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2012 East Azerbaijan earthquakes © Mardetanha, 2012

Environmental migration and displacement in Azerbaijan: Highlighting the need for research and policies

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Introduction

From a geological and environmental point of view, the Caucasus region – where the Republic of Azerbaijan (hereafter “Azerbaijan”) is located – is a very active and hazardous area; this is mainly reflected in the intensity and the frequency of floods, storms, landslides, mudflows and earthquakes (ogli Mammadov, 2012:361,

362). Simultaneously, due to climate change, the country is increasingly exposed to slow-onset processes, such as water scarcity, salinization and pollution, rising temperatures, sea-level fluctuation, droughts and soil degradation. While natural disasters have displaced 67,865 people between 2009 and 2014 (IDMC, 2014), the



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progressive exacerbation of environmental degradation is thought to have significant adverse impacts on livelihoods and communities especially in certain areas of the country.

After gaining independence in 1991 as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country experienced a strong economic crisis, followed by a rapid growth due to the development of the oil industry and growing supply of jobs (Bayramov and Aliyeva, 2011). For this reason, in recent years, Azerbaijan became a destination country for thousands of people from neighbouring regions (Aliyev, 2008:27; Azhgibetseva, 2014), while internal migratory flows from rural to urban areas, and mainly to Baku, also became more and more significant (Aliyev, 2008: ii).

This policy brief first gives an overview of the environmental situation of Azerbaijan. Second, it explores how disasters and climate change may affect the population and its mobility. Lastly, it critically analyses national environmental policies and programmes, highlighting the need for further research and evidence on climate change impacts.¹

Key points of the brief

- Azerbaijan is exposed to several environmental challenges. Natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods and landslides, have displaced thousands of people in recent years while slow-onset processes, such as salinization, rising temperatures, sea-level fluctuation, droughts and soil degradation are increasingly affecting communities and livelihoods. Climate change is expected to exacerbate the intensity and frequency of these environmental events.
- Further research is necessary to shed light on the migration and environment nexus in different areas of the country and help policymakers and national authorities to formulate and implement effective adaptation and mitigation policies and programmes.
- Review of policies show that the linkages on migration–environment are not yet made in Azerbaijan. The link between environment and climate change and human mobility should be incorporated in Azerbaijan’s migration policies, as well as in national policies on environment and disaster risk reduction.

Extreme weather events and slow-onset processes in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan’s exposure to severe weather events and negative impacts on the population are increasing. In 2015 alone, 74 extreme weather occurrences were registered, while 94 were recorded in 2014 (Ministry of Emergency Situation, 2016). Floods, landslides and earthquakes are the most frequent sudden-onset events (Table 1).

Rivers often overflow as a result of intense snowmelt and showery rains in mountains areas; most floods and inundations have occurred in the uplands of the south slope of the Great Caucasus and Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic (Safaraliyev, 2015:14). Non-climatic factors such as sediment accumulation, taking place in and around the Kura River basin, also increase the frequency of floods (Abbasov and Mahmudov, 2009; Abbasov, 2010). Landslides are most often caused by heavy rains, underground water and erosion (Safaraliyev, 2015:14). Finally, earthquakes occur most frequently in the southern part of the Greater Caucasus, the Ganja region in the Lesser Caucasus, and in the Autonomous Republic of Nachichevan.

Azerbaijan is also particularly vulnerable to different and interrelated slow-onset environmental processes, such as sea-level fluctuation, increasing temperature, salinization, desertification, land and forest degradation and loss of biodiversity. The most significant feature of the Caspian Sea is its constant level fluctuations: the sea level can present monthly oscillations with the rate of 30–40 cm interval (the highest rate of the sea level occurs from June to August, while the lowest rate appears from December to February) (Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, 2015a). Sea-level fluctuation are due to both environmental- and human-related factors, such as the balance of the regional waters, pollution and rising temperatures, construction of infrastructures and gas and soil exploration. Caspian Sea oscillations seem to affect mostly oil and gas industries, chemical industries, agriculture and fisheries. Although predictions are the constant focus of debates, according to prognoses based on regional climate change, the Caspian Sea level is expected to rise about 70–80 cm by 2020.

