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Climate change, natural disasters and human displacement

Successive IPCC reports have shown that climate change is giving a profound impact on the natural environment and the sustainability of life in many areas. UNHCR has been working on it for longer than you may think.

We needed to, because, though we often speak of this issue in terms of the future consequences of climate change, the fact is **the future is now**.

Beyond becoming a more prominent driver of population movements, some of the manifestations of climate change, such as flooding, water scarcity and food insecurity, are already affecting UNHCR operations for refugees, returnees and IDPs.

For example, flooding in Somali refugee camps in north-eastern Kenya in November 2007 led to 12,000 refugees losing shelters. It also prompted displacement of some 80,000 refugees to safer locations.

In eastern Chad, four-month-long rainy season has been growing shorter due to climate change. Consequently, the dams constructed to collect water during the rainy season are ineffective. As a result, refugees are today receiving as little as one third of the standard water rations.

Numerous efforts have been made to predict the number of people who will be obliged to move as a result of climate change. Current estimates seem to range between 250 million to one billion people who will be forcibly displaced by the year 2050.

If I take the low end of the prediction range at 250 million additional people to be forcibly displaced, this means that we will be seeing displacement at the level of about 6 million a year during this time period.

At UNHCR we manage about 10 million refugees and have partial management responsibility for another 20 million internally displaced people. We are talking here about quantum leaps in the numbers of people who will find themselves in the forced-displaced category.

1. Displacement scenarios

We consider that it is of vital importance to anticipate foreseeable movement scenarios, and to strengthen the responses to the humanitarian consequences.

The Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for the Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, Walter Kälin, has identified some movement scenarios stemming from climate change. These are useful as a starting point for analyzing the character of displacement and assessing the protection and assistance needs of those moving from their homes.

a) Hydro-meteorological disasters (sudden onset):

These are projected to increase in future and will lead to new and larger situations of internal displacement, rather than to cross-border movements of people.

As states have primary responsibility for their citizens, national and local authorities would have an especially important role to play in responding to such scenarios. Internally displaced persons (or IDPs in a short form) should receive protection and assistance in accordance with the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

There may be instances where people affected by such disasters cross an international border, as this is the only escape route. In such situations, they would not normally qualify as refugees entitled to international protection. While benefiting from the applicability of human rights norms, ‘their status remains unclear.’

b) Environmental degradation (Slow onset):

These will gradually lead to the deterioration of life and economic opportunities in affected areas, inciting voluntary movements in the initial phases. As areas become less hospitable, for example owing to complete desertification or rising sea levels, population movements could be deemed as forced displacement and become permanent.

c) Sinking Small island states

The phenomenon will prompt internal relocation as well as migration abroad, until such time as the territory is no longer able to sustain human life. As in the previous scenario, prevailing international refugee law would not automatically apply.

d) Armed conflict and violence:

Decrease in vital resources, attributable to climate change, triggers conflict. Regardless of the underlying causes, those displaced by armed conflict inside their country are IDPs. Those fleeing to other countries could qualify as refugees or for temporary protection under the relevant international or legal instruments.

2. UNHCR’s response to displacement scenarios

As mentioned, some movements prompted by climate change could indeed fall within the traditional refugee law framework. This brings them within the ambit of international or regional refugee instruments, or so-called “complementary forms of protection” and also within UNHCR’s mandate.

The clearest example is that of refugee movements provoked by armed conflict rooted in environmental factors. Climate-related issues are projected to become an even more direct and common driver of conflicts.

Some argue that conflict over energy sources, fertile land and fresh water is among the factors fuelling the crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan. As future conflicts multiply, so will the demands for protection and assistance under the refugee framework.

The most dramatic manifestation of climate change is the ‘sinking island’ scenario. The inhabitants of island states may be obliged to leave their own country as a result of rising sea levels and the flooding of low-lying areas.

In all these cases, UNHCR’s role regarding those obliged to seek safety abroad may be called for. Certainly, statelessness would be a concern. UNHCR considers that an international consensus must be forged in relation to such situations, notably on where, and on what legal basis, such populations might be resettled. Any arrangements set in place would need to incorporate specific measures to prevent the populations concerned from being rendered stateless.

