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Climate change, disaster, displacement and migration: initial evidence from Africa

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Introduction

In its First Assessment Report in 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that the gravest effects of climate change may be those on human mobility. Over the last year, some progress has been made within both the academic and the humanitarian policy community in seeking answers to some basic questions arising from this issue, such as how and where people are displaced, who and how many are displaced, and how (if at all) they are protected. In parallel, work has been done to highlight this issue in the climate change negotiations.¹

The 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) provides the common international framework to address the causes and consequences of climate change. In 2007, the Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC authoritatively established that human-induced climate change is accelerating and already has severe impacts on the environment and human lives.²

Although there is not a mono-causal relation between climate change, disasters, displacement and migration, the existence of a clear link between the phenomena is increasingly recognised.³ This paper presents some initial empirical findings in relation to this link, focusing on two African countries: Somalia and Burundi.

A typology and some numbers

To address the need for basic answers to inform policy, advocacy and operations, an expert group was established in 2008 under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). A typology based on the work of the Representative to the UN Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, was further developed in a joint

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¹ The following submissions from humanitarian agencies to the UNFCCC specifically address migration and displacement:

- a) Change, Migration and Displacement: Who will be affected? Working paper submitted by the informal group on Migration/Displacement and Climate Change of the IASC – 31 October 2008 to the UNFCCC Secretariat, available at <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2008/smsn/igo/022.pdf>
- b) Climate change, migration and displacement: impacts, vulnerability and adaptation options, Submission by the IOM, UNHCR and UNU, in cooperation with NRC and the RSG on the Human Rights of IDPs, 6 February 2009, available at <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2008/smsn/igo/031.pdf>
- c) Forced displacement in the context of climate change: Challenges for states under international law, Submission by UNHCR in cooperation with NRC, the RSG on the Human Rights of IDPs and UNU, 15 May 2009, available at <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2009/smsn/igo/049.pdf>
- d) Climate change and statelessness: An overview, Submission by UNHCR supported by IOM and NRC 15 May 2009, available at <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2009/smsn/igo/048.pdf>

² *The Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, available at www.ipcc.ch

³ See for example Kolmannskog, 2008, *Future floods of refugees*, Oslo: Norwegian Refugee Council, available at http://www.nrc.no/arch_img/9268480.pdf

paper to clarify how people can be displaced in the context of climate change and their protection status.⁴ Based on this typology, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre of NRC (IDMC) carried out a study to start addressing the question of how many people are displaced.⁵

A significant impact of climate change is the increase in the frequency and severity of certain hazards. Hazards combined with vulnerability can result in disasters.⁶ The overall trend shows that the number of recorded natural disasters has doubled from approximately 200 to over 400 per year over the past two decades.⁷

The majority are climate-related disasters – that is, disasters which climate change can influence both in terms of frequency and severity. These include the meteorological (for example storm), the hydrological (for example flood), and the climatological (for example drought). According to the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, this situation of more frequent and severe disasters may be “the new normal”.⁸

The first category of the IASC typology concerns displacement linked to sudden-onset disasters, such as floods and storms. According to the OCHA-IDMC study, more than 20 million people were displaced due to climate-related sudden-onset disasters in 2008.

The second IASC category concerns displacement linked to slow-onset disasters, such as drought. According to the OCHA-IDMC study, more than 26.5 million people were reported affected by 12 droughts in 2008, but estimates for displacement are not readily available. Determining the element of force and ascribing causation is much more complex than in sudden-onset disasters. A particular slow-onset disaster case, which is separated out as a third category in the IASC typology, is that linked to sea-level rise and resulting in loss of state territory, as in the case of small island states.

The final IASC category concerns the indirect displacement link through conflict. The two main schools of thought in environmental conflict research are the neo-malthusians

⁴ Informal Group on Migration/Displacement and Climate Change of the IASC, 2008, Climate Change, Migration and Displacement: Who will be affected?: Working paper submitted by the informal group on Migration/ Displacement and Climate Change of the IASC - 31 October 2008, available at <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2008/smsn/igo/022.pdf>

⁵ OCHA and IDMC/NRC, 2009, *Monitoring Disaster Displacement in the Context of Climate Change*, available at [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/12E8C7224C2A6A9EC125763900315AD4/\\$file/monitoring-disaster-displacement.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/12E8C7224C2A6A9EC125763900315AD4/$file/monitoring-disaster-displacement.pdf)

⁶ United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. Terminology: Basic terms of disaster risk reduction, available at www.unisdr.org/eng/library/lib-terminology-eng%20home.htm

