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Local Responses to Climate-Forced Displacement & Migration: Uniting Mayors and City Leaders as Global Champions



Introduction

Climate-forced displacement is emerging as the human face of the climate crisis. According to some estimates, by 2050, some 200 million people are expected to be forced to leave their homes for climate-related reasons such as rising sea levels,¹ increasing resource scarcity, acute desertification, and greater frequency and severity of extreme weather events.

¹ “Environmental refugees: an emergent security issue”, Myers (2005)

Worse still, entire nations in the Pacific Ocean are facing complete destruction. Most of Tuvalu, a nation of some 12,000 people, will likely become uninhabitable by 2050, making it the first nation state to disappear due to climate change. Other countries, including the Maldives, Marshall Islands and Kiribati are also facing such existential threats.

Climate change has already become a key driver of displacement. In 2018 alone, it was estimated that 17.2 million people were newly displaced as a result of disasters linked to natural hazards, most of which were climate and weather-related.²

Growing urbanization will amplify the impact of climate-forced displacement. People are likely to migrate to cities in the face of climate change. However, unplanned or sharp acceleration in urbanization puts a strain on urban infrastructure.

While climate-forced displacement is a looming reality, it has not yet reached crisis levels. As such, this human dimension of the climate crisis has yet to capture the international community's attention. The multilateral system has been slow to respond to this climate change–displacement nexus.

The absence of global champions and leadership has meant a scarcity of common definitions, international norms and policies, much less a robust protection regime for those displaced by climate change, including internally displaced persons.

As such, there is an opportunity for local leaders to empower Mayors—who are best-placed to address local challenges associated with climate displacement—to press forward a people-centered approach to climate action and to provide the needed leadership to address climate-forced displacement & migration.

² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre: Global Report on Internal Displacement in 2018

To facilitate local leadership on this issue, the researchers conducted an assessment of the level of awareness among Mayors and local leaders about how climate–forced displacement and migration is affecting their communities, as well as the extent to which they are preparing, with or without support from other levels of government, to protect displaced communities and help receiving ones. The research was designed also to identify the desired, and required, city leadership and to propose a toolkit with options for leaders to address the issue of climate–forced displacement.

The research for this report is thus based on mixed methods. Data comes from multiple sources, including secondary literature, official UNFCCC, World Bank, International Organization for Migration and other reports, some 20 semi-structured interviews in focus groups with Mayors and local officials over Zoom, and surveys of an additional 15 Mayors and local leaders on the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) Virtual Platform.

Understanding Climate-Forced Migration

Quantifying climate–forced migration is challenging. There are multiple drivers of migration and a lack of clear standards for data collection. It is challenging to know whether it is climate change that is the main factor triggering displacement, rather than other causes, or whether this is in combination with other factors. Nevertheless, there is some data on displacement due to slow–onset environmental processes, such as drought or sea–level rise, albeit most of it based on case studies (qualitative). There is also improvement in data collection over the past decade, allowing us to begin to grasp the magnitude of future climate–forced migration. What we do know is that the cascading impacts linked to climate change are already shifting patterns of migration and will increasingly do so, especially in terms of causing internal displacement.

Current Trends and Projections

In 2018, the World Bank developed a new model to project internal climate migration, which incorporates slow-onset climate change factors (water stress, crop failure, sea level rise) into future population distributions for three regions: Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America.³ The main findings of the World Bank's Groundswell report were as follows: in the absence of policy action, climate change could result in the movement of 143 million people by 2050. Sub-Saharan Africa stands to be most affected, with internal climate displacement expected to account for some 86 million persons or close to 4% of the region's population by 2050. Internal climate displacement in South Asia and Latin America could number some 40 million and 17 million persons respectively.

The World Bank estimates are likely too conservative. Only three regions are covered, while the report exclusively models internal migration (rather than cross-border) and excludes displacements due to extreme weather events as well as planned relocation. Already, in 2018, 17.2 million people in 144 countries and territories were newly displaced in the context of disasters within their own country, while the first half of 2019 saw 7 million new internal displacements due to disaster. Additionally, governments are already relocating communities because of the climate crisis—tens of thousands of people have been relocated in Haiti and in Vietnam, hundreds of thousands in Ethiopia, about a million in the Philippines and several million in China.