Another major environmental issue is the increase in temperature; according to the Asian Disaster Reduction Center, over the last century, the air temperature increased on average by around 0.5°C (Safaraliyev, 2015:14). The temperature in the country is expected to continue to rise and precipitation to increase. In 2010, the Second National Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

¹ This policy brief is based on documents available in English. The author acknowledges that more information may exist in Russian and Azerbaijani documents.

Table 1. Major hazards in Azerbaijan from 1990 to 2016

Event	Year	Deaths	Total population affected
Earthquake	2012	0	22,499
Extreme temperature	2012	5	N/A
Flood	2010	3	70,000
Flood	2009	0	5,000
Landslide	2000	11	N/A
Earthquake	2000	31	N/A
Earthquake	1999	1	9,170
Earthquake	1998	1	700,010
Flood	1997	11	75,000
Flood	1995	0	1,650,000

Source: EM-DAT, 2016.

(UNFCCC) forecasted a cumulative temperature increase over the period from 2021 to 2050 of 1.50 to 1.60°C, and precipitation is forecast by the PRECIS model to increase by 10 to 20 per cent by 2050 compared to the 1961 to 1990 baseline level (World Bank, 2012:9). These changes are worrying especially because they intensify the possibility of extreme weather events (Safaraliyev, 2005:14); for example, a rise in temperature may correspond to unusual snowmelt on mountainous areas and showery rains that may result in heavy floods. Floods and overflows in the areas of the Great and Little Caucasus within 2003–2008 seem to have been, at least partly, caused by this dynamic (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2009:51).

Moreover, according to the report compiled by the World Bank in 2012, the change in climate is expected to stress water resources and water quality (Shelton, 2003:303); surface water is indeed predicted to decrease by 23 per cent from 2021 to 2050, and stream flow is also expected to reduce significantly (World Bank, 2012:13). The salinization (but also the waterlogging) of the water is another major problem in Azerbaijan, largely due to the inadequate design of the irrigation distribution network (Asian Development Bank, 2005:10; 2014:3; Shelton, 2003:304). The lakes of the Kura and Araz basins, similar to the lakes on the Absheron Peninsula, are affected by an increase in salinity (5,000–13,000 mg/L) and a reduction in fish populations and sea biodiversity, probably because of upstream water management and pollution due to industrial and domestic waste (Shelton, 2003:303; Safaraliyev, 2015:13). The soil of large areas of land is also becoming salinized; in 2009, 1.5 million ha of land has been recorded as being no longer suitable for agriculture mainly because of salinization (Shelton, 2003:303).

According to the *Country Environmental Analysis* compiled by the Asian Development Bank (2005), an environmental map of Azerbaijan distinguishes the following main zones where the population is exposed and thus vulnerable to different environmental hazards:

- Absheron Peninsula;
- Kura-Aras lowlands;
- mountain districts Great Caucasus, Lesser Caucasus and Talysh mountains and their foothills; and
- transboundary rivers and the Caspian Sea.

First, the Absheron Peninsula suffers from oil, mercury and other types of chemical contamination (deriving mainly from accumulated old waste of abandoned industrial facilities), which heavily contaminates air and water. The districts located near the confluence of the Kura and Araz rivers (the Sabirabad, Imishli and Saatli districts) are particularly vulnerable given their exposure to possible floods and inundations; a severe flood in 2010 affected the area. Three people lost their lives while more than 70,000 people have been affected with tens of thousands of homes destroyed (Safaraliyev, 2015:22). In these districts, agriculture-related issues, especially salinity and industry-related problems, as well as environmental sanitation complications make people vulnerable, especially in smaller towns.

The mountain communities of the Greater Caucasus region of Azerbaijan are the most exposed to earthquakes, which have often caused large number of human losses and destructions. A very strong one measuring 5.6 on the Richter scale struck Zaqatala and Gakh (on the north-western part of Azerbaijan) in 2012. Several people were injured, and about 3,000 houses and public buildings

