

BACKGROUND PAPER

Children on the Move: Why, Where, How?

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Climate Mobility and Children: A Virtual Symposium

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Children on the move: why, where, how?¹

The world is home to 2.3 billion children, with 29.3 per cent² of the world population under 18 years old and 1.8 billion young people³ aged 10 to 24 years old⁴ the largest generation in history. A significant number of these children and youth live in areas vulnerable to climate impacts with, for instance, half a billion children living in extremely high flood occurrence zones and nearly 160 million children living in areas experiencing high or extremely high drought severity. For many of these children and youth, vulnerability to the impacts of natural hazards and climate change is combined with, and compounded by, issues such as conflict, extreme poverty and lack of access to basic services such as sanitation and safe water.

Climate Mobility and Children: A Virtual Symposium

In order to shine a light on the plight of children on the move and to better understand how children and young people are affected by climate-related migration and displacement, UNICEF and the International Organization for Migration hosted a virtual symposium in November 2020. Over two days, experts, policymakers and young people from around the world met to discuss and debate pertinent questions, unpack key concepts, propose actions and outline an agenda to ensure that children's rights and needs are part of the wider debate on climate change.

In parallel, there is a growing awareness that the adverse impacts of climate change increasingly contribute directly and indirectly to temporary and permanent migration and displacement within countries and across borders. Migration in the context of climate change is often a multi-causal phenomenon, with multiple drivers intersecting to shape the decision to migrate. For this reason, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of people on the move due to climate impacts, including children.

However, it is clear that children and youth are heavily impacted by migration dynamics. In addition, migrations are generating deep demographic transformations – with the children of immigrants representing the fastest growing segment within child and youth population in a number of high and middle-income countries across the world, but also resulting in families being separated and children remaining behind, or unaccompanied children migrating along dangerous routes. The child, climate and migration nexus remain underexplored; however, it is already clear that climate impacts add new layers of vulnerability to a large number of children and young people living and migrating in difficult conditions.

Children and young people are those least responsible for climate change, and yet are among the most vulnerable to its effects. Today's children and young people are feeling the effects of environmental change, and today's leaders must design policies aimed at minimizing its impact on future generations and propose aspirational alternatives. This paper provides an overview of the state of knowledge on the child/youth, migration and climate change nexus, before outlining potential recommendations to address this growing challenge.

Children on the move in a changing climate: what do we know about the nexus?

Data regarding environmental migration and children/youth is scarce but it is likely that children/youth are also moving in the context of climate change due to a combination of drivers.

Environmental migration is by nature multi-causal, with a combination of climate, environmental, economic, security, social and demographic factors shaping the decision to migrate. Data regarding environmental migration and children/youth is scarce but it is likely that children/youth are also moving in the context of climate change due to a combination of drivers. Millions of children⁶ migrate within or across borders, either with relatives or unaccompanied, for a variety of reasons, such as seeking better opportunities or family reunification. In 2019, 21 per cent of the total migrant stock⁷ were children and young people.

The percentage of young migrants is higher in low and middle-income countries than in high-income countries, with the African continent hosting the highest proportion of child migrants (aged 18 and under) as well as young migrants (18 to 24 years old), with 25 per cent of child migrants and 16 per cent of young migrants. High numbers of young migrants are also recorded in Asia (15 per cent child and 12 per cent young migrants), Latin America and the Caribbean (19 per cent and 14 per cent respectively) and Oceania (9 per cent and 13 per cent respectively).⁸

Children on the move in Somaliland – A multi-causal and complex situation

A study conducted in Somaliland revealed that 450,000 of Somaliland's estimated one million displaced persons are children who have mostly been forced out of their homes by drought. Most of these children move with their families, but some children are sent to larger towns whilst their parents stay behind to maintain their livelihoods in rural areas. These children and their specific challenges and needs are often invisible as they are absorbed into networks of friends and extended family.

