



Climate Induced Migration

Background

It is difficult to establish a clear causal connection between the adverse effects of climate change and the movement of people. Individuals or communities may decide to relocate due to a multitude of reasons. Poverty, loss of livelihoods, environmental degradation, human rights abuses, disasters, violence or conflict are just some reasons that compel people to move. However, there is growing scientific evidence that anthropogenic climate change is increasing the likelihood of weather-related disasters. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), the number of disaster events that displaced people has increased significantly since 2016, reaching almost 1,600 events in 2018. It has recorded a total of 7,000 such events from 2008 and 2018 that resulted in 265 million internally displaced people, more than three times the figure for conflict and violence. According to IDMC, weather-related hazards account for more than 87 per cent of this total while geophysical hazards (e.g. earthquakes, volcanic eruptions) account for the rest. As climate change accelerates and populations rise in areas exposed to storms and floods, the IDMC warns that ever more people are at risk of being displaced.[1] In addition, climate change also accelerates environmental degradation, exacerbating competition over scarce resources and the risk of violent conflict.[2] To make matters worse, those who are least responsible for the crisis and less able to cope with and respond to hazards or shocks – including the poor, women, children, the elderly and other marginalized groups – are also the most likely to be displaced.

The risks faced by persons forced to move due to climate change are similar to those faced by all migrants and displaced persons in vulnerable situations. As they relocate, their vulnerabilities are compounded by the circumstances they face in transit, at borders, and in their host destinations. This is especially true for people displaced by disasters. Once they cross country borders, they lose their legal status and unfortunately, whatever human rights protections they enjoy as citizens of their countries. In general, cross-border migrants or displaced persons who are unable to have access to safe, affordable and regular migration options are likely to experience difficulty in exercising their rights throughout the entire migration process. They may be denied entry through punitive border control regimes; they may be subject to exploitation, difficult working conditions, marginalization and human rights violations, especially if they have irregular status. They may face criminalization, expulsion, xenophobia, discrimination, social exclusion and/or persecution, including heightened threats of arbitrary detention, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, violent attacks, rape and torture. They are likely to experience difficulty in gaining access to basic necessities, such as food, water, adequate health care and housing. Increased exposure to disease, loss of social safety networks, stigmatization and discrimination all have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of persons moving in response to climate change.

Even when the decision to migrate is part of an adaptation strategy or in the context of planned relocation, the movement of people can pose a grave threat to the enjoyment of their rights and their existence as peoples. For example, the displacement of indigenous peoples and the potential loss of their traditional lands, territories and resources threaten their cultural survival, traditional livelihoods and right to self-determination.

Understanding human mobility and how they relate to different climate shocks and stresses is key to developing effective policy responses, adaptation plans and investments. However, this is falling between the policy gaps, as existing international frameworks and national policies are yet to make that crucial link between climate change impacts, environmental degradation and human mobility. It is therefore important to underscore the urgent need for international cooperation and solidarity in responding to the complex and growing challenges posed by climate change and the forced movement of people.

Gender Perspectives

Climate-induced displacement, amongst other human mobility issues, is a gendered phenomenon – which means that men, women and transgender are disproportionately impacted by the causes and consequences, in terms of access to services, security and justice. However, policy discourses and research around the same regard these as gender-neutral – failing to find interlinkages between migration, ecosystems and gender. The fact that disaggregated data on gender and other identifiers when it comes to climate migration is hardly present in most climate change studies is telling.

Structural inequalities, including gender inequality, impede the mobility of some and force the displacement of others. Those who lack resources & networks to escape deteriorating environmental conditions may be unable to move and therefore trapped in conditions of vulnerability. When disaster hits communities already grappling with poverty, landlessness and joblessness, the massive destruction of lives and livelihoods due to climate breakdown dramatically increases the vulnerabilities of those who are already at risk.

There is a gender perspective when considering the connection between climate risk, migration and displacement. In many countries' women face social, economic and political barriers that limit their coping capacity when affected by climate shocks and stresses and may also limit their ability to migrate. Climate-induced displacement exposes women to an increased risk of violence, trafficking and conflict. For instance, women and girls in the Philippines were already vulnerable to sexual violence and trafficking due to high poverty rates. Their displacement during super typhoon Haiyan has only made it worse.

According to a 2018 study by the Sierra Club, “displacement often creates conditions that are conducive to gender-based violence and other violations of human rights, such as sexual harassment or physical abuse. For example, after 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, women faced “increased incidents of sexual and domestic violence, forced prostitution, and sex and labour trafficking in cyclone-affected areas.” Challenges to safety and security persist outside of formal internal displacement camps; a 3.5-fold increase in the rate of gender-based violence was reported for women who were displaced following Hurricane Katrina (U.S.), mostly driven by violence inflicted by an intimate partner. In planned relocation processes, sexual harassment of women by authorities has also been reported.” [3]

There are a number of normative frameworks that tackle the nexus between climate change and human mobility, including the UNFCCC, Platform for Disaster and Displacement, Global Compact on Refugees, Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction. However, it appears that the international community lacks the political will to address the challenge of upholding and strengthening the human rights protections of people displaced by climate change. Said frameworks all acknowledged the issues and challenges, yet none went beyond declarations of principles, affirmations of existing norms and standards, or acknowledgement of good practices.

Governments appear reluctant to agree to new obligations or duties for which they can be held accountable for. Whether on the matter of providing additional financing to support a comprehensive protection agenda beyond what has already been pledged (but yet to be realized) under existing mechanisms, or to host climate-displaced people, States seem most resolute in stalling negotiations on these areas.

It is clear that the current political and economic context is not conducive to reaching agreement on a new legally binding instrument to protect the rights of climate migrants.

Demands

Therefore, the WGC highlights the following key asks at #COP25:

- Negotiations on displacement, migration and planned relocation should be a standalone agenda item to the COP process so that a global governance mechanism could be established. Merging this to the Loss and Damage workstream undermined the gravity and severity of the issue. It is unlikely that the Warsaw International Mechanism would be able to adequately address the issue.

- Negotiations on displacement and migration should not be limited only within the mandate and timeframe of the Paris Agreement. The scope and measures for addressing displacement and migration should be reflected throughout the UNFCCC.
- There should be an independent, stand-alone legal protocol under the function and authority of the Conference of the Parties (COPs) of the UNFCCC. Such a protocol should be drawn on the basis of the widely-agreed principles of the UNFCCC such as 'common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capacities' (CBDR-RC) and should focus both at international and domestic levels to ensure comprehensive protection from the impacts of climate change, and guarantee protection of substantive human rights as per international law.
- Optimization of of Human Rights Treaty Bodies (HRTB), including the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Committee on the Rights of Migrant Workers (CMW) and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CPRD), in seeking innovative ways to tackle the issue of human rights violations as a direct impact of climate breakdown.

References:

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