At the same time, migration is not always an option. Mobility, when possible, is often regarded as an adaptation of last resort.⁴ Attachment to place, possible negative policy incentives, and other reasons, may lead millions of people either unwilling or unable to flee strained environments, leaving them in areas of high risk. According to the

³ World Bank - Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration (2018)

⁴ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre: Global Report on Internal Displacement in 2019

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), vulnerable populations have the least opportunity to move, or do so only under duress or extremely distressed conditions.

These trends will make climate-forced displacement, planned relocation, and immobility important policy concerns in the coming years.

Climate Change as a Driver of Forced Displacement

Scientific evidence has shown that climate change expresses itself not only through slow shifts in average environmental conditions over relatively long periods, but also by more extreme weather events. According to the IPCC, this has led to increased intensity and size of climate change–related environmental impacts on human communities and ecosystems. No longer are these impacts episodic or localized. The cascading impacts linked to climate change are already shifting patterns of migration and will increasingly do so, especially in terms of causing internal displacement.

At the same time, environmental factors do not always lead directly to displacement. Instead, environmental pressure leads to land competition, impoverishment, and encroachment on ecologically fragile areas. Climate–forced displacement will not occur in isolation but in conjunction with migration already driven by economic, social, or security reasons.

Various studies and research have shown that the substantial majority of persons forcibly displaced by climate change will try to remain in their own country. When the migration is cross–border, the persons forcibly displaced by climate change tend to stay within their neighboring region, where cultural, religious or family ties are more easily maintained.⁵ It is rare when climate–displaced persons leave their own region.

⁵ “Climate change, migration and displacement”, Overseas Development Institute (2017)

The main exception to this trend is Central America, where the role of climate variability and unpredictable weather patterns has been recognized as one among other key drivers in increased migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to the United States in recent years.⁶

In terms of the regions that would be most profoundly affected by climate-forced displacement, current studies have identified five areas: i) dry parts and coastal areas of Africa; ii) the river systems in Asia; iii) parts in the interior and coast of Mexico and Central America, iv) the Caribbean; and v) low-lying islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. These “hotspots” will then create knock-on impacts for climate-sensitive economic sectors, particularly agriculture, and on the resiliency of urban infrastructure and social support systems in both rural and urban areas.

Impact on Urban Areas and Receiving Cities

Growing urbanization will amplify the impact of climate-forced displacement. If they decide to move, people are likely to migrate to cities because cities tend to offer social assistance systems superior to those offered in rural areas. Cities also offer diverse income opportunities away from agriculture and allow for better access to education and healthcare services.

However, unplanned or sharp acceleration in urbanization increases air and water pollution, accelerates land degradation and the loss of biodiversity. It has forced millions of people to live in slums without clean water, sanitation and electricity. Already, the global population is expected to reach 9.8 billion in 2050, with populations doubling in the 47 least developed countries. By 2050, two-thirds of the global population is expected to be living in urban areas, the majority in Asia and Africa.

⁶ “Recent Migration to the United States from Central America: Frequently Asked Questions”, U.S. Congressional Research Service (2019)

Increased urbanization, due to climate–forced displacement, may result in increased urban poverty and inadequate housing, as well as limiting access to education and services. There are also health concerns—chaotic urbanization is associated with the spread of disease. Migration and displacement can undermine vaccination programs. Finally, rapid and poorly managed urbanization also gives rise to environmental issues.

While increased climate-forced migration will put pressure on urban infrastructure and service, it may also provide opportunities. There may be positive spillover effects from urban agglomeration—the increased concentration of workers in cities and metropolitan areas—and potential economies of scale. Local leadership will need to be prepared, however, to take advantage of these opportunities and will likely need planning assistance to do so.

Protection Gaps for Climate Displaced Persons

The use of different terms to describe persons displaced by climate impacts, fears around the emotionally–charged issue of migration, vastly divergent estimates of the likely scale of climate-forced displacement, and lack of dialogue between ecologists and social scientists have lent a great deal of uncertainty to the protection of these populations.

