

Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change: An Overview of Key Terms, Concepts and Dynamics

Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility

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Introduction

“Human mobility” describes the movement of individuals and groups of people with different capacities or agency and under a variety of context-specific conditions. Environmental factors have always shaped human mobility, as people move in the context of access to land, water and livelihoods and related effects on safety, security and wellbeing. However, climate change is further affecting mobility and immobility patterns through increasingly frequent and intense extreme weather events such as floods, storms, droughts and wildfires, but also through slow-onset processes including sea-level rise, land and forest degradation, fresh water depletion and rising temperatures. Such events and processes often compound one another and interact with social, economic, political and environmental conditions to influence people’s needs, choices and capability to move or stay.

Human mobilities and immobilities in the context of climate change[1] can increase vulnerability and exposure to climate risks, particularly when climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction programming and policy are not extended to people on the move or to populations who remain in place. In certain circumstances, however, human mobility can contribute to adaptation, protect and sustain wellbeing and strengthen resilience, such as when people can make meaningful choices about whether and how to move or stay and are able to access the adaptation, protection and development support required for dignified and sustainable outcomes.

This brief article aims to clarify the three forms of climate-related mobility introduced in the UNFCCC Decision at COP 16 (2010) in the Cancún Adaptation Framework (see Decision 1/CP.16 paragraph 14(f)): “displacement”, “migration” and “planned relocation”). It builds upon definitions of these three forms of human mobility in the UNFCCC Technical Guides developed under the Task Force on Displacement (TFD) of the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change Impacts (WIM ExCom) in relation to national climate change planning (2024), accessing finance (2025) and non-economic losses (NELs) (2026). The paper also aims to clarify “immobility”, which has gained prominence in UNFCCC policy discourse and several workstreams, sometimes under different framings (e.g. “enabling in situ adaptation” and “preventing people from becoming trapped”). However, the term “immobility” has not been formally included in a COP decision text to date. Mobilities and immobilities in the context of climate change all fall on a broad spectrum of agency and constraint, with important implications for human rights, protection and equitable policy and programming.

Displacement, migration, planned relocation and immobility, while not the only forms of human mobility, offer a useful starting point for understanding why human mobility must become more central to climate action, including within UNFCCC workstreams. The definitions are followed by a brief discussion of the common and interrelated dynamics across them.

Displacement

Within global policy and legal frameworks,[2] “[d]isplacement describes the movement of people who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence. This movement can be driven by a variety of factors, including the impacts of climate change. Displacement may refer to forced movements within a country (internal displacement / internally displaced people) or across international borders (cross-border displacement / cross-border displaced people who may in specific circumstances include refugees)” (TFD).

Adverse “impacts of climate change” can include loss of home, land or livelihoods; inability to access vital services (e.g., healthcare and education); and impacts on or serious risks to safety, wellbeing and essential aspects of cultural and social life. Displacement can be temporary and take the form of evacuations. Displacement can become protracted, lasting years and even spanning generations.

1. When describing climate-related mobilities, this paper uses the phrase “in the context of climate change” to indicate the complex, multicausal relationship between climate change and human mobility. “Climate-related mobility” is used synonymously with “mobility in the context of climate change”.
2. See Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, the Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change (Nansen Protection Agenda). The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are applicable to all forms of displacement.

Most people displaced in the context of climate change remain in their own countries. They are "internally displaced persons", or IDPs, a status that, regardless of the causes of displacement, triggers host State duty-bearer obligations until displacement is fully resolved. People displaced across borders in the context of climate change also require support and protection within their host countries, as described by the Nansen Initiative. The principle of non-refoulement may apply when returning to the country of origin might lead to substantial harm (ICJ AO para. 378). In certain circumstances, for example, involving persecution, the breakdown in public order or discrimination, some people crossing borders in the context of climate change might satisfy the complex legal criteria for refugee status. The term "climate refugee" is not a legal definition or category.

People displaced both within and across borders due to conflict, violence and other non-environmental reasons often settle autonomously — or are settled by host States — in areas exposed to environmental risks and hazards made worse by the adverse effects of climate change. Climate and development policy and programming must therefore respond to the human rights, protection needs, adaptation requirements and mobility aspirations of these populations. The adverse impacts of climate change can also increase the number of stateless people and contribute to the further vulnerability of people who are already stateless. As called for in a recent report, States and other stakeholders should take steps to "identify and protect stateless persons, and to reduce and prevent statelessness in climate-vulnerable contexts".

Migration

Migration has long been part of how people and households adapt to and cope with changing environmental conditions, including through seasonal and circular mobility to diversify livelihoods and manage environmental variability. The TFD describes migration as "the primarily voluntary movement of people away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border (international migrants) or within a State (internal migrants) for a variety of reasons that may be linked to the impacts of climate change". However, because migration in the context of climate change is frequently undertaken to cope with, avoid or adjust to deteriorating environmental conditions, people's decisions about whether, when and where to move are rarely free from constraints or structural necessity and can result in the erosion of human rights. Agency in migration decision-making is determined by factors such as age, gender and socio-economic status, and those with the least agency — often women, children, older people and the poorest — are among the most vulnerable.

When well-planned and supported, migration — including seasonal, circular and labour migration — can be a proactive adaptation strategy, helping diversify incomes, reduce vulnerability and build resilience through social and financial remittances and diaspora support. Through translocal livelihood systems, households can remain connected across locations, enabling resources, information and support to flow between migration origin, transit areas and destination. However, trade-offs across different social, spatial and temporal scales can result in maladaptive migration outcomes and losses and damages. Therefore, the success of migration as adaptation, and migration outcomes more generally, often depends on access to climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction and development support.

