

Climate crisis and displacement – from commitment to action

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Significant progress has been made in focusing international attention on the need to address displacement in the context of disasters and the adverse effects of climate change. Despite a wide range of global policy frameworks, however, actions being taken are not yet having a sufficiently deep and far-reaching impact.

Displacements associated with climate- and weather-related hazards have reached levels unprecedented in modern times. The intensity and frequency of hazards that can trigger displacement are increasing, eroding fragile livelihoods and ecosystems, aggravating existing vulnerability and undermining resilience. Since 2008, an average of 24.5 million new disaster-related internal displacements per year have been recorded globally, with almost 90% of these associated with weather-related hazards such as floods, storms and droughts.¹

Although the bulk of human mobility in the context of disasters and the adverse effects of climate change occurs within national borders, people may also cross national borders to look for safety abroad. In 2021, for instance, Angolans fleeing drought found refuge in Namibia where, at the request of the government, the Namibia Red Cross Society provided them with assistance.² Others moving away from harm, however, may find themselves in a place where their rights are not recognised or protected, potentially trapped in their new location, without assistance and support to return home or to build a new life in a new place.

Global policy frameworks

Despite its urgency, the issue of displacement associated with climate change has only recently made its way onto the international agenda. While the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement refer to disasters, they do not mention climate change. Paragraph 14(f) of the Cancún Framework for Adaptation (adopted in 2010 at COP16) recognised “climate change induced displacement, migration and planned

relocation” as important adaptation challenges and committed States to enhancing coordination and cooperation – but follow-up remained extremely limited.

The breakthrough came in 2015 when, after difficult discussions, governments negotiating the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 accepted several provisions on human mobility. The Framework recognises displacement as a devastating impact of disasters and promotes global and regional cooperation to reduce disaster risk (including displacement risk), enhance preparedness and response, and incorporate the needs of disaster-displaced persons in post-disaster reconstruction. In October, 109 States endorsed the Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda which presents a series of tools to manage and reduce displacement risks and to protect those who are displaced.³ Finally, COP21 held in Paris in December 2015 instructed the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage (WIM) to establish a taskforce to develop recommendations for integrated approaches to avert, minimise and address displacement related to the adverse impacts of climate change. December 2015 also saw the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; Sustainable Development Goal 13 – to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts – is relevant for climate change-related displacement despite not directly addressing the issue.

The recommendations of the WIM Task Force on Displacement were unanimously endorsed by COP24 in December 2018. In the same month, the UN adopted the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) containing detailed commitments and recommendations

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relevant to preventing and addressing climate change-related displacement.

While none of these instruments is legally binding, they are all highly authoritative. Many governments and some regional organisations have started to implement their commitments and many effective practices are emerging. The degree of consistency across the thematic areas of disaster risk reduction (DRR), climate change policy and migration is also encouraging. However, despite many examples of good practice, action is still insufficient given the scale of the challenges.

International commitments

Among the commitments made by States and many instances of emerging good practice, four stand out.

Investing in enhanced data and knowledge:

Compared with a few years ago, the intersection of climate change and displacement is better understood today. However, we still need to deepen our grasp of not only the drivers, vulnerabilities and risks that lead to displacement, but also what we can concretely do about them. The commitment of States to invest in enhancing data and knowledge is already addressed in paragraph 14(f) of the Cancún Adaptation Framework, albeit in a very general way. The Sendai Framework, the Nansen Protection Agenda and the GCM provide more detailed guidance. The Sendai Framework (para 24) highlights the importance of collecting, analysing, managing and using relevant data on disaster risks and the vulnerability, capacity and exposure of specific locations and populations, and promotes the dissemination and accessibility of such data. It also insists on the relevance of mainstreaming disaster risk data and assessments into local development plans (para 30).

The Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda and other relevant documents, in particular the 2021 Report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel (HLP) on Internal Displacement, highlight the need for gender-, age- and diversity-disaggregated data. The HLP report found that governments' willingness and capacity

to act are improved if governments own the relevant data and possess the capacity to analyse them. Governmental ownership, however, must not mean that data are monopolised by authorities. Thus the GCM insists (paragraph 18h) on the need for strengthening joint analysis and sharing of information among stakeholders in order to better map, understand, predict and address migration movements.

Helping people to stay: Displacement risks can be mitigated through reducing disaster risks, supporting adaptation and strengthening individual and community resilience. The Sendai Framework focuses on investing in structural and non-structural measures reducing disaster-related risks and impacts. Supported by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's *Words into Action* guidelines⁴, governments around the world have started to include disaster displacement in national DRR policies and planning. Out of 46 countries included in IDMC's 2021 Internal Displacement Index, most acknowledge disaster displacement in their DRR strategies.

However, only 27 national climate policies and adaptation plans recognise the link between displacement and climate change – in contrast to the recommendations of the GCM.⁵ These recommendations include minimising the drivers that compel people to leave their country and seek livelihoods elsewhere through irregular migration. The GCM also explicitly calls on States to develop adaptation and resilience strategies relating to disasters and climate change. At a more general level, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relating to ending poverty, achieving food security and combatting climate change highlight the need to enhance the adaptive capacities of eco-systems and communities. Indicators to measure progress in attaining these goals include the number of countries that have adopted and implemented national and local disaster risk reduction strategies in line with the Sendai Framework.⁶ According to the World Bank, concrete climate action and more inclusive development action could substantially reduce levels of displacement. If combined with the full

implementation of the Paris Agreement, achieving the SDGs would therefore be one of the most effective ways to prevent climate-related displacement and migration.

