

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Climate Change and Human Mobility: A Humanitarian Point of View

1. There is growing concern that climate change and in particular changes in frequency, intensity and location of weather events like floods, storms and droughts may have impacts on human mobility that will cause societal strains in many countries and perhaps at a global level. Human mobility is a primary mechanism to cope with extreme weather events, and migration a possible strategy for adaptation to changing climatic patterns. As displaced persons and migrants often encounter situations of need, vulnerability, and distress, the impact that climate change may have on human mobility is also of concern to the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement.

2. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported in the Fourth Assessment Report (2007) that climate change is already happening. It is important to make a distinction between the current and near-term impacts of climate change on migration and the impacts when climate change further accelerates in the medium and long-term, decades from now.

3. If no significant measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are taken in the coming ten years scientists fear that climate change will accelerate to a global temperature rise of more than 2 degrees Celsius which may have a far reaching and massive impact on human lives, in particular in the most vulnerable developing countries. This includes the dislocation or migration of populations from coastal areas as well as areas where there is permanent water shortage. The only global policy to reduce such demographic pressures is a sharp reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

4. However, in recent public discussions scenarios of massive displacement and migration due to climate change have often been presented as a near-term risk, with immediate operational implications. Such predictions of ‘demographic catastrophies’ can contribute to xenophobia and social tensions, and distract from the humanitarian needs of nowadays migrants, refugees and displaced persons. As a matter of fact, much of today’s assumptions about the possible extent and nature of migration that are, as the IPCC puts it, “at best, guesswork”¹.

5. Humanitarian organisations are often closest to the people and their conditions on the ground, and thus have a role to play in providing the reality-check on conjectures made on the consequences of climate change and the way people might have to cope with, and adapt to it. It is, therefore, important that they contribute humanitarian feedback and information to the discussions.

6. However, humanitarian organisations cannot operate on the basis of general conjectures, but rather must respond to the realities on the ground. They must complement their planning by strategic information on long-term risks when it is scientifically sound and operationally relevant. It is indispensable that they uphold and follow the humanitarian imperative, which is to take action here and now, and respond to needs and vulnerabilities as they evolve.

¹ IPCC 4th Assessment Report, 2007. Working Group II, p. 365 (“Box 7.2. Environmental migration”).

7. Therefore, for National Societies of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, humanitarian action related to displaced populations and migrants, including those whose move may be correlated to climate change, will be primarily in the following general fields: (a) *Humanitarian response*, (b) *disaster risk preparedness and reduction*, and (c) *building community resilience*. National Societies may also have to engage increasingly in (d) *attenuation of resource conflicts*. All these areas of work have to be informed by information about changing risks.

(a) *Keep a humanitarian focus, and respond flexibly*

8. The significance of climate change is generally recognised. However, the range of potential changes is vast. We have clarity about mounting risks, but often lack clarity on how and where those materialize locally. Climate change influences mobility patterns in different ways and directions. Possible changes range from increasing short-term displacement due to natural hazards and disasters, over modifications in seasonal migratory patterns, or the loss of nomadic ways of life, to rural flight, urbanisation, and long-distance migration.

9. Mobility patterns are mostly influenced by factors not directly related to climate change. Economic, social and political factors play an important role. Even when a weather-related disaster is one of the factors it is difficult to identify if and how strong climate change may have been a contributing factor. Thus, predictions about the impact of climate change on human mobility contain many uncertainties and assumptions, and are too general to serve as a practical basis for programmes and projects.

10. It is essential that National Societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent keep their focus on the concrete humanitarian response. First and foremost, it is in the specific context, at the local and regional level, where humanitarian action must assist and protect the people at risk, help increase their options and choices and alleviate pressures that may force them to migrate against their will and desire. Humanitarian work with and for migrants must be a flexible response to real-life situations as they evolve.

(b) *Protect populations through disaster risk reduction*

11. A common conjecture is that the threat of natural disasters, including such related to climate change, may force people to search for safer places. However, human mobility due to disasters or the threat hereof, has normally proven to be at relatively short distance, and within a country or a region. There is little hard evidence today of large-scale and long-distance migration linked to natural disasters. Where disasters occur, the displaced usually have the desire to return home when the situation is normalising.

12. Nevertheless, data collected over the past four decades show indeed that the number of persons affected world-wide by natural disasters is on the rise. The affected are persons whose livelihoods are destroyed or imperiled, and who often are displaced even though they do not move far and for long. There is an evident need to intensify preventive work to protect these populations.

13. It is important to give consideration to the impact and costs of a world-wide increase in natural disasters, and adopt policies to confront these risks. Nevertheless, for National Societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent the immediate humanitarian imperative is to focus on measures at local and regional level to prepare for, and reduce the risks to populations in disaster-prone areas today. This implies also to take into account available information, such as meteorological data, and to keep in mind the changing patterns of risks that are known and relevant to humanitarian operations.

(c) *Contribute to people's resilience at community level*

14. Climate change related weather events make living conditions in many places increasingly precarious, thus causing social and economic distress and contributing to migratory pressures on communities (multidirectional and complex as these pressures may be). Humanitarian advocacy, including by National Societies of the Red Cross Red Crescent, may encourage governments to take measures to alleviate these pressures through improved services and sustainable development.

15. However, the comparative advantage of National Societies lies in their volunteer based work on the ground. This may involve, among others, programmes for food security and income generation, programmes for health and education, or humanitarian relief activities. By strengthening the resilience of people at community level, National Societies are contributing most effectively to the reduction of migratory pressures. Climate change is a significant factor that must be built into those efforts. Building resilience must take into account these risks as they evolve.

(d) *Attenuate conflicts related to resource competition*

16. A current argument is that climate variability and the related shifts in the availability of basic resources, such as water and agricultural land, puts new competitive stresses on many societies. This will lead to an increase in inter-communal violence and armed conflict. In general terms, this is a plausible hypothesis but it does not provide a sufficient basis for anything like a new operational paradigm for humanitarian preparedness and action. Operational generalisations as to the what, where and when of new types of conflict induced by climate variability are hardly possible today. Actually, conflicts in recent history have been at least as much influenced by competition over mineral resources as by competition over basic resources that become rare in certain regions due to environmental degradation and extreme weather events.

17. Nevertheless, we do know that competition over scarce resources is a constant in human history. The ensuing conflicts all-too often lead to the dramatic and massive displacement of people. There is also ample evidence that conflict can induce long-distance and long-term migration. In other words, the hypothesis that correlates migration and displacement to conflict, and conflict to competition over resources, is sufficient.

18. It goes, therefore, without saying that National Societies, in partnership with the ICRC, must maintain, and even strengthen, their humanitarian role in conflicts, in particular their involvement in humanitarian advocacy that can reduce tensions over resources before conflict breaks out.