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Topic: Human mobility in the context of climate change, natural disasters, and conflict

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What is Human mobility in the context of climate change, natural disasters, and conflict?

Environmental change and environmental degradation - desertification, deforestation, land degradation, climate change and water scarcity - are fundamentally redrawing the map of the world. Environmental degradation affects where and how people are able to live. It drives human displacement and forced migration by threatening lives over the short term and making people's livelihoods untenable over the long term, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable.

According to the World Bank¹ climate change will push tens of millions of people to migrate within their countries by 2050 in three regions - Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America that together represent 55 percent of the developing world's population.

Climate-driven "out-migration" will occur in areas where livelihood systems are increasingly compromised by climate change impacts. These "hotspots" are increasingly marginal areas and can include low-lying cities, coastlines vulnerable to sea level rise, and areas of high water and agriculture stress.

Climate change impacts will pose one of the greatest threats to people, ecosystems, and development goals over the coming decades (IPCC 2014).

Climate change will intensify environmental degradation and natural hazards in many regions (UNEP 2016). In the next few decades, climate change impacts will work together with other stressors, such as pollution and overexploitation of resources, affecting a world population that is both urbanizing (UNDESA 2015) and growing rapidly (UNDESA 2017).

Climate change undermines human, national and global security by acting as a "threat multiplier". The increasing frequency and intensity of droughts, floods and storms exacerbate food and water insecurity. Together with sea-level rise, they increase competition for resources and drive displacement and migration. All this can lead to human insecurity.

In its presidential statement on 20 July 2011 (S/PRST/2011/15), the United Nations Security Council, feared "that possible adverse effects of climate change may, in the long run, aggravate certain existing threats to international peace and security." Rather than constituting a direct threat to peace and security, climate change predominantly acts as a multi-dimensional threat multiplier exacerbating conditions and factors that can heighten the risk of conflict, crime and violent extremism.

¹ Groundswell: preparing for internal climate migration, World Bank, Washington DC, 2018

In the 2015 Paris Agreement, it is stressed that climate change “represents an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies and the planet”. According to the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Africa is the continent that will be most affected by climate change although it contributes the least to it. With large swaths of desert, widespread poverty, and limited adaptive capacity, many regions in the African continent and their communities are particularly vulnerable.

While the effects of climate change may constitute a direct challenge to peace and security, conflict and violent extremism can also further worsen the environmental conditions of the affected areas. Not only does war disrupt social and economic life, it can also destroy vital agricultural infrastructure and know-how, cause pollution and degradation in land, forests, rivers and lakes, worsen the impact of drought and floods, and hasten desertification. War also tends to erode the ability of countries and communities to protect the environment and carry out activities to mitigate the effects of climate change.

When environmental change affects the drivers of human movements, it is referred to as environmental mobility or environmental movement (Foresight 2011). As established in the Cancun Adaptation Framework (UNFCCC 2010), these terms encompass the categories of migration, displacement, and planned relocation.

According to the global report on internal displacement (IDMC 2019) heightened vulnerability and exposure to sudden onset hazards resulted in 17.2 million new disaster displacements in 144 countries and territories. Storms, particularly tropical cyclones, and monsoon rains forced more people from their homes in the East Asia and Pacific region than anywhere else. The 3.8 million new displacements recorded in the Philippines were a reminder of the country’s high exposure. The monsoon season took a heavy toll in South Asia, where 2.7 million new displacements were recorded in India alone.

Unfortunately, the global number of people displaced by slow onset disasters remains unknown. Drought conditions monitored in just nine countries - Afghanistan, Brazil, Burundi, Ethiopia, Iraq, Madagascar, Mongolia, Senegal and Somalia - were responsible for at least 760,000 new displacements during the year, a clear underestimate.

High temperatures and low precipitation levels also contributed to unprecedented wildfires from the US to Greece to Australia, displacing hundreds of thousands of people, severely damaging property and preventing swift returns.

The East Asia and Pacific region accounted for most of the internal displacement associated with disasters recorded worldwide in 2018.

Typhoons, monsoon rains and floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions triggered 9.3 million new displacements.

The Philippines alone recorded 3.8 million new displacements associated with disasters, more than any other country worldwide.