⁷ Emergency Events Database available at www.em-dat.be

⁸ Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Opening Remarks at the Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development Conference and Exhibition “DIHAD 2008 Conference”, 8 April 2008, available at: <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/YSAR-7DHL88?OpenDocument>

and the cornucopians.⁹ The neo-malthusians, among them Thomas Homer-Dixon, claim that population growth and resource scarcities result in violent competition.¹⁰ The cornucopians, on the other hand, emphasize the role of human ingenuity and cooperation in overcoming scarcity. Cooperation rather than conflict may be the response to environmental challenges, and even conflict does not have to result in violence. Some researchers, among them Nils Petter Gleditsch, claim that it is abundance rather than scarcity of resources that often leads to conflict – because rebel groups draw funding from the exploitation of natural resources and/or it is a conflict about the control of valuable resources.¹¹

There seems to be consensus in environment and conflict research regarding some main findings: The environment is only one of several inter-connected causes of conflict and is rarely considered to be the most decisive factor; the conflicts believed to involve an environmental element, have mostly taken place within a country; and, the role of the state, and more generally society's problem-solving capacity, is crucial.¹²

The IASC expert group considered that many of those displaced in the context of climate change are likely to remain within their own country and qualify as internally displaced persons (IDPs) under the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The main normative protection gap identified was in the case of those who cross a border due to sudden-onset or slow-onset disasters, since many would not qualify as refugees according to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

The IASC typology can be considered a work in progress. There are other effects of climate change not explicitly dealt with, such as increases in certain diseases and epidemics. Some of these effects are related to the “natural” disasters while others can perhaps be considered either sudden-onset or slow-onset disasters in themselves.¹³

There are many other complex links that also need consideration: disasters and degradation can trigger displacement and conflicts, and conflicts and displacement, in turn, often cause further environmental degradation.

We could also add another category to the IASC typology, namely displacement linked to measures to mitigate or adapt to climate change. For example, biofuel projects and forest conservation could lead to displacement if not carried out with full respect for the rights of indigenous and local people.¹⁴

⁹ Gleditsch, N P, 2003. Environmental Conflict: Neomalthusians vs. Cornucopians, in *Security and the Environment in the Mediterranean: Conceptualising Security and Environmental Conflicts*, Berlin: Springer.

¹⁰ Homer-Dixon, T, 1994. Environmental scarcities and violent conflict: evidence from cases. *International Security* 19(1): 5-40.

¹¹ Gleditsch, N P, 1998. Armed Conflict and the Environment: A Critique of the Literature. *Journal of Peace Research* 35(3): 381–400.

¹² German Advisory Council on Global Change, 2007. *Climate Change as a Security Risk*, available at: http://www.wbgu.de/wbgu_jg2007_engl.html

¹³ See for example the Emergency Events Database categories at www.em-dat.be

¹⁴ See for example *Resisting Displacement by Combatants and Developers: Humanitarian Zones in North-West Colombia*, Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2007.

Finally, it is important not to overlook those who are not displaced. While some remain because of resilient capacity, others may in fact be forced to stay. They do not have the resources and network to move.¹⁵ Displacement will result in particular needs, but it is important to stress that many of those left behind may also have very serious protection concerns and there is a need for an inclusive approach to all affected.

Research methodology

The research presented in the following sections explores the interaction of climate change, disaster (in particular drought), conflict, displacement and migration, as well as protection challenges and responses in the cases of Somalia and Burundi. The IASC typology is used as a background, and the article does not attempt to link specific disasters and displacement directly to climate change. Three main questions drove the research:

- What are the links of disasters, conflict and displacement in the context of climate change?
- What are the particular protection challenges for displaced people in this context?
- How does society and law prevent displacement, protect the displaced and seek durable solutions to the displacement in this context?

There were several reasons for choosing Somalia and Burundi as the subjects of research. While all countries will eventually be affected by climate change, some are more immediately and particularly vulnerable. While producing the smallest amount of greenhouse gases, Africa is one of the continents most vulnerable to climate change and with the greatest lack of adaptive capacity.¹⁶ Somalia and Burundi are considered among the most vulnerable countries in the world.¹⁷

Recently, some case studies investigating the correlation between environmental degradation and migration patterns have been carried out, but there has been little

¹⁵ Black, R. et al., 2008, Demographics and Climate Change: Future Trends and their Policy Implications for Migration, Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, University of Sussex, Brighton, available at

http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Demographics_and_Climate_Change.pdf