In addition to the children displaced by drought, Somaliland hosts numerous refugee children fleeing conflict in Yemen and other parts of Somalia, as well as children and youth looking for work opportunities. In this context, many young people decide to leave Somaliland and search for better educational and job opportunities abroad, in Europe and in Gulf countries.

Source: 'No Mother Wants Her Child to Migrate. Vulnerability of children on the move in the Horn of Africa'. UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence (2019). <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Child-Migration-Horn-of-Africa-part-1.pdf>

Continents most vulnerable to climate impacts are also hosting the highest proportions of children and youth migrants.

Continents most vulnerable to climate impacts are also hosting the highest proportions of children and youth migrants. It is probably not possible to establish a direct correlation between levels of migrant youth and climate vulnerability, but it is important to consider that extensive movements of children are occurring in areas particularly exposed to natural hazards and the impacts of climate change, such as coastal areas of South Asia, the Mekong Delta, Caribbean and Pacific Islands or the Horn of Africa.

Sudden-onset hazards such as hurricanes or floods are displacing millions of people each year. In 2019 alone, 1,900 disasters triggered by such hazards resulted in 24.9 million new displacements⁹ in 140 countries and territories. This data only includes people displaced within their own countries – the number of people crossing borders due to disasters is not known. In 2019, it was also estimated that 50.8 million people lived in internal displacement situations due to both conflict (45.7 million) and disasters (5.1 million); 18.3 million of these were children under 15 years old.¹⁰ For example, 262,384 young people aged between 15 and 24 were displaced by disasters in Afghanistan in 2019, 55,570 in Sudan and 9,894 in Haiti.¹¹

Faced with a disaster, most people move over relatively short distances and tend to return rapidly to their areas of origin. In these contexts, children have special needs which are not always being met. For instance, it is estimated that at least 6.6 million internally displaced children aged under five have specific nutritional needs and that another 11.7 million children aged between 5 and 14 need better access to primary or secondary education.¹²

Slow-onset environmental degradation is also driving people to migrate to cope with adverse impacts on livelihoods, for instance where land degradation and ocean acidification are affecting livelihoods linked to agriculture/fisheries. Slow onset impacts on health, food security, access to water and other basic services can also drive the decision to migrate. Data related to the number of people moving in connection to slow-onset impacts is not known as it is difficult to determine the exact weight of climate and environmental factors in the decision to migrate. It is however likely that many children are pushed to migrate alone or with their families in such contexts. For instance, around 160 million children live in areas experiencing high levels of drought – and by 2040, one in four children could live in areas facing extreme water stress.¹³



In other contexts such as the United States-Mexico border, unaccompanied migrant children travel alone whilst the rest of the family stays behind.¹⁴ They often originate from areas that are especially vulnerable to climate impacts. Furthermore, increasing numbers of people are affected by planned relocation measures – a process where entire communities are relocated away from dangerous areas such as coastal zones. This type of movement also has specific implications for children who need to adapt to new environments.

In addition, immobile populations – those who do not have the means to migrate out of environmentally fragile areas, and/or people left behind whilst member(s) of the household move out – are often especially vulnerable to climate impacts. Households with low-income levels, few alternative livelihood options and limited social capital have a low capacity to cope with adverse impacts.¹⁵ In some climate vulnerable areas in countries such as Azerbaijan, women and children are left behind whilst men migrate to find economic opportunities. Such situations can potentially create further layers of vulnerability for children who might need to shoulder additional burden in the absence of one or both parents. This includes increased vulnerability to abuse, increased need to work and reduced access to education, adverse psychosocial impacts and increased vulnerability to natural hazards in places of origin.

Data related to protracted situations of displacement linked to disasters is incomplete and we do not know how many children remain in situations of displacement and for how long following a disaster.

All projection models seem to predict a rise in human mobility linked to climate impacts in the next decades. For instance, the World Bank argues that by 2050, without urgent global and national climate action, 140 million people could be on the move within their own countries in three regions (sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America).¹⁶ Considering the demographic weight of children and young people in places where predictions are the highest, it is likely that many more children will be affected by mobility impacts linked to climate change in the immediate and longer-term future.

