Climate Change and the Future of Safe Returns

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Severe climate impacts threaten the cornerstones of durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) by rendering areas of return and of local integration too dangerous to live in or too fragile to support large populations.

The repatriation of refugees has declined since 1990 from 15 million in 1990-1999, to 10 million from 2000-2009 and to only 3.9 million from 2010-2019. While protracted conflict situations and instability are major factors, climate impacts could already play a role in this trend.

If climate impacts are not adequately considered in repatriation and local integration strategies, refugees and IDPs may be again put in harm's way and at risk of further displacement. More climate research is needed to address these issues.

INTERACTIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Climate change will have an increasing impact on the possibility of finding durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons. In some contexts, the interplay between environmental degradation, permanent loss of livelihoods, exacerbated fragility or frequent exposure to extreme weather events may hamper or even rule out possibilities for sustainable voluntary return.

Given the additional pressure that displaced populations may bring to host environments, insufficient attention to environmental issues may affect host communities' receptivity, compounding challenges for successful local integration. Perceptions of refugees aggravating local environmental problems have the potential to foster inter-communal tensions. Support for durable solutions, especially for populations hosted in climate hotspots, will have to be climate-sensitive in order to avoid competition over scarce resources and respect the environment.

Attention must also be given to planned relocation, which seeks to move people out of harm's way. UNHCR and partners have developed guidance to perform planned relocations respecting the human rights of the populations, when hazards such as sea level rise threaten to render certain areas uninhabitable. [1]

1. Guidance on Protecting People from Disasters and Environmental Change Through Planned Relocation, 2015

CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND UNINHABITABILITY

While some countries are already experiencing severe climate impacts at current warming levels of about 1°C above pre-industrial levels, projections indicate that the impacts of climate change could render some areas uninhabitable in the future.

In the context of climate change, habitability is determined by the magnitude of climate impacts and the ability of the socio-political system to respond to them. Governments with large financial and technological resources will be better equipped to keep climate-affected areas habitable than governments without such capacities. Risks to habitability include sea level rise-driven territorial loss and freshwater salinization, the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and associated risks to human health and livelihoods. In some regions rising temperatures could surpass the human body's threshold. Adaptation options are context-specific and vary across individuals, households and communities.

Though some impacts can no longer be avoided, the magnitude of future challenges will be determined by present emissions reduction measures. Physical, technical and financial limits of adaptation exist, but under the temperature limits of the Paris Agreement, effective adaptation can minimize the experience of adverse effects in affected regions.

Returning to Safety? The Urban Pull and Climate Risks

Returnees gravitate towards urban centers rather than their places of origin, requiring a different response for housing, infrastructure and service delivery. While some urban centers may provide labor market opportunities, often displaced persons and refugees get trapped in poor and informal urban areas. Frequently, people displaced in the context of climate change have few skills relevant to urban labor markets because their livelihoods were based on traditional forms of agriculture in rural areas. Similarly, subsistence farmers do not necessarily generate monetary income and have little to no savings. These conditions make them susceptible to exploitation and forms of debt bondage, which renders people immobile.

Poor urban settlements are also particularly fragile and exposed to climate impacts. Humanitarian and development actors need greater understanding of urbanization trends and increased engagement in support of refugees and host communities. Capacity building activities such as trainings and education programs for refugees and displaced persons can help create context-appropriate solutions. Without such efforts, those displaced in the context of climate change could form an urban underclass in their new communities.

In Darfur climate considerations are key to durable solutions for returning IDPs and refugees

UNHCR and local partners hold a community focus group discussion in the village of Semema in West Darfur where Sudanese former refugees from Chad have returned home, February 2020.

The sustainable return of IDPs and refugees to their villages is key for peace and development in Darfur and is the objective of a multi-partner project led by UNHCR in West Darfur under the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF). Durable solutions for IDPs and refugees require the resolution of land disputes to facilitate people's ability to return to their land. In order to address some of the underlying obstacles to return, the PBF project, launched in 2020, includes the development of Land and Natural Resource Management Plans essential to support just and equitable allocation and access. These plans will be informed by the increasing impacts of climate change through environmental fragility assessments in order to identify appropriate adaptation and mitigation measures, e.g. changes to crop production or agricultural method, infrastructure support, water holes, irrigation systems, tree planting schemes, etc. Implemented in what is considered a protracted displacement crisis, the project aims at linking durable solutions, the impacts of climate change over resources and land disputes to the rule of law and a longer-term development perspective, which altogether will play an enabling role for a broader contribution to sustainable peace in Sudan.

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