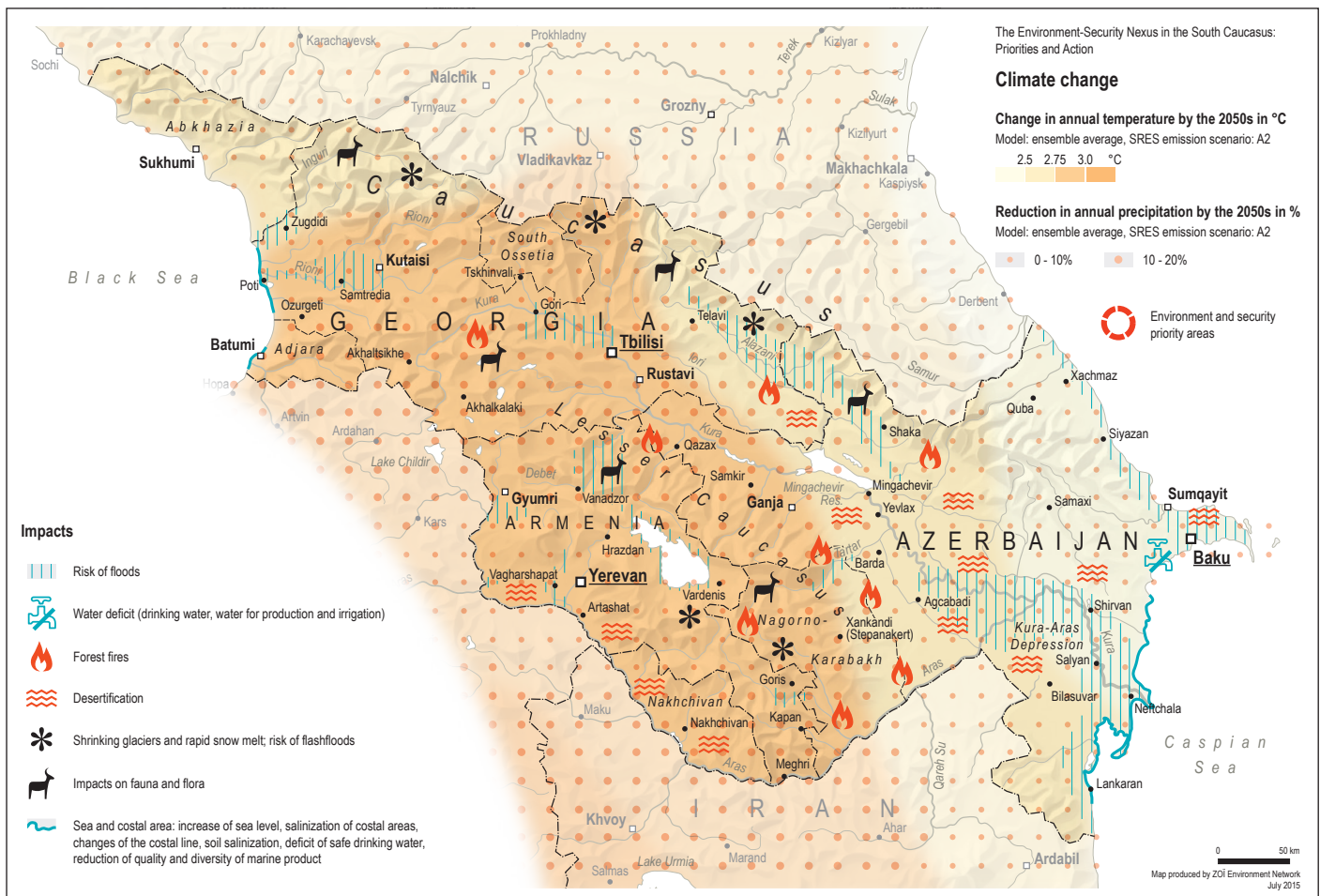
were either destroyed or damaged. 7,000 families were evacuated and settled either in tents or nearby houses. On top of this, the communities that live on the Greater Caucasus Mountains are very much exposed to the risk of climate-induced flooding and water stress, as well as general soil erosion and land degradation that characterizes the region (ENVSEC and UNDP, 2011).

The settlements located directly on the Caspian Sea shores are affected by sea-level fluctuations and especially by sea-level rise. Although updated information is not available, it has been documented that, because of the sea oscillations, many roads have been often blocked, communication has been irregular, beaches, boulevards and other recreational areas have fallen into disrepair, and the progressive marine ecosystem degradation has significantly damaged Caspian fisheries and the fish economy in general (Zoï Environment Network, 2011; UNDP, 2004; Kudat, 1999). A few sources seem to suggest that environmental migration from the Caspian Sea area, and in particular relocation plans, were implemented by local authorities in the 1990s (Kudat, 1999; Migration Policy Centre, 2013); however, information on this matter is scarce.