¹⁶ Boko, M., I. Niang, A. Nyong, C. Vogel, A. Githeko, M. Medany, B. Osman-Elasha, R. Tabo and P. Yanda, 2007: Africa. Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, M.L. Parry, O.F. Canziani, J.P. Palutikof, P.J. van der Linden and C.E. Hanson, Eds., Cambridge University Press,

Cambridge UK, 433-467, available at <http://www.ipcc.ch>

¹⁷ The Anatomy of a Silent Crises, Global Humanitarian Forum, 2009, available at http://ghfgenewa.org/Portals/0/pdfs/human_impact_report.pdf

research looking into this correlation and protection and law in conflict and post-conflict countries.¹⁸

The research is based on both a desk-study and a field study. The field trip was carried out in July 2009. Due to security concerns, the research relating to Somalia was carried out in Nairobi and Dadaab in Kenya, as well as Hargeisa and surrounding areas in Somaliland. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with experts and affected people.

The interviews centered around the questions identified above relating to the displacement dynamic and protection needs and responses. The number of interviewees was limited (49 in total), and the majority were experts. A field study with such limitations cannot provide a detailed or comprehensive account. Rather, the intention was to sketch out some findings that can provide a starting point for further research. These findings are the subject of the next sections of the paper.

Somalia case study

With almost 20 years of armed conflict and droughts and floods, there is a constant, but increasingly acute, humanitarian crisis in Somalia. The climate in Somalia is arid to semi-arid. Livestock and rain-fed agriculture, the main livelihoods and components of the economy, directly depend on the weather and environment. According to researchers, international humanitarian agency staff, local NGOs and local people, the drought cycle has changed over the last decades from once every ten years (when the droughts were given names) to becoming an almost nameless constant.

In addition to changes in the climate, there has been a high population growth and concentration in some areas. As one elder said, “The drought now is different; there is less rain and more people.”¹⁹ While many believe that Allah causes the droughts and disasters, the older people talk about the change they have witnessed, and, as one interviewee said, “These are becoming stories in our community now.”²⁰ In 2009, the drought intensified in many regions, and in the places that experienced rain, it often came in the form of unexpected and heavy rainfalls that often killed off much of the livestock that was already weak from the drought.²¹

An escalating civil war exacerbates food insecurity further. The country now faces its worst humanitarian crisis in eighteen years.²² As a water-stressed, low-lying and coastal, poor and war-torn country, Somalia is especially vulnerable to further climate change.

¹⁸ EACH-FOR, 2009. *Synthesis Report*, available at http://www.each-for.eu/documents/EACH-FOR_Synthesis_Report_090515.pdf

¹⁹ Interview 34

²⁰ Interview 32

²¹ “Too much, too soon,” as 15,000 flee floods, 29 October 2009, IRIN, available at <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=86791>

²² Somalia: Half the Population in Humanitarian Crisis Amid An Escalating Civil War, 24 August 2009, Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit – Somalia, available at <http://www.fsasomali.org/>

Since the country is not a party to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change they do not have a National Adaptation Programme of Action or any climate change policies and will face additional difficulties accessing information and resources.

The complex dynamics of conflict, disasters and human mobility

There are many links between conflict, disasters and human mobility. Most Somalis are pastoralists, and they have always moved to greener pastures during droughts. International humanitarian agency staff, local NGOs and local people seemed to agree that one could talk of displacement when their migratory pattern is disturbed.

A recent assessment mission concluded that drought has affected even the traditional areas pastoralists in North Somalia migrated to in times of hardship.²³ Hence, pastoralists cannot use migration as a traditional coping strategy to save their herds, and they resort to erratic and abnormal movement – or are forced to settle.

The poor pastoral households with smaller livestock herds, and those who cannot afford to transport their livestock by truck, generally remain behind in areas that receive less rainfall.²⁴ Some pastoralists lose too many of their livestock due to the lack of pastures and water and give up their traditional livelihood to settle permanently in the cities, where they often join the urban poor and IDPs, or in the countryside, where they create enclosures. For example, within a week during the summer of 2009, a family that had 480 sheep, lost 224 animals, and could not continue moving because the remaining animals were too weak or ill.²⁵

There may also be an indirect link between drought and displacement through conflict. Some interviewees believed the drought exacerbates the conflict by increasing competition over fertile land and resources. Now that automatic weapons have become common among people, traditional dispute and coping mechanisms have been weakened.

