

Managing Climate Change-Related Human Mobility: Potential Interventions for Operational Engagement

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Introduction

Climate change-related human mobility poses critical challenges to development, poverty reduction, and economic and political stability.¹ The adverse impacts of climate change can compel people to leave their homes, worsening extreme weather events (including both slow and sudden onset effects of climate change), threatening livelihoods, and weakening food systems, infrastructure, and social services, among others. But mobility can also be a source of adaptation and risk reduction, allowing people to move to safety, diversify livelihoods, and contribute to development, climate action, and peacebuilding.

This document is an outcome of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)'s learning journey on environmentally induced migration. SDC colleagues convened three learning journey meetings focused on mapping all operational engagements and building a better understanding of system boundaries, types of interventions, key considerations, and concrete examples of existing SDC activities broadly categorized around three pillars:

- **Addressing the drivers of forced displacement:** building resilience in climate-vulnerable communities to empower people to choose to stay or move, by finding solutions to limit exposure to climate hazards and reduce vulnerabilities.
- **Supporting people on the move:** providing humanitarian support and durable solutions for those who move because of climate change, as well as supporting all people on the move (including those who move for non-climate reasons) to build climate resilience and reduce their vulnerabilities to adverse climate events.
- **Enabling safe mobility:** enabling safe, regular, and orderly mobility in the context of climate change, within and across borders.²

Importantly, because climate-related mobility is a complex, multi-causal issue, operational engagements to address this phenomenon should be holistic and grounded in local contexts and partnerships. Thus, these three pillars often overlap in practice. They are complementary, meaning the goal is not to prevent people from moving, but to minimize situations where people are forced to move, including by enabling people to move safely and supporting them once they move. This document aims to support a better understanding of possible operational engagement on climate change-related human mobility. It accompanies a Factsheet which summarizes the evidence base on how climate change impacts human mobility.

¹ This document accompanies a separate Factsheet on climate change-related human mobility, which provides an overview of how climate change impact human mobility; what is climate change-related human mobility; and which international processes and initiatives address climate change-related human mobility.

² These were adapted from the International Organization for Migration, see [Institutional Strategy on Migration, Environment and Climate Change 2021-2030](#)

Pillar I: Addressing the Drivers of Forced Displacement

In the context of environmental degradation and climate change, a key objective is to enable people to choose to stay—i.e., preventing forced displacement. But looking for solutions to support adaptation in place is complicated by the fact that environmental and climate factors are rarely the sole drivers of mobility. There may be a fairly direct link in some cases (e.g., flood displacement) but in other cases, climate impacts drive movement in less direct ways, and indeed many people choose to stay even when disasters make livelihoods and living conditions difficult.

Fact is: Most people prefer to stay where they live, and hence want to find solutions that can enable them to continue thriving in their communities.

--> Measures to address the drivers of forced displacement therefore always strongly depends on the context in which we operate. An understanding of the local circumstances and possible options is important to determine appropriate strategies to help reduce vulnerabilities.

Approaches to support adaptation in place

Approaches to support adaptation in place include measures that prevent harmful environmental changes, reduce their impact, and build resilience in communities to prevent and minimize forced and unsafe forms of migration. The goal is to either “help people stay,” or at least, “make migration a choice”; by building resilience and addressing the adverse climatic and environmental drivers. These approaches overlap and can - inter alia - include:

- **Climate change mitigation:** Climate change mitigation refers to efforts to reduce or prevent the emission of greenhouse gases. While more indirect, urgently stepping up efforts to mitigate climate change and shift towards climate-resilient development pathways will be fundamental to reducing climate impacts, including those related to displacement. Although necessary to curb the effects of global warming, this will not have a direct impact on the beneficiaries directly.
- **Climate change adaptation:** Process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects that seeks to moderate or avoid harm or exploit beneficial opportunities (e.g., increasing crop diversity, techniques for water harvesting, passive cooling approaches for buildings, etc.). Adaptation is a broad category that includes many of the interventions noted below. While not all adaptation can be directly and entirely attributed to addressing the drivers of forced displacement, one promising approach is to target adaptation to hotspots of climate displacement, or to specific hazards and processes that are known to trigger displacement.
- **Livelihood diversification:** A process by which a diverse portfolio of activities is used to survive and to improve living standards. This can improve resilience by diversifying people’s assets and incomes, particularly in contexts where people’s livelihoods tend to be highly vulnerable to climate change (e.g., certain forms of fishery or agricultural-based livelihoods).
- **Resilience building:** Resilience can be fostered through humanitarian action, development cooperation, or efforts to promote peace, and aims to enable individuals, communities, and institutions to adapt to and recover from crises and challenges. Such interventions increase the ability to resist, absorb, accommodate, and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic

structures and functions. They empower individuals to withstand disasters and other shocks, for instance through access to social protection.