Terminology & Definitions

One issue undermining efforts to address the climate change–displacement nexus has been the absence of an agreed definition. Terms such as “environmental refugees” or “climate refugees” have been suggested, however using the term “refugee” has been controversial, as environmental factors are non-discriminatory and no form of “persecution” is involved in these situations.

Article 1A of the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees defines refugees as those who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race,

religion, nationality or political affiliation, are outside the country of their nationality and unable to return owing to this fear. However, because this definition excludes situations in which people are forced to move for reasons beyond their control—e.g. slow onset and extreme weather disasters—the “refugee” label and accompanying protections, as in the case of climate displacement, are not applicable.

Given these difficulties, UNHCR has cautiously moved towards the term “environmentally displaced persons,” defining them as those: “who are displaced from or who feel obliged to leave their usual place of residence, because their lives, livelihoods and welfare have been placed at serious risk as a result of adverse environmental, ecological or climatic processes and events.” To avoid confusion with other categories, UNHCR notes that such a definition makes no reference to cross-border movement, nor to displacement related to persecution, armed conflict or human rights violations.

In 2007, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) proposed a working definition of what it calls “environmental migrants.” According to the IOM, these are defined as “persons or groups of persons who, for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.”

In the environmental space, experts have also used the terms “environmentally-induced displacement” and “environmental forced displacement”. In the migration field, we have seen the use of various terminologies, including “climate migration” (which is now often used by IOM particularly in follow-up to the adoption of the Paris Agreement), “climate-induced migration”, “climate-forced migration”, and “environmental forced migration.”

All the above terminologies are descriptive terms, not a status that confers obligations on nation states.

Limitations of Existing International Frameworks

There is also a lack of definitional clarity for those who may be displaced from small island states such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, which face complete inundation by rising sea levels. While the 1954 Convention on statelessness defines a stateless person as an individual “who is not considered a national by any State under the operation of its law,” it is unclear if the physical disappearance of territory would then refer to a non-existent State. This is an unprecedented situation, and it remains unclear how the international community will address these individuals, much less afford them some form of international protection.

Possible points of legal reference include the 2009 African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention), the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement adopted by the UN in 1998, and the Nansen Initiative. The Nansen Initiative is a State-led process outside the United Nations framework which could inform a basis for protecting the rights of people susceptible to internal displacement in the context of climate change, natural disasters or environmental stress.

These documents are not without their own complications, however. In particular, these instruments will likely not cover a person who over time becomes compelled to relocate due to a slow-onset disaster (e.g. desertification of previously arable land). This is also complicated by the fact that a number of governments have been reluctant to term persons uprooted by natural disasters as internally displaced persons (IDPs) because they fundamentally perceive IDPs as those displaced by conflict (e.g. Colombia) or may not wish to apply the Guiding Principles to them (e.g. Armenia during the 1988 earthquake).

With the support of the governments of the Maldives, Tuvalu and other Small Island Developing States (SIDS), in 2007, the Living Space for Environmental Refugees network (LiSER) suggested expanding the 1951 Refugee Convention by proposing a protocol on environmental refugees. They described environmental refugees as “persons displaced by

impacts on the environment, which include, but are not limited to, climate change, force majeure, pollution, and conditions that are forced upon the environment by state, commercial enterprises or a combination of state and commercial entities.” However, to date, UNHCR has opposed this proposal, mainly because of the resistance of most nation states to the expansion of asylum rights and the risk that renegotiating the Refugee Convention might pose to the current international system.

A Call to Action

Given the lack of legal protection for climate-forced migrants and the stalled action at the international level, Mayors and local governments are prepared to take the lead on the issue of climate-forced migration.

As part of this research project, we spoke with, interviewed, or surveyed some 30 Mayors and local leaders to a) assess their awareness of climate–forced migration in their cities, b) identify the most vulnerable populations impacted, c) determine the extent of preparedness planning at the local level, and the level of higher government support for that planning, and d) inquire about the kinds of measures or support they desire to address the challenges of climate-forced migration in their cities and fully harness the opportunities associated with mobility.