Conversely, the armed conflict may exacerbate the drought. War and military activities have detrimental impacts on the environment. Lack of state control or any other effective form of governance has led to widespread misuse and overuse of natural resources and environmental degradation. For example, the commercial production and export of charcoal resulting in deforestation and thereby contributing to drought, is an important part of the war economy, with much of the proceeds going to warlords.²⁷

There is also the question of access and ability to move. The armed conflict can hinder the normal movement of pastoralists and others moving due to drought, as they cannot

²³ Rapid Assessment Report on the Current Drought Emergency in the Sanaag Region, July 2009, Horn Relief.

²⁴ Quarterly Brief - Focus on Gu Season Early Warning, 12th June 2009, Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit, available at www.fsasomali.org

²⁵ Interview 32

²⁷ Interview 41

pass through certain unsafe areas.²⁸ Land grabbing and new enclosures also restrict pastoralist movement and trigger conflicts.

Furthermore, the armed conflict impacts on the access of humanitarian agencies to the drought-affected. Somalia is one of the most dangerous places for aid workers in the world, and humanitarian space is shrinking at an alarming rate.²⁹

Floods may also hinder the movement of persons displaced both due to drought and conflict. The flash floods in South Somalia in the summer of 2009 may temporarily have made it more difficult for people to flee across to Kenya.³⁰

Settlements and displacement and mass movement of people due to conflict, droughts and floods to an already resource-stressed area, may deplete the area of resources. There has been a massive and abnormal movement to areas that receive rains. Technology plays a role in this: today, people inform each other immediately about rainfall in an area through mobile phones, and the wealthier pastoralists transport huge numbers of livestock by trucks, creating a sudden and massive pressure on pastures.³¹ This, in turn, could make the area more prone to disaster, increase competition over scarce resources and conflict and trigger further displacement.

The drought can also contribute to another form of secondary and longer-distance displacement. When asked why Somalis were coming to neighbouring countries like Kenya, both international humanitarian agency staff and displaced persons themselves first mentioned the conflict in and around Mogadishu. When asked more in detail, however, it became clear that many people first fled from Mogadishu to the countryside or another town within Somalia, but because of the current drought and environmental degradation in these areas, they were forced to move further.³² This anecdotal evidence from Somalia indicates how complex the interaction of conflict, disasters and displacement can be.

The relevance of traditional protection frameworks and mechanisms

People displaced by climate-related disasters and conflict face many different protection challenges relating to for example food, water, shelter, healthcare and sexual and gender-based violence.³³ In Somalia, new formal laws are often nothing more than theoretical. One reason for this is that they are not gazetted or otherwise made available, so few

²⁸ Interview 22

²⁹ Flyktningregnskapet 2009, NRC, available in Norwegian at <http://www.flyktninghjelpen.no/?did=9408606>

³⁰ Protection Cluster Update, 17th July 2009, IASC Somalia. See also Warning over conditions at Dadaab camp, 17 July 2009, IRIN, available at <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=85325>, also confirmed in several interviews including interview 41

³¹ Interview 41 and Quarterly Brief - Focus on Gu Season Early Warning, 12th June 2009, Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit, available at www.fsasomali.org

³² Interview 22 and interview 43

³³ See for example Protection Report, 16th July 2009, NRC.

people know about them, and they are not applied and enforced. In many respects, the traditional Somali clan law, *xeer*, is more important.

This set of rules and obligations has been developed between clan elders over a long time in a region where droughts are frequent and people depend directly on the weather and natural environment. In *sharia*, which has had substantial influence on *xeer*, and to some extent is applied directly, there are also norms relevant to climate change and the environment. For example, natural resources are considered to belong to God and all of humankind should benefit from them.

While *xeer* is a polycentric legal system, some generally accepted norms relevant in a climate change context can be identified. For example, there are resource-utilization rules regarding use of water and pasture, and the temporary or permanent donation of livestock and other assets to the poor.³⁴ An elder in Hargeisa explained how the norm was translated to an urban displacement setting. “In the rural areas, we give animals to those who have lost their own animals; here in the city, we help with shelter and food rations.”³⁵

On the other hand, the conflict and constant drought mean that fewer people have enough animals to be able to donate to others in need.³⁶ Rules identified as part of *xeer* in one area, further state that pasture is free for all pastoralists in times of need, irrespective of clan affiliation; that individual pastoralists should not destroy shared pasture and fruit-bearing trees; that pastoralists should not establish private enclosures or farms on grazing land, and that visiting grazers must respect grazing *xeer* and maintain peaceful coexistence with host communities.³⁷

There is a willingness of competing pastoral groups to recognize drought-induced problems, even during times of hostility, and there are historical examples of how lengthy movements across Somalia have occurred without incident.³⁸ Since everyone is affected by drought at some point, this reciprocity can be seen as “survival insurance.”³⁹

Weak and powerless clans can only seek client status with a more powerful clan and hope that they fulfill their obligations. A general challenge today is that that automatic weapons have become common, and the authority and responsibility of clan elders has been weakened due to *inter alia* warlords targeting them and rejecting their authority.

