



Climate Change and Disaster Displacement

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“The drought made the conflict worse. Some raiders came and took away the little food we had raised on our farm. Now we are in a very hard time: the people at home face conflict and famine. They are starving. If we could go back, we would have only dry land and death to greet us.”

— Pastoralist from Somalia, Shedr Camp, Ethiopia.

The adverse effects of climate change and disasters have contributed to increased forced displacement over the past decades. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimates that over 25 million people are forced to move due to disaster-related causes each year, with the likelihood of being displaced by disasters today twice what it was in the 1970s. Scientists agree that ongoing climate risks will continue to contribute to increased forced displacement in the future.

The effects of climate change and disasters can exacerbate already fragile situations, and can fuel conflict over depleted resources. People who have already been displaced by conflict can be forced to move again when disasters strike or due to inhospitable living areas because of the adverse effects of climate change. Their ability to return can be limited if their home areas are also similarly impacted.

UNHCR's role

UNHCR has been working on displacement issues due to climate change and disasters for many years. Efforts to protect and assist those affected or most at risk have gained momentum. Important challenges, however, remain. A global policy framework is still in its infancy.

UNHCR is working on several fronts to respond to these challenges. This includes efforts to respond swiftly to disasters when States call upon UNHCR to assist, and to support States to put in place measures to respond appropriately to those who are displaced in the context of such disasters and the effects of climate change.

UNHCR also seeks to work with States to develop law and policy so as to enhance risk mitigation and to ensure that people who are displaced in the context of disasters and the adverse effects of climate change are protected.

Law and Policy

Most persons who flee sudden-and slow-onset disasters remain within their own country and become internally displaced persons. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement continue to guide efforts to protect and assist them.

Some persons displaced by disasters seek safety and assistance in another country. These persons may fall

within the 1951 Refugee Convention or regional refugee conventions when the legal criteria are met. In the former case, this includes where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons linked to his or her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.

In most cases, however, people displaced in the context of the adverse impact of climate change or disasters are not covered by these international and regional refugee instruments. UNHCR, working closely with States and organizations involved in the Platform on Disaster Displacement, seeks to contribute to address this gap.

Nansen Protection Agenda

In 2011, following an expert roundtable in Bellagio convened by UNHCR to address gaps and responses for addressing climate-related displacement, Norway hosted an international conference on the issue in commemoration of the first High Commissioner for Refugees and polar explorer, Fridtjof Nansen. The conference developed 10 Nansen Principles: a set of recommendations to guide responses to displacement related to climate change and other environmental hazards.

In 2012, Switzerland and Norway launched the Nansen Initiative to build consensus on a protection agenda addressing the needs of people displaced across borders in the context of disasters and climate change.

In 2015, these efforts culminated in the endorsement by 109 States of the Nansen Initiative's Agenda for the Protection of Cross-border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change.

The Nansen Protection Agenda provides States with practices to better prevent and prepare for disaster-related cross-border displacement. It also contains steps to protect and respond predictably to the needs of persons forced to flee in the context of disaster or the effects of climate change. It is comprehensive,

addressing the protection of cross-border displaced persons and management of disaster displacement risk in the country of origin.

The State-led process that succeeded in the adoption of the Nansen Protection Agenda is being carried forward by the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD), currently chaired by Germany, which UNHCR supports. It aims to ensure implementation of the recommendations of the Nansen Protection Agenda.

Other global processes

There are other global processes where UNHCR seeks to ensure protection of persons forcibly displaced in the context of sudden- or slow-onset disasters. These include:

- The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), including the implementation of the 2015 Paris Agreement and the establishment of the Task Force on Displacement;
- The Habitat III New Urban Agenda;
- The Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (SFDRR);
- The Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD);
- Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- Follow-up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit; and,
- The 2016 New York Declaration, with its call for the development of a global compact on refugees and a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration.

National legislation and regional instruments

UNHCR has worked intensively with States and alongside other partners to strengthen legislative frameworks to ensure that persons displaced by disasters receive protection and assistance. In Africa, UNHCR seeks to encourage national implementation and operationalization of the Kampala Convention, which specifically recognizes persons displaced internally by "natural or human-made disasters, including climate change".

General guidance provided by UNHCR to States on the use of humanitarian visas and temporary protection arrangements to provide third country stay for displaced persons can also be applied to protect those displaced across borders by climate change and disasters. Of particular note is also the 2014 Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action which recognizes the challenges posed by

climate change and disasters, including the displacement of persons across borders, and the need to give more attention to this, including by UNHCR. In support of the adoption of appropriate national and regional measures, UNHCR has compiled good practices from countries in the region.

Informing policy development

UNHCR undertakes and commissions studies to improve understanding of climate change and disaster displacement, and is working to improve data collection and methodologies to analyse how sudden- and slow-onset disasters influence displacement dynamics. This will help ensure that policies developed by States to respond to these displacement challenges are well-informed and evidence-based.

Response

Operational responses to disasters include: prevention; preparedness; planned relocation; and emergency relief. A goal throughout is to enhance the resilience of those displaced and also the communities in which they live. The adoption of the New York Declaration by all UN Member States in 2016 provides an important validation

and boost to this work with its commitments for addressing the drivers and root causes of large movements of refugees and migrants; for fostering improved self-reliance and resilience; and for protecting the human rights of all people on the move.

Prevention

UNHCR works with displaced persons (IDPs and refugees) and the communities in which they live to reduce the risk of disasters. Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) tools are employed to minimize risks. UNHCR operations, for example, have supported the planting of trees to help prevent landslides. These responses not only protect the environment but can also prevent secondary displacement.

Preparedness

UNHCR's Preparedness Package for Refugee Emergencies (PPRE) includes a number of advanced preparedness actions for UNHCR and partners to respond to displacement, both in conflict and disaster situations. Moreover, the interagency Camp Management Toolkit also includes a number of preparedness provisions to reduce the risk of secondary displacement in the event of disasters.

Planned Relocation

UNHCR is also supporting Governments and communities considering relocation of residents for disaster or risk prone areas. This includes the development of guidance, in collaboration with Brookings Institution and Georgetown, to ensure that this is done with their consent and with other safeguards in place. Because relocation processes may carry serious risks for those relocated, they must be planned and undertaken in full consultation with those affected and in full respect of their human rights.

Emergency response

UNHCR emergency teams are on stand-by to be deployed, when appropriate and feasible, in the event of a sudden disaster to provide protection and assistance, as we did for example most recently in 2016 in response to the earthquake in Ecuador. As inter-agency lead for protection, UNHCR works to enhance the protection capacity of governments and other partners.