

NANSEN CONFERENCE

CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISPLACEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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BACKGROUND PAPER

A changing climate forcing people to move

Climate is a key determinant for today's demography. Climatic conditions change over time due to natural climate variability, but changes in global mean temperature have been relatively small since the end of the last ice age. Now we are on our way to change our climate beyond this natural variability. Climate change is gaining momentum, and the international community is struggling to reach agreement on how to deal with it. Without concerted and decisive action, we face a high risk of environmental and social disruption that would change living conditions fundamentally throughout the globe.

The implications for human welfare and security, and for our strategies for adaptation, disaster risk reduction, humanitarian aid and protection of displaced people, could be far-reaching. There is little doubt that factors such as the deterioration of agricultural land, desertification, reduced access to water and sea-level rise will make parts of the earth less habitable. Such slow-onset change is expected to be the most important driver of human displacement related to climate change in the future. However, the frequency and intensity of sudden-onset hazards such as floods, hurricanes and other extreme weather events are already increasing in accordance with climate model projections. Such sudden-onset events are having a significant immediate impact and are reason for serious concern.

There is no simple causal relationship between climate change and displacement, and consequences will vary according to time and place. Climate change influences vulnerability and displacement through complex interactions with other driving forces. These include social, economic and political factors, conflict and demographic changes, and other environmental stresses that undermine ecosystems and life-support systems. Communities may be vulnerable not only because they live in areas prone to flooding, drought, or other extreme weather events, but also because they may already be marginalised. Such communities may not have access to adequate sanitation, water, electricity, healthcare, education or other basic services. Vulnerability and resilience to climate variability and change are distributed unevenly across the globe, and as global temperatures continue to rise, climate change may push the poorest and most marginalised communities in many parts of the world beyond their capacity to respond. Meanwhile, events such as Hurricane Katrina and the 2003 European heat wave have shown that the capacity to adapt to climate-related extreme events is lower than expected even in developed areas.

The backdrop to the *Nansen Conference on Climate Change and Displacement* is an increasing need to develop policies and capacities to manage climate-change-induced displacement, including prevention of forced displacement, appropriate protection for those who already are displaced, and enhanced preparedness and response capacities. How should states, societies, the international humanitarian system and affected communities meet the emerging challenges posed by the increasing number of people being displaced by natural disasters?

Displacement does not just affect the poor regions of the world; in our interconnected world, it concerns us all. Key issues are resource scarcity, security, moral obligations and the unequal geographical distribution of the impacts of climate change. It is therefore vital to improve our still

insufficient understanding of the relationship between climate change and displacement. However, the fact that there are gaps in our understanding should not prevent us from taking action now.

The suffering that is likely to be caused by unchecked climate change and the needs for adaptation highlight the need for effective mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions to limit global warming. The potential implication for human displacement is one among many reasons why we cannot afford to fail in our efforts to prevent dangerous climate change. Nevertheless, global warming is already taking place, and some additional warming is unavoidable. Even with effective mitigation, we will have to manage and adapt to further climate change, and seek to limit the impact on those affected.

Prevention, protection and response

Managing climate-change-induced displacement will be a complex task for policy makers and practitioners. The conference will explore how civil society, politicians, and development and humanitarian actors are being challenged by climate change and resulting displacement, and will develop recommendations for action.

i. Prevention and climate change adaptation

There are two courses of action to limit the consequences of climate change: decreasing emissions to prevent further warming (mitigation), and adapting to the climate change that has already occurred. There is scientific consensus that mitigation can only prevent further warming and not reverse existing warming. While adaptation to climate change becomes increasingly important for preventing involuntary displacement, mitigation remains an important and necessary means to limit emissions and preventing further global temperature rise.

The consequences of climate change will be felt at the local level, and every region will need specific solutions tailored to its needs. The ability to prevent and deal with the impacts of climate change – increasing extreme weather events, slow-onset events and possible consequences for displacement – will depend on such factors as legislation, available resources and the active involvement of society as a whole. It is crucial to involve local communities and authorities in the prevention of climate-change-induced disasters and in the planning of integrated multi-hazard approaches that are necessary to reduce the need for displacement.

Most local solutions are tailored to the current climate, and not to the projected climate. In order to develop governance and livelihood systems that are robust and flexible, also in relation to the future climate, it is of fundamental importance to forge common frameworks, tools, and strategic alliances between scientists, policy makers, humanitarian organisations and other actors.

Generally, expenditure on prevention is much lower than expenditure on emergency relief. However, the prevention of humanitarian disasters will not only save many lives, but will also increase local resilience, capacity and participation. Substantial financial commitment will be needed to establish the necessary early warning and preparedness systems, hydro-meteorological forecasts, structural protection and information services. Greater priority needs to be given to developing sustainable and human-rights-based resilience to climate change in order to prevent displacement. However, (seasonal) labour migration is widely acknowledged as a rational adaptation strategy to climate change processes and as such should be supported.

ii. Early warning and preparedness

When designed properly and working optimally, early warning systems and other preparedness measures facilitate early action, improve the humanitarian response and reduce the impacts of adverse climatic events on the lives and livelihoods of affected populations. However, the existing

early warning systems, though diverse, are challenged by climate change and not adequate to ensure the necessary humanitarian response or prevent displacement.