³⁴ Norton, Gregory *Land, Property and Housing in Somalia*, NRC 2008.

³⁵ Interview 30

³⁶ Interview 32

³⁷ Puntland Development and Research Centre (2003) “Integration of Customary Law into Sharia and Secular Law (Cross-sectional, Pastoral, Frankincense and Marine Norms)”, report for Diakonia, quoted in Norton, Gregory *Land, Property and Housing in Somalia*, NRC 2008. The applicability of these norms in (at least parts of) Somaliland were also confirmed in interviews with elders.

³⁸ Little, Peter D. (2003) *Somalia: Economy without State*. The International African Institute, quoted in Norton, Gregory *Land, Property and Housing in Somalia*, NRC 2008.

³⁹ Interview 31

Protection in Kenya

Some of the displaced people cross the border to Kenya. The Kenyan 2006 Refugees Act recognizes as refugees those with well-founded fears of persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, in accordance with the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and those who flee due to one of the reasons set out in the wider refugee definition (including for example generalised violence) of the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.

Kenya is party to these conventions, but maintains certain reservations and *inter alia* restricts the right to work and freedom of movement. UNHCR has lobbied hard to get neighbouring countries to accept Somalis as *prima facie* refugees. The Kenyan government refers asylum seekers who apply under the Refugees Act to UNHCR for refugee status determination. A senior UNHCR staff said, “If drought and conflict coincide, we will not split hairs.”⁴⁰ Several of those interviewed in the Dadaab refugee camps mentioned drought as at least one of the reasons for their displacement.

Due to the conflict and fear that armed opposition forces are entering the country, Kenya officially closed its border with Somalia in 2007. Somali pastoralists who live on both sides of the border are allowed to cross. Others, who cannot bribe the police and other authorities, are subject to serious police abuses, detention and forcibly returned to an area where their lives or security may be at risk, a violation of the principle of *non-refoulement*.⁴¹ Still, there has been a dramatic increase in new arrivals to the Dadaab camps, with 45,000 persons in the first six months of 2009 and the influx continuing at about 7,000 per month.⁴²

Dadaab is already one of the world’s oldest, largest and most congested refugee sites. Furthermore, the environmental situation is not much better than in Somalia. In 2009, Kenya has experienced one of the worst droughts in decades, with millions in urgent need of food aid.⁴³ In the camps, the availability of water and trees for firewood and construction is limited, and competition between the local population and the displaced people is increasing. Women collecting firewood outside the camps are at great risk of rape. Reported sexual and gender-based violence cases have increased by 30 percent in 2009.⁴⁴ When the rains came in 2009, it fell as heavy and unpredictable showers, often

⁴⁰ Interview 24

⁴¹ World Refugee Survey 2009 – Kenya 2009, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,ERI,,4a40d2aa76,0.html>

⁴² Somali Refugee Emergency in Kenya, August 2009, Regional Bureau for Africa UNHCR HQ Geneva 20th August 2009.

⁴³ WFP food appeal for 3.8 million in need, 25 August 2009, IRIN, available at <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=85847>

⁴⁴ Somali Refugee Emergency in Kenya, August 2009, Regional Bureau for Africa UNHCR HQ Geneva 20th August 2009.

resulting in floods that devastated people's houses, destroyed food, polluted water, and triggered outbreaks of diseases such as cholera.⁴⁵

The case of Somalis displaced to Kenya shows how some of those displaced due to climate-related disasters and/or conflict may receive a formal protection status, but that much may still be needed to make this an effective protection.

Burundi case study

Burundi has recently come out of a civil war and is among the poorest countries in the world. The small, landlocked country already struggles with a high population density, land scarcity and deforestation. In a country where 94 percent of the working population is employed in the agricultural sector, many as subsistence farmers with rain-fed farms, this has devastating effects. Accelerating global climate change comes on top of these challenges. The trend of higher mean temperatures, a longer dry season and heavier and more concentrated rains is only set to increase with further climate change.⁴⁶

To survive the latest drought in 2008 in the northern province of Kirundo, many people had to sell what little they had, making them even more vulnerable to the next drought. The most marginalized and vulnerable sections of society, such as single women, may not have the resources to move and may actually be forced to stay during a disaster.⁴⁷ As one widowed mother said, "If a drought or flood comes, we will suffer. We have to stay; we have nowhere else to go."⁴⁸

