

CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND CONFLICT

Rising global temperatures caused by greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are increasing the frequency and severity of extreme weather events. These hazards, together with the longer-term effects of “slow-onset” climate events, such as rising temperatures, desertification, loss of biodiversity, land and forest degradation, glacial retreat, ocean acidification, sea-level rise and salinization, have affected, and are likely to continue to affect, global migration patterns. As the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (“UNHCR”) has stated, “Climate change is the defining crisis of our time and disaster displacement one of its most devastating consequences.”¹ Displacement, in turn, will present security issues. In this article, I highlight the connections between the global climate crisis, migration and conflict.

Calls to Action on Climate

There are countless calls to action to mitigate climate change. To pick a single one: the International Energy Agency just released its Annual World Energy Outlook² in which it notes that in 2020 renewable sources of energy continued to grow rapidly and electric vehicle sales set new sales records, which regrettably are offset by the “stubbornness of the status quo,” namely significant increases in the use of coal and oil, prompting the second largest annual increase in CO₂ emissions in history. The report concludes that the “direction of travel is a long way from alignment” with the IEA’s path to a 1.5°C stabilisation in rising global temperatures by 2050 above pre-industrial levels, and absent concerted global governmental efforts over and above net zero policies that already have been pledged (and for which significant means of implementation are yet to be enacted), will not be reached.

Connecting the Dots

In 1992, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (“IPCC”), in its First Assessment Report,³ citing risks of shoreline erosion, coastal flooding from sea-level rise, and the effects of severe drought on food supplies, water resources and biomass, warned that the “largest impacts on humanity of climate change may be on human settlement.” In October 2021, almost 30 years later, the US government (in a report issued by the staff of the National Security Council) for the first time officially reported on the link between climate change and migration.⁴

Studies to date suggest that climate change, for many, is a contributing factor, rather than the singular cause of migration. Climate migration may be temporary (*e.g.*, displacement due to storms, inland floods, droughts or wildfires) or more permanent (*e.g.*, displacement caused by sea-level rise or human heat thresholds), and in either case may contribute to instability and conflict. As the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (“IDMC”) noted, it is difficult to distinguish temporary or voluntary, from permanent or forced, displacements in the context of slow-onset hazards. For some facing the impacts of climate change, the decision to move

¹ UNHCR, “Climate change and disaster displacement” (“Disaster Displacement”) (available [here](#)).

² Available [here](#).

³ Available [here](#).

⁴ See White House, “Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration” (October 2021) (available [here](#)) (“NSC Report”).

may be an opportunity and an attractive option with the possibility to return, while those forced to move may well face loss of property, access to services and community agency.⁵

It may be difficult to isolate the specific factors driven by slow-onset climate change, and separate them as well from other drivers of social change. As summarized by the IDMC, slow-onset climate events can erode the capacity of ecosystems to provide critical services such as fresh water, food, shelter and energy, or may turn into a disaster prompted by a rapid-onset event. These events may reduce the capacity of ecosystems and communities to withstand the impact of slow and rapid-onset events, and potentially trigger a cascade of hazards.

These events also may be aggravating factors, acting as a threat multiplier or magnifier for other pre-existing drivers of conflict (*e.g.*, the emergence of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region has been linked to natural resource scarcity exacerbated by drought and desertification). Climate migration also has the potential to bring groups into contact with one another, exacerbating resource scarcity, altering balances of power and otherwise increasing tension (*e.g.*, herder-farmer conflicts are increasing in Nigeria, across the Sahel and further into sub-Saharan Africa). These events can create a dangerous cycle: they may aggravate poverty or economic distress,⁶ and reduce the ability of fragile states in particular to reduce the tensions that can lead to violent conflict. Conflict, violence and social, ethnic and ideological polarisation, in turn, can disrupt livelihoods, increasing vulnerability to slow-onset climate events.

Climate change can also adversely impact vulnerable communities already displaced by conflict. The UNHCR notes that populations displaced for reasons other than climate often reside in climate change “hotspots” where they may be forced again to flee. For example, in the Sahel region, violence perpetrated by armed groups has forced close to an estimated 3.0 to 3.5 million to flee both within countries and across borders, exacerbating challenges in receiving areas attributed to climate change and environmental degradation.⁷ In 2020, the International Committee of the Red Cross estimated that of the 20 countries deemed most vulnerable to climate change, 12 are beset by internal conflicts,⁸ suggesting that conflict-ridden areas are less able to cope with climate change (and climate change can increase the risk of conflict by exacerbating existing social, economic and other tensions), rather than there being a direct correlation between climate change and conflict.

There are other aspects of the inter-relationship between climate change (and changes to biodiversity) and conflict to note as well:

⁵ See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, “Thematic Series: No matter of choice: displacement in a changing climate” (December 2018) (available [here](#)) (“IDMC Thematic Study”). See also the Framework Convention on Climate Change (Cancun COP 2010) (available [here](#)).

