

# Climate change, conflict and displacement: implications for protection agencies

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## Introduction

The complex interactions of climate change, conflict and displacement are increasing the challenge of ensuring protection outcomes for at-risk individuals by specialist protection agencies. Systems thinking has often been adopted by humanitarian and specialist protection agencies – both to map the relationships between drivers and triggers of displacement, and to better understand the capacities of those at risk to manage and adapt to their changing conditions that can result in displacement. Yet, so far, siloed approaches to dealing with the climate crisis, displacement and conflict remain dominant, and in juxtaposition with the increasing recognition that complex interactions between displacement drivers and triggers span issues related to conflict and climate. Despite increasing recognition of these complex interactions, humanitarian and protection agencies are only just getting to grips with the implications for the way they understand and act on displacement issues. As such we cannot

yet say with confidence that current approaches are helping to ‘identify and mobilise the right actors and approaches’ to respond, before, during and post-displacement (IDMC and NRC, 2015), where climate and conflict are a factor. As we argue throughout this paper (and the accompanying full report, Peters et al., 2021), rather than becoming a compartmentalised specialism within the field of displacement, considering climate change presents an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between displacement drivers and triggers – and must be understood as such.

### **State of the evidence: five key areas for critical thinking**

1. The factors contributing to population movement are complex

It may not be appropriate or possible to say climate change or natural resource scarcity

‘cause’ movement or conflict. To understand the intersection of climate change, conflict and displacement, we need to consider vulnerability, inequality, rights and power (Klepp, 2017).

Mobility reflects a continuum of choice, ranging from forced displacement without choice to fully chosen migration. Displacement and migration patterns are likely to change under increasing climate and demographic pressures (Rigaud et al., 2018), including in contexts already contending with issues of conflict and underserved protection needs.

## 2. Climate change may become a more direct driver of displacement in the absence of appropriate mitigating actions

The evidence and practice on climate-induced/ environmental population movement is weak and contested (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2017). Displacement tracking tends to focus on those displaced by rapid-onset, extreme events and not the harder to track slow-onset, creeping changes in seasons and environmental degradation (IPCC, 2019).

The World Bank’s Groundswell study (Rigaud et al., 2018) is one of the few to project the impact of adaptation measures on reducing internal displacement and migration (to between 50% and 80% of that if no action were taken). But if international climate mitigation commitments are not met and adaptation options are not prioritised, climate change will continue to accelerate and could become a stronger factor in displacement and migration in contexts where people are already highly vulnerable. Displacements may result in direct threats to the enjoyment of rights to life, adequate standard of living, safety and security.

## 3. Climate change has implications for protection concerns

Changing weather patterns and the impacts of climate change intersect with disruptions to, access to and control over land, natural resources, livelihoods, individual rights, freedoms and lives. In turn, these may threaten the enjoyment of the right to life; physical integrity; an adequate standard of living; health, water and sanitation; and self-determination and development (UNHCR, 2020).

These factors can impact the decision and ability to cross an international border and have implications in terms of legal protection status (ibid.).

## 4. The displacement outcome remains of greater importance than the specific climate factor

Debates continue over the strength of the evidence linking climate change and conflict, and displacement consequences – in part because of the different research parameters employed (Peters et al., 2020). But safeguarding the rights of those displaced, meeting humanitarian needs and blending the immediate provision of livelihoods, shelter and food security with longer-term durable solutions remains the primary concern for protection agencies over identifying the specific climate factor as a displacement driver – which could be incredibly granular, varying by household or even individual.

Focusing on displacement outcomes also helps turn attention to the need to devise collective adaptive preparedness and response strategies, which serve displacement-affected people in a changing climate who are also contending with issues of conflict and violence.

## 5. Protection agencies should continue to address pre-existing intersectional vulnerabilities

While the intersectional dimensions of linked climate-conflict-displacement impacts are often cited (e.g., UNDRR, 2020), there is limited evidence documenting the intersectional vulnerabilities and impacts for different communities over varying temporal or geographical scales.

Contexts experiencing challenges associated with violence, armed conflict and non-armed conflict are typically more vulnerable to climate change impacts. This is owing to there being less effective climate and disaster risk governance and management systems in place and lagging socioeconomic development (Peters, 2019). In turn, the climate impacts and protection consequences for these populations are driven by underlying vulnerabilities, which change over time.

Greater emphasis is needed on addressing these pre-existing, intersectional vulnerabilities amongst disaster-prone populations than on the hazard itself. Intersectional profiles will shape an individual's ability to deal with disaster impacts, and whether an individual qualifies for international protections.

### Where to next: implications and recommendations

By no means an exhaustive list, protection agencies should consider the following as they seek to address the protection challenges arising from the climate-conflict-displacement nexus. More details on each of the recommendations can be found in the full report.

#### Advocate to close legal protection gaps

- Demand greater clarity around the legal basis for access to a country's territory.

- Continue to work in collaboration with the Platform on Disaster Displacement to better understand how the Global Compact on Refugees can ensure protection and humanitarian support to those forcibly displaced by natural hazard-related disasters (UNHCR, 2018).
- Develop, implement and promote organisational Climate Action Frameworks (in line with UNHCR (n.d.) and the Norwegian Refugee Council) to steer future policy and advocacy work.

#### Close knowledge gaps

- Take a longer-term perspective on tracking the multifaceted drivers of displacement in contexts where climate change, conflict and displacement interact, and ground truthing findings with the lived experiences of communities affected by this tripartite relationship.
- Pool financial resources and commission mixed-methods research to reveal new insights on displacement drivers, triggers and trends.
- Protection agencies should support calls for improved interoperability of displacement data sets, and coherence in definitions and key metrics.
- Use partnerships with meteorological organisations to examine the relative attribution of climate change to an event that has contributed to displacement.
- Lead the way in experimenting how climate change attribution analysis can be integrated into existing organisational tools and methods to better understand complex interactions.

#### Broker new partnerships for policy and advocacy engagement

- Push back on securitised framings of climate change and redirect attention to the attainment of rights and the varying protection needs of displacement-affected people in a changing climate, in contexts of violence and conflict.

- Engage with UN Security Council members on humanitarian access, climate and hunger, protection of civilians and displacement linked to extreme weather events.

### Accelerate sectoral responses that support humanitarian and climate ambitions

- Devise a strategy between likeminded agencies for how the Climate, Environment and Conflict Action Plan proposed following the 75th UN General Assembly on the humanitarian impacts of climate-conflict-environmental nexus can be scoped further.
- Mainstream climate resilient adaptation into multi-year interventions (e.g., for water, sanitation and hygiene; electricity; health; and education).
- Advocate for the financial inclusion of crisis-affected people through access to bank accounts, credit and other mainstream financial services.
- Collaborate with development counterparts specialising in disaster risk to design and deliver genuinely conflict- and displacement-sensitive disaster risk reduction interventions

- and document these through robust empirical research.
- Engage with National Disaster Management Authorities and join the Risk-informed Early Action Partnership (REAP) to champion displacement issues within early action (REAP, 2021).

### Get one's own house in order by greening operations

- Become signatories to The Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organisations, develop implementable Plans of Action with green targets to reduce carbon emissions at agency or departmental level, and establish an environmental footprint baseline against which to track progress. Consider how supply chains can be 'greened' by prioritising eco-friendly suppliers and shifting to renewable energy technologies.

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Full references can be found in the full report.



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