As mentioned before, Azerbaijan faces serious issues in relation to the supply and quality of water resources, salinization and soil erosion and consequently in relation to land degradation (Republic of Azerbaijan, 2009). These dynamics are greatly impacting the agricultural sector, which is of great importance to Azerbaijan as it accounts for a large portion of employment, rural livelihoods, food security and rural growth (Ahouissoussi, Neumann and Srivastava, 2014:74). Moreover, despite the lack of location-specific data on the matter, the direct effects of climate change on livestock could also be severe; indeed, evidence in the literature shows that higher temperature decreases livestock productivity (Ibid., 76).

It is important to point out that in recent years, an increase in migration from rural to urban areas, and particularly to the capital city Baku, has been documented (Allahveranov, Aliyeva and Sadigov, 2012). This phenomenon seems to pose several challenges to the country as it is thought to lead to “the misallocation of skilled labour, distortion of the traditional rural sectors, rising unemployment and poverty in urban areas” (Aliyev, 2008). Nevertheless, it is difficult to find any research that assesses if this flow is also linked to

Map 1. Climate change impacts in Azerbaijan



Source: Zoï Environmental Network, 2015.



IOM and local partners improve Azerbaijan's water system. © IOM, 2010 (Photo: Mila Teshaieva)

the several environmental issues increasingly affecting Azerbaijani people and their livelihoods in rural areas.

Moreover, it is significant to point out that about 400,000 people displaced during the ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the Nagorny–Karabakh region live in difficult and poor conditions, particularly in relation to their inadequate housing and precarious livelihoods, especially in rural areas. Hence, this group remains particularly vulnerable within the country and might suffer particularly of the negative consequences of environmental and climate change.

Review of policies

At the international level, Azerbaijan signed the UNFCCC in June 1992; in 1997, a State Commission on Climate Change was established by the President's Decree. Azerbaijan has submitted two National Communications to the UNFCCC in 2000 and 2010. Both National Communications recognize several environmental challenges faced by Azerbaijan; pollution and inadequate supply of water, air pollution, soil degradation, erosion and salinity and biodiversity decline are highlighted as the main targets of adaptation and mitigation efforts. In these documents, the need for implementing education and awareness-raising activities in relation to environmental protection is also stressed. However, aside from some general references concerning the agricultural sector, the impacts that climate and environmental change are having and will likely have on human settlements and livelihood are hardly mentioned.

Moreover, despite thousands of people having been displaced by natural disasters in recent years, issues concerning environmental migration and displacement are not addressed. Similarly, in the Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) submitted by Azerbaijan ahead of the Conference of Parties (COP21) in Paris, it is stated that “in order to reduce vulnerability of Azerbaijan towards climate change impacts [...], relevant adaptation measures for decreasing or minimizing the losses that may occur at national, local and community levels per sector” should be implemented; though issues more specifically related to environmental migration are not mentioned.

At the national level, the first National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP) was developed from 1998 to 2003 in collaboration with the World Bank, together with other NEAPs in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The NEAP recognized, among others, the following problems as requiring immediate action: pollution, overfishing, deteriorating water quality, loss of fertile agricultural land from erosion, salinization, deteriorating irrigation systems, losses in biodiversity, Caspian Sea coastal erosion and sea-level rise (Republic of Azerbaijan, 1999). According to the Asian Development Bank (2014), under NEAP influence, local Environmental Action Plans were introduced in the country, involving public participation, assistance to local and regional authorities and policy formulation. However, despite the vast variety of environmental issues covered by the NEAP, Azerbaijan chose not to renew it and developed new national environmental strategies and action plans,

such as the State Program on Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development, which covers the period from 2008 to 2015 and addresses environmental concerns particularly in relation to water supply and sanitation (Asian Development Bank, 2014).

Despite the fact that the national annual expenditures on the protection of environment significantly decreased from 2012 to 2014 (The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2015), many programmes and activities have been implemented to enhance awareness and ensure the protection of the environment, safeguarding life and efficient use of natural resources (Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, 2015b). Again, none of these national plans and programmes seem to address, within their frameworks, issues of displacement or potential environmental migration, a clear sign that these concerns are not yet priorities within the national discussion on environment and climate change.

