

How to avoid the worst possible scenarios

Environmental migration – multifarious solutions to engage now

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The impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on migration are felt on every continent. The linkages between migration, environment and climate change are complex. People might migrate directly due to climate and environmental impacts, such as when natural disasters like storms and floods strike. In 2020, over **30 millions of people** (<https://bit.ly/3xmbGSa>) were internally displaced by disasters in 145 countries.

The decision to migrate

The decision to migrate can also be indirectly influenced by environmental conditions – for instance when ocean acidification in small island states or land degradation in sub-Saharan African countries negatively affect the ability of households relying on farming and fishing to make a decent living. Climate impacts on the physical and mental health of population is another driver of migration, made even more relevant by the Covid-19 crisis. Developing countries are not the only ones experiencing population movements linked to environmental impacts, with the US recording **1,714,000 disaster displacements** (<https://bit.ly/3xrVntA>) in 2020 and nearly one million people displaced by weather-related disasters in Europe between 2008 and 2020. Looking ahead, **143 million people** (<https://bit.ly/3AHgX96>) could migrate because of climate change by 2050.

Governments cannot afford to delay taking decisive action to address these challenges. There is still time to create the policies and develop initiatives to avoid the worst possible scenarios. Over the last decade, UN member states have showed increasing political will to discuss and tackle the issue. The willingness of many developing and developed nations to

engage in multilateral policy discussions has resulted in the development and adoption of instruments that have reshaped the global governance of environmental migration. Chiefly among them are the **Recommendations** (<https://bit.ly/3hMqsuT>) of the Task Force on Displacement, a text mandated by the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change and adopted by the states party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2018. Another crucial development were the negotiations and adoption of the first multilateral agreement on international migration, the **Global Compact** (<https://bit.ly/36oF2n0>) for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, in 2018.

Applicable policy measures

Environmental migration is a very contextual phenomenon – countries' experiences are so diverse that a one size fits all approach is inadequate. Yet, these two instruments outline guiding principles that can help states determine what policy measures could be applicable in their national contexts to

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photo: private

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address environmental and climate impacts on migration. Priority should be given to addressing the adverse climate and environmental **drivers of migration** (<https://bit.ly/3qV10ff>). This means increasing investments in climate mitigation and adaptation, and in interventions that reduce the risk of natural disasters and improve environmental conditions, such as land rehabilitation. Most people wish to live productive and dignified lives at home and avoid migrating out of necessity. Policy options should help them reach this goal. However, in some cases, it is not possible for people to remain in or return to areas that are irreversibly damaged by climate impacts. This means that states would benefit from looking at legal and policy options that facilitate migration, both within countries and across borders, and provide protection to vulnerable migrants. The applicability of legal principles in such situations, such as **non-refoulement** (<https://bit.ly/3k2SLrA>), is increasingly debated. In 2020, a UN Human Rights Committee Decision outlined that states might have an obligation not to return people to areas where climate change impacts violate people’s right to life. Other migration management options include offering special visas, expanding regional free movement agreements, or considering planned relocation options to move entire communities out of harm’s way. Countries most vulnerable to climate impacts should be supported in their efforts to translate global policy principles into national policy and legal frameworks that address environmental impacts on migration. Many countries already have **policies relevant to environmental migration** (<https://bit.ly/3y3xUsh>) but increased technical assistance is often needed to build national knowledge bases, collect sound data and evidence, review existing frameworks and create policies that address environmental dimensions of migration. Different kinds of sectoral policy interventions can help address major issues, from rural development to disaster management. It is vitally im-

portant that migration policymakers and climate policymakers work together to ensure that migration management measures on the one hand, and climate adaptation and mitigation planning on the other, feed one another.

The development of programmes and policies should strive to include migrants. In many European countries, migrants living in urban areas are likely to be exposed to environmental stressors such as poor indoor air quality, heat and cold. Climate action can also help promote migrant integration and inclusion in Europe, as shared urban green spaces can promote increased **social cohesion** (<https://bit.ly/3xpHxBC>). Migrants can also be actor of climate action, notably by supporting initiatives in their countries and regions of origin through investments and financial and social remittances.

We need increased solidarity worldwide

Looking at the future, we are facing immense policy and legal challenges we do not yet have the tools to fully address, from the risk of disappearance of small island states due to the sea level rise to the long term impacts of slow onset environmental degradation on migration. In an interconnected world, no country can address environmental and climate impacts on migration in isolation. Increased solidarity, joint action and significant financial investments are all needed to ensure that the countries most vulnerable to climate impacts address challenges and seize opportunities. In the last decade, we have seen increased political will to handle these difficult questions. Political leaders need to step up to ensure that global policy principles are turned into concrete action on the ground that protects and supports environmental migrants.

1 The opinions expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).