

Implementation of the Workplan of the Task Force on Displacement under the  
Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage,  
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

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**Synthesizing the state of knowledge to better understand displacement related  
to slow onset events**

IDMC on behalf of the Advisory Group CSOs  
Summary Report, July 2018

### *1. Context*

This synthesis focuses on assessing the state of knowledge on displacement related to slow onset events. Rapid onset events and voluntary migration are not the primary focus of this paper, however, the information developed in the following sections will explain in more detail how a clear distinction between migration and displacement is often blurred in the context of slow onset events. Also, slow onset events may in many situations interact or exacerbate rapid onset events.

The objectives of the assessment of the state of knowledge and of the report are to:

- Synthesize information on displacement related to slow onset events
- Enhance understanding on displacement related to slow onset events.
- Formulate key opportunities around the main knowledge gaps on displacement related to slow onset events to inform the development of recommendations by the WIM Task Force on displacement

### *2. Methodology*

The Advisory Group Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)<sup>1</sup> is a member of the Task Force on Displacement and is represented by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (NRC/IDMC). It is leading the implementation of this activity, in consultation with the reference group, composed of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the UN Program for Development (UNDP) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This synthesis further benefited from literature reviews and cased studies that were made available by the Hugo Observatory and the University of Neuchâtel, as well as contributions from a broad range of experts working on the issue of slow onset events and displacement.

### *3. Summary of findings*

It is difficult to paint a consistent picture of the reality of displacement related to slow onset events, because of the wide range of slow onset events, their impacts, affected regions and drivers and types of movement. Displacement related to slow onset events is neither easy to characterize nor to plan for, but rather requires an understanding of the potential effects of various slow onset processes which are likely to interact with other displacement factors, including resilience, violence, and rapid onset events. Despite this challenge, the literature on displacement related to slow onset events demonstrates a growing consensus that slow onset factors are just one input into mobility decisions, and they are usually not the

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<sup>1</sup> The Advisory Group Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) is composed of NRC/IDMC, the Hugo Observatory, the Arab Network for Environment and Development (RAED), Refugees International

dominant input. However slow onset events contribute to increased risks of displacement, in particular when they reach the tipping point of turning into a disaster situation. Thus, it is best understood not as its own displacement category but as a factor to be considered when looking at a potential slow onset and displacement situations.

There are inherent uncertainties in the way slow onset impacts will play out in a given locale and this will affect the magnitude and pattern of displacement. Literature further recognizes that more research is needed to better contextualize and understand displacement related to slow onset events, particularly at scales ranging from regional to local, where slow onset events impacts may deviate from the broader trends identified in a global-scale analysis. In many cases, a richer, more detailed set of climate, biophysical, socioeconomic, and political indicators is available at regional, national, and local levels.

The literature identifies four major ways in which slow onset events may turn into disasters and contribute to increase displacement risks.

1. Slow onset events may contribute to decreased ecosystem services and in particular decreased provisioning services, including the availability of, and access to, basic human needs such as fresh water, food, shelter, and energy production that are vital for human survival. The scarcity of vital resources may in turn lead to a serious disruption of livelihoods. When this disruption of livelihoods overwhelms the community's capacity to cope with the changes, the situation turns into a disaster and risks of displacement are more prominent. Slow onset events may, for example, in combination with other factors, lead to acute food insecurity as their impacts on food production affect environmentally-based livelihoods, be they based on agriculture, pastoralism, horticulture, fisheries or hunting and gathering. Policies, institutions, and the actions of individuals, organisations and governments strongly influence the extent to which food systems are resilient to climate hazards and adapt to climate change and whether individual households are able to access and afford sufficient nutritious food. When individuals and whole communities are unable to cope with acute food insecurity, they may become displaced to survive in alternative locations that offer food security. Resources in new locations, even if they offer security, can face additional stress from serving a much wider population with the newly-arrived migrants, also bringing the potential for tensions between the host and migrant community. The regions with the highest vulnerability to undernutrition are also areas where yield losses related to climate change are predicted to be relatively high, thus further increasing the vulnerability of these populations to food insecurity.
2. Slow onset events may turn into a disaster prompted by a rapid onset event. Many slow onset vents impacts are in fact rapid onset events. For example when sea level rise suddenly turns into flooding, or when desertification turns into wild fires, or when temperature increase turns into heatwaves. When rapid onset events overwhelm the population's capacity to withstand their impacts, they may increase risk of displacement. In these context, slow onset events are one of the underlying factors of displacement. It is therefore a more complex situation than to simply attribute a disaster to either a rapid or a slow onset event as in many situations the two types of event are intertwined. In the face of rapid onset induced disaster, people may see no other option than to seek assistance elsewhere for their survival, and are therefore displaced.
3. Slow onset events may erode community's and ecosystems's capacity to withstand the impacts of slow and rapid onset events, and possibly trigger a cascade of hazards, prompting displacement. In fact, when livelihoods are not restored or strengthened after a disaster, either induced by a slow or a rapid onset event, subsequent events, even if less severe, can push

