dimension will form part of the programme of the first conference, which will concentrate on the complexity of factors that cause migration. In addition to environmental changes, the conference will also consider the contributory economic, political and social conditions. The discussions will aim to shed light on current debates over a definition of environmentally-induced migration and the terminology used in the field.

To enable such a multifactorial analysis, the conference series will aim to further a dialogue between geoscientists and social scientists. The only way to tackle this topic, explained Prof. Faist, chair of the first conference, is to look at the objective, measurable environmental changes, studied by geoscientists, and then focus on the projected responses of the people, governments and other non-governmental agents involved. The same environmental change can result in strikingly different responses – a fact to be explained via additional factors, including the governmental response to such situations.

Europe hasn't seen much environmentally-induced migration: most environmental refugees are displaced internally, relocating within the same country. Yet some European scientists and politicians outline a potential security threat to Europe and consecutive economic, political and social disturbances. The second conference, entitled 'Environmental degradation, forced migration and conflict', will address this issue. To overcome a simplistic correlation between the three phenomena, it will also consider a range of other factors which can condition conflict, such as the vulnerability of certain groups of refugees. In order to ensure that various examples of conflict are presented, a number of non-European scientists, working on local case studies, will be invited to attend. 'The conferences will be a very suitable opportunity to extend the links we

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have with researchers outside Europe and also with researchers in developing and transformation countries', commented Prof. Faist.

The conferences will also be open to young scientists. Given the novelty of the field, the scope for further research is great, and the conferences will give young investigators a chance to present and discuss their work with senior colleagues.

The multidisciplinary discussions generated by this series could lead to more holistic models of environmentally-linked human mobility patterns, by providing deeper insight into the factors to be considered. Conference outcomes will also feed into the making of policy briefings, with recommendations on the enhanced understanding, anticipation and management of environmentally-induced migration.

'The series will be an opportunity for both fields, environmental and migration research, to see the overlapping areas of interest between them. The conferences will concentrate not only on the developments in society but also on the interaction between humans and nature – an arising field for both environmental and social scientists, with major repercussions,' summarised Prof. Faist.