

Policy paper on Climate Displacement

Executive summary

Millions of people already today face great difficulties in handling climate-driven events. These problems are evident and the aim here is to address them with policy recommendations. We suggest a climate justice pathway that links human rights to human and economic development, as well as safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable people. We part from the historical fact that much of the moral burden of causing this situation is shared between many economically successful nations, not least the Global North.

Even more relevant as we are approaching the COP26 at the end of this year, parties now need to agree on actions on a variety of issues connected to climate change. As for the recommendations in this paper, more than anything we call for the creation of an effective international framework to deal with climate displacement.

Introduction on the context of Climate Displacement

Research published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change suggests that we have a carbon budget of approximately 10 years before a point of no-return in triggering Earth system feedback effects which will exacerbate the adverse effects of climate change (IPCC, 2018, p.108; Ritchie and Roser, 2020).

These irreversible system feedback effects include the thawing of permafrost in the Arctic releasing methane; weakening of the land and sea to act as carbon sinks and instead acting in the opposite way with increased forest fires and increasing bacteria in the ocean producing more CO₂ (Berners-Lee, 2019, p.272).

The adverse effects include an increased frequency of droughts, floods, disappearance of small island developing states, increased food insecurity, adverse effects to human health, increased threats to livelihoods and an increase in poverty, changing structure of communities, and interacting and cascading risks (IPCC, 2018, pp.234, 238, 240, 244).

Adverse effects to human health in both the Global North and Global South through increased diseases and bacteria (such as an increased incidence in Lyme disease and other vector-borne diseases and *Virbio* bacteria in Canada and Northern Europe), malnutrition, greater vulnerability to diseases through malnutrition, greater risk of injuries and deaths owing to more intense heatwaves and fires (IPCC, 2018, pp.240-241).

Climate change will fundamentally affect the lives of millions who may be forced to seek refuge in other areas. Between 2008 and 2014, more than 25 million people per year were uprooted because of rapid-onset disasters such as floods

and storms (Biermann and Boas, 2018, p.405-406). In practical terms, climate-induced displaced people, whether displaced internally or across borders, in developing countries will be an issue of international concern, cooperation and assistance.¹

It is these people who are most likely to be compelled to leave their homes for other locations both within their countries as well across national borders owing to low adaptive capacities, their often vulnerable location vis-à-vis climate change events, often high population densities, already existing hunger and health problems, low incomes, often weak governance structures and political instability (Biermann and Boas, 2018, p.409) that is exacerbated by the effects of climate change. By increasing food and water shortages, increasing the population of disease vectors and increasing temperatures, climate change will also harm labour productivity and economic growth in already highly constrained countries in the Global South.

Furthermore, in general, people who are marginalized – in terms of economy, culture, politics and economics – are more vulnerable to climate change and adaptation to mitigation responses that fail to defend their rights. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the impacts of climate change deepen existing gender inequalities. For instance, according to sociocultural norms, women have less opportunity to influence decisions to mitigate and cope with the impacts of climate change.

To address these issues, the 200th Executive Committee Meeting of the Liberal International Declared in 2018 in Berlin several important principles for approaching the problems. Among the conclusions in the declaration reached were that all countries will need to take action and that this will require action by many stakeholders. Perhaps most importantly, that climate justice is precisely the task of linking human rights to these issues, using a humanitarian approach and “safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable people and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its impacts equitably and fairly” (Berlin Declaration).

There is still no clear and internationally accepted institution or framework to assist people who are displaced by causes attributable to climate change. In terms of “the legal gap” these groups are still not covered by today’s international agreements, although there have been promising initiatives during the last 15 years, as just to mention one, the Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular

¹ It is worth noticing that while the majority of climate-induced displacement occurs within the borders of countries, some people are forced to move abroad. Bangladesh, China, India and the Philippines each recorded more than 4 million disaster displacements in 2019.

<https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/>

migration from 2018 (Jakobsson 2019 pp 15-24). The current system of international law (including refugee, human rights and migration law) is not equipped to deal with climate induced migration. The intersection of climate change and migration requires comprehensive solutions to the multidimensional challenges it creates.

There is also a lack of agreement among scholars and institutions on the appropriate definition to use for people who have been displaced by causes attributable to climate change.

To conclude, this means that millions of people in different parts of the world already today face great difficulties in handling these climate-driven events. Historically, the factual and moral burden of causing this situation is shared between many economically successful nations, not least the Global North.

These problems are evident and the aim of this paper is to address them with the following policy recommendations. We aim, therefore, to prevent and mitigate the forecast problems by outlining a climate justice pathway that links human rights to human and economic development, as well as safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable people. In the following, we seek to approach a humanitarian approach based on sharing the burdens and benefits of climate changes and impacts equitably and fairly.

Policy recommendations

1. Getting the terminology right

We raise the issue of the most appropriate definition to use on climate displacement.² We believe that “climate displacement” is the most useful term. Recognizing the somewhat confused situation in this matter, we believe that things should be called by its proper name. The alternative term, climate-driven migration, have other annotations that we wish to avoid. Migration is, indeed, one adverse effect following from climate change, but all stakeholders must at the same time recognize that re-allocation of persons due to climate effects will exist – and of evidently already exists – in practically every nation and every region in the world. To us, the term migration will most probably continue to mislead the discussion as if this matter would be a challenge only for some nations.

² One common definition terms “persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad” (IOM 2009).

Another issue to be mentioned is the rising use of the term “environmental” displacement, referring to other sorts of adverse effects than those from greenhouse gases. In this paper we hold the view that other environmental consequences could be included in the term climate displacement.

2. Creating an effective international framework

We suggest creating an effective international framework. With their legacy of contribution of greenhouse gases, the Global North have a responsibility in creating such a framework. We call on the EU to contribute to the commitment of the Global North in developing such a framework and take the lead in the Global North to reduce damage caused by climate change. There are several areas that we would like to suggest as important aims of such a framework.

- a. Develop and support climate adaption programmes in places where climate displacement will cause severe negative effects. Examples of priorities are living standards of displaced people, financial instruments for managing natural disaster risks and needed infrastructural projects and green bonds.
- b. Support the development and the diffusion of new technological innovations that prevent the adverse effects of climate displacement. More specifically, there is a need for early warning systems and other applications to be made accessible in the Global South.
- c. Recognize the promising work already accomplished, as for example manifested in the Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration and the Nansen Protection Agenda. There is a need for further research efforts on coordinated migration and strengthening of multilateralism.
- d. Support governments and local communities to create protection in most efficient and decentralised ways and promote regional solutions such as for example insurance schemes in order to raise resources for prevention of climate displacement. This includes sheltering support and all levels of government and in coordination and collaboration with relevant stakeholders.
- e. Strengthen the legal protection for climate displacement migrants who are not already covered by other regulations.
- f. Last but not least we wish to propose an international alliance of the willing in order to create further support for those people not recognized within the legal framework. Once again, the nations of the Global North have the responsibility of taking lead in this, and such an alliance could find new methods of handling the issues mentioned in this paper.

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The policy paper is as a result from the Climate Migration Impact Series, an initiative by Liberal International through which the following participants have chosen to elaborate this paper:

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