Task Force 6
Accelerating SDGs: Exploring New Pathways to the 2030 Agenda

CLIMATE-INDUCED DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION: A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR G20 COLLABORATION

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Abstract

The impacts of climate change could displace up to 250 million people by 2050, exacerbating poverty and inequality, and derailing the achievement of SDGs by several decades. The impacts of climate change on countries of the Global South are disproportionate. In these countries, large-scale sudden displacement could lead to violations of people's rights. These negative consequences could be avoided through policy interventions aimed at empowering and enhancing human capital. In certain countries of the Global North, population shrinkage and its economic consequences are inevitable, but these could be addressed through immigration. Collaboration between countries likely to witness climate change-induced displacement at scale, and those that require immigrants to sustain and grow their populations and economies, could result in positive outcomes for both sets of countries. This Policy Brief makes this argument through illustrative cases.

The Challenge

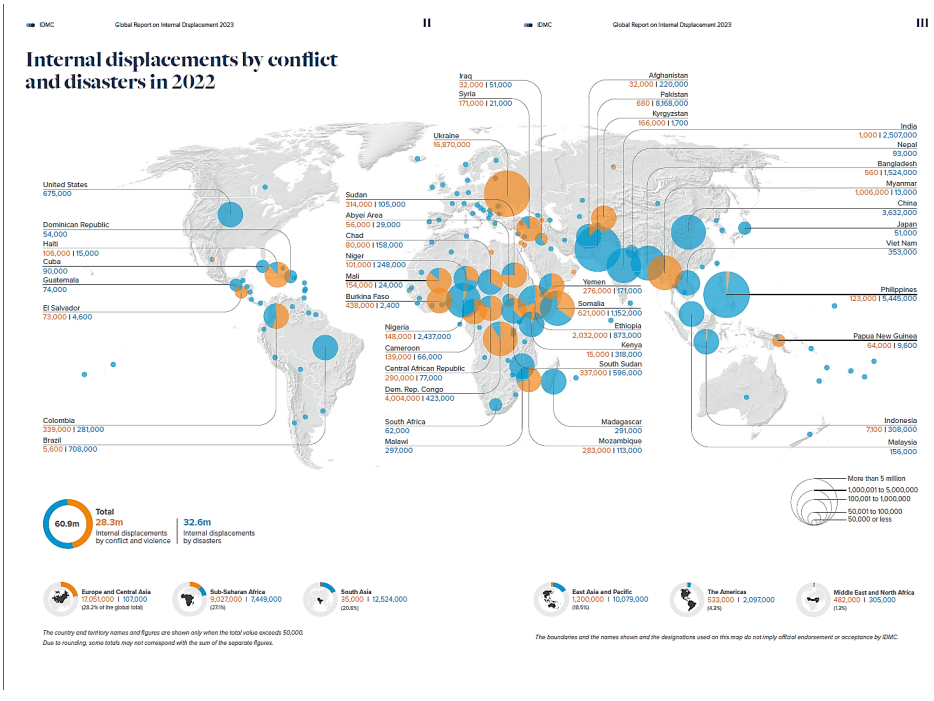
1

Climate change-induced displacement

The Climate Risk Index 2021 shows that while the impacts of climate change are being felt worldwide, they are disproportionately affecting developing countries. These consequences are threatening lives and livelihoods and human security, and thereby delaying progress towards the achievement of the 2030 Development Agenda.[1] The vulnerability of the physical space, in particular—due to rising sea levels, severe storms and wildfires, and other extreme weather events exacerbated by global warming—is threatening relationships among people and places, and can trigger massive displacement.[2]

Countries of the Global South are experiencing increasing displacement—estimates say the numbers could go as high as 250 million people by 2050.[3] They are also suffering massive loss of lives, more due to disasters than conflict and violence (see Figure 1). Over 97 percent of disaster-induced displacement in 2022 was weather-related.[4] As the impacts of climate change become more severe, vulnerable communities could increasingly find that their only viable option is to uproot themselves and move to another place. To be sure, throughout human history, people have moved or retreated in response to the vagaries of climate.

Figure 1: Internal Displacements in 2022



Source: IDMC[5]

Today, however, such climate-induced movement is constrained by constructs such as political borders and immigration laws.

