

Human mobility, natural disasters and climate change in Latin America

- From understanding to action -

Importance of environmental migration for Latin America

Latin America, along with the Saharan countries of Africa, is among the regions that are most fragile and vulnerable to the impact of climate change. The most vulnerable countries have been identified as Haiti, Guyana, Bolivia, Honduras and Guatemala¹. Projected variations in rainfall patterns will bring about changes in the water cycle, such as sudden floods, droughts and the consequent risk of forest fires². In addition, rising temperatures are leading to glacier melt in the Andes, considerably shrinking drinking water reserves and causing supply-related tension between inhabitants.

Another seriously affected geographic region is the Caribbean and Central America, where strong tropical storms have devastated the coasts of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Guatemala. The continent has also been hit by geophysical events, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, which in recent years have occurred frequently in countries such as Haiti (2010), Chile (2015), Ecuador (2016) and Mexico (2017).

Events like these often have a knock-on effect on human mobility, both across and within borders. The numbers of people affected in 2015 by flooding alone are estimated at 171,000 in Paraguay, followed by Brazil (59,000), Venezuela (45,000), Argentina (36,000) and Uruguay (24,000)³.

When all types of events are taken into account, an estimated 8 million people in South America were internally displaced or evacuated in the context of natural disasters during the 15-year period from 2000 to 2015.

In the absence of official records, especially of cross-border movements, the real number of displaced persons is clearly higher.

In addition, changes in land use brought about by the spread of agriculture, pollution of natural resources, deforestation and land degradation are exacerbating environmental deterioration and affecting the livelihoods of rural populations.

Type of event	Displaced persons
Floods	4,707,668
Volcanic activity	73,053
Landslides	154,632
Seismic events	2,972,545
Forest fires	20,924
TOTAL	7,928,822

Source: N. Rodríguez Sernas, Human mobility in the context of natural hazard-related disasters in South America, background paper, NRC/UNHCR/IDMC, 2016.

¹ According to a study conducted by the ND-Gain Country Index project as part of the University of Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (United States).

² D. Ionesco et al., The Atlas of Environmental Migration, Routledge/IOM, London and New York, 2017.

³ RESAMA: Migración, medio ambiente y cambio climático: agenda 2030, buenas prácticas y desafíos para la región suramericana, 16th South American Conference on Migration, Asuncion (Paraguay), 2016, available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311765043_Migracion_medio_ambiente_y_cambio_climatico_agenda_2030



In the continent's socioeconomic context, environmental and climate-induced migration⁴ is having a negative impact on the societies concerned: in places of origin, the proportion of economically active adults is falling, while in places of destination the local authorities are often overstretched by the new inhabitants' integration requirements.

Human mobility in the context of climate change and natural disasters, and the inter-American human and humanitarian rights system

Responses to environmental migration problems are usually anchored in adaptation strategies carried out in the context of natural disasters, including climate change. Those affected are initially treated as 'victims' and granted humanitarian assistance on-site. The problem is that they are not offered the ideal conditions to migrate at the right time, which could save lives and ensure dignified treatment. In most cases, national migration legislation limits the entry into other countries of environmentally displaced persons, and even in the case of internal displacement, state policy does not fully recognise their rights as citizens.

International law recognises only one very small category of forced migrants as eligible to be granted asylum in other countries, namely 'refugees', 'stateless persons' and those entitled to additional protection⁵. This means that other forced migrants run the risk of being banned, deported or detained if they try to cross an international border.

Examples of rights that are affected by natural disasters, climate change and environmental degradation are:

- Right to life and security of the person
- Right to adequate nutrition and not to go hungry
- Right to have access to basic services, such as drinking water, health, safe housing, education, free passage and mobility
- Right to have access to natural resources, land, water and biodiversity of good quality and sufficient quantity
- Right to treatment and protection from the spread of disease in places affected by natural disasters

Proposed lines of action for development cooperation programmes

In line with the recommendations of the Nansen Initiative, policies for managing natural disaster-induced human migration should be very diverse and depend not just on the type of human mobility but on local risks. Communities facing drought require different measures from those affected by seismic threats.

Climate change being considered irreversible, many of the efforts to reduce its impact are directed at having societies develop adaptation strategies, including the possibility to leave their places of origin. Meaningful experiences have already been acquired using innovative approaches aimed at augmenting the capacity to adapt of vulnerable populations and ecosystems⁶. Adaptation initiatives can help reduce the need to diversify livelihoods through migration, in that the capacity to adapt is strengthened by innovation-seeking processes and more intense use of resources in areas that are vulnerable to climate change. It is nevertheless hard to predict how effective such measures are in easing the pressure to migrate.

⁴ Term recommended by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in IOM Outlook on Migration, Environment and Climate Change, IOM, Geneva, 2014 (http://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mecc_outlook.pdf).

⁵ At present, only some human rights principles are recognised as giving rise to a duty to protect on the part of the host country. Human rights law has broadened a country's duty to protect beyond 'refugees' to include people at risk of arbitrary deprivation of life, torture, or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. This is known in international law as 'complementary protection', because it describes human rights-based protection that is complementary to that provided under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

⁶ Climate Change and Migration: Possible Roles for German Development Cooperation, discussion paper, GIZ, Eschborn (Germany), 2012.