⁶ See Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects” – Chapter 12 (available [here](#)).

⁷ See Disaster Displacement. See also Climate Refugees, “Climate, Conflict, Migration in the Sahel – Regional Expert Weighs In” (October 2020) (available [here](#)).

⁸ See International Committee of the Red Cross, “When Rain Turns to Dust: Understanding and responding to the combined impact of armed conflicts and the climate and environment crisis on people’s lives (2020) (available [here](#)).

- climate mitigation/adaptation strategies may themselves increase instability and result in conflict;
- the scramble for minerals and other resources that are critical to more sustainable sources of electrical power and the shift more broadly to a low-carbon economy may prompt conflict, particularly in countries with fragile political structures and economic conditions⁹;
- violent extremist groups, transnational criminal organizations and other non-state armed groups may seek to exploit climate migration to further their own objectives, to exacerbate drivers of migration by limiting access to food and other resources or to hamper intervention aimed at mitigating climate change and reducing climate migration;¹⁰
- malign state actors may seek to gain geopolitical advantage through offers of security assistance;
- water scarcity and other consequences of climate change¹¹ may lead to inter-state conflict (*e.g.*, the tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam); and
- conflict may exacerbate environmental vulnerabilities, for example attacks may lead to water, soil or land contamination, in turn reducing the local population's resilience and capacity to adapt to climate change. Similarly, conflict may impair the ability or willingness of governmental authorities to manage and protect the environment in affected areas, and natural resources may be exploited to enhance war-torn economies. Conflict and political instability can also degrade the environment, for example, through the destruction of forests and damage to infrastructure such as oil rigs.¹²

Migration, whether climate-induced or not, also has a political dimension. Simply stated, it can itself lead to political instability in communities that receive migrants, which in the context of climate migration can have an impact in areas far removed from the source of the migration. As noted in the NSC Report, “[a]nti-immigration political actors may seize on both real and perceived challenges of uncontrolled or large migration flows to improve political standing, inflaming existing tensions and undermining efforts to appropriately respond to acute migration or refugee crises, such as those caused by the Syrian civil war or extreme weather and violence in Central America.

In October 2021, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a National Intelligence Estimate (“NIE”)¹³ that concludes that the effects of climate change are “likely to

⁹ See transcript of podcast, On Peace, Tegan Blaine, United States Institute of Peace, “How Climate Change Impacts Global Conflict” (available [here](#)).

¹⁰ See the NSC Report.

¹¹ See, *e.g.*, Address by Crisis Group President & CEO Robert Malley to the UN Security Council’s session on climate and security risks, “Climate Change is Shaping the Future of Conflict” (April 2020) (available [here](#)).

¹² See International Committee of the Red Cross, “Seven things you need to know about climate change and conflict” (July 2020) (available [here](#)).

¹³ National Intelligence Council, “National Intelligence Estimate: Climate Change and International Responses Increasing Challenges to US National Security Through 2040” (available [here](#)). The

exacerbate cross-border geopolitical flashpoints as states take steps to secure their interests.” Warming temperatures and reductions in sea ice already are accelerating competition over access to natural resources in the Arctic, and increased temperatures and more extreme weather patterns increase the risk of cross-border conflict, particularly after 2030, as extreme weather events exacerbate existing, or lead to new, water insecurity. The NIE sees the climate migration as moving from largely domestic displacements to cross-border migration as droughts, more intense cyclones together with storm surges, and floods exacerbate stress faced by already vulnerable internally displaced groups. Cross-border migration has the potential to heighten instability as it disturbs political, socioeconomic and demographic dynamics, and pits originating countries against receiving countries. Finally, the NIE cites as a new source of geopolitical tension unilateral testing and deployment of large-scale solar geo-engineering.

Climate Migration

In spite of the increased focus on climate change-induced displacement, there is no overarching legal regime that covers these migrations. In fact, there appear to be no accepted definitions to characterize those moving. The International Organization on Migration (IOM) identifies “climate migration” as “a person or group(s) of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives, or living conditions, are forced to leave their places of habitual residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move within or outside their country of origin or habitual residence.” The lack of accepted definitions may be because climate change is not viewed as the singular driver of migration or because a more precise definition could trigger legal obligations under international or domestic law.

Whether one refers to climate migrants or environmental migrants, as a technical matter they are not “climate refugees.” The reason for this is that a “refugee” is a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”¹⁴ While reporting suggests that many affected by climate do not cross international borders, even those that do are unlikely to qualify as “refugees” under international law, unless perhaps, as the UNHCR notes, the interaction of the effects of climate change with

NIE, the first of its kind on climate change, was one of four reports (or the unclassified version of reports) issued by the Biden Administration on October 21, 2021. The others are the Defense Climate Risk Analysis (available [here](#)), the Strategic Framework for Addressing Climate Change issued by the Department of Homeland Security (available [here](#)) and the NSC Report cited above. *See generally*, “Fact Sheet: Prioritizing Climate in Foreign Policy and National Security” (available [here](#)).

