

April 2021



POLICY BRIEF: How do we address the humanitarian consequences of climate change?

1. Our starting point

On 25 March 2021, Danish Red Cross convened an online event on addressing the humanitarian consequences of climate change. The aim of the event was to outline some of the key issues relating to climate change seen from a humanitarian perspective, and what the implications are for humanitarian action: The framework, the way we work, and the need to change our policies and way of working as donor states, governments and humanitarian actors. The event was hosted as part of a series of events to develop policy recommendations for the implementation of the new Danish Strategy for development and humanitarian assistance.

The speakers at the event included Maarten van Aalst (Director of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Climate Centre and coordinating lead author of the IPCC report), Miriam Cullen (Assistant Professor of Climate and Migration Law at Copenhagen University) and Annette Msabeni-Ngoye (Deputy Secretary General, Kenya Red Cross). The interventions of the speakers were followed by a panel debate with Karin Poulsen (Danish Ambassador to Ethiopia), Roberto Forin (Global Programme Coordinator, Mixed Migration Centre), and Anne Mette Meyer (Senior Climate & Forecast Based Action (FbA) Advisor, Danish Red Cross).

2. Where are we now?

The speakers highlighted how we have increasing data and knowledge about the effect of climate change and climate related events. The recently published IFRC World Disaster Report 2020¹ shows that we, on a global scale, are affected by stronger and more unpredictable disasters. Climate change has become a global humanitarian crisis which affects the health and living conditions of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people. These communities often live in fragile contexts, where authorities are not able or willing to serve them in the best possible way.

Climate change also acts as an additional driver pushing vulnerable rural people towards the progressively expanding urban areas worldwide and is changing the patterns of risk in already increasingly stressed environments. As of now, more than 20 million people are displaced from their home yearly due to climate related disasters.² Many can still return home after a short period of time, but an increasing number of people end up in long term displacement or are forced to cross borders using migration as a survival strategy. Researchers estimate that there in 2050 may be up to 200 million climate refugees in the world.³

Much of the existing legal protections are built on what triggered the displacement. The policy framework for addressing protection concerns for climate displaced persons is developing, and it is important to take note of these developments in future donor and government policies. Implementation of the international

¹ <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/world-disaster-report-2020/>

² IDMC, Disaster Displacement: A Global Review 2008-2018, 2019, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/disaster-displacement-a-global-review>.

³ Estimated by Professor Norman Myers, Oxford University. The estimate is discussed by analysts but is the commonly accepted number applied broadly from the IPCC to the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change.

commitments related to climate change, disasters and environmental degradation under the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the context of disasters and climate change, would contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Paris Agreement and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 at global, regional, national and local levels. We should also take note of some of the recent developments with the UN Human Rights Committee decision on *Ioane Teitiota v. New Zealand*⁴; the UN Human Rights Committee General Comment no. 36, the IACtHR, and the International Law Commissions' Draft Articles on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disaster.

In Kenya, where we are seeing larger and more frequent weather-related disasters, affecting planting seasons, water scarcity, food insecurity, and an increase in conflicts around water access for pastoralists. The increase in vulnerabilities for already vulnerable people is evident, and we see a growing urban displacement trend, with growing informal settlements, also facing risks to climate-related disasters. Similarly, Ethiopia experiences multiple crises related to drought, flooding, locust infections and the effects of COVID-19, but it is also a country experiencing layers of crises with the current conflict in the North, ethnic strife and an upcoming election.

Looking at mobilities in the context of urbanization and climate change, we know that twice as many people are likely to be displaced by disaster than they were in the 1970's, and that 60% of refugees and 80% of internally displaced people live in cities. At the same time two thirds of the world's major cities are vulnerable to climate change, and by 2050 some of these will be below sea-level. Often the urban poor are the ones hit the hardest by climate change effects. Those who lack capital will be stuck in and around cities dependent on assistance, or they will have to migrate.⁵ Cities should play a much bigger role in migration and displacement policies, taking into consideration the climate risks they face.

So far much of the climate change policies and support has been very top-down, handled through high level plans for roll out. But this not necessarily what serves the vulnerable communities the best. Humanitarian and other actors need to serve these communities better with risk reduction, early action and adaptation measures adjusted to these communities' reality. National adaptation plans and international support for the implementation of these, must reflect the risks facing these communities and their own solutions to a much higher degree.

With experiences from Kenya and other countries, working with anticipatory action, we heard how this is part of the solution. It is not enough to respond to crises. We need to take action before they happen. The experience shows us that working more through an anticipatory approach, we can have better and more effective solutions for people experiencing crises. One that protects hard-won development gains and deals with problems before they arise. This is also relevant for other areas, and actors like the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and others are looking at forecasts and anticipatory actions beyond extreme weather events. This is equally relevant in relation to epidemics, displacement and migration patterns.