Data related to protracted situations of displacement linked to disasters is incomplete and we do not know how many children remain in situations of displacement and for how long following a disaster. The available disaster-related data disaggregated by age does not consider cross-border movements, which has significant implications when discussing questions of international protection.

There is also a significant gap in knowledge on migration-related data linked to slow onset events. Collecting and analysing this kind of data is complex, mostly due to the multi-causal nature of environmental degradation that makes it hard to draw a direct correlation between climate impacts and migration choices. Looking ahead, large numbers of children are also predicted to live in climate hotspots that are extremely vulnerable to climate impacts. However, it is important to recall that not all children exposed to such impacts will migrate. Strong climate mitigation and adaptation efforts in the next decade can reduce risks of exposure and lessen disruptive impacts on children, while some of the most at-risk people might not be able to migrate at all. To what extent disruptive climate impacts will influence the migration of youth and children will depend largely on policy measures that will be developed and implemented in the immediate future.

The currently available data briefly outlined above paints only a partial picture of what environmental and climate impacts are affecting the mobility of children. We already know that millions of children are on the move in areas vulnerable to climate impacts and environmental degradation, but it is difficult to evaluate how many of these children are moving directly or indirectly because of climate change.

Protection gaps

Specific vulnerabilities of migrant children and young migrants in the context of climate change remain underexplored. In general, children and young migrants face specific challenges¹⁷ during their migration or displacement experience, especially as it occurs at a crucial time in their emotional, cognitive, physical and social development. The stressors they can be exposed to can lead to psychological issues and undermine their overall well-being.¹⁸ Some of these challenges include linguistic barriers, access to education and other essential services, vulnerability to smuggling and trafficking, statelessness. Such challenges are often compounded for unaccompanied minors.

In internally displaced persons (IDP) camps or within poorer communities in urban areas where IDPs are settled, fragile health systems can lead to restricted access to a number of essential services that children and youth need to fulfil their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in dignity.

Some specific challenges linked to climate and environmental conditions are the following: children experiencing displacement linked to natural hazards and disasters can be exposed to physical harm that adversely affects their health. Children may be injured or killed during disasters and they may also suffer from the effects of malnutrition caused by disruptions in food supply or diarrhoeal illness caused by contaminated water, including in the context of slow-onset environmental degradation. Moreover, disasters can cut off access to medical care, also for non-disaster related illnesses. In internally displaced persons (IDP) camps or within poorer communities in urban areas where IDPs are settled, fragile health systems can lead to restricted access to a number of essential services that children and youth need to fulfil their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in dignity. This includes access to comprehensive sexuality education, access to and counselling on contraception, dignified care related to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), prenatal and postnatal service, STI (sexually transmitted infections) counselling and care.

Children and youth can be at risk of losing members of their families in disasters or finding themselves temporarily or permanently separated from their relatives, including during evacuation procedures.¹⁹ These risks are amplified in displacement situations. Separation from relatives might raise protection issues, such as exposure to (S)GBV in camp settings, violence and abuse and risk of trafficking.



Mental health stressors are an issue, such as post-traumatic stress symptoms and post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and other mental health issues. Many migrant children may face the loss of their homes and their possessions, sometimes permanently, and may be affected by the extreme stress experienced by their relatives. They may also face the loss of their ancestral culture and traditions, such as in cases of planned relocation of entire communities who need to leave their ancestral lands behind.

Children's education can be disrupted by displacement and migration in the context of disasters and the impacts of climate change.²⁰ Families can be forcibly displaced, and schools destroyed. Even when the decision to migrate is linked to slow onset impacts, children's education can suffer when families move from rural to urban areas and do not have the means to provide formal education to children. Some children may also be forced to work to support their families, including in dangerous conditions.

