# Environmental Migrant of Central Asia: Problem of Status Identification

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**ABSTRACT.** *At the present stage, the process of "environmental migration" is marked by high intensity and is manifested in the escalation of cases of internal movements over external ones. The dynamics of this phenomenon are of particular importance for regions most susceptible to climate change, which is associated with several socio-economic problems. Such regions include Central Asia, due to the impact of negative environmental factors and a combination of socio-economic difficulties.*

*The article examines the status of "environmental migrant" and the criteria for identifying migrants of this category in the Central Asian region. To achieve this goal, the developed approaches to the definitions of "environmental migration" and "environmental migrant" in the Central Asian region are analyzed. The authors determined the presence of similar natural and anthropogenic factors that caused the movement of people. In conclusion, the study offers recommendations for adjusting the criteria for identifying an environmental migrant at the regional level based on the manifestations of permanent and sudden natural disasters that are identical to Central Asia.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Central Asia, environmental migration, environmental migrant, migration, ecology.*

## INTRODUCTION

In modern world politics, the migration process in all its manifestations does not lose its relevance. As noted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) different classifications of people's movement have been created depending on the time spent in the country of residence, spatial characteristics, purposes, and much more (IOM). Of particular importance and relevance is the identification of the main reasons for human movement in the context of external and internal migration. Thus, among the most common factors of international migration, labor activity stands out. However, the largest share of internal displacement cases, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) at the end of 2022, was due to natural disasters and amounted to about 53%. It is worth noting that this annual indicator is the highest in a decade (IOM, 2023).

Increased attention at the present stage to the problem of displacement due to natural disasters, climate change, or negative transformations of the ecosystem must be associated

with a set of events at the international level. Thus, the International Committee of the Red Cross noted the increase in the number of migrants because of negative changes in the environmental environment.

According to the data, cases of environmental movement exceed military or other conflicts. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UN HCR) also cited 36 million displaced people by natural disasters in 2009 (UN HCR, 2010). According to a World Bank report published in 2021, climate change will create more than 200 million internal "climate migrants" by 2050 (WB, 2021).

These facts indicate an increase in the frequency of cases of environmental displacement, which emphasizes the relevance and scale of this process throughout the world.

The high intensity of the people's environmental movement is manifested at the national and regional levels. Thus, for states and regions that are most vulnerable to climate change and have several social and economic problems, environmental migration is a current and sharp question. Central Asia should be included among such regions.

Due to the impact of many negative environmental factors in the region on people, such as the drying up of the Aral Sea, the consequences of nuclear tests at the Semipalatinsk test site, melting glaciers, degradation of water resources, increased temperatures as a result of global warming together with socio-economic negative indicators the process of environmental migration is being formed and intensified.

Because of the commitments undertaken to implement the sustainable development goals (SDG) by the Central Asian states by 2030, it should be noted, that environmental migration covers several points from the global list of SDGs. Consequently, there is a need to refine the general approach to determining the status of an environmental migrant and the criteria for its identification.

Particular importance in solving this problem is given to scientific research in this area, as well as recommendations for subsequent adjustment of migration legislative documents by the needs of the states of the Central Asian region.

## RESEARCH METHODS

When writing the article, the following scientific methods were used: comparative and content analysis, which made it possible to identify the most wholly developed classifications of the category of "environmental migrant" and compare the selected criteria for this concept; statistical sampling method, the use of which helps to specify the determinant parameters of the definition of "environmental migrant" based on natural, anthropogenic negative progressive events common to Central Asian countries; a systematic approach, where "environmental migration" is considered as an integral set of interacting objects and relations of socio-economic, political and natural content.

## DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH OUTCOMES

The reason for the prevalence of internal displacement, mainly related to environmental degradation, is supported by many scientific studies.

Thus, the meta-analysis by Austrian researcher Hoffman R. explaining the relations between environmental changes and migration revealed that unfavorable environmental factors affect more on internal migration than external migration. At the same time, countries with low or middle-income levels are most susceptible to adverse

environmental effects (Hoffmann et al, 2020). This type of migration differs from other types of movement in that it is mainly accompanied by crossing borders and, usually, the receiving part consists of countries with a high level of economic development. These factors together indicate the need for a more detailed analysis of the relatively new type of movement known as "environmental migration" and the status of "environmental migrant".

At the present stage, the generally accepted term "migration" has yet to be developed. The most developed instruments used in international law treat cases of displaced persons with the status of "refugees" more often than "migrants".