The risks associated with extreme weather events will only keep increasing as global mean temperatures rise,[6] and heightened by slow-onset processes such as sea-level rise, glacial melt, and long-term decline in precipitation. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report[7] in 2022 warned that a minimum of 3.3 billion people in the world are highly vulnerable to climate change. By 2100, sea-level rise alone could displace millions. Estimates of displacement induced by sea-level-rise are highly divergent due to competing definitions of who is 'at risk.'[8]

Adaptation response to climate change

Adaptation to climate change is a set of actions to reduce vulnerability to actual and expected changes in climate. Based on their timing, adaptation can be reactive or anticipatory, and depending on the degree of spontaneity, adaptation can be 'autonomous' or 'planned'.[9] 'Autonomous adaptation' refers to the changes that natural and most human systems undergo in response to changing conditions in their immediate environment, irrespective of any broader plan or policy-based decisions. Such initiatives do not require state intervention.

'Planned adaptation', meanwhile, is the result of decisions that are based on an awareness that conditions have changed or are about to change, and that some type of action (usually by the state due to the scale involved) is required to achieve, maintain, or return to a desired state. These could be in the form of interventions aimed at either preventing, tolerating, spreading loss, or changing location, and may be classified by their function as protect, accommodate or retreat. Every planned adaptation action represents a distinct value-laden decision about what to preserve, purposefully change, or allow to change unguided.[10] In most cases, the initial state response of 'planned' adaptation is to protect what is valued, failing which, the attempt is to accommodate, and the last option is to retreat from a location when it is no longer possible to spread the loss. Unguided retreat or improperly planned/executed retreat results in disempowerment and diminished well-being of the retreating population.[11]

Managed retreat is expensive, however, and in most cases the long-term benefits outweigh the up-front cost.[12] Retreat can be more effective at reducing risk, more socially equitable, and more economically efficient if it is managed and strategic. Managed and strategic retreat is designed and executed in ways that promote broader societal goals of economic and environmental security, disaster risk reduction and social cohesion.[13] To date, "managed retreat projects have been largely incremental, minor adjustments implemented using a handful of policy tools, guided by a limited set of social values, and small scale in their contributions to climate change adaptation."[14] There are socio-political and cultural barriers to retreat because of associated political risks to elected executives and rootedness of inhabitants.[15]

Yet some managed retreat projects have succeeded. For example, as a response to coastal hazards in Kiribati, since 2010, managed retreat has helped people move voluntarily as job trainings were provided and helped facilitate migration.[16] Managed retreat projects have also relocated whole communities by constructing new towns/housing complexes nearby, keeping social ties intact. Such initiatives have been undertaken across 11 cities in Argentina and at Lockyer Valley in Australia in response to riverine flood hazards.[17,18] While specific knowledge of such moves related to climate change may be lacking, whole-community and new-community resettlements have precedents. Indeed, moving complete settlements to make way for dams and mining is not new.[19]

Planned and managed retreat instead of protect/accommodate as the way forward for poor, high-risk areas

Sea-level rise causes a range of impacts for coastal areas, including submergence/increased flooding, increased erosion, ecosystem changes and increased salinisation.[20] Adapting proactively to these changes through a range of measures such as protection, accommodation or retreat can reduce the possible impacts. While protection has significant costs, analyses suggest that in densely populated coastal areas, it is considerably less than the cost of avoided impacts.[21] For about 13 percent of the world's coastline, protection is an economically robust adaptation strategy to minimise total costs of sea-level rise.[22] Small islands,

Africa and parts of Asia are most likely to witness coastal abandonment due to sea-level rise.[23] For about 65 percent of the global coastline, primarily rural, unmanaged retreat is cheaper[24] but is undesirable due to negative socio-economic outcomes. Unmanaged retreat/dispersal leads to loss of social ties and access to needed services, has economic consequences such as difficulties maintaining livelihoods due to non-transportable skills, or finding affordable housing. Preventing unmanaged retreat is the way forward.

Managed retreat can take various forms. These include "*whole community*" retreat, "*new community*" retreat, and managed dispersal.[25] In *whole community* retreat, all or most of a neighbourhood or town moves at once to a new area, retaining social ties, while in *new community* retreat, people move from many places into a well-serviced new neighbourhood or new town. However, building receiving areas for planned retreat is a massive challenge.[26] Finding land is particularly difficult as land at desirable locations may be under competing productive uses. Retreat could also lead to loss of indigenous knowledge and culture unless it is in the form of whole-community retreat. Over time, this may leave spaces devoid of population at strategic locations, posing security challenges.