- **Effective social protection:** Social protection, including strong social safety nets, can enable people to withstand shocks, and avoid forced displacement. In this context, social protection could offer affected communities a safety net so they can choose to stay.
- **Sustainable natural resources management:** The environmentally sustainable management of the land, water, and biodiversity resources, in a way and at a rate that maintains and enhances the resilience of ecosystems and the benefits they provide.
- **Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR):** The policy objective of anticipating and reducing disaster-related risks, which can prevent disaster displacement. Disaster risk management (DRM) describes action aiming to achieve DRR, mainly through reducing vulnerability and exposure to hazards, also including elements such as financial risk transfer options.
- **Humanitarian assistance:** Humanitarian assistance is intended to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity before, during and after periods of conflict, crisis or natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for when such situations occur. Anticipatory action can help people prepare for disasters before they strike, reducing the damages and losses they could incur. Building back better can also enable people to stay.
- **Climate and gender-sensitive conflict prevention/peacebuilding:** Policies and programs that meaningfully engage women in assessing and addressing the gender-differentiated risks and opportunities of climate change impacts in fragile contexts are key to better addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting more inclusive, peaceful societies, and in turn managing the gendered impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on forced displacement.

Selected SDC examples

Switzerland is involved in various multilateral engagements,³ as well specific bilateral examples below. SDC colleagues created a longer list of relevant Swiss examples [here](#).

- **Bolivia:** The first domain of the Bolivian portfolio is adaptation to climate change: agroecology, water management, investment in climate change, and municipal environmental management. These projects ensure a basic income for the population, especially in rural areas, and prevent rural-urban migration.
- **Armenia: (7F-10375) Modernizing VET in agriculture in Armenia (MAVETA):** The intervention assists the Government of Armenia in reforming the vocational education in agriculture and making it better match with the market demand, leading to more economic development and more decent jobs. The project aims to improve employment opportunities for youth living in rural areas by the means of combining theoretical knowledge with practical training in a selected number of professions. Thus, contributing to avoiding migration from rural areas.
- **Nepal:** Resilience strengthening through better use of remittances enhances the beneficiaries' climate change adaptive capacities. Business development services, teaching and trainings

³ Switzerland supports the major multilateral funds dedicated to climate change and to the environment, including the Green Climate Fund (GCF), the Adaptation Fund (AF), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Special Climate Change Fund and the Least Developed Countries Fund, as well as to the UN system and multilateral development banks which are strongly involved in climate change adaptation and mitigation as well as the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources.

include green jobs and other green features (waste management, energy efficiency). Increasing food production and climate change resilience of people living in rural areas can also reduce the adverse drivers of forced displacement

- Contribution to the Climate Risks and Early Warning Systems Initiative (CREWS) – global: (7F-11038). CREWS supports Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States in creating necessary human capacities to generate and communicate climate and weather risks timely and effectively. This could save millions of lives and significantly reduce economic losses caused by natural disasters and a changing climate. The Swiss contribution supports CREWS as a key mechanism to achieve the UN Early Warnings for All Initiative. The combined expertise of SDC and MeteoSwiss increases the impact and sustainability of CREWS.
- Jordan: (7F-10583) Flood Risk mapping (NFMP): The overall goal of the project is to enhance the understanding and governance of the flood risks in Jordan through setting up a national flood mapping programme which should ultimately increase resilience (also) of most vulnerable people and avoiding (internal) forced displacement.

Pillar II: Supporting People on the Move

Climate change and environmental degradation not only trigger migration and displacement, but they can adversely affect people already on the move. In this context, supporting people on the move in the context of climate change can take two basic forms: supporting those who move because of climate-related reasons, and building the climate resilience of all people on the move (including those who move because of non-climate reasons).

First, approaches under this pillar can target people who move (directly or indirectly) because of climate change, providing them with humanitarian and development support and ultimately with durable solutions. Climate-related mobility may pose unique challenges because of its scale and unpredictability and the potential vulnerability this may create. For instance, it may amplify existing rural-urban migration trends beyond the predictions of urban planners and the cities' capacities to properly host and integrate. Climate-related mobility can also pose specific protection and humanitarian needs which vary according to the type of disaster (e.g., slow or sudden onset), a person's access to resources and safe migration options, and their reception conditions on arrival. For instance, people who are forced to move by an unexpected disaster may have different capacities and resources than those who move because agricultural outputs have gradually worsened because of desertification.