Although there was no survey or systematic monitoring of people moving away (or subsequent returns), it was also clear that some people left Kirundo in search of other livelihood. Burundi's National Adaptation Programme of Action mentions human mobility as a historical adaptation to drought and food insecurity.⁴⁹

Droughts and environmental degradation can also exacerbate land conflicts, and Burundi is a country with a high proliferation of small arms.⁵⁰ Every month you hear about people, even brothers, killing each other over land in Burundi, and many murders probably go unreported. One refugee who recently returned home noted, "My family had sold much of the land to survive the drought, and when I came back, my brothers were not happy. They were afraid I would claim my part of what little was left of the land. I

⁴⁵ Floods could threaten up to 750 000 in Kenya—UN, 6 November 2009, Reuters, available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKL640656>. CH .2420

⁴⁶ National Adaptation Plan of Action to climate change, Burundi, January 2007, available at www.unfccc.int/resource/docs/napa/bdi01e.pdf

⁴⁷ Interview 11, Interview 12

⁴⁸ Interview 11

⁴⁹ National Adaptation Plan of Action to climate change, Burundi, January 2007, available at www.unfccc.int/resource/docs/napa/bdi01e.pdf

⁵⁰ Mission Multidisciplinaire en Province de Kirundo, du 09 ou 12 Juin 2009, Draft of July 2009.

still have not claimed it.”⁵¹ According to some NGO staff, “The next crisis in Burundi will be over land.”⁵² Violent conflict could also lead to new displacement.

Categories, protection needs and responses

Little is known about the particular protection challenges of the persons who move in the context of drought in Burundi. Some international humanitarian agency staff suggest that the protection challenges are more similar to those faced by migrants than displaced persons. For example, the drought in Kirundo was characterized by family separation with the male head of household leaving in search of work, while in conflicts and sudden-onset disasters, entire families are often forced to move. If land is lost, it is likely to be through an interfamily conflict, and the women who are left behind may be vulnerable and at risk of expulsion and exploitation or other rights violations.

A senior international humanitarian agency staff discussed whether the term “distress migration” is more appropriate than displacement.⁵³ Perhaps the tipping point is when the entire family leaves; when there is no possibility of survival there, we can talk about forced displacement. But, the same interviewee clarified, “Everyone talks about it as displacement here,” referring to all drought-related movement.

All interviewees agreed that the displaced persons do not receive the same level of attention and protection as refugees and persons displaced due to conflict and sudden-onset disaster. It was considered that the persons displaced are often left to themselves with less access to the aid, public services and security that other displaced persons would benefit from in a camp.

They may therefore be even more vulnerable and at risk of rights violations. Interviews revealed that the coping mechanisms often depend on what they used to do in their place of origin (for example, farmers work on other people’s farms) and often people move to a place where they have family or some sort of network.

In Burundi, there are not many effective laws and policies on displacement, and if you find a law or policy, even the department meant to implement it, may not be aware of it. It is therefore necessary to analyze statements, discussions and practices. The Ministry of National Solidarity is responsible for assisting “sinistres”, a term often employed by government agencies and others. By using this term, roughly corresponding to “disaster-affected persons”, they include not only people affected by conflict and sudden-onset disasters, but also slow-onset disasters like droughts.

As a response to drought and food insecurity, the government has previously made a national call for solidarity. Now a national platform has been established under the Hyogo Framework for Action, and crises cells are to be established when a disaster hits.

⁵¹ Interview 13

⁵² Interview 18

⁵³ Interview 16

Unlike the particular international protection of refugees, those internally displaced are under the protection and sovereignty of their own government, but the government can declare a disaster and call on outside help. This may leave them particularly vulnerable and render humanitarian access difficult in some countries such as Somalia. But according to senior international humanitarian agency staff, “Burundi seems to be quick to declare disaster,” “there is not a problem of political will,” and “there is a regular link between the government and humanitarian agencies.”⁵⁴ As one international humanitarian agency staff said, “The government has the main responsibility, and we are supposed to be auxiliary, but in reality we are called upon and are the main actors in every crisis.”⁵⁵

Hence it is important to look at how the different development and humanitarian agencies consider the persons displaced due to drought. According to UNHCR in Burundi, “We know what a refugee is, while in a drought it is unclear what the categories are, who has responsibilities.”⁵⁶ If UNHCR intervenes, it is on purely “humanitarian grounds” and as part of a joint UN effort, since natural disaster displacement does not fall clearly within its mandate. UNHCR acknowledged that this happens more and more, due to the One UN concept, even though the One UN approach has not yet been rolled out in Burundi. They were for example part of the mission to Kirundo.