In the context of the legal framework on migration of Azerbaijan, only the *2004 State Concept of the Azerbaijan Republic on the Migration Management Policy* includes “ecological factors” as trigger of internal migration from the Caspian Sea Region and a consequence of natural disasters and soil salinization due to the absence of appropriate resources and methods to improve the quality of the land.

In relation to disaster management and disaster risk reduction, Azerbaijan signed the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015 in 2005. In the context of the Central Asia and South Caucasus Regional Consultations on the Post-2015 Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience, the participating countries agreed that the major hazards are of regional character and thus strengthening cross-border coordination and exchange of information on subregional and regional levels should be priorities (Safaraliyev, 2015). At the same time, Azerbaijan and its neighbouring countries recognized that, on the national level, efforts should be made mainly to increase awareness of disaster risk reduction, integrate disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation and improve systems of data collection and sharing in relation to risk assessment and disaster management (UNISDR, 2013).

In 1999, the law “on Status of Refugees and internally displaced persons” and the law “on Social Protection of internally displaced persons and persons equated to them” were adopted. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre states that the national Azerbaijani law “on Status of Refugees and internally displaced persons” and the law “on Social Protection of internally

displaced persons and persons equated to them” recognizes “military aggression, natural or technological disaster” as causes of displacement. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) affected by natural disasters should thus gain all the rights gained by other types of IDPs (such as housing, medical assistance, education and right of movement to the previous place of residence). In recent years, the Ministry of Emergency Situations has been playing an important role in protecting and providing basic services to the affected population in the aftermath of natural disasters, including the reconstruction of destroyed or damaged buildings. Nevertheless, the institutional capacity to respond to natural climate hazards, as well as its capacity of providing facilities and support for IDPs remain limited (IDMC, 2014). In fact, Azerbaijan’s law on forcibly displaced persons does not provide details on the institutional arrangements to implement the law, nor does it indicate who is to fund the measures identified in the law and who is to monitor its implementation (Wyndham, 2006:10). At present, people displaced by disasters, people in areas of insecurity, IDPs’ descendants and returned IDPs are not officially registered as IDPs and might thus end up not being eligible for the benefits set out in the 1999 legislation (IDMC, 2014; OHCHR, 2015). Existing inequalities between rich and poor populations and vulnerable communities within Azerbaijan could increase and place a strain on institutions, food supply and rural growth (World Bank, 2012) if proper policies on disaster risk reduction and management are not developed.

Conclusions and policy implications

- Research on the impacts of environmental and climate change on human mobility and livelihood in the context of Azerbaijan is scarce. More and better information are required to understand the following: (a) impact of various natural disasters and slow-onset processes on communities in different regions of the country; (b) ways in which human mobility (such as rural–urban migration) is linked to environmental factors; and (c) adaptation and mitigation actions that can be implemented both by local actors and authorities in areas particularly exposed to natural disasters and environmental change.
- While in recent years thousands of people have been displaced (at least temporarily) due to natural disasters and a few have been relocated as a consequence of the Caspian Sea level fluctuations, Azerbaijan’s environmental policies and programmes fail to address or even mention issues related to environmental migration and displacement; and, vice versa, migration policies

place very little attention on environment and climate change as trigger of mobility.

- Policies should provide protection to people who live in areas at risk of or that are affected by environmental degradation, while IDPs displaced by natural disasters should be granted eligibility for the benefits set out in the 1999 legislation “on Status of Refugees and internally displaced persons”. Migration policies should also clearly account for environmental factors triggering mobility, with the aim of protecting environmental migrants and responding to their needs.

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From the north of Italy, **Irene Leonardelli** recently graduated from a master's programme in International Migration and Social Cohesion that gave her the opportunity to study in Amsterdam, Bilbao and Dublin. Previously, she completed a bachelor's degree in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Bologna (Italy) and a one-year course in Cooperation and Development at the Complutense University in Madrid. She has always been interested in critically studying dynamics of migration and "integration" in a world in constant change. In the past few years, Irene has been mostly focusing on researching processes of migrants and asylum-seekers' reception in the island of Sicily (Italy), collaborating with different local organizations and conducting ethnographic fieldwork. She is currently an intern at the IOM Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) in Berlin, contributing to the Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Evidence for Policy (MECLEP) project.

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