

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

Pillar I: Policy/Practice – National/Subnational

Activity I.2

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

Summary Report

Produced by IDMC on behalf of the Advisory Group CSOs

May 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)ⁱ 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 remains consensual on demonstrating how slow onset factors are just one input into mobility decisions, and they are usually not the 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 hunter gathering. Policies, institutions, and the actions of individuals, organisations, and countries 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 communities are unable to cope with acute food insecurity, they may become displaced to survive in alternative locations that offer food security. 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 events 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 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 factor of displacement. It is therefore complex to 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, pushing them more quickly into a situation of acute humanitarian need and 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 and contribute to a less intense rapid onset 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.

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 the 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. Slow-onset events may also create crises through the economic and social impacts of the event. Conflicts, for example, are a main responsibility of 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.

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 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 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. Potential areas of 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 stockholders and policy maker, and in ensuring research is addressing relevant stockholders 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:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ The Advisory Group Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is composed of NRC/IDMC, the Hugo Observatory, the Arab Network for Environment and Development (RAED), Refugees International

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