Second, approaches under this pillar can include all migrants regardless of why they move and support their climate resilience. From an operational and policy perspective, people who move because of climate change and people who move for other reasons can sometimes be supported similarly, because they often have similar vulnerabilities and face similar exposure to human rights violations, food insecurity, exploitative and abuse employment conditions, and exclusion from basic services, access to water and shelter, and labour markets, among others. In particular, people on the move can settle in areas again prone to climate risks. For instance, many migrants move to informal, peripheral urban settlements where they lack access to transportation and robust, inclusive basic services, while being particularly vulnerable to climate events such as floods and storms. Regardless of why someone moved (e.g., whether somebody is conflict-displaced or disaster-displaced), they may move to destinations where they are again climate-vulnerable and can be supported with interventions to build climate resilience.

Approaches to support people on the move

Providing humanitarian aid for people who move due to climate events

In the immediate response to climate change-related displacement, humanitarian aid interventions include food and non-food items, emergency shelter, water and sanitation, health, psychosocial support, and support in restoring family links. Protection interventions will include specialized referrals, including mental health, child protection, and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and trafficking in human beings. These tools can be targeted to places where people displaced by environmental or climate events move, such as urban peripheries or settlements.

Providing durable solutions for people who move due to climate events

In order not to create protracted displacement where people are stuck in dependency on external aid, people in displacement situations ultimately require durable solutions. The concept of durable solutions is not specific to climate change-related human mobility, but it applies nonetheless. Displacement has been typically resolved through the pursuit of “durable solutions” through sustainable (re)integration in people’s places of origin; sustainable local reintegration where displaced persons take refuge; or resettlement and sustainable integration in another location within the country or in another country.

Targeting humanitarian and development support to people who move due to climate events does not always differ from programming in response to other migration and displacement situations. But climate change-related human mobility may pose particular challenges that require new responses from various stakeholders. Recurrent disasters may change the current situation of large-scale but short-term displacement, to a mix of increasingly protracted displacement for some while others return and are displaced again regularly. In such cases, responses would need to both flex up and down to repeated displacement, whilst supporting a core protracted displacement scenario. Similarly, the boundary between survival or forced migration and pre-planned or voluntary migration may become increasingly mixed, even within one location (e.g., where slow-onset sea level rise leads both to people choosing to leave in advance and more frequent floods that trigger displacement). This underscores the need for context-specific, joined-up humanitarian-development-peace nexus, and innovative responses.

One important area to consider is social cohesion between people on the move and host communities, and reducing stigma, discrimination, and xenophobia. In certain contexts, host communities may be more willing to accept people who move because of climate events. There has often been a ‘warm welcome’ for people displaced by disasters, although this warm welcome tends to wear off if the displacement becomes prolonged (among other reasons). But the evidence is mixed on whether migrants displaced by climate change are perceived more positively than other migrants, and development responses that enhance livelihoods and resilience for both migrants and host communities alike could help to foster this welcome and social cohesion.

Supporting climate resilience for all migrants

No matter their reason for moving, migrants must benefit from access to safe, climate-resilient livelihoods, infrastructure, and services. For instance, conflict-displaced migrants in Belize have, over decades, formed informal settlements in rural areas. These settlements, however, are not constructed to withstand the increased frequency and severity of both floods and wildfires—even though they did not move because of climate change, these migrants are climate-vulnerable. Thus, there is a need to ensure

all people on the move are included within climate adaptation interventions. Such programming can also boost social cohesion by including both migrant and host communities (or targeting people and communities based on their vulnerabilities rather than their migratory status).

Interventions at migration destinations, especially in urban areas, are crucial. Indeed, many migrants tend to settle in cities, often in urban peripheries or informal settlements vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Thus, safe access to housing, water, employment, health, education, and other services is crucial for migrants at their destination. Legal documentation and information on rights can help to facilitate migrants' access to these services. To ensure proper livelihood security for migrants, interventions should focus on urban resilience and disaster risk management, including risk reduction through sound urban planning, climate-resilient infrastructure, and disaster preparedness. The focus on secondary cities is crucial in this regard, as the services and infrastructure available tend to be less secure. An additional focus should be put on the provision of services to vulnerable populations in informal urban settlements. Interventions in the area of affordable, decentralized water and sanitation services should be established and the efforts in education and skills development for improved livelihood security should continue. Implementing such urban-focused interventions does not mean starting from scratch, and instead could build on SDC's forthcoming 'urban-sensitive programming' tool.

