

**CLIMATE MIGRATION
AND ADAPTATION:
RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE OSCE**

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Climate Migration and Adaptation: Recommendations for the OSCE

Summary

In the next 27 years, 216 million people are predicted to be internally displaced as a result of climate change. Climate events exacerbate pre-existing drivers of migration while also shifting typical patterns of migration due to their rapid and unprecedented nature. While many people will be on the move, many others will be trapped in or unwilling to leave unsafe situations. Climate migrants are not recognized by international law as refugees, meaning that they rely on protection and support from local and national policies. Most climate migrants move internally within their country or region to major urban areas. Policymakers should enact proactive policies that facilitate the economic development of their urban areas, which in turn provides benefits for long-time residents and migrants. They should also invest in climate adaptation measures for those who remain in place, which decreases pressures on urban areas and protects people who do not have the ability to leave dangerous situations. This policy paper analyzes the current climate migration policy landscape and provides additional policy recommendations according to the OSCE migration mandate priorities.

The Link Between Climate Change and Migration

As climate change increases the frequency and intensity of natural disasters, exacerbates temperature and precipitation extremes, and causes sea levels to rise, people's mobility is being impacted. A World Bank report predicts that in just 27 years, climate change could lead to 216 million internally displaced people, with 5.1 million residing in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Clement et al., 2021). However, climate migration is not just something that *will* happen in the future. Climate impacts are already reshaping mobility. In 2021 alone, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre reported 138,619 disaster displacements (not accounting for conflict) in just 16 of the OSCE countries (IDMC, 2021).

There are two kinds of climate hazards that impact migration in different ways: slow-onset and rapid-onset events. Slow-onset events consist of those that develop over time, such as droughts, changes in temperature or precipitation, or sea level rise. These usually lead to slow but steady levels of out-migration and are commonly associated with partial migration where just one or two family members migrate away and send remittances (Kaczan & Orgill-Meyer, 2020). Rapid-onset events are typically conceptualized as disasters: hurricanes, floods, or wildfires. These typically result in large numbers of displacement in the short-term. Often people return to their homes and rebuild in place,

though they are usually left with assets that have decreased in value, unsafe living conditions, and increased vulnerability (McLeman, 2018). Though rebuilding is sometimes possible, it is increasingly becoming untenable as climate conditions worsen, which poses new policy imperatives, such as the management of planned relocations (Baurick, 2020; Nagle Alverio et al., 2021).

Slow and rapid onset disasters lead to a variety of migration patterns, which must be addressed with different policy responses. Though climate migration is the standard term, a more accurate name for the phenomenon is climate mobility as it also encompasses those who cannot move (Adams, 2016; Benveniste et al., 2022). There are four major types of climate mobility to consider when creating climate mobility policy (Schewel, 2020):

- Forced migration: having the ability to migrate but lacking the aspiration to do so
- Voluntary migration: having both the ability and aspiration to migrate
- Trapped: lacking the ability to migrate but aspiring to do so
- Voluntarily immobile: having the ability to migrate but lacking the aspiration to do so

Notably, though the media often presents climate migration patterns as mainly flows of people moving across borders, typically from the Global South to the Global North, the vast majority of climate migration happens internally within the country of origin and to a lesser extent within the same region (Rigaud et al., 2018).

Many governing bodies struggle to formally recognize climate migration because of the difficulties of separating climate change from other drivers of migration. However, instead of trying to isolate climate change as a separate driver, policymakers should conceive of climate change as an amplifier. Climate change limits the food people can grow, the value of their assets, and their options for sustaining a livelihood. The migration that results can often seem like classic economic migration. It is important to understand the dynamics of climate change and migration, however, because of the unprecedented rate at which it is occurring. People who have been able to adapt to sub-optimal conditions over decades are now being faced with permanent and increasingly worsening changes to their environment and simply do not have enough time to adapt successfully. Thus, climate change will exacerbate the economic, social, and political drivers of migration in ways that are unprecedented and which re-shape the current patterns of migration flows. Furthermore, climate change has been caused by a group of high-emitting countries. Making the link between climate and migration allows for advocacy to encourage those who are most responsible for climate change to contribute equally to the solutions.

