

Human Rights Council Side Event

“Climate change: it is happening here, it is happening now:

Fighting climate change through international solidarity”

Geneva, 26 June 2019

Climate change related migration

1. We first need to be careful about terminology. When we make a link between migration, or rather displacement, and climate, we are talking about two types of climate-induced displacement. Those caused by sudden-onset disasters, such as floods, earthquakes, volcano eruptions and landslides, often called “natural disasters” and those generated by slow-onset disasters, such as droughts, desertification, increased salinization or sea level rise, which are what we would call here “climate change related migration”. Some organizations, including the very respected Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), simply makes a distinction between disasters, without qualifier, but clearly focusing on natural disasters, and conflicts, as triggers for displacement, mainly because it is very difficult to quantify slow-onset displacement.
2. Indeed when it comes to statistics, we have relatively reliable figures regarding so called “natural disasters”. From 2008 to 2017, natural disasters displaced 203,4 million people. So an average of 20 million / year. In 2018, another 17,2 million people got displaced because of sudden-onset disasters.
3. For people displaced by climate change, statistics are missing and we operate with very broad estimates. For example, the World Bank, in a 2018 report, estimates that up to 143 million people may be displaced by climate change by 2050. Others put the figure much higher, but all agree that the number will increase every year, since very little is being done by the international community to reverse environmental degradation.
4. In the absence of reliable data, what do we know? Whether displaced by slow or sudden-onset disasters, the overwhelming majority of “climate-displaced” people, let’s say 99,5 %, move to another part of their country, and, so far, very few are crossing international borders. When it comes to victims of conflict and violence, as an average, 20% of them cross an international border and become refugees.
5. Most people displaced by climate change move to cities, usually to the poorest parts of the suburbs, thus accelerating the phenomenon of urbanization without proper planning and absorption capacity.
6. People displaced by climate change are unlikely to return to their place of origin, since one of the triggers for their displacement is loss of livelihood, which is likely to be irreversible.
7. Those are the few knowns. The unknowns are many. What is the main reason for someone affected by climate change to take the decision to move? Climate change is often one of the factors, an aggravator or a multiplier. In many situations of desertification or salinization for example, there is also often chronic poverty, competition for scarce resources, lack of support by the government, discrimination of certain ethnic groups, land property issues, land

confiscation, debts, etc. Another question is when does the person take the decision to move? In most cases, such a decision can be postponed (e.g. in case of a good crop) or precipitated. Unlike conflict or natural disaster, there is usually no need for the people to leave immediately, but rather a progressive deterioration of the situation, which makes life unbearable, with most of the time people losing their livelihoods. Unlike for natural disasters, where, after the first days or weeks of chaos, there is a certain level of planning, the final destinations of those moving for climate change related reasons often vary from one individual to the other, with the government or local authorities being unaware of their displacement. Many people often end up being either illegal or unregistered in their own country, with all kinds of consequences regarding access to basic services, police harassment, etc.. Climate change is also discriminatory. While affecting all countries and indeed all of us, its main impact is felt by developing countries, with less resources and less coping mechanisms.

8. For the few people able to cross an international border (this phenomenon is likely to increase in the coming years), there is no guarantee they will ever be able to obtain a proper status (some of them might be able to obtain temporary visas, but this would rather be the exception). In short, most of them are likely to be in an irregular situation.
9. During the negotiations of respectively the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Global Compact for Migration, States made it clear that people displaced for climate-related reasons should not be mentioned in the GCR. Reference to them was deleted from the first draft of the GCR. In short, States don't want to hear about so called "climate refugees" and to extend them the rights granted to refugees.
10. In the GCM, there are two objectives making specific reference to climate-induced displacement. Objective 2, entitled "minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin" has a sub-section dedicated to "natural disasters, the adverse effect of climate change, and environmental degradation". This part is rather detailed and touch on prevention, disaster preparedness, building resilience and humanitarian assistance. Objective 5, which focuses on "enhancing availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration", dedicates two full paragraphs (21 g) and h)) on admission, stay and solution for respectively "migrants compelled to leave their countries of origin, due to sudden-onset disasters and other precarious situations" and those fleeing "slow-onset disasters, the adverse effects of climate change, and environmental degradation". Indeed the Global Compact on Migration is not binding, but the most striking is the fact that not only victims of sudden-onset disasters are treated differently from the victims of slow-onset disasters, but also that the language pertaining to the latter is much weaker than the one related to the former. In short, today, governments are still reluctant to build the beginning of a protection system for the people forced to move because of climate change.

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