Selected SDC examples

- Tunisia, Himayatuna Program: This program aims to strengthen the crisis management capacity of the National Office of Civil Protection (ONPC), among others, in favour of migrants in distress, through the implementation of a training and continuing education centre. An analysis of "crisis roots causes" (i.e., climate change) is also planned as part of the initiative.
- Central America: Educational and protective communities for children, adolescents and youth in contexts of violence in Honduras and El Salvador. Child protection and education in the context of forced displacement due to violence, poverty and climate change. In Guatemala: Comprehensive protection for people on the move. The project will strengthen the quality of the protection provided to people on the move in Northern Central America.
- Mekong: PROMISE (Poverty Reduction through Safe Migration, Skills Development and Enhanced Job Placement in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand): The project supports migrants from Cambodia, Lao and Myanmar in Thailand along the migration cycle. Although this project does not explicitly address migrants in the context of disasters, environmental degradation and climate change, climate change in the countries of origin is most probably also a driver for migration, and many migrants are from poorer rural areas. PROMISE promotes safe migration policies and safe migration management at government levels and the level of the private sector.
- Other projects in Western and Northern Africa (East African Roads Project / Enfants et Jeunes sur les routes migratoires en Afrique du Nord et de l'Ouest) recognize inter alia climate change as a factor leading to migration of children and youth, seeking to ensure protection of migrant children and young people on the move against the risk of abuse and to facilitate socio-economic integration.

Pillar III: Enabling Safe Mobility

Millions of people are displaced by the effects of climate change or extreme weather events. While for the moment, most climate change-related human mobility is internal, it is expected that future cross-border movements will increase. And for many people living in climate hotspots or affected areas, migration has become an important safety valve to adapt to changing environmental conditions or in extreme cases to assure their safety and survival.

However, there are few opportunities for regular migration specifically targeted for climate change-related human mobility. While some limited number of people have the necessary resources (knowledge, networks, and financial resources) and are able to access mobility schemes, many end up in situations of involuntary immobility. With narrow options and pathways for migration however, many embark on perilous journeys and find themselves in situations of heightened vulnerability, exploitation and abuse (see Pillar II).

Legal and policy frameworks remain patchy and insufficient. Most of this displacement is internal, and the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement recognizes natural or human-made disasters as reasons for displacement and obligates states to protect, promote and fulfil the human rights of internally displaced people within their territory without discrimination. But these principles have not been consistently enforced.

When people cross borders, the 1951 Refugee Convention does not provide climate change as legal grounds for refugee protection, except if it strengthens the risk of persecution on other grounds. For instance, climate change may strain natural resource supply, leading to ethnic persecution. Climate change would not itself be the direct grounds for refugee status, but a climate-sensitive approach to refugee status determination could help identify those eligible on existing grounds within the 1951 Refugee Convention. Regionally, the African Union's legally binding Kampala Convention guarantees rights for those displaced internally by natural disasters, and similar efforts have been made under the Cartagena Declaration in Latin America, alongside non-binding regional efforts and agreements.⁴ But these regional efforts are either not implemented at the national level, or non-binding. Thus, most progress happens at the national and bilateral levels.

Approaches in the absence of coherent legal and policy frameworks

Existing measures cannot sufficiently address the vulnerabilities and needs of people who move in the context of climate change and environmental degradation, especially as this challenge grows in the coming years. They often apply only to narrow groups, such as those able to secure sponsors (e.g., in Argentina's case), or apply only to disasters rather than the broader spectrum of environmental factors that trigger displacement. But there are lessons to be learned from how these imperfect measures are agreed on and implemented.

⁴ The Pacific Climate Mobility Framework, the Kampala Ministerial Declaration on Migration, Environment and Climate Change for East and Horn of Africa States, the EU Working Document, and the Americas Regional Guidelines in Central America and South America, respectively, are some of the most advanced.