Some relevant proposals for action adapted to the characteristics of the region's countries, to which international cooperation, and German cooperation specifically, can contribute, are described below.

Research

With a view to closing the gap in empirical evidence and data on environmental migration, cooperation must be fostered with research organisations and centres. With more empirical evidence and better information, development cooperation efforts could be adapted to assist populations that are forced to migrate. It would be very important to have reliable estimates of environmental migration in the Latin America and Caribbean region.

One of the biggest difficulties in making timely proposals on the challenge of climate change-induced migration is finding the social, economic and policy relations (causal or other) underlying the phenomenon before, during and after its occurrence. This is a relevant point which cooperation could support by fostering research. Cooperation could also serve as a nexus for linking research initiatives developed in German and European universities, opening new main research areas in the Andean and Amazonian region, for example, with the participation of Latin American researchers.

Migration as a climate change adaptation strategy

Towards the construction of effective strategies both in political and technical fields, it is necessary to eliminate negative prejudices on environmental migration as global crisis; in fact with proper planning, migration can become an effective strategy for climate change. Climate change adaptation approaches help augment people's resilience; the people and areas most vulnerable to climate change have to some extent already been mapped⁷. Development cooperation could focus adaptation efforts on those hotspots as a means of building resilience and thereby help reduce pressure for mass, uncontrolled movements. This does not mean stopping people from migrating out of such areas; first, because such migration is a survival strategy, and second, because the people concerned may face issues of impoverishment as causes of irregular migration.

While there exists a series of good practices of climate change adaptation, innovative initiatives need to be broadened and implemented on a much wider scale as a matter

of urgency. One of the problems is spreading information on 'best practices' in a language that is more accessible to the people concerned.



Encouraging on-site measures of adaptation is primarily of importance for 'trapped' populations that cannot leave the site of the disaster and frequently have to face adversity.

Incorporating the migration dimension into climate change adaptation plans and programmes

Human mobility is a key aspect of adaptation planning, in that an effort should be made to avoid migration or displacement that serves to worsen human well-being.

Implementation of the Cancun Adaptation Framework⁸ in national adaptation plans (NAPs) has already made good progress in countries like Bolivia (chiefly in drinking water management), Colombia (infrastructure models and urban policy) and Ecuador (river basin management). Possibilities for cooperation action are:

- Incorporate human mobility issues into both PNAs and national adaptation programmes of action (NAPAs). Unlike NAPAs, which served to identify and prioritise urgent adaptation needs in the short term, PNAs are broader and cross-cutting; they cover needs in the medium and long term, they can be integrated into national development plans and they include many tools that countries can use for their planning processes⁹.

⁸ Adopted as part of the Cancun Agreements at the Climate Change Conference held in Cancun, Mexico, in 2010. See <http://unfccc.int/adaptation/items/5852.php>.

⁹ K. Warner et al., Integrating Human Mobility Issues within National Adaptation Plans, United Nations University – Nansen Initiative Joint Policy Brief #2, 2014.

⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

It is strongly recommended that all German cooperation initiatives in the region for NAP or NAPA formulation incorporate the risk of possible human mobility processes, engaging the interests and needs of local vulnerable groups in a participative and transparent manner. This ensures that the measures and proposals identified take account of traditional knowledge that could help reformulate other social, economic and environmental policies from a local perspective. Technical assistance on human mobility should be made available throughout the process of formulating instruments and comprise meetings with experts, workshops with vulnerable groups and the organisation of specific training courses on migration as adaptation in general.

Prevention and resilience



The best means of prevention cannot totally eliminate the risk of natural disasters and climate change. Successful planning of preventive measures therefore has to include guidelines and criteria for planned relocation in the event of forced displacement and displacement planning; for example, the transfer to safer locations with better conditions. It is important to take account of the difference between temporary and permanent relocation.

In this respect, areas of high and medium risk and safe zones must be duly mapped. This is where circular migration comes in, in addition to relocation, as an alternative form of climate change adaptation.

A broader approach has to combine climate change and risk and disaster management efforts. Here, a series of lines of action could be followed: improvement of infrastructure, urban planning, agrarian reform and other action aimed at strengthening the resilience of vulnerable people and thereby helping them to deal with natural disasters in their places of origin and their communities.

Support for migration with dignity

The development of policy frameworks and of procedures for handling the migration of the persons affected should be strengthened by applying the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, granting humanitarian visas and permits with transparency and clarity as to the rights of such persons (period of stay, permission to work, access to public services, no deportation to the country of origin for the duration of the emergency, etc.), appropriate consular action on the part of their country, and other support.



- Specialised and general training for migration, customs and security agents, especially at border crossings, on subjects pertaining to the rights of internally and cross-border displaced persons;
- Active integration of the population at risk or already displaced in public planning and implementation of humanitarian assistance activities, and their integration into the labour market, is hugely important;
- Build capacities and genuine possibilities for guaranteeing resettlement and/or migration with dignity;
- Systematise best migration practices in to deal with disasters and climate change risks;
- Policy and legal frameworks also have to include improved living conditions in places of destination of internally or cross-border displaced persons, using an approach that encompasses the entire host community and not just the persons affected.

