



Climate Induced Migration

Background

Climate change is devastating communities' lives and livelihoods across the world. Extreme weather events such as cyclones, super typhoons, heatwaves and massive bushfires impact the environment, people and economies. Climate change has contributed to the growing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, especially in recent years. In 2020 alone, direct economic losses and damages from notable natural disaster events were assessed at USD 268 billion, and have displaced more than 40.5 million people.¹

Projections of [200 million climate migrants](#) by 2050 seemed overwhelming when first released in 1990, but today this figure already seems quite conservative. In the coming decades, millions or even billions of people will be displaced and forced to migrate because of the climate crisis, many times more in the Global South than in the Global North. Most of them will likely relocate within their own countries, and few will move beyond national borders. But what is particularly striking is that it is no longer just the poorest regions of the world where the climate crisis and displacement are so interlinked. Seven of the [ten countries](#) most affected by climate risks in 2018 are from the developing world, although three developed countries have also made it to the list. This again proves that climate change knows no borders, although it has differentiated impacts depending on levels of wealth inequality, gender, race, and other considerations.²

Migration as a survival strategy, in the face of displacement due to climate change impacts, comes with its own risks and challenges. People who are displaced and forced to migrate are usually already vulnerable and face limited options, capacities and resources. In addition to experiencing loss of loved ones, homes, heritage, mobility, territory and sources of livelihood, communities displaced by extreme weather events face few options.

The Women and Gender Constituency is one of the nine stakeholder groups of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), consisting currently of 33 women's and environmental civil society organizations and a network of more than 600 individuals and feminist organizations or movements focusing on gender equality and women's human rights to achieve climate justice.

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 borders, migrants often lose documentation statuses and associated human rights protections they hold 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 are often denied entry through punitive border control regimes, are subject to exploitation, difficult working conditions, marginalization and human rights violations, especially if they have irregular documentation statuses. Climate migrants 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. With the Covid-19 pandemic, they are especially at risk in overcrowded relocation camps, with very limited access to food, clean water, sanitation, and healthcare.

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 have yet to make that crucial link between climate change impacts, environmental degradation and human mobility. It is therefore critical 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.



Covid-19 perspective of climate induced migration

Migration, climate change and public health are three key policy challenges of this early 21st century. Far from being isolated, these challenges are linked with one another, both directly and indirectly. The connections between them have never been as apparent as within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: borders and immobility played a central role in the response, and COVID-19 has been tied to climate change, for instance, with regards to the temporary positive impact of lockdown measures on **CO2 emissions**. In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, many have suggested that similar measures should be replicated in the fight against climate change, while others have deemed this as misguided

and pointed to the potentially counterproductive effects of such claims. Lastly, physical distancing requirements are expected to further complicate responses to climate-related displacement (as recently confirmed in East India and Bangladesh, where Cyclone Amphan struck).

In addition to such relationships, a uniting feature of these three phenomena is the way they each have been labelled, perceived, and reacted to from a crisis perspective. Crisis framing is not just about how each topic is covered in the media or discussed in the public eye: crisis narratives translate into, and justify, short-term, ad-hoc responses instead of preemptive, integrated approaches that may be more appropriate given the global and systemic nature of these phenomena. The opposite is equally true: emergency measures (e.g. evacuations, lockdowns, state-of-emergency declarations) can also play a role in creating and exacerbating crises. Moreover, measures in each crisis, whether health, climate or migration-related, have resulted in calls for, or the actual, restriction of migration and mobility, whether to contain the spread of a virus, to lower carbon emissions, or to restrict incoming migration flows deemed massive and/or sudden.

Although migration, climate change, and public health can be subjected to emergencies that are deemed temporary (such as rapid arrivals of migrants, sudden-onset disasters, or epidemics), this does not mean that only short-term, ad hoc measures are needed or should be implemented to address such events. On the contrary, such interventions need to be reconciled with longer-term, preemptive, measures that better correspond to the structural nature of these phenomena.

As marginalized and vulnerable populations have remained on the losing end when it comes to mobility restrictions, the adverse effects of environmental change and healthcare provisions, it is important to recognize that potential 'crisis' events are far from disconnected or fortuitous. We could argue that this 'colliding of crises', made apparent by COVID-19, forms, in fact, a continuum of causes and effects which must be treated in an integrated manner. The COVID-19 pandemic risks worsening the precarious living conditions already faced by millions of IDPs and migrants (e.g. in Burkina Faso, Venezuela, and Yemen), exacerbating food insecurity for millions (a situation that is already commonplace in the Sahel region due to the effects of climate change, conflict and economic shocks) and derailing much-needed global efforts to tackle climate change as governments focus on economic recovery following the pandemic.

As long as we refuse to perceive these issues as interconnected and to proactively tackle the deeply entrenched inequalities at the societal level through solidarity mechanisms, we will remain blinded by short-term visions and prone to shocks during forthcoming global 'crises'.³



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.”⁴

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 have shown themselves 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 hosting climate-displaced people, Parties 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 demands at COP26:

- ➔ **Negotiations on displacement, migration and planned relocation should be a stand-alone agenda item to the COP process so that a global governance mechanism could be established.** Merging this with the Loss and Damage workstream undermined the gravity and severity of the issue. It is unlikely that the Warsaw International Mechanism nor the Santiago Network on Loss & Damage 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.
- ➔ There must be optimization 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

- 1 Ponserre, S., & Ginnetti, J. (2019). [Disaster Displacement: A Global Review, 2008-2018 \[Thematic Report\]](#). Retrieved from Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC).
- 2 NASA Earth Observatory, [“The Impact of Climate Change on Natural Disasters”](#).
- 3 IOM Environmental Migration Portal: [“COVID-19, Climate Change and Migration: Constructing Crises, Reinforcing Borders”](#).
- 4 [Women on the Move in a Changing Climate: A discussion paper on gender, climate & mobility](#) [Sierra Club], December 2018.

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