- **Humanitarian visa schemes:** In May 2022, Argentina announced a new scheme to provide humanitarian protection to people displaced by disasters in Central America.⁵ This has not been fully implemented, and applicants face documentation requirements and must be sponsored, but this reflects an important example of a government providing access to mobility for disaster displacement. Moreover, in November 2023, Australia proposed a treaty with the low-lying atoll state Tuvalu, allowing 280 people from Tuvalu to settle permanently in Australia (2.5 percent of Tuvalu's population) and providing funding for coastal climate adaptation in exchange for security conditions. An earlier example was trialled by New Zealand, in its 2017 'climate refugee' visa to provide a small number of Pacific Islands permanent migration pathways to New Zealand. The initiative was met with strong opposition by the Pacific Islanders, who requested stronger commitment to mitigation efforts and were opposed to such a scheme given their desire to stay. It remains to be seen whether the Australia-Tuvalu treaty will face similar opposition and whether or how it will be implemented.
- **Temporary protection:** Some countries grant migrants upon arrival and those already in their territories some protection against returns to places severely affected by disasters and climate change. Measures are available in Italy, Switzerland, and the United States, for instance, providing the legal basis to temporarily admit or allow people to remain if they would be deported to a country dealing with environmental disasters.
- **Human rights law:** Similarly, international human rights law may be applicable based on the principle of non-refoulement. In a 2020 case, the Human Rights Committee found that people should not be returned to their country of origin if this would put at risk their right to life and essential human rights. In this specific case, they did not find that the person was at imminent risk, but this case highlighted that human rights law can establish grounds for admission and stay which give effect to international human rights obligations and principles, including in the context of climate change-related human mobility.⁶
- **Bilateral and multilateral free movement agreements:** Free movement of persons between states could assist in addressing the protection gap for disaster displaced persons. For instance, two Caribbean Free movement agreements allowed disaster displaced persons to enter, work, and resettle in nearby Caribbean islands during the 2017 Atlantic Hurricane Season. Within Africa's regional and sub-regional economic communities, implementation of free movement of persons protocols remains slow. IGAD's Free Movement of Persons Protocol includes a commitment that Member States "facilitate the extension of stay or the exercise of other rights by citizens of other Member States who are affected by disaster," although this is still being adopted.
- **Transhumance agreements:** Climate change, conflict, and population growth are disrupting these traditional modes of movement and pose serious threats to pastoral livelihoods. There is a need to take into account the impacts of climate change in policies related to transhumance and to strengthen agreements related to cross-border transhumance. There are agreements at the African Union level recognizing the rights of pastoralists to move, and at the regional level in ECOWAS and IGAD. At the national level, some countries have drafted pastoral charters aimed at ensuring that pastoral communities on international transhumance respect the legislation of the

⁵ PDD policy brief, "Argentina: leading initiatives to address displacement in the context of disasters and climate change," available on https://disasterdisplacement.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Policy_Brief_Argentina_compressed.pdf

⁶ UNHCR briefing notes, "[UN Human Rights Committee decision on climate change is a wake-up call, according to UNHCR](#)"

host countries in relation to protected areas, classified or protected spaces, and animal health regulations.

- **Regular labour mobility pathways as adaptation:** The expansion of labour migration channels can function as one tool of climate adaptation,⁷ allowing people to move away from climate-vulnerable areas (and in some cases, helping them move into green skilled jobs and to bring those skills back to their communities of origin). However, the accessibility to these pathways very much depends on the availability of assets, credentials, and skills, meaning they are not available to many of the most vulnerable. (Potential) migrants in climate-vulnerable situations may be excluded from such an option and may find themselves trapped / in situations of immobility.
- **Planned relocation:** Planned relocation may be an effective or necessary strategy to address the impacts of climate change. However, for it to be sustainable, any planned relocations of internal or cross-border migrants must be fully informed, participatory, and voluntary.⁸ While small-scale planned relocations have occurred for years, experience in the Pacific Islands demonstrates that the process of establishing community buy-in, planning the relocation, ensuring conditions for sustainable integration at destination, and financing this process takes years. This is even more difficult in cases of cross-border planned relocations, which are exceptionally rare.

The question around how to support safe mobility in regard to climate change, environmental degradation and disasters is political, and efforts to do this are incipient and imperfect. The potential approaches above require further strengthening to address the reality of climate change-related human mobility, whether internally or across borders, and will need further advocacy, funding, and reforms.

Selected SDC examples

(The SDC mapping matrix on Hazu is accessible [here](#))

- IGAD: Switzerland supports IGAD through a project which focuses on regional migration governance, with a component on climate change-related migration through its' specific outcome "Preparedness in preventing and responding to disaster-induced climate-related displacement have been increased".
- ECOWAS: Through its regional labour migration program in West Africa and by intermediary of UN partner agencies, Switzerland seeks to strengthen implementation of the existing ECOWAS free movement protocol, hereby harmonizing transnational policy and legal frameworks by strengthening the role of the ECOWAS Secretariat, through the intermediary of UN partner agencies.
- PDD: Switzerland is a member of and supports the Platform on Disaster Displacement, a State-led initiative working towards better protection for people displaced across borders in the context of disasters and climate change.

⁷ Michelle Leighton and Meredith Byrne, "[With Millions Displaced by Climate Change or Extreme Weather, Is There a Role for Labor Migration Pathways?](#)" (2017).

⁸ Elizabeth Ferris and Erica Bower, "[Planned relocations: what we know, don't know, and need to learn](#)" (2023).