Distress migration, often undertaken by vulnerable and marginalised individuals and households with limited adaptive capacity to sustain a dignified life, is a reactive coping strategy. It can further erode assets and lead to rights violations through exposure to precarious conditions, including exploitation, debt-bonded labour and harm to physical and mental health.

Planned Relocation

In the TFD Technical Guide, "planned relocation is understood as a measure of last resort when home areas have become, or are becoming, unsafe to live in and communities or groups of people are assisted to move away from their homes or place of temporary residence, are settled in a new location and provided with the conditions for rebuilding their lives".

Planned relocation is undertaken to protect people from risks and impacts related to disasters and environmental change, including the effects of climate change. It is a distinct form of human mobility in the context of disasters and climate change; unlike displacement or migration, it is planned, intended to be permanent and generally involves clearly identified sites of origin and destination. Planned relocations can be initiated by communities themselves or external actors. Most often, planned relocation is carried

out under the authority of the State and takes place within national borders.

Planned relocations usually concern the movement of a “community”, meaning a group of households bound by shared vicinity, similar cultures, livelihoods or ancestral ties, with the aim of preserving these elements in the new site. Beyond moving away from risk, the aspirations of people undergoing planned relocation are to (re)build a permanent home in a safer place, restore livelihoods and maintain cultural ties and practices for future generations. Therefore, a new relocation site should include more than new homes, providing the conditions for restored or improved livelihoods, education, health and culture.

These processes are different from development-induced forced resettlement for a range of reasons, including that they are undertaken to protect people and therefore should be consent-based and, when possible, community-initiated and led.

Immobility — Agency and Constraints

People are immobile in the context of climate change when they do not leave their homes or places of habitual residence. This can happen when people choose to stay (voluntary immobility), when people wish to move but are unable to leave (involuntary immobility), and along a continuum of situations in between. The distinctions matter. While voluntary immobility can reflect agency, autonomy and cultural ties, people who wish but are unable to move (sometimes referred to as “trapped populations”) can experience a profound erosion of human rights.

Staying is often an active preference and choice shaped by ties to land, ancestors and community; investments that cannot be easily taken along or relocated; and a way of life that people value. To stay with dignity, people require the resources and services necessary to adapt in place and determine their own mobility and adaptation futures. The International Court of Justice’s Advisory Opinion on the Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change (para 381) affirmed that failure to implement timely and adequate adaptation measures to address the adverse impacts of climate change may violate the right to privacy, family and home. Forcing people to leave, or withholding what people need to stay, including climate adaptation support and access to services, may breach the right to be protected against arbitrary displacement (Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, Principle 6).

Involuntary immobility can occur when people, despite rising climate risk, are unable to move for financial, physical, health-related, administrative or social reasons (e.g., caregiving responsibilities). Climate change can deplete the resources needed to move but also increase risks faced by people who are already unable to move for reasons other than climate.

Immobility can affect a whole community or only its poorer households, an entire household or just certain members. Some people cannot leave at all; others cannot leave when it matters most, for example, in the hours before a storm or a flood.

Common Dynamics Across Mobilities

Although conceptual terms and discussions around “human mobility” can be useful in research, policy and other areas of discourse and development, discussions of mobilities and immobilities in the context of climate change are ultimately about people, whose lives have been or might be affected by climate change. While definitions can be helpful, they have their limitations.

Human mobilities are complex: As mentioned above, they are shaped by multiple environmental and non-environmental factors. Situations of high coercion and limited choice severely undermine wellbeing, dignity and access to basic rights, while situations supportive of choice and agency can lead to better outcomes. However, even when movements involve significant degrees of agency, positive outcomes depend fundamentally on whether States and development actors uphold human rights and provide enabling legal, social and economic protections supporting those who move, those who cannot or choose not to move and host communities.

People’s mobilities often change over time: People who initially “stay behind” might eventually move, voluntarily or involuntarily, as social, financial and/or environmental conditions change. People living in protracted (i.e., unresolved) displacement can be displaced multiple times or become

involuntarily immobile in informal settlements, particularly as exposure to environmental hazards worsens. Migration can also result in involuntary immobility, particularly when people are unable to move on from hazard-prone settings and may subsequently become forcibly displaced. Poorly implemented planned relocation can lead people to move elsewhere or, alternatively, become involuntarily immobile when they lose the resources needed to move autonomously.

Human mobilities are often relational: The mobilities of some household or community members can enable others to stay voluntarily. That, in turn, sometimes increases the risk of and danger from displacement or involuntary immobility for those who remain — often children, older people, people with disabilities or women — particularly when environmental hazards worsen and/or climate adaptation and development investments and programming are insufficient.

Indigenous Peoples and other marginalised populations — both on the move and remaining at home — are particularly vulnerable to forced, erosive or maladaptive mobilities and immobilities: Indigenous Peoples and others with strong sociocultural ties to land and place are most likely to be severely harmed by displacement, distress migration and other disruptions to traditional mobility patterns — such as pastoralism — as these can erode traditional ways of life and knowledge. Planned relocations and other more voluntary adaptive mobilities also disproportionately involve Indigenous Peoples or other marginalised populations with unique attachments to land. These experiences are often driven by heightened and unjust levels of environmental exposure, socioeconomic vulnerability, histories of colonialism and various other forms of discrimination.

Recommended Further Reading

We recommend the following further reading:

- It's Time for Solutions! Addressing Displacement and Other Human Mobility Challenges in The Context of Climate Change Loss and Damage
- Participation, Engagement and Representation of Migrants, Displaced Persons and Refugees in Loss and Damage Financing, Action and Support