Providing substantial infrastructure up-front is costly and difficult to finance. Compared with existing areas, it is difficult to provide the complete suite of services within the first few years. It is typically very hard to find financial backers for larger developments, where development occurs over more than five years. Large-scale communities often require at least ten years to complete, and new towns may take 30 or more years. Retreat to smaller new neighbourhoods is therefore preferred. Managed dispersal involves movement of people to wherever they can find a place to live and make a living. This provides choices to those moving but undermines social ties.[27]

While there are many positive implications to managed retreat, population movements could strain infrastructure; increase demand for land and housing; encroach on agricultural and natural areas; force people into marginal areas with few services; disrupt economic activity; and fray social bonds.[28]

Left unaddressed, climate-induced displacement is more occupational than physical, since households in the absence of adequate or appropriate financial and social capital are trapped in the high-risk location. Under such circumstances, akin to development-forced displacement, "impoverishment risks"[29] in the context of displacement due to hydropower development are heightened manifold.[30] The impoverishment risks include: landlessness; joblessness; homelessness; loss of access to common property and services; marginalisation; increased morbidity and mortality; food insecurity; and social disarticulation for the displaced people.

The G20's Role

2

Some G20 members are faced with economic challenges emanating from climate-induced displacement, while others face the prospect of shrinking populations. Rapidly ageing and declining populations could disrupt labour markets, threaten the fiscal sustainability of pension systems, and slow down economic growth. The Republic of Korea, Italy and Japan—with the lowest fertility rates well below the replacement level of 2.1—are staring at rapid population ageing and decline.[31] Countries such as China and India, meanwhile, bear the brunt of extreme weather events that trigger large-scale displacements[32] and wipe out decades of developmental gains.

Both sets of countries are addressing the challenges. Despite efforts, however, by 2100, Japan's population could drop to 72 million from the current 125 million, and South Korea's, to 24 million from the present 51.7 million;[33,34] by then, 22.8 million people in India could be displaced due to sea-level rise.[35]

In the face of such diverse problems, the role of the G20 becomes relevant. As the premier forum for international economic cooperation for diverse economies, the G20 could facilitate solutions for the economic losses suffered by countries due both to low fertility, and the impacts of climate change. G20 has the opportunity to promote partnerships between the two sets of countries that have the potential to simultaneously address the challenges of climate-induced displacement and declining population through managed dispersal. Managed dispersal from countries with high-risk areas and large displacement potential could be targeted to countries with low fertility. Simply funnelling the displaced will not meet the requirements of low-fertility countries nor the broader societal goals of economic and environmental security, disaster risk reduction, and social cohesion at both ends.

Barring the New World countries, all are based on either ethnicity, religion, language or all of these. These governments have to contend with the preference for the similar by their citizens, and movement of human capital is constrained by societies' general aversion for the dissimilar. There is increasing evidence that ageing societies are becoming more averse to open immigration policies, and older people have systematically more

negative attitudes toward immigrants than younger people.[36] This, despite benefits of immigration directly accruing to the aged in the form of sustained pension system and geriatric care, as in the experience of the Netherlands which has not had organic population growth since 2014.[37] Socialisation patterns of the elderly and their relative lack of exposure to immigrants make it difficult for the aged to accept the dissimilar. The G20 could be the platform for blue-sky thinking on these challenges.

Recommendations to the G20

3

1. **Facilitate conversations on human capital formation and transfer.**

- The G20 Working Groups on Culture, Disaster Risk Reduction, Development, Education, Employment, and Environment and Climate Sustainability will likely have conversations that are relevant for addressing the economic challenges emanating from low fertility and climate-induced displacement. To facilitate focused discussions on such challenges, there is a need to establish an Engagement Group consisting of civil society, parliamentarians, think tanks, women, youth, labour, businesses and researchers of the G20 countries. This group could help take stock of sector-specific challenges and develop effective solutions to address them. It can collaborate with other engagement groups, especially T20 and other relevant working groups, for policy formulation to discuss priorities and recommendations.