It is also important to consider the impacts of parents' migration on children who stay behind. Children left behind might remain exposed to hazards and the increasing impacts of environmental degradation, with acute potential impacts on their lives, health, and physical integrity. In the absence of the parent(s), they might need to work to contribute to the household's income or shoulder an increasing part of child and/or elderly care and domestic work. The mental impacts linked to parental separations are also a concern. All these disruptions impact children's well-being and education and might reduce resilience to future disasters.

However, it is also important to remember that well managed and legal migration might be a positive experience for children, young people and their families. Migrating can help people move out of harm's way and protect their physical health. It can also provide members of the household with access to educational and job opportunities previously unavailable.

GENDER DIMENSIONS

Young women and girls, particularly those who are displaced, disproportionately feel the impacts of climate change. Over the last years, there has been growing consensus among the international community on the negative impacts of climate change in advancing gender equality. Several Human Rights Council Resolutions²¹ and the Commission on the Status of Women²² recognize that climate change magnifies the inequalities women and girls suffer in accessing rights and poses a significant threat to the achievement of sustainable development goals.

Entrenched social and gender norms, harmful practices and stigma influencing their roles, capacities and coping strategies, behaviours, expectations, opportunities, access to basic needs and recourses, rights and justice increase their vulnerability.

Entrenched social and gender norms, harmful practices and stigma influencing their roles, capacities and coping strategies, behaviours, expectations, opportunities, access to basic needs and recourses, rights and justice increase their vulnerability. At the same time, the experience of migration and displacement often exposes them to new threats and jeopardizes their access to rights and services. A report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Plan International and IMPACT shows how internally displaced women and girls are at greater risks of missing out on education and are less likely to access health and livelihood opportunities.²³

Disasters and climate change cause additional gender-based obstacles in accessing education and remaining in school as a result of deteriorating livelihoods and negative coping strategies. Girls' lack of access to education – a denial of their rights – compounds their vulnerability as they have limited information about climate change, what to do in a disaster and access to information and timely and life-saving early warnings. Disruptions in education and/or overcrowding of school facilities lead to enhanced protection risks for adolescent girls. Studies have shown that schools are a safe space which reduce girls' risk of violence. Girls who are displaced or have migrated in connection with climate impacts may be exposed to violence leading to an extended dropout status. Studies have also shown that impacts of disasters on health systems further increase the risk of women and girls to unplanned pregnancies and sexual and reproductive health complications.



Girls' participation in decision-making is increasingly recognized as fundamental to age- and gender-sensitive policymaking to better address girls' needs and well-being.^{24,25} As observed by Plan International's children-centred climate change adaptation (4CA) programme,²⁶ girls in particular have an important role to play in reducing risk and, when adequately supported and empowered, can effectively communicate risk and drive change in their communities.

POLICY GAPS

Children and youth issues are often overlooked in policy discussions related to migration, displacement and climate change, which hinders the understanding of how to develop best responses. Recent analyses produced by the International Organization for Migration highlight that the global, regional and national governance of migration and displacement in the context of climate impacts has evolved positively in the last decade. The topic was notably taken up in the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015 as it mandated the creation of a specialized Task Force on Displacement that produced seminal recommendations in 2018. The adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, negotiated among United Nations Member States and adopted in 2018, represented a positive step, as the Compact proposed comprehensive measures for States to address climate and environmental impacts on migration. Comprehensive policy principles and guidance are therefore available, but they rarely include specific dimensions linked to children and youth.

Moreover, there is a lack of connection between relevant policy discussions on migration and displacement in the context of climate change and vital instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Progress has been made, such as with the recent inclusion of youth representatives in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Task Force on Displacement, but significant gaps remain.

Providing more information on the how, why and where children migrate in connection with climate impacts is key to encourage the development of policy responses in relevant forums and ensure that these policies can create long-lasting and positive impacts on the lives of migrant children and youth.