3. Looking ahead: Addressing the challenges we face

The speakers at the event made it evident that the climate crisis and its humanitarian consequences entail a series of challenges, which must be dealt with.

Climate change can no longer be considered a future issue alone. The effects of climate change are already here, and we have little time left to mitigate the crisis and prepare for the consequences. Those who have contributed least to the climate crisis are suffering the worst consequences of the crisis. Climate disasters are most frequent in countries and regions, where people are already vulnerable. Climate change and extreme weather conditions are affecting plants and livestock, resulting in water scarcity, more outbreaks of diseases and loss of livelihood and housing. Furthermore, the climate crisis often interlaces with and amplifies the consequences of humanitarian crises such as armed conflict or displacement.

We need to change the way we think about protection and climate-displacement. We need to move away from reactive protections that are triggered after disaster occurs, to framing protection in terms of preventing those disasters occurring - and if they do, ensure immediate and longer-term solutions for those that are displaced. We need to strengthen preparedness for foreseeable events, to ensure that the poor and vulnerable communities have the capacity or resources that functional resilience requires. We must work

⁴ <https://www.refworld.org/cases,HRC,5e26f7134.html>

⁵ <https://mixedmigration.org/articles/climate-exposure-the-complex-interplay-between-cities-climate-change-and-mixed-migration/>

with local actors and communities to identify laws, policies and practices that impede local resilience – and those that promote it. We must take seriously the “whole of society approach” and think laterally to improve regular pathways for people displaced due to climate change. This includes consideration of the private sector role.

It is essential to prioritise investment in better more innovative and resilient solutions such as warning systems linked to prevention and local preparedness efforts and find ways of preventing and addressing the longer-term needs arising from climate-related displacement, as an increasingly urban issue. Countries like Denmark have taken important steps in support of adaptation and a stronger focus on intersections and commitments to green investments, not least in the recovery from the impact of COVID-19. It is important to ensure a strong focus on approaches that reach the local communities and bring their innovative practices into reality, which form part of the efforts in for example Kenya and Ethiopia, with a focus on climate adaptation and resilience building, and empowerment of communities to define and take early action based on their specific situation.

4. Recommended actions

First, we must recognise the climate crisis is here with severe consequences for the most vulnerable people and communities around the world. The priority must be to uphold and strengthen protection for those who are most exposed to the impacts of climate change. There are very limited funding opportunities to address and alleviate suffering due to climate change in fragile contexts. These contexts are characterized by high risks, and lowest levels of capacity to mitigate risks and handle consequences. This makes it difficult for the local actors that are best placed to support community-level resilience building and calls for a change in funding modalities. We need new funding modalities and partnerships with non-traditional funders and investors to develop adaptive financing mechanisms for complex settings.

Second, it is not enough to respond to crises and disasters – we must act before they happen. The humanitarian system needs to adopt an anticipatory approach to both imminent and underlying risks, including displacement. By taking an anticipatory approach we can mitigate humanitarian consequence through innovative and more effective solutions that deal with problems before they arise and protect hard-won development gains. We need to link protection issues and capacity building for resilience to all preparedness measures otherwise the efforts will be lost.

Third, legally the link between protection and preparedness points to a need for exploring existing protection frameworks to strengthen the prevention of and response to climate-related displacement. This would include the potential for development of principles for protection and durable solutions for those that are long-term or permanently displaced – or series of events – that caused severe disruption to the society and its institutions.

Finally, communities most exposed to and vulnerable to climate change effects and displacement must be at the centre of any action. Global, national and local actors must be better at developing anticipatory action and integrate climate initiatives and humanitarian actions that build on communities’ own innovative practices and empowers them to define and take early action based on their specific situation and capacity.

Danish Red Cross strongly recommends that the new Danish strategy for development and humanitarian assistance will be a catalyst for taking preventive humanitarian action in relation to climate changes to a larger scale.

Danish Red Cross recommends:

Recognise and address the impact on those most exposed in fragile settings

Address growing needs in fragile contexts and support the development of new adaptive financing mechanisms in partnership with non-traditional actors

Invest in anticipatory approaches

Support innovative and anticipatory solutions linked to prevention and local preparedness and resilience building

Strengthen the protection of climate displaced

Work to strengthen existing legal frameworks for protection to include people that have been displaced by climate-related events, which has caused a serious disruption of the functioning of society

Support locally-led solutions

Support locally anchored anticipatory approaches, increasing decision-making, action and funding at the local level, to empower communities to manage changing risks