- A Working Group within the Sherpa Track should be established to discuss labour, employment and social issues of those retreating from high-risk areas with high fertility and relocating to low-fertility countries.

2. **Facilitate partnerships**

- Help forge partnerships between countries with shrinking and ageing populations and those with large numbers within high-risk areas, and build a relationship of trust and collaboration—essentially a government-to-government facilitative framework. The Energy Transition Partnership,[38] established in 2020 to accelerate sustainable energy transition in Southeast Asia in line with the Paris Agreement and the SDGs, could serve as a model for deliberation and adoption.

All of the above recommendations could help facilitate managed dispersal from high-risk areas to countries with ageing and shrinking populations. In the process, challenges associated with dispersal (i.e., unmanaged retreat) could be avoided since no new infrastructure would be needed at destination due to population shrinkage. This eliminates the threat of encroachment of agricultural land and natural areas,

and boosts the economy at destination through production, and at source through investment and remittance.

Recommendations for Source Countries

- Identify high-risk areas and assess economic losses due to recurring hazardous weather events.

- Evaluate options to protect/ accommodate/retreat.

- If retreat is the most favourable option, evaluate whole community retreat/new community retreat/ managed dispersal options.

- If managed dispersal is the agreed option, assess the number of potential young migrants at the end of an appropriate period in the future (10/5 years).

- Match this number with human capital requirement in destination countries with low fertility and declining population.

- Work with the government and private sector of the destination country to establish funded facilities (language schools, cultural centres, trade schools) at or near source and provide priority access to target population. A third of the potential migrant grooming period should focus on specialised skill building to meet the demand in destination country.

Some of the above are already happening, albeit in bits and pieces. For example, the World Bank maintains Climate Risk Country Profile.[39] Another example is the immigration ecosystem that prevails in India for facilitating migration to countries like Canada and Australia. The data relating to the number of potential young migrants and human capital requirements can be ascertained through global population records maintained by governments of different countries and the UN. Additionally, inter-governmental cooperation to facilitate the exchange of cultures is already prevalent. For instance, the Alliance Française promotes the French language and Francophone culture around the world. The basics for facilitating managed dispersal are already in existence.

All of the above will help ensure achievement of broad societal goals of economic and environmental security (at source and destination), disaster risk reduction (at source), and social

cohesion (at destination). Social bonds will be frayed for those who migrate but new social ties can be forged due to exposure to and training in language schools and cultural centres of destination country.

Source countries could be faced with loss of indigenous knowledge and culture, and empty spaces at strategic locations due to depopulation. Extra effort would need to be made to record indigenous knowledge and culture, and maintain empty spaces as natural areas for ecosystem services including carbon sequestration, and territorial dominance.

Recommendations for Destination Countries

- Assess economic losses due to population erosion.
- Evaluate options to enhance population organically (incentives for sections of the population within child-bearing age) and inorganically (immigration).
- If organic growth is insufficient to sustain the population and the economy, evaluate immigration through managed dispersal from source countries.
- If immigration through managed dispersal is the agreed option, assess the number of potential young immigrants required at the end of an appropriate period in the future (10/5 years).
- Match this requirement with human capital generation and dispersal from source countries of preference.
- Work with source country government and private sector to establish funded facilities (language schools, cultural centres, trade schools) at or near source and get priority access to potential migrants.
- Work with source country government and fund cultural centres of source countries at destination to familiarise the receiving population with immigrants who are dissimilar.
- Through innovative use of media introduce in-country the concept of managed dispersal and socio-economic benefits of managed dispersal at destination and source to raise the acceptance of the dissimilar in line with the ethos of “One Earth, One Family, One Future”.

- Provide ‘empathy training’ to enhance cognitive, emotional and compassionate empathy among younger generations. It can be expected that such groups, in the future, would not face any inhibitions accepting the dissimilar for the growth and sustenance of their own country and economy.

Due to rapidly declining population, inorganic population growth will not strain infrastructure or drive the demand for land and housing. Immigrants would not have to move into marginal areas or encroach upon agricultural and natural areas. Challenges of unmanaged retreat could be avoided. The obvious benefits to destination countries include minimising economic fallout, and building social ties with dissimilar yet familiar economic agents.

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