Protection through refugee law and regional migration law

During the droughts in Kirundo, many people move across the border to neighbouring Rwanda rather than internally in Burundi. Interviewees considered that most cross-border movement is probably illegal, but the fact that people are ethnically and linguistically the same along the borders, facilitates the movement.

During the 2004 drought, many people went to Rwanda. According to UNHCR staff, the agency made an effort to consider them within a political context – there was a certain fear that the 2005 elections would trigger persecution based on ethnicity – and the displaced themselves naturally also recounted the accepted political narrative to UNHCR and Rwandan authorities.⁵⁷ Thus, they fell within the traditional mandate of UNHCR and the 1951 Convention refugee definition.

In the words of one interviewee, today, some people move to Uganda and work or seek protection as refugees in a camp: “Normally, people have many reasons to leave; those who leave mainly because of hunger, will give another reason that is accepted by those who provide protection.”⁵⁸ Displaced persons interviewed as part of this research, gave both environmental and political reasons for having left Kirundo. Some people who leave

⁵⁴ Interviews 16 and 19

⁵⁵ Interview 18

⁵⁶ Interview 19

⁵⁷ Interview 8

⁵⁸ Interview 13

during a drought may therefore legitimately be considered 1951 Convention refugees, but many fall outside of legal definitions and protection frameworks.

The free movement of people and goods now being discussed in the East-African Community, which Burundi is part of, could help address the challenge of climate change, drought and pressure on land, and encourage development through remittances and new skills. UNHCR is currently working with the government to address challenges in the process of legal cross-border movements outside the 1951 Convention.

While people who move may receive more attention and protection if labelled “displaced”, the case of Burundi clearly also highlights the need to increase focus on development and the facilitation of movement for people so they can choose more or less freely to move before they are more or less forced to move.

Longer-term development and climate change adaptation

Large parts of Africa, including Burundi, is still first and foremost facing “economic” rather than “physical” water scarcity – that is, human, institutional, and financial capital limit access to water even though water in nature is available locally to meet human demands.⁵⁹

The role of governance is illustrated by the fact that while the climate is not so different in Rwanda, the twin neighbour, having consolidated peace and come further in terms of development, did not experience similar devastation. A lot could have been done to prevent or at least reduce the effects of the 2008 drought in Kirundo, such as better management of water and irrigation.⁶⁰

After the many disasters followed by emergency relief in Kirundo, natural coping capacities and practices of local people have also changed. Some people have a mentality of aid dependency. In the words of a senior international humanitarian agency staff, “People need help to adjust, not just to survive through a drought to face yet another one a few years later. Many donors want to help, but we think long-term action is needed, not more emergency aid.”⁶¹

Burundi has some laws and policies to prevent environmental degradation and ensure sustainable development, but, as a senior government staff said, “A main challenge is that the country has just come out of a crisis, so everything is a priority, and the environment is seen as a break on development by investors and others.”⁶²

⁵⁹ International Water Management Institute, 2007. Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture. Water for Food, Water for Life: A Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture. London: Earthscan, and Colombo: International Water Management Institute.

⁶⁰ Mission Multidisciplinaire en Province de Kirundo, 2009, draft of July 2009.

⁶¹ Interview 3

⁶² Interview 21

The National Adaptation Programme of Action identifies priority options of adaptation and project proposals, such as reforestation, promotion of energy/wood-saving techniques, setting up erosion control mechanisms, popularizing rainwater harvesting techniques and popularizing short cycle and dryness-resistant food crops.

There is also a need to create and encourage other livelihoods than farming. Burundi is among the least urbanized countries in Africa. The government offers settlement in “peace villages” to returning refugees who have no land or do not remember where it is because their families fled so long ago. This villagization may prove a positive adaptation to the new environmental situation.

The case of Burundi challenges us to think differently about disasters and development. Getting donors and national governments to spend money on preventing potential future disasters is difficult, however.

Conclusion

This paper has presented some initial findings regarding the links between climate change, disasters, displacement and migration, as well as protection challenges and responses in this context. The IASC typology has contributed to clarifying how people can be displaced in the context of climate change. It focuses on sudden-onset and slow-onset disasters and conflicts.