¹⁴ *See* “Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees” (1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol) (available [here](#)). The US Immigration and Nationality Act (available [here](#)) has a similar definition focusing on “persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution.” The 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (of the Organisation of African Unity, available [here](#)) and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, Colloquium on the International Protection of Refugees in Central America, Mexico and Panama (available [here](#)) extend refugee status to persons fleeing events/circumstances “seriously [disturbing] the public order.” *See generally*, UNHCR, “Legal considerations regarding claims for international protection made in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters” (October 2020) (available [here](#)).

violence, conflict or fear of persecution prompting migration is sufficient to trigger refugee status.¹⁵

In part because of the lack of accepted definition and the difficulty of attributing decisions to migrate directly to climate, as well as the fact, as the IDMC noted, because of “the wide range of phenomena, impacts, drivers and types of movements they provoke and the regions they affect,” it is difficult to be definitive about the scope of displacement caused by slow-onset environmental change, and therefore how to address it.¹⁶

Implications if Not Mitigated

That said, based on current projections of the potential impact of the climate crisis across the globe, climate migration needs to be addressed. The IDMC estimates that, as of the end of 2020, there were 55 million people living in internal displacement – 48 million due to conflict and violence (across 59 countries and territories), and 7 million due to disasters (across 103 countries and territories).¹⁷ Climate migration ultimately may be exacerbated by existing trends in non-climate induced migration to coastal areas and to urban and peri-urban centres in developing countries already facing challenges in delivering basic services.

In September 2021, the World Bank, building on a study that it released in 2018, posited that, without concerned action to reduce GHG emissions and to support green, inclusive and resilient development, by 2050, slow-onset climate change could force 216 million people across six regions to move within their countries, migrating from areas with lower water availability and crop productivity and areas affected by sea-level rise and storm surges.¹⁸ The report projects that “hotspots” of internal climate migration in rural, urban and coastal systems could emerge as soon as 2030, and spread and intensify by 2050. Climate change impacts will likely affect the poorer and more vulnerable regions, putting at risk development gains. Some areas could become uninhabitable, due, for example, to sea-level rise or extreme heat stress.

As the staff of the National Security Council recently noted,¹⁹ while to date climate-related migration has been largely internal and largely to urban areas, the “accelerating trend of global displacement related to climate impacts is increasing cross-border movements, too, particularly where climate change interacts with conflict and violence.” In sum,

¹⁵ See UNHCR “Strategic Framework for Climate Action” (2021) (available [here](#)).

¹⁶ See IDMC Thematic Study.

¹⁷ See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website ([link](#)).

¹⁸ World Bank, “Groundswell, Acting on Internal Climate Migration – Part II” (September 2021) (available [here](#)). The 2021 report covers East Asia and the Pacific, North Africa, and Eastern and Central Asia, as well as qualitative analyses of climate-related mobility in the countries of the Mashreq and in Small Island Developing States. The 2018 report (available) covered Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America. The 216 million represents almost 3% of the regions’ population, 85.7 million (4.2%) in Sub-Saharan Africa, 48.4 million (2.5%) in East Asia and the Pacific, 40.5 million in South Asia (1.8%), 19.3 million in North Africa (9.0%), 17.1 million in Latin America (2.6%) and 5.1 million in Eastern and Central Asia (2.3%).

¹⁹ See NSC Report.

displacements would adversely impact both sending and receiving areas, with the latter potentially being ill-equipped to receive climate migrants and meet their basic needs. Climate change-induced shifts in social, economic and living conditions could be compounded by fragility and economic or other crises, prompting migration and concurrently reducing the capacity of affected areas to cope, adapt and rebuild.

Next Steps

The World Bank report concludes that concerted efforts to cut GHG emissions, and related initiatives, could reduce climate-related migration by up to 80%. The extent of the reductions are particularly pronounced in areas with large populations in climate-vulnerable areas and climate-sensitive livelihoods. Related initiatives include embedding internal climate migration in development planning, in both receiving and sending areas. These range from broadening opportunities for people affected by climate change to adapt where they live or increase the likelihood that they will have more viable options if they move. Planning can also increase the likelihood of more resilient and inclusive economic urban and rural transformations. Development policies will also need to address the nexus between climate change and conflict insofar as climate change, natural catastrophes and resource degradation can contribute to conflict, and also can hamper humanitarian assistance.

In addition to taking steps to reduce the drivers of climate migration (which needless to say must be embraced for the sake of the planet) and build resilience of potential host communities, it is equally important for the international community to develop enhanced legal protections for climate migrants. Ignoring the problem will not make it disappear.

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