Implementation of international agreements

The three main challenges for the future of our planet are expressed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and in the New Urban Agenda adopted by the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III).

Their complexity and scope are reflected in SDGs 11 (make cities inclusive and sustainable) and 13 (take action to combat climate change). In addition, three SDG targets are related to human mobility: protect migrant workers (target 8.8); facilitate migration governance through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies (target 10.7); and generate data disaggregated by migratory status (target 17.18). Possible implementing measures in international cooperation programmes are: Start from the principle of 'Leave no one behind', the keystone for meeting the demands of marginalised groups; this implies mainstreaming the migration issue, especially when it comes to exercising rights, assistance in the migration process, and improved conditions in places of destination;

- Frame action in terms of the 'integrated land-use management' recommended by the New Urban Agenda, linking urban and rural issues in a single planning approach, holding grassroots consultations and fostering active participation by the population at risk in both the planning and implementation of humanitarian assistance, and in the planning of definitive solutions for those affected;
- Focus action on intermediate cities that currently play an important role as communication nodes between urban and rural areas; here steps should be taken to facilitate new residents' access to social services and infrastructure, and to improve urban management of climate change and natural disaster risks.



International cooperation can contribute technical support and specialised advice for local governments, specifically in combining environmental protection, climate change adaptation and the development of local policies and planning tools for integrating migrants, displaced persons and other vulnerable groups.

Support implementation of the recommendations of the South American Conference on Migration

For the 16th South American Conference on Migration, held in November 2016 in Asunción, Paraguay, the Red Sudamericana para las Migraciones Ambientales (South American Environmental Migration Network, or RESAMA) submitted a report for the whole region of South America¹⁰. As proposed, some measures can help make up for shortcomings and promote progress in environmental migration in the region:

- Linkages, coherence and coordination between national and regional migration, climate change and disaster directives and policies;
- Incorporation of environmental migration into national and regional legal and policy frameworks on climate change and disaster risk reduction, drawing on the draft legislation or new directives on climate change and migration drawn up by various countries in the region;
- Alignment of existing directives or adoption of new migration directives that recognise and protect persons displaced across national borders in the context of a disaster or climate change;
- Contribution to the implementation at regional and national level of the recommendations and action guidelines of the 2030 Agenda on displacement in the context of disasters and climate change;
- Adoption of the 2030 Agenda as the basis on which to align migration, climate change and disaster policies and directives in the light of evidence on the impact of climate change on human mobility in South America;
- Establishment of a working group under the OSUMI (South American Observatory on Migration) in order to strengthen and harmonise regional development and national initiatives on migration, the environment and climate change, by providing assistance and technical cooperation, training stakeholders and producing knowledge and information.

¹⁰ Migration, environment and climate change: the 2030 Agenda, best practices and challenges for the South American region, in Spanish only (see note 3 above).

Reinforce the role of subnational governments

There are no international rules governing the role played by the local authorities; in practice, however, it is at the local government level that the challenge of independent land management is met, and part of the local government mandate is to meet the needs of the local population. In many cases, the mapping of danger zones is a subnational task, which is why it is so important to conduct an exhaustive study of the different safe and danger zones at that level. Relocation can thus be limited, and greater vulnerability prevented. Environmental migration essentially takes the form of internal movements requiring immediate responses, in both rural and urban areas. The persons affected tend to turn to the closest authorities, whether or not they have a remit to act. Local governments therefore assume tasks in situations involving emergencies, risk, environmental management and the provision of basic services. It is therefore vital to support local capacity building, both to prevent and respond to environmental risks and to find solutions for the persons affected.

Conclusion

This document presents a series of possible action lines in respect of which international cooperation agencies and international bodies such as the United Nations, IOM, the European Union and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH could play a major role, not just as technical advisers or providers of financial resources, but also thanks to their capacity to link players, sectoral policy fields and levels of government.

The challenges to be overcome require a holistic approach, which implies an enormous effort of interinstitutional coordination in countries, but also between bilateral and multilateral cooperation entities with the capacity to form alliances with the private sector and civil society. Rising to these relatively recent challenges requires developing innovative initiatives adapted to the reality of each region or country. It also implies, above all, that many stakeholders must have the courage to take a clear stand in favour of the interests of people affected by climate change and natural disasters.

This text is an abstract of a technical proposal addressed to the German cooperation, aimed at orienting future action lines on the subject of 'environmental migration' in Latin America. Since 2015, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH has been carrying out activities in Ecuador specifically aimed at local government development of public policies on human mobility in the context of climate change and natural disasters. At the same time as there have been advances in the technical and policy approaches, GIZ has facilitated the formation of a regional working group, 'human mobility in the context of natural disasters', the participants in which are members of programmes in the region, technical specialists from partner organisations, NGOs, research institutes, and experts in migration and climate change.

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