Early warning systems need to be better tailored to the management of climate-change-induced displacement, systematically monitoring displacement and migration patterns, including distress migration, and changes in patterns of seasonal labour migration. They will also need to work along various time scales corresponding to immediate, short-term, and seasonal and multi-year forecast data. The establishment of a new global framework for climate services that promotes the use of seasonal, one-year and two-year climate predictions and global exchange of expertise will be a vital step forward in this regard. Climate services, however, are weakest where they are needed most – in climate-vulnerable developing countries. It is therefore necessary to invest in upgrading existing weather and climate observation systems, facilitating the exchange of data, and making better use of existing climate research programmes and risk management techniques.

National, regional and sub-regional governments and bodies, as well as international organisations, each have a role to play in building early warning systems and ensuring a strong link between early warning and early action. It is also vital to consult with and engage local communities at risk, and to take proper account of local traditional early warning systems. Moreover, there is a need to explore innovative modalities for humanitarian financing in support of enhanced emergency preparedness.

iii. Legal protection of environmentally displaced persons

The increasing trend of climate-change-induced displacement raises important questions of how well people displaced by climate-related events are protected by existing legislation and the various national, regional and international protection regimes. International law only recognises a very small group of forced migrants as entitled to protection from other countries. It is in relation to external displacement that the main legal protection gaps are found. People are being displaced by both slow- and sudden-onset events. The immediate focus is on displacement caused by sudden-onset events, and substantially more research and work is needed to establish how protection regimes and mechanisms can cater for displacement caused by slow-onset events.

The majority of those displaced are internally displaced persons, who are covered by the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Some externally displaced persons can and should be recognised as traditional refugees. However, for most externally displaced persons, who fall outside the existing legal frameworks, new approaches based on for example human rights and complementary protection must be explored.

It is widely agreed that the 1951 Geneva Convention should not be renegotiated. Ongoing international policy discussions rather point to applying existing law and protection regimes in relevant areas, such as humanitarian, human rights and refugee law, and instruments on internal displacement, disaster management and legal migration – as well as clarifying, or even developing new, legislation. The 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement include a number of principles that may be applicable to external displacement situations. These principles should be explored and the option of developing a set of internationally agreed principles for externally displaced persons as a result of natural disasters should be further looked into. While a legal framework for the internally displaced is in place, the implementation of protection principles for these populations must be strengthened in connection with displacement due to climate change.

It is important to note that, from a human security and protection perspective, there is normally no reason to distinguish between displacement due to the impacts of climate change and displacement due to other natural disasters. Legislation and protection mechanisms that applies to all those displaced by natural disasters should therefore be developed. Given the magnitude of the issues

involved, it is crucial that we take a collaborative approach based on principles of international cooperation and burden- and responsibility-sharing.

iv. Adapting humanitarian disaster response to climate-induced displacement

The number and frequency of large-scale, sudden-onset crises, combined with increasing slow-onset impacts is creating a huge challenge for humanitarian action. The loss of assets and livelihoods and the limited time for recovery between each event are pushing vulnerable people beyond their coping capacity. The humanitarian response system itself is struggling to provide the equipment and human resources to protect populations in need. It is therefore vital to develop financing and coordination mechanisms that facilitate timely response to crises on this scale.

In this context, there is a pressing need to examine capacity needs and identify measures to ensure appropriate capacity at all levels. Effective partnerships between the international community and affected governments, regional institutions and affected communities must be explored. Capacity development at local level, where the impacts are greatest, is crucial. In addition, the impacts on existing financing mechanisms should be explored, as well as the role that international and regional institutions, national governments and humanitarian partners could play in designing future mechanisms.

Finally, this analysis of capacity needs should take into account new trends in humanitarian aid, such as the need to respond to displacement in urban areas.

The way forward

There is growing international interest in the issue of climate change and displacement, as is reflected in the number of conferences and expert meetings on this topic and the focus on research and development in this area. The Nansen Conference is therefore a timely and natural follow-up of the expert conference on climate change and displacement organised by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in February, and the International Organisation for Migration workshop on climate change, environmental degradation and migration in March this year.

The outcome of the Nansen Conference is expected to feed into relevant international and regional policy processes, such as the UNHCR Ministerial Conference in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Geneva Refugee Convention and the 50th anniversary of the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness to be held in December this year. Other relevant policy processes include the Conference of the Parties of the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 17) to be held in Durban in December 2011, the United Nations Environment Programme's Global Environment Outlook 5 (GEO-5) report, to be published in 2012, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in June 2012, the UN General Assembly, and the forthcoming special report on managing the risks of extreme events and disasters designed to advance climate change adaptation – to be released by the end of 2011 – and other work by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

A closer dialogue between climate change scientists, development and humanitarian actors and policy makers is needed to develop a better understanding of the links between and consequences of climate change and displacement, and to strengthen the basis for a well informed policy discussion on how to respond to human displacement in the context of a changing climate. The Nansen Conference on Climate Change and Displacement in the 21st Century is offering just such an opportunity.