The Climate Migration Policy Landscape

Though the media often refers to climate migrants as climate refugees, climate migrants are not currently recognized by international law and, thus, cannot receive refugee status (Burkett, 2018). As a result, climate migrants are left without legal recourse and must rely on national and local policies for their protection. Most organizations and governments do not consider climate change to be a driver of migration, and there is a sense among them that it is not occurring (Nagle Alverio, forthcoming). As such, policies that specifically consider climate migrants are lacking, including in the OSCE migration mandates. This is problematic because without consideration and proactive planning, the influx of climate migrants is likely to lead to xenophobia and fearmongering that can result in discrimination and violence (Mianabadi et al., 2021). Furthermore, a lack of active policymaking for climate migrants misses the unique opportunities that they pose for the economic development of the places that they move to, as the OSCE recognizes in its mandate (OECD & ILO, 2018). Migrants are able to balance the ongoing decline of the working-age population, fill gaps in the labor market, and boost the flow of regional remittances (OSCE, 2016).

Some governments have begun to implement policies focused on climate migrants out of necessity. A common policy is planned relocation or managed retreat, where communities are moved to a new location after a climate disaster like a flood or hurricane. Planned relocations are costly and, if not carried out with the true engagement of those affected, can lead to unjust outcomes (Mortreux et al., 2018). For instance, the Indigenous tribes in Kivalina, Alaska requested a planned relocation in 1998 due to the melting of the permafrost that they reside on. The U.S. federal government would not approve the site until 2018 and the people of Kivalina must find short-term solutions while the relocation plans are underway (Bronen, 2011). Thus, planned relocations should be utilized in unique circumstances in close collaboration with affected communities and should be planned for proactively. Since many people are migrating on their own accord, some countries have considered creating policies that attract migrants to mid-size cities as opposed to mega-cities in order to boost the economy of the cities and remove population pressures from the major cities (Davison Mongla, 2022; Van Berkel et al., 2022). This can be done by expanding access to affordable housing, job training, education, and social services to migrants in mid-size cities.

On an international policy scale, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is the relevant governing body for international agreements related to climate change. Historically it has been focused on climate mitigation (reducing

greenhouse gas emissions), though in recent years, there has been increasing attention on climate adaptation (Dudley et al., 2014). In the last two years, countries in the Global South have put pressure on countries that have contributed most to climate change to contribute to a loss and damage fund. Loss and damage refers to the irreparable harm that climate change causes, including making land uninhabitable, which ultimately leads to climate migration (Doelle & Seck, 2020). Climate migration is not a major focus of the UNFCCC, though it arises in adaptation planning and could become more central as loss and damage becomes a critical issue for states.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the diverse ways that climate change impacts migrants, both in their original location and in their final destinations, many policy solutions can be pursued. The specific policy mix that will best suit a country or region will be based on the specific political and economic context. Below are key recommendations for climate migration policy organized around the OSCE key migration policy areas.

Regulating migration

- Begin tracking climate-related migration, including when climate change is one amongst several drivers.
- Strategically invest in climate adaptation in communities where people prefer to stay in place and where climate forecasts predict adaptation is feasible.
- Invest in early warning systems for rapid-onset disasters and prioritize crafting plans that take into account the need for short and long term migration.

Facilitating legal migration

- Pass policies that allow migrants to work in the formal sector, especially in industries with a high demand for workers.
- If considering a planned relocation or managed retreat, ensure that the unique needs and desires of the target community are incorporated into the planning process. When doing so, ensure that economic measures are not the only metrics used. Social, cultural, and place-based factors should be incorporated when weighing the pros and cons of a managed retreat.
- Advocate for countries that have contributed the most to climate change to commit funds to policies targeted towards climate migrants. This includes advocating for the recognition of climate migration in international law.

Supporting people and communities

- Invest in low-cost water, energy, and sanitation infrastructure systems in urban areas. Transform vacant or underutilized buildings into affordable housing developments.
- Pass policies that protect migrant rights, including ensuring access to education, healthcare, social services, and protection by law enforcement bodies.
- Direct new developments in industry, service, tourism, and other economic activities to smaller cities and towns.
- Update internal policies that provide access to communities after disasters to increase eligibility for those affected by climate events

Conclusion

Climate change is already affecting mobility, forcing people to migrate, and trapping them in unsafe situations. As climate change continues to worsen in the coming decades, migration will be further impacted. In the absence of proactive policies, millions of people will suffer and have their basic human rights violated, and countries will miss out on major opportunities to promote economic development and protect their citizens. Many different approaches to climate migration policy should be considered based on the local context, the needs and desires of the affected populations, and the overarching long-term policy goals. Ultimately, by explicitly taking climate migrants into account, states can align their migration policy objectives and long-term economic policy objectives.

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