The Mayors and local leaders represented a range of towns and cities—from an African town of roughly 22,000 to major African and European cities with populations ranging from 1 to over 3 million inhabitants.

What We Learned

- Most of the local leaders, particularly of African cities and towns, are witnessing what they believe to be climate–forced migration.

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- Those local leaders recognize that the causes of migration are complex and multidimensional, yet believe that climate is a driving force of that migration.
 - Many local leaders identified the decreased viability of agricultural livelihoods due to changes in weather patterns—reduced rainfall, droughts, and increased heat, for example—as one factor pushing rural populations into cities.
 - Other “push” factors mentioned are flooding, rains, and rising sea levels that are directly impacting human settlements in these cities and forcing populations to migrate.
 - Some migrants are coming into these cities from nearby low-lying areas situated close to water bodies that are rising and threatening existing structures.
 - Cities situated in higher elevation are receiving these migrants, often in large numbers.
 - Migration to cities is putting pressure on urban infrastructure—including schools, roads, and health clinics.
 - At the same time, many communities within cities, such as informal settlements, are experiencing consistent flooding forcing residents to move.
 - Migration is pushing some up into mountainous areas, leading to deforestation and potential landslides.
 - Informal settlements along coastlines are fast-growing, leading to the destruction of mangroves, a reduction in biodiversity, and pollution of the ocean.
 - Other populations are vulnerable to outmigration because of cyclones, hurricanes and other severe weather events that have nearly decimated or completely destroyed their communities.
 - The most affected groups of people in host cities and towns represented here are children, youth, women, agricultural workers, slum dwellers, and disabled persons—those that are being displaced from their homes and communities and are forced to migrate elsewhere.

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- When they are displaced and have to migrate, vulnerable populations end up experiencing homelessness, poverty, and food insecurity. This requires local governments to respond to these challenges, putting even more pressure on infrastructure, public goods and service delivery.
 - There are impacts on cultural heritage from climate-forced migration, such as indigenous cultural and spiritual practices and culturally significant landscapes. Traditional medicinal systems are impacted when people are unable to harvest or protect their seed quantities to grow natural herbs used by the majority of disadvantaged populations.

Actions Recommended

Three broad areas of action emerged from the Mayors and local leaders that we interviewed:

A - Advocacy: Raise Awareness

Local leaders agree that climate–forced displacement and migration is not under serious discussion in their cities. Even at the national or regional level, some noted, there is very little focus on it. The topic simply does not have the sense of urgency required to address it and there is thus a need to raise awareness of the issue at the local level.

By now, virtually all local leaders and their cities are aware of and preparing to adapt to the impacts of climate change. Many are also undertaking mitigation actions, some of which are focused on the reduction of carbon and other greenhouse gases. Other efforts focus on stemming deforestation, preserving natural resources, and adding green infrastructure to urban areas. These adaptation and mitigation efforts occur both in tandem with, and separate from, national governments. In addition, local leaders participate in regional and international networks of Mayors and cities—the GPM, UCLG, MMC and C40—to share best practices and push for multilateral solutions to climate change.

At the same time, almost all of the local leaders identified the need for better data and knowledge about the intersection of climate change and migration. Some mentioned also the need for raising awareness of climate change impacts more generally for their populations. One Mayor called on local leadership to help foster a “mind change” and a “mind setting” that would help their communities to understand and better prepare for the impacts of climate change, including potential displacement.

Some local leaders spoke about the importance of women and youth in raising this awareness locally. The youth might come together to replant trees, for example, or help

communities be more resilient in other ways. Women might lead an awareness campaign against cutting down trees, or try to convince their community about the importance of replacing trees that have been cut down. In one city, the Mayor's office has a dedicated youth and women's desk with climate change response actions as one part of the agenda for both.

Finally, at least one local leader recognized the need to access and tap into the knowledge of indigenous and other communities that have historical oral histories recounting ways of protecting natural resources and building resilience to climate change impacts. At the same time, local leaders called for raising awareness among local communities regarding the value of cultural assets and heritage, including indigenous and subsistence practices, and protecting them as part of local adaptation strategies. The local leaders that utilize participatory budgeting and planning are better equipped to tap into this local knowledge and utilize it as part of their participatory budgeting and planning.