Recommendations

If the international community is to deliver on the promise of Agenda 2030 to 'leave no one behind', it cannot afford to overlook the current and future consequences of adverse climate impacts on children on the move.

Managing migration and addressing displacement of children and youth in the context of climate change is an immense challenge that remains to be fully tackled. If the international community is to deliver on the promise of Agenda 2030 to 'leave no one behind', it cannot afford to overlook the current and future consequences of adverse climate impacts on children on the move. The following recommendations have been developed to support States to address some of the specific child-related challenges linked to mobility and climate change. These recommendations are aligned with those developed under the Task Force on Displacement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the commitments expressed in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and those expressed in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

DATA AND INFORMATION

There is a need for an increased understanding of children's specific situation regarding (im)mobility in the face of climate change.

- > Disaggregated data by age, gender, ethnicity and disability should be collected to better understand the unique needs and capacities of different groups. 'Children' are not a homogenous group and many will face additional barriers in accessing their rights, especially when displaced or migrating.²⁷
- > Environmental change often aggravates poverty and can erode the capacities of children and young people to migrate, thereby limiting their personal development opportunities. In addition, migration and displacement in the context of environmental change can worsen the vulnerabilities of children and young people,²⁸ such as experiencing increased risk during migration journeys, moving to unsustainable locations or enduring family separation. However, migration can also be a life-affirming experience for youth who might access opportunities they did not have before, such as livelihood diversification and improved access to education, health and work opportunities. All these nuances need to be better understood and explored.



POLICY

For children and youth who cannot or choose not to move, policies need to focus on offering dignified and aspirational opportunities that would help them adapt to climate impacts and remain in their places of origin.

- > It is important to recall that many people on the move, including children and young people, would rather not move or be displaced, but are forced to do so because of the adverse impacts of climate change and increasing occurrence of disasters. The narrative around dignified livelihood opportunities that are sustainable and adapted to contexts of climate vulnerability is also important for returning migrants,²⁹ many of whom are potentially young people who decide to return to their areas of origin. The specific needs of children left behind by migrating parents also need to be considered. This is especially important in terms of vocational training and educational opportunities. The participation of children and youth in policy discussions such as the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is vital to ensure that their experiences are understood and reflected.

For children and youth who must or choose to move, better migration management is necessary to provide legal migration options rooted in rights-based approaches, as outlined in global commitments.

- > It should be acknowledged that migration will be inevitable in some contexts where climate change mitigation and adaptation measures will not be sufficient. Therefore, there is a need to discuss and examine what the options for dignified and legal migration are, and to expand pathways available to children facing significant, and often increasing, levels of vulnerability.

PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Children and young people need to be included and heard in these conversations.

- > Youth involvement should be an integral part of the response to challenges linked to human mobility in the context of climate and environmental change. Raising awareness among and involving and empowering young people is at the heart of the response to such challenges.³⁰ They should be given full access to relevant knowledge and included in all disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation efforts, including risk assessments, resilience-building, capacity-building, training and awareness-raising, and community engagement.
- > Children and youth should also be included in disaster preparedness measures and their needs must be considered at all stages of the humanitarian response and of the recovery process. This includes ensuring that the set-up and maintenance of key preparedness infrastructures, including evacuation sites and Emergency Operations Centres, and all interventions aiming to achieve reconstruction and durable solutions will consider the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children and youth.



Endnotes

1. This Background Paper is produced by Mariam Traore Chazalnoël, Dina Ionesco and Iulia Elisabeta Duca, Migration, Environment and Climate Change Division, International Organization for Migration (IOM) with inputs from Jessica Cooke, Plan International and review by Lorenzo Guadagno, IOM.
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30. In 2019 the International Organization for Migration dedicated both sessions of the International Dialogue on Migration to the role of youth in determining the future effectiveness of cooperation on migration around the world, including on climate related impacts.

UNICEF works in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents — and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfill their potential, from early childhood through adolescence. And we never give up.

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