In other scenarios, where natural disaster may lead to cross-border population movements, the “forced” character of the movement, and the characterization of such movements, will require further analysis.

We need to determine under what circumstances, such persons can be regarded as being in need of international protection.

UNHCR considers that the broader international human rights regime should serve as the basis for guiding the responsibility of states towards people who are in need of international protection but who do not qualify for refugee status.

UNHCR's role with conflict-induced internal displacement would be triggered as a result of the "Cluster Approach", introduced in 2005 as part of the UN humanitarian reform process.

3. UNHCR's role in natural disasters

UNHCR is frequently called upon to assist in international emergencies caused by natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods and violent storms. This is not because the people affected by these events fall under the UNHCR mandate but because UNHCR has the experience and capability to assist.

By extension, it is hard for me to envisage a true international emergency of forced displacement precipitated directly or indirectly by climate change, in which UNHCR would not play a key role.

Governments are primarily responsible for protecting and assisting those affected by natural disasters. However, many countries lack the resources to fulfil their obligations towards disaster victims.

States and international organizations should act in accordance with the principle of international solidarity and burden-sharing by supporting and supplementing national response capacities.

Since the "Cluster Approach" was developed to ensure a more predictable UN response to humanitarian crises, the multiplication of natural disaster scenarios will further test the efficacy of this approach. New paradigms and models of cooperation may be required. UNHCR stands ready to contribute to further reflection in this area

4. Terminology

Recently, a growing number of commentators have used the notion of 'environmental refugees' or 'climate refugees'. This refers to people who are obliged to leave their usual place of residence as a result of climate change or sudden natural disasters.

Clearly, the 1951 UN Refugee Convention will indeed be applicable in some cross-border displacements. For example, the victims of natural disasters flee from their homeland because their government has consciously withheld or obstructed assistance.

If this was to punish or marginalize them on one of the five grounds set out in the refugee definition, the people concerned could legitimately be considered to be 'refugees'.

Under the 1969 Organization of African Unity Refugee Convention, some situations of cross-border movements which take place as a result of natural disasters may also, depending on the circumstances, be envisaged under that Convention's definition of the term of refugee.

Apart from these situations, UNHCR has reservations with respect to the terminology and notion of 'environmental' or 'climate' refugees. The majority of those people, who are commonly described as 'environmental refugees', do not cross an international border.

They consequently fail to meet one of the key criteria for refugee status under the 1951 Convention.

UNHCR considers that any initiative to modify this definition would risk a renegotiation of the 1951 Refugee Convention. This may result in a lowering of protection standards for refugees and even undermine the international refugee protection regime.

5. What do we need to do?

UNHCR would encourage the international community to adopt a three-pronged strategy, based on the notions of understanding, prevention and response.

a) Understanding the issue

States and other stakeholders must engage in a dialogue about the relationship between climate change, environmental degradation, armed conflict, displacement and migration. It should be based on empirical evidence and with the aim of developing a common understanding of the concepts used in relation to these issues.

Additional knowledge is required on the environmental ‘hot spots’ where displacement is most likely to take place. More analysis is also needed on coping mechanisms and on the sinking small island states.

b) Prevention

Displacement or migration is often the final survival strategy employed by populations whose human security is threatened. We need to understand and reinforce the resilience of communities. This is in terms of their physical security and their ability to sustain adequate livelihoods.

Preventive activities are of vital importance at the local level and must be supported by both the affected states and the broader international community.

c) A rights-based response

An effective and equitable response will be needed to safeguard the rights and meet the needs of people who are on the move in situations where adaptation strategies have proven inadequate. Ensuring respect for the human rights of those affected, irrespective of their status, should be paramount in any such interventions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

UNHCR stands ready to contribute to initiatives on these issues. It is committed to forging strong partnerships with UN and other humanitarian partners, as well as states, to develop appropriate rights-based responses and maximize its efficacy in addressing the plight of affected populations.

If funding is available, I am confident we can find the international mechanisms necessary to address the problem.

Thank you very much.