Helping people to move out of harm's way:

One way of coping with the adverse impacts of climate change is leaving locations where life has or will become impossible, for instance where rising sea levels render low-lying islands or coastal plains uninhabitable. Anticipatory or reactive planned relocation has recently gained traction as a disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation measure. Fiji developed national guidelines on planned relocation in 2018, which are now being translated into standard operating procedures. In the same year, Vanuatu published a national policy on climate change and disaster-induced displacement, which addresses the issue of planned relocation. Recent studies by the Platform on Disaster Displacement, the UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law and the International Organization for Migration identified hundreds of cases of disaster- and climate-related relocation projects, indicating that efforts are underway across all continents.

Enhancing the availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration across borders is one of the explicit goals to which States committed when they adopted the GCM (Objective 5). Humanitarian visa and temporary protection schemes, or temporary work permits, could be used to admit persons affected by sudden-onset disasters in situations where adaptation in or return to their country of origin may be possible at a later stage, while visa options for permanent residence are a tool for situations where the country of origin has become uninhabitable. Work is underway in the context of the UN Network on Migration to map countries' follow-up to and implementation of the GCM in national policy and practice. Agreements on the free movement of persons have a particularly interesting potential at regional and sub-regional levels. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), for example, recently finalised a

Protocol which makes free movement of persons in the Horn of Africa region explicitly available for persons affected by disasters once it enters into force. In South and Central America, governments have already adopted guidelines on and guides to effective practices to harmonise immigration laws to make domestic practices more consistent and predictable. Meanwhile, in the South Pacific region, discussions on developing a regional human mobility framework have started.

Protecting the displaced: States continue to unanimously recognise the UN Guiding Principles as an important international framework for protecting IDPs and the number of countries incorporating them in national laws and policies is growing. The legally binding 2009 Kampala Convention on the assistance and protection of IDPs in Africa explicitly includes people internally displaced in the context of climate change. Overall, however, the 2021 HLP report concluded that "there has been a collective failure to prevent, address and resolve internal displacement".⁷ This is particularly true for those displaced during weather- and climate-related disasters as international attention tends to focus on displacement linked to armed conflict.

International commitments to granting persons displaced across borders (in the context of disasters and climate change) the right to be admitted and not sent back – and to ensuring their right to livelihoods, services and other conditions necessary for a life in dignity – remain largely absent, and prospects for progress in the near future are slim. For the time being, this leaves the task of improving this protection to courts and human rights mechanisms. The 2019 decision of the UN Human Rights Committee in the case of *Teitiota v New Zealand* opens up interesting perspectives. While concluding that climate-related conditions do not yet threaten life in Kiribati, the Committee recognised that the right to life may prohibit the deportation of people to countries where adverse impacts of climate change do create life-threatening conditions. The creation of a mandate for a Special Rapporteur on the promotion and

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Floods have damaged and destroyed homes in and around Satkhira district, Bangladesh.

protection of human rights in the context of climate change by the Human Rights Council in October 2021 further highlights the importance of human rights for people affected by the impacts of global heating.

Conditions for effective action at scale

As this overview and the accompanying articles in this issue of *Forced Migration Review* indicate, we have clearly not reached a stage where action has a sufficiently deep and far-reaching impact. Regarding solutions for IDPs, the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement has identified a series of elements that must be in place to achieve progress at scale:

First, country-led action: Governments must assume their primary responsibility for preventing displacement, protecting and assisting IDPs, and finding solutions to end displacement. This can only be done effectively if governments integrate displacement into national and local development planning and institutionalise a whole-of-government approach to ensure comprehensive, coordinated action by all relevant authorities. At the same time, the international community must create

mechanisms to ensure predictable technical and financial support and provide for peer-to-peer learning opportunities.

Second, whole-of-society approach:

Communities at risk of displacement, and IDPs and the communities hosting them, must be seen as people with rights, agency and capacity. Their involvement must go beyond being consulted. Community-based planning and action, and systematic involvement of local civil society and private sector capacities, are key to success; this should include drawing on traditional knowledge.

Third, a UN system that is fit for purpose:

To increase the effectiveness of international support, there needs to be a fundamental shift from a predominantly humanitarian approach to internal displacement to a primarily development-oriented approach. This requires clarifying the responsibilities of development actors and enhancing overall accountability within the UN system. Strong leadership by Resident Coordinators is needed in order to overcome competition among UN agencies, and to ensure collaborative UN action to support governments in preventing, managing and resolving displacement.

Finally, predictable and accessible

financing: There is a need to significantly scale up financial support for displacement-sensitive climate action, including through improved access for affected countries to the Green Climate Fund and similar financing mechanisms.

These conditions for effective action at scale are relevant beyond the search for durable solutions for IDPs. They are also essential to reducing displacement risk and strengthening the resilience and adaptation capacities of affected communities. They set an agenda for enabling stakeholders to move from international commitments to prevent, manage and resolve internal and transboundary displacement to concrete actions relevant for the millions of people at risk or already displaced in the context of disasters and the adverse effects of climate change.

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