B - Capacity Building: Invest in People and Communities

Climate change, including forced displacement, impacts all kinds of communities. However, as the data increasingly show, some communities are more vulnerable to its impacts than others. Virtually all of the local leaders that we interviewed and surveyed mentioned the following groups as particularly vulnerable to climate–forced displacement and migration: women, children and youth, elderly, agriculture workers, people living in informal settlements or slums. Mayors spoke of the difficulty of the transition from an agricultural economy to an industrial or knowledge economy for rural to urban migrants.

Several local leaders emphasized the importance of circular migration to address the climate change–migration nexus. Skills and training will be key to ensure that vulnerable populations are able to come into cities for work but return to their communities and villages and empower them. National and local governments could and should assist with

educational programs and helping people to acquire new skills to strengthen their livelihoods and communities.

One Mayor referred to this capacity-building as increasing the ability of vulnerable communities to remain close to their existing communities, even if in nearby cities. These cities can help to create the conditions by which they can hold on to talent and human assets to reduce displacement and migration that tears people from their national and cultural roots. Another Mayor spoke about “solidarity funding” to help rural communities and villages preserve their natural resources — through tree planting, bamboo harvesting, etc. — and to shore up their local economies.

Building a technical and human capacity platform for local expertise was mentioned as necessary. Several interlocutors raised the need to ensure technical cooperation and exchange of best practices between cities. They also emphasized the importance of cooperation between sending and receiving cities.

C - Innovative Financing: Diversify and Pool Funding Sources

Mayors and local leaders increasingly recognize the importance of the private and philanthropic sectors in driving mitigation and adaptation efforts. Many of them suggested the need to corral these resources to address climate-forced displacement and migration. They were also careful to stress the continued importance of securing national and international resources.

That said, local leaders face various challenges accessing these resources. City leaders identified several potential interventions and steps to empower them to address these challenges:

1. **Diversify Funding**—look beyond local and national governments to international institutions, philanthropic nonprofits, and private investors to empower local leaders to

proactively prepare for climate displacement and migration. Funding should be utilized to finance not only city-wide planning but also community-led projects.

2. **Pool Resources**—pool resources from the private sector, civil society, and international partners to complement each other’s funding. (One leader mentioned the potential role of the C40 and sister city program to mobilize resources through EU, USAID funds, and other possible donors). Perhaps create a common fund for impacted cities and communities from these pooled resources.
3. **Build Capacity**—recognize that local leaders sometimes require additional capacity to access new funding sources. They may not be aware of these resources (e.g. Bloomberg Mayoral Initiative) and may not have the team to develop the application and ensure proper follow-up. Supporting administrative capacity in cities is critical to identifying and tapping fiscal resources.

A Toolkit to Champion Local Solutions for Climate-Forced Displacement & Migration

- Invest in local data collection and engage in evidence-based urban planning that recognizes climate-forced migration in the region and the need for adaptation and resiliency planning
- Harness the potential of urban-rural circular migration to help strengthen vulnerable communities and regional economies, while reducing the impacts on urban infrastructure from climate-forced migration
- Advocate at the national, regional and international levels for recognition of migration as a credible measure of adaptation, allowing access to funds/grants assigned for climate action and disaster risk management to finance migration related resilience & adaptation projects as well as inclusive relocation programs
- Advocate for climate-forced migration as a credible measure of adaptation and access to funds/grants to finance migration related resilience & adaptation projects as well as inclusive relocation programs
- Advocate for the establishment of dedicated regional financial facilities for parts of Africa, Central America and Asia, possibly under the leadership of the World Bank, dedicated to financing adaptation, development and resilience programs to mitigate the impacts of climate-forced migration, as well as extending technical support and assistance to affected countries;
- Advocate at the regional and international levels to establish a *Climate Emergency Protection Framework* to provide persons affected by a sudden onset and forcibly displaced across international borders similar temporary protections granted to “refugees” under international law.
- Advocate for the preservation of the statehood of countries facing existential threat as result of the climate crisis, protecting the rights of their populations and rich heritage.