households over the edge, and more quickly into a situation of acute humanitarian need, resulting in a vicious cycle. A slow onset event may therefore turn into a disaster when the population has not yet recovered from a previous rapid onset induced disaster. Likewise, slow onset events may render populations more vulnerable to rapid onset events so that even less intense rapid onset events turn into a disaster because of the inability of the population, weakened by the underlying slow onset, to cope with the impacts of the rapid onset event.

4. Finally, slow-onset events often are a hidden aggravating factor in many contexts, acting as a threat multiplier for other factors of crisis such as economic, social, cultural and political factors. Increasingly, these factors become difficult to disentangle one from another, and may culminate in humanitarian crises, creating internal and cross border displacement. Crises may also arise from the economic and social impacts of a slow-onset even. Conflicts, for example, are often associated closely to fragile governance structures and the inability of the State and relevant stakeholders to ensure peace. However, slow onset events, although they are not a direct catalyst for violent conflict, can exacerbate already fragile situations. They can fuel conflict over resource scarcity and are often described as a multiplier or magnifier of pre-existing conflicts. On the other hand, conflict, violence and other polarized societies, political ideologies and social and ethnic divides can further contribute to the disruption of livelihoods. Such disruptions may render populations more vulnerable and further exposed to slow onset events, while accelerating their vulnerability to other more acute political factors. Thus, in cases where conflict and/or other economic, social, cultural, and political instability factors are present simultaneously with slow-onset events, such factors may amplify the effects of the slow-onset events, as well as the slow-onset events multiply the other instability factors already present in the community, ultimately leading to potential migration.

#### *4. Identified gaps*

Increasing the modeling resolution and improving data inputs to produce more spatially-detailed projections are among the opportunities identified in this synthesis. Building country-level capacity to collect and monitor relevant data can increase understanding of the interactions among slow onset events impacts, ecosystems, livelihoods, and displacement and help countries, international actors and local organisations tailor policy, planning, and investment decisions. New data sources, including from satellite imagery and mobile phones—combined with advances in climate information can be beneficial to improving the quality of information about slow onset related displacement. Inclusion of slow onset events and displacement questions in national census and existing surveys is another way to advance data collection. Over time, as more data becomes available on slow onset events and its impacts on livelihoods, the scenarios and models would be more accurate.

It is clear that the scale and nature of this displacement will largely depend on the adaptation, disaster risk reduction and development policies that are implemented not only to mitigate the impacts of slow onset events, but also to facilitate, initiate and/or manage migration as a positive strategy and planned relocation as a last resort option. Opportunities exist in relation to addressing the underlying determinants of vulnerability, increasing the involvement of the private sector in resilient development, increasing exposed areas' habitability in the longer term, and supporting resilient development through strengthening underlying governance structures.

Empirical studies stress that in the context of slow onset event migration does not necessarily represent a failure of adaptation policies, but may also be an actual adaptation strategy used by migrants

themselves. At present, however, migration policies are still generally missing from adaptation policies. Literature further recognizes that there is a ‘tipping point’ at which communities fall from voluntary adaptive migration into forced displacement, when coping capacities are exhausted communities fall into a gradual process of impoverishment and become displaced. Literature further identifies planned relocation as a last resort option for protecting those trapped in areas highly affected or prone to the adverse effects of slow onset events.