Most of the treaties and agreements on migrants are ascribed to the states that ratify them as the main areas of cooperation and ensuring the rights of migrant workers. Thus, the most developed legal framework at the international and regional level should include labor migration. According to the UN Migration Agency (UN MA), a "migrant" is considered to be any person who moves within the country or abroad. In this case, movement is carried out regardless of one's legal status, voluntary or forced movement, period of stay in another territory, and what must be emphasized, whatever the reasons for migration are (UN MA).

It is worth noting that although the definition of "migrant" status implies the presence of a reasonably wide range of reasons for movement, most migration documents still do not mention the environment as a source of movement. The IOM indicates that sudden and progressive negative environmental events can cause environmental migration (Sironi et.al, 2019).

Among several non-governmental organizations, for example, "Amnesty International" (AI), cites the consequences of climate change or other natural disasters as a source of migration (AI).

Among the organizations at the regional level, the African Union and its "Declaration on Refugees, Repatriates and Internally Displaced Persons in Africa", adopted in 2009, stand out. It shows natural disasters as a factor of negative impact on the socio-economic situation, which contributes to an increase in the number of refugees in the continent's countries.

Thus, some international organizations note that unfavorable environmental factors can also cause migration. However, despite all attempts to define "environmental migration", the official status of "environmental migrant" in international law has not yet been developed. Therefore, it seems necessary to analyze the existing classifications of the concepts of "environmental migration" and "environmental migrants" to identify criteria that could simplify the process of identifying these categories.

Some scientists presented their concepts, recommendations, understanding, views, and opinions about this type of migration.

Thus, a researcher from Egypt, El-Hinnawi identified three categories of "environmental migrants":
- persons who have been temporarily displaced, but can return to their previous place of residence after environmental damage has been eliminated;
- persons displaced for an indefinite period and settled elsewhere;

- persons leaving their usual residence in search of a better quality of life when their usual residence has been damaged to such an extent that it can no longer meet their basic needs.

The author also identified a separate group of people who moved due to environmental degradation caused by military operations (Bates, 2002).

In our opinion, this typology does not sufficiently disclose the reasons for environmental migration of which it is difficult to define a particular migrant as an "environmental one". It is also not specified whether those migrants who settled in a certain place with government support should be in this category, or whether the move was made by the affected person independently. Another remarkable feature of an environmental migrant, according to the author, is the almost destruction of the previous place of residence. Considering the cumulative effect of gradual negative environmental phenomena such as drought, desertification, anthropogenic disasters, and melting glaciers, we draw attention to the absence of destruction of the place of residence in most cases. These long-term events also influence migration flows and can shape and strengthen them. As a result, the mechanism of the impact of ecosystem degradation on the positive decision to migrate is revealed.

J. L. Jacobson identified and classified a separate category of "environmental refugees":
- persons temporarily displaced due to local natural disasters such as avalanches or earthquakes;
- people migrating because environmental degradation has negatively impacted their lives or presents unacceptable conditions for their health;
- persons who move due to soil degradation leading to desertification or other unfavorable changes in their place of residence (Renaud et al, 2007).

It should be emphasized that, as a rule, the term "refugee" implies the forced displacement of persons. However, in this classification, it is noted that "environmental refugees" must also include those who voluntarily move from places with a negative environmental environment. The author does not specify whether it is necessary to include in this category those who, after a forced move, return after the restoration of previous conditions of residence.

It should be noted that the researcher noted a deterioration in health status as a reason for environmental migration, as well as a change in the socio-economic status of people exposed to adverse environmental factors. This fact proves that the transformation of the ecosystem and its adverse reaction, which affects all spheres of human life, contributes to migration. Thus, environmental factors can interact and create other sources to shape movement.

To determine the type of environmental migrants, special attention must be paid to the study of the causes of migration, and to develop methods that establish their number for subsequent adjustment of legal documents. This will contribute to a more coordinated work of states and the provision of appropriate support to this category of persons.

Identifying the necessary parameters causing the migration process will help to formulate criteria for the status of an environmental migrant more clearly. Generally, all harmful environmental sources are divided into two large groups - natural and anthropogenic.

W. Franklin and J. Cardy identified three main reasons for "environmental migration":
- emergencies such as natural, environmental, or industrial disasters;

- planned or unplanned movement for the development of the territory of residence, for example, in the case of the construction of a reservoir or deforestation for the residence of indigenous peoples;
- malnutrition, unfavorable living conditions, poor health, disease, and hunger, which may be caused by insufficient resources for life, with the accompanying conditions of soil degradation, insufficient water supplies, or pollution (Franklin & Cardy, 2003).