The OCHA-IDMC report has identified a methodology for monitoring displacement and come up with some first numbers. At least 20 million people were displaced by climate-related sudden-onset disasters in 2008 alone. Clearly, there is a need for more research and systematic displacement monitoring as suggested in the OCHA-IDMC study. This would provide a baseline for informed estimates as to how current displacement trends may be affected by further climate change, and would be a necessary element for any improvement in the response for the displaced. In addition, data should be collected on related factors, including the duration of displacement and the needs of displaced populations.

Field studies may be particularly useful in research on displacement related to slow-onset disasters, the links between climate change, conflict and displacement, and climate change impacts on those who already are displaced. While findings obviously differed in the two case studies presented here, there were also several similarities.

Both cases illustrate how complex the dynamics of a disaster can be. Global climate change and local environmental degradation are only two of many factors in the droughts and conflicts. Large-scale armed conflict may be fuelled through a particular access to resources (for example, charcoal), and other factors can play a more crucial role than the environmental when it comes to weakening dispute resolution mechanisms and increasing the risk of violent conflict (for example, the proliferation of automatic weapons).

The dynamics of human mobility are very complex. While some people may be forced to move, others are forced to settle or do not have the resources to move. The particular protection needs of all those affected and those displaced need to be further researched so responses can be tailor-made.

While new legal and policy solutions may be needed, developing these will take time and it is also important to look at how existing law already applies. The two case studies support the IASC paper in indicating that many of the people who move, may qualify as internally displaced persons. Some of those who move in the context of drought may differ somewhat from other internally displaced persons, however.

The multi-causality of movement also means that some people displaced across a border in the context of climate change, can legitimately be considered refugees. Many, however, fall outside of the traditional refugee law framework. The facilitation of other forms of legal cross-border migration may be part of the solution to address their needs as well as give other people the option to move now rather than being forcibly displaced later.

Both case studies indicate that formal, written law may play a rather limited role in a conflict and post-conflict situation. The roles and responsibilities of international humanitarian agencies are crucial since the affected states often have limited ability and/or will to protect. The cases also indicate that local law and practices may still play an important role. There is a need to identify and fill operational and legal gaps in protection. States and humanitarian agencies should review policies, laws and institutional arrangements and take a rights approach when addressing climate change, disasters and displacement.

While countries that are already affected by conflict, droughts and floods are particularly vulnerable to further climate change, they may have certain strengths – such as local customary law frameworks and mechanisms – that are relevant in the context of climate change and could be further researched, improved and supported.

What we also need is politics of the next disaster. Longer-term development and mainstreaming climate change adaptation and environmental considerations in humanitarian response are needed to mitigate the cycle of disasters and emergency relief. Exactly which adaptation measures are needed, will vary from country to country, and can include reducing poverty, reforestation, supporting pastoralism as a livelihood as well as creating and encouraging other livelihoods.

Currently, much focus is on the climate change negotiations. This article has showed the importance of addressing displacement in a climate change context. It is also clear that to be effective, climate change adaptation needs to be comprehensive and address different factors of vulnerability. After much advocacy and awareness-raising, a reference to migration and displacement also features in the draft climate change text now:⁶³

⁶³ Non-paper 41 on adaptation, paragraph 13, available at: http://unfccc.int/files/meetings/ad_hoc_working_groups/lca/application/pdf/awglcaadaptnp53061109.pdf

All Parties [shall] [should] jointly undertake action under the Convention to enhance adaptation at the international level, including through: [...] (b) Activities related to migration and displacement or planned relocation of persons affected by climate change, while acknowledging the need to identify modalities of inter-state cooperation to respond to the needs of affected populations who either cross an international frontier as a result of, or find themselves abroad and are unable to return owing to, the effects of climate change.

It is important that the reference to “the international level”, is not interpreted to mean that only cross-border movements are addressed. It should rather be interpreted to encompass international cooperation as well as international standards to address migration and displacement, whether such movements are internal or cross-border. Much of the movement is after all expected to be within countries, and the plight of internally displaced persons is a matter of international concern.

In addition to the displacement-specific text, key language on risk management and disaster risk reduction has been included in the draft text. How and how much money will be made available for these purposes is still unclear, and it remains to be seen whether and how a climate change agreement incorporates displacement and other humanitarian issues. While working to ensure a humanitarian climate change agreement is crucial, the case of Somalia reminds us that some of the most vulnerable countries may not even be part of this framework.

While much more research is needed, this paper has also made the case that we do have enough knowledge to also act now. We have to “avoid the unmanageable” by cutting greenhouse gases and mitigating climate change. At the same time, climate change is already having effects and “managing the unavoidable” is also necessary. Climate change is here and now. People are displaced. People must be protected.