The South American region is frequently affected by disasters and extreme events, as climate change is believed to affect the frequency and intensity of weather-related hazards (Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2017), causing floods, droughts and hailstorms. Climatic

phenomena were responsible for 88 per cent of the disasters in the region in the past five decades (Pivetta, 2016). According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014), during the past decades of the twentieth century, unusual extreme weather events have severely affected South America, and together with the socioeconomic characteristics of population and geographic features, contribute to the strengthening of the vulnerability of human systems to natural hazards.

The scale of human mobility triggered by rapid-onset natural hazards is largely determined by the location of homes in areas prone to their impacts, and people's underlying vulnerability to shocks and stresses that can make their homes uninhabitable disrupt or destroy their livelihoods and leave them with few safe and voluntary solutions to their predicament.

However, while vulnerability and low levels of resilience and capacity are currently key drivers of disaster displacement risk, exposure to hazards is likely to increase in the region in the foreseeable future. This is a result of - among other drivers - population growth and urbanization, environmental degradation and climate change. In order to mitigate displacement risk, it is imperative to intensify efforts to reduce people's vulnerability to hazards by addressing factors related to low levels of human development, which are also core drivers of displacement in other contexts. Failure to do so will heighten vulnerability and foster instability, increasing the risk of vicious cycles of displacement.²

Climate change, in tandem with drivers of people's increasing exposure and vulnerability, is expected to heighten the risk of human mobility globally in the coming years and decades as extreme weather events become more frequent and intense³.

Meanwhile, armed conflicts lead to further flows of people fleeing violence either within their countries (internal displacement) or across international borders (refugees). Analysis of civil wars over the past 70 years indicate that at least 40 per cent are linked to the contested control or use of natural resources such as land, water, minerals or oil.⁴

It is now obvious, that environmental issues are one factor in human mobility. But, what is different now is that the degree of environmental degradation and the wherewithal to move are combining to create a push and pull effect that is on a scale never seen before.⁵

Understanding movement of populations caused by environmental degradation in Africa

Disasters triggered significant displacement elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, forcing almost 2.6 million people to flee their homes due to drought, cyclones, and floods in 2018.

Small-scale and frequent disasters go relatively unnoticed as conflict takes centre stage, but what these localized crises illustrate is that displacement is more about an endogenous problem of poverty and lack of development than the consequence of external threats posed by natural hazards. Sub-Saharan Africa's population and urbanisation rate are predicted to increase dramatically in

² IDMC, Global Disaster Displacement Risk: A baseline for future work, October 2017, p.18

³ IPCC, Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers, pp.10-12,16

⁴ UNEP (2009) *From Conflict to Peacebuilding: the role of natural resources and the environment*, Geneva: UNEP. Years have been updated by the author.

⁵ Ionesco, D., Mokhnacheva, D. & Gemenne, F. (2017) "The Atlas of Environmental Migration", London: Earthscan

the coming decades, putting more people at risk of disasters. If unaddressed, poverty, vulnerability and climate change will increase the risk of population movements.

A combination of climate change and increasing exposure and vulnerability is expected to exacerbate this trend in the coming decades as extreme weather hazards become more frequent and intense.⁶

But the picture is complicated. The most vulnerable groups often lack the means or connections to move, and may be trapped in place. Others, such as pastoralists, in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa regions, rely on seasonal migration as a livelihood strategy. Meanwhile, the planned relocation of populations in the face of a risk such as major land degradation can act as a release valve, reducing environmental pressures on fragile ecosystems but also, in effect, “exporting” their environmental footprint elsewhere.

It is also important to remember that displacement/migration itself can have environmental impacts, causing environmental degradation that can prolong the humanitarian emergency or worsening relationships with host communities. Rapid urbanization or poorly managed refugee camps and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) settlements can put pressure on scarce water, energy and food resources, lead to uncontrolled waste disposal, and put refugees and migrants in direct competition with local communities.⁷

Tackling environmental migration globally

In many countries, the issue of irregular migration and forced displacement has rocketed up the political agenda, attracting attention from academics, policymakers and the development/humanitarian community.

In November 2016, the Hugo Observatory on Environment, Migration and Climate at the University of Liege became the world’s first academic entity dedicated to the topic of environmental migration.⁸ This reflects an increasingly sophisticated understanding of environmental displacement as well as growing research and best practice in the fields of climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.