The literature portrays displaced persons as victims of slow onset events in need of assistance and protection but it also provides examples of how affected communities can also be drivers of community based solutions. Return is a desirable, and generally a durable, solution but regardless of the various factors pushing a decision to leave, return is less likely when slow onset climate processes are in effect because of their virtual irreversibility. Integration then becomes a major issue that requires more attention and resources.

Research capacity in least developed countries in particular, and in countries most vulnerable to climate change needs to be strengthened through increased financial support, transfer of research methodologies and capacity-building activities for national researchers, institutions, and affected communities in vulnerable countries. Ensure that research agendas are driven by national needs and priorities, as identified by governments, independent researchers, communities affected and other concerned entities. Support to local research capacities, as well as their inclusion into international networks, need to be considerably strengthened.

## *5. Recommendations*

The Warsaw International Mechanism has a unique opportunity to support the international community in addressing these challenges through enhancing understanding, coordination and action. The WIM can play a key role in enabling research to be more consistently shared with relevant stakeholders and policy makers, and in ensuring research is addressing relevant stakeholders and policy maker’s needs. Exchange between scientific research and policy is two-way, with research needing to ensure that the questions are investigated thoroughly and results are relevant and useable, while policymakers and practitioners need to listen to and incorporate the scientific results.

Concrete recommendations for consideration by the ExCom include:

- Recognise the need for and encourage significant national and international investment in better understanding the phenomenon, including through systematically recording pre-emptive evacuations, spontaneous and planned movements during extreme events, planned relocations and returns at regular intervals before during and after events.
- Increase national ownership of and accountability for data collection, analysis and reporting, by integrating data collection on slow onset displacement into national progress reporting against the SDGs and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.
- Recognise displacement in slow-onset contexts as a development issue that is determined by sectoral policies and investments at local, national and regional levels. In so doing, frame the discussion on slow onset displacement around risk and impacts, with increased investment in understanding local contexts and reducing vulnerability and exposure.
- Increase investment in understanding the build-up of slow onset crises and specific thresholds that result in forced displacement. Consider allocating a fixed percentage of adaptation funding for risk assessments and threshold monitoring.

- Recognise the opportunity to present existing challenges as future opportunities. Understand investing in filling data gaps and monitoring the drivers, scale, patterns, risks and impacts of slow onset events and associated displacement as 1. a prerequisite for negotiations and agreements on financing instruments and technical assistance; and 2. as a basis for developing migration and displacement strategies for rural-rural, rural-urban, internal and cross-border movements as part of current and future adaptation to climate change.

## 6. Annex: Specific challenges as opportunities: advancing the state of knowledge

### **Opportunities on assessing impacts of slow onset on displacement risks**

- Enhance the identification, mapping and assessment of condition and vulnerability of most exposed areas to slow onset events and populations living in these areas. Historical analogues should be used to assist with the identification of those areas particularly exposed, rather than just existing databases and climate projections.
- Systematically record loss and damage (including displacement) related to slow onset events i.e through setting up a loss and damage accounting system in countries as a critical public service for risk information, attribution and policy formulation on risk reduction policies, including on addressing slow onset related displacement.
- Improve research on impacts of slow onset on other drivers of displacement (including conflicts) and inter-relationship of these drivers, as well as on loss of cultural heritage and loss of identity and their consequences on displacement.
- Improve research on how different types of slow onset events, not just desertification and sea level rise, increase risks of displacement.
- Enhance understanding on interaction between slow-onset processes and sudden-onset events, and their impacts on displacement.

### **Opportunities on understanding factors of displacement and on identifying the displacement threshold**

- Improve understanding of the determinants of displacement decisions and the identification of the threshold when a slow onset turns into a disaster and leave most vulnerable populations with no other reasonable option than to move for survival.
- Improve understanding on differentiated perceptions of risk of slow onset event and encourage policymakers and decision makers to account for the perception of risk by those affected.