In our opinion, the list of environmental reasons for movement must include the mixed impact of anthropogenic and natural factors, that is, a combination of natural causes of ecosystem destruction and human influence. Thus, as an example, we can cite a dam failure in Uzbekistan in 2020, where the source of the disaster was a combination of both natural factors in the form of unfavorable weather conditions and anthropogenic factors - improper operation of the structure ("Do proryva zhizn' byla kak v raju", 2021).

The impact of several factors shaping movement makes it difficult to isolate environmental push factors for migration. Amnesty International, an international non-governmental organization, confirms the aspect according to which migrants can experience several push factors simultaneously (AI). The Center for Mixed Migration's 2019 survey highlights that more than 50% of migrants surveyed cite more than one reason for their movement. Unfavorable ecology is also taken into account as a migration factor, but it is represented in a secondary role, inferior to economic sources of movement (Horwood et. al, 2018).

Hoffman R. also emphasizes in his work that environmental factors can aggravate and create migration factors (Hoffman et. al, 2020). Thus, even though the negative impact of ecology is not indicated as the root cause, it can still increase the severity of other migration sources, giving rise to several other causes of environmental migration. Consequently, to identify environmental migrants, researchers often resort to scientific methods such as interviews and surveys. However, in our opinion, these methods cannot provide objective material for identifying the number of environmental migrants due to the predominance of support for migrants of other categories. Therefore, we believe it is necessary to use combined scientific methods to identify the category of "environmental migrants"

It must be emphasized that a comprehensive development to develop a generally accepted definition of "environmental migration", as well as the separation of "environmental migrants" into a separate category, will contribute to the consistent regulation of not only international migration flows but also regional ones.

Of particular importance is the further improvement of these terms in legislation not only at the international but also at the regional level. The clear advantage of active processes of internal environmental migration over international migration supports this situation. Equally important is establishing cooperation between states within the region due to common transboundary environmental problems associated with high sensitivity to climate change. Central Asia is usually considered to be such a region (Sabyrbekov et.al, 2023). The relevance of this problem was emphasized by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan at a meeting of the Council of Heads of State - founders of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea in 2023. Referring to the research conducted by analysts, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev noted that with the current processes of climate change in 2050, Central Asian countries should expect about 4 million climate migrants (Milliony "klimaticheskih" migrantov).

It is necessary to note the presence of home research in the field of environmental migration in Central Asia. Thus, among the region's scientists, L.F. Delovarova (2014), Issova L.T., Gubaidullina M.Sh. (2020), Buleshova D.D. (2007), Samay A.D. (2023), Alayeva G.T. (2020), Nasritdinov E. and Ablezova M. (2015), Abdurashitov F.M. (2015), Ziyayeva M.A. (2015) should be highlighted. These scientific works present the results of an analysis of the relationship between the socio-ecological factors and migration processes in the Central Asian region.

It is also worth highlighting the existing legal norms of the Central Asian states where environmental migration occurs. In particular, the Decree of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan dated May 3, 2010, No. 211 On the Procedure for Implementing Environmental Migration in the Republic of Tajikistan (as amended and supplemented as of May 2, 2019) (Pravitel'stvo Respubliki Tadzhikistan, 2019) and Law of the Kyrgyz Republic dated July 30, 2002 No. 133 On Internal Migration (Ministerstvo justicii Kyrgyzskoj Respubliki, 2021). These legislative documents reveal the definition of an environmental migrant, the cause of which is a sharp deterioration of the environment or an environmental disaster, both natural and anthropogenic. However, in both cases, sufficient attention is not paid to negative natural events that have a cumulative effect. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan do not address the phenomenon of environmental migration in their legislation.

Thus, at the present stage in the Central Asian region, there is a certain basis for further improvement of approaches to solving emerging problems of environmental movement. However, there are still many problems underlying environmental migration that the Central Asian states have to find a way out of.

Although the ex-Soviet countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, share common borders and are part of the same region, a more detailed analysis of climate risks reveals both differences and highlights similarities.

The 2021 Country Climate Risk Profiles for countries in the region identify common climate-related natural hazards: high temperatures, drought, and flooding. Also, each Central Asian country has its most pressing threats, which are uncommon throughout the region. Thus, mudflows are dangerous for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; landslides are dangerous for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Drought, which is typical for the region's states, is not included in the list of natural threats for Turkmenistan. Thus, due to the negative impact of these natural events, the condition of water, land and soil, agricultural productivity, urban infrastructure, and energy are deteriorating, and poverty rates, inequality, and morbidity rates are increasing throughout the region.