Meanwhile, migration and displacement issues have been increasingly reflected in the new international agreements concluded in 2015 that set out much of the development framework for the next 15 years. The Sustainable Development Goals, for example, include a commitment to facilitate “orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration” as part of Goal 10 to reduce inequality within and among countries.⁹

The Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, also finalized in 2015, creates a global framework for reducing disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health, aiming to substantially reduce the number of displaced people globally by 2030.¹⁰ Finally, migration issues

⁶ Africa Report on Internal Displacement, 2018

⁷ Recovery, reconstruction and the addressing of energy and shelter needs of displaced people demands natural resources. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 36 million trees from the Virunga National Park were used to meet the cooking and shelter needs of refugees between 1994 and 1996.

⁸ For more information see: <http://labos.ulg.ac.be/hugo/>

⁹ *Sustainable Development Goal 10, Target 7* “Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies (Accessed 7 April 2017: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg10>)

¹⁰ UNISDR (2015) *Reading the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2015-2030* (Accessed 7 April 2017: http://www.unisdr.org/files/46694_readingsendaiframeworkfordisasterri.pdf)

were formally integrated in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change with the creation of a Taskforce under the Warsaw Mechanism on Loss and Damage to develop recommendations for integrated approaches to prevent, minimize and address climate change displacement.

A number of initiatives directly seek to address aspects of environmental displacement itself. The Platform on Disaster Displacement is a state-led process that endeavours to forge consensus on the rights and protection needs of people displaced across borders in the context of disasters and climate change.¹¹ The International Organization for Migration, meanwhile, has created a special division devoted to Migration, Environment and Climate Change that pushes for greater international cooperation in this field.

On 19 September 2016, the United Nations General Assembly convened a high-level meeting on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants as a way to build international consensus to address the growing challenge of international migration and the increasing flow of refugees. The meeting adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants.

Beyond the usual worthy statements, which themselves reflected something of a high-water mark for the political prominence of migration and displacement, the declaration included two important annexes. The first was a framework for a comprehensive response framework for refugees. The second was a roadmap towards the achievement of a Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which was adopted at an inter-governmental conference on international migration in Marrakech, Morocco in December 2018. The hope is that these frameworks will create a new, improved international response to irregular migration and refugee flows.

In Africa, governments have made a series of commitments on collecting and sharing data as part of efforts to prevent internal displacement and protect and assist Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), incorporating the principles of international law into national legislation and regional frameworks such as the Kampala Convention¹².

Dealing with environmental degradation and human mobility

Climate change, environmental degradation and mismanagement contribute to many of the political, economic and social drivers of conflicts. We need to better understand, and mitigate, those complex and inter-dependent factors. Ultimately, unless we can deal with long-term environmental vulnerability, huge numbers of people displaced every year could become the “new normal”. Fundamentally, we have to find a way of doing more than just responding to recurring crises.

The environmental community has an important role to play in building awareness of the ecological drivers of conflicts and mobility; strengthening the capacity of communities and countries to withstand shocks and environmental change; and helping to plan the relocation of communities likely to be displaced by unavoidable environmental change.

¹¹ Formerly known as the Nansen Initiative: <http://disasterdisplacement.org/>

¹² AU, African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, adopted 23 October 2009

Ultimately climate induced human mobility is not just a political challenge. We need to think of it as a development challenge and, critically, an environmental management challenge. The scale of possible future displacement under even moderate climate change scenarios means that environment, humanitarian and displacement-focused actors must work together to build people's resilience in a changing world.

Reliable data on population movements/human mobility is vital to ensure a timely and well-targeted operational and policy response. Evidence of the multiple causes of displacement and its impact on development priorities such as food security, education, health and the protection of vulnerable groups can inform more holistic action by governments and aid agencies.

Early warning systems and disaster risk reduction, preparedness and management systems also rely on credible data. Baseline information and consistent monitoring can build up an understanding of the needs and coping strategies of people in gradually deteriorating conditions such as those brought on by drought, which in turn can inform the development of prevention and preparedness plans. The identification of unusual or intensified migration patterns can serve as an indicator of the need for interventions at least to mitigate a crisis.

The next few years will be critical for the development of a more effective, compassionate and rights-based approach to human mobility. We need to work more proactively to reduce risks and avoid merely reactive responses.