### **Opportunities on identifying slow onset related displacement patterns**

- Improve policymakers preparation to urban migration and displacement by ensuring flexible social protection services and including migrants and displaced persons in planning and decision-making.
- Improve research on immobile populations and how they can be supported to stay or move depending on their desire.
- Improve research on impacts of slow onset related displacement on populations located in zones of transit and communities located in destination areas.
- Improve research on duration and destination of displacement by type of slow onset event.
- Improve research on prolonged and protracted displacement in the context of slow onset events, including factors that affect the duration of displacement and the situation of communities left behind, including the role of remittances.
- Improve profiling of displaced populations and their specific protection needs.

### **Opportunities on displacement related to slow onset events data**

- Ensure that already available data and expertise are acknowledged, used and disseminated and that relevant stakeholders are consulted and integrated in new research efforts.
- Integrate slow onset and displacement questions in existing data collection efforts (including databases on demography, agriculture, land-use, etc.)
- Produce a harmonized inventory of data sets and national assessments and apply the harmonized data to create models identifying evolution over time and long-term trends, including at different temperature increase scenarios.
- Identify key common variables, methodologies and tools for investigating, analysing and mapping loss and damage associated with slow onset events and the way they impact displacement. This common methodology could be built on systematic inventory and evaluation of the questions used in existing surveys and questionnaires to assess the links between slow onsets and displacement to harmonize questions in future research.
- Collect disaggregated data including gender, elderly, youth, disabled persons, ethnicity etc. on underlying drivers of displacement, as well as related to the latent and structural factors that determine how exposed and vulnerable people are to hazards in the first place.
- Develop and use innovative approaches for data collection: drones pictures, data generated by mobile networks' customers, mobile applications with full respect and safeguards for protecting personal data. These applications could be further developed in partnership with local universities and could allow for information to be posted directly by users in an open-source format.
- Improve free and transparent access to data and methodologies for governments, researchers and communities to generate long-lasting benefits for appropriate policy reform.
- Promote interagency and interdisciplinary data collection and data sharing.
- Enhance context specific, people-centred and defined data in order to best address the rights, interests and voices of displaced persons.

### **Opportunities on ways to avert, minimize and address displacement related to slow onset events**

- Improve integration of ways to reduce vulnerability and exposure to slow onset events in sustainable development, adaptation and disaster risk reduction policies to better support communities and households to stay in place and avert and minimize displacement.
- Improve research on how human decisions on ecosystem and land use management can mitigate displacement risks.
- Improve accuracy of systematic observation and early warning systems in monitoring impacts on populations for all types of slow onset events in all relevant regions.
- Improve knowledge on the benefits and risks of migration as adaptation in the context of slow onsets, especially for most vulnerable groups.
- Enhance knowledge on practical challenges of relocation with respect to international human rights standards, social justice, cultural and individual considerations, and the wellbeing of relocated people and host communities.
- Enhance knowledge on strategies to ensure sovereignty, cultural continuity, and community cohesion in the face of large-scale and permanent displacement and relocation.
- Enhance understanding of provision of assistance before, during and after displacement, including responsible entities, types of assistance, and assessment of its efficiency. Identify benefits from early response and assistance before the slow onset reaches the tipping point of a disaster.
- Enhance understanding of specific challenges and solutions for conflict-ridden and fragile states that have less capacity to prepare for and respond to slow onset events, and how slow-onset events and displacement impacts can create new conflict risk.
- Enhance knowledge on specific protection needs of protracted displaced persons and how these needs evolve over time. Assess the effectiveness of existing protection measures and explore how existing protection instruments can be tailored to those displaced in the context of slow onset events, including at the regional level.
- Enhance knowledge on post displacement situations and challenges associated with achievement of durable solutions (e.g., return or successful integration into a new community) as well as actions which can be taken to minimize these risks and obstacles, including when country of origin is permanently affected by slow onset events.
- Improve enablement of local communities, including for women, children, Indigenous peoples, and other groups in decision-making and driving solutions and experience sharing.
- Enhance financial, technical and capacity support to improve awareness of legal instruments, appropriate policies and practical tools for decision makers, migrants and displaced communities, host communities and communities of origin from local level to international levels, and invest in improved access to information, legal support and innovative solutions.