However, the region's countries also have specific characteristics in disrupting the ecological balance. According to the Climate Change Knowledge Portal (CCKP), in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, the water level in the Caspian Sea has been falling for a long time, which may lead to the disappearance of its northern part. In Kyrgyzstan, there is a decrease in ecosystem elements and an increase in arid areas; in Tajikistan, there is a decrease in biodiversity. Moreover, in general, countries are characterized by vulnerability to climate disasters (CCKP).

Each factor, individually or in combination, will have an extremely negative impact on people through areas of activity and directly, directly threaten life. As a result, citizens will be faced with a choice—to stay and adapt to new conditions or to move. It is worth noting that R. Hoffman points out that it is necessary to pay special attention to citizens who are most susceptible to environmental changes in their place of residence and who

have decided voluntarily or involuntarily to stay in their original place (Hoffmann et. al., 2020).

We selected data from the INFORM Risk Index from the European Commission Portal (ECP) to obtain results on the intensity of a particular natural threat (ECP). The INFORM Risk Index is an open-source global risk assessment of humanitarian crises and disasters. It can support decisions about prevention, preparedness, and response.

The numerical indicators given in Table 1 cover data for 2019 (INFORM, 2020) and 2023 for the most current indicators of natural hazards and impacts. Thus, we did not add to the table indicators such as tropical cyclones and tsunamis, which do not occur in the region. The limit for each type of natural event is 10 points. Data for Central Asian countries are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *"Data of indicators of danger and natural disasters among Central Asian countries"* (EC)

| Indicators | Flood | Earthquake | Drought |
|---|---|---|---|
| Numerical indicators for 2019/2023 | | | |
| Kazakhstan | 6,0 / 6,0 | 7,5 / 6,5 | 5,0 / 6,1 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 5,6 / 5,6 | 9,7 / 8,6 | 6,7 / 5,6 |
| Tajikistan | 5,4 / 5,4 | 9,7 / 9,3 | 7,6 / 7,6 |
| Turkmenistan | 6,4 / 6,4 | 8,6 / 3,3 | 4,6 / 4,4 |
| Uzbekistan | 6,3 / 6,3 | 9,9 / 8,1 | 6,6 / 6,6 |

Based on the data in Table 1, flooding is a constant danger for countries throughout the region, and the indicators have not changed over five years. The presence of floods in the Central Asian region confirms the lack of changes in numerical indicators.

The risk from earthquakes has decreased in all countries of the region but remains at a fairly high level, especially in Tajikistan, which is explained by the country's geographical features. The danger and negative impact of drought and earthquakes have decreased for 2023, but the decrease in indicators is not significant. We assume that this process will have a permanent negative impact due to the cumulative effect.

These natural phenomena have an exclusively natural source, such as an earthquake, or can be the result of both natural and anthropogenic, as well as combined interactions. Consequently, the presence of such threats can increase migration flows in the region's states due to the direct impact on people.

The indicators presented in the table emphasize the relevance of the problem of migration due to environmental factors and indicate the need to expand the definition of "migration" in legislation, primarily at the regional level.

## CONCLUSION

The process of environmental migration implies a comprehensive global scale with an emphasis on the regional level. Consequently, given the growing number of migrants worldwide, the issue of determining environmental migration and the status of an environmental migrant is of particular relevance. The high sensitivity of regions to global climate change, combined with the impact of anthropogenic factors that have a long-term impact, gives rise to new cases of environmental displacement. At the

same time, there is a deepening and increase in the intensity of the current process of environmental movement among countries in the world's regions. As a result, an urgent need is revealed for forming a common approach to defining the concepts under study.

Taking into account and based on the presented classifications of such terms as "environmental migration" and "environmental migrant", we assume that for the Central Asian region, there is a need to supplement the system of grouping research objects with the identification of more significant features.

Thus, from our point of view, "environmental migration" should imply the movement of a person both within and outside the country under the influence of an unfavorable environmental factor, which will include climatic reasons, both directly in the form of forced movement or evacuation and in areas of life activity, leading to a change in a person's socio-economic status. Migration in this case can be either voluntary or forced, for an indefinite period, with subsequent return or moving to a new place permanently.

Considering the presence of permanent natural and anthropogenic adverse environmental events in the Central Asian region, additional criteria must be introduced for a holistic definition of the concept of "environmental migrant". Identifying environmental causes, among other push factors for movement, is especially important. In this context, it is necessary to pay special attention to the intensity of the ecosystem degradation factor as the primary migration source

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