Submission to the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement on Internal Displacement in the context of Disasters and Climate Change

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1 Introduction

We thank the Panel for the opportunity to provide input into its future work. Our short submission concerns internal displacement in the context of disasters and climate change, highlighting selected areas where we believe the Panel could make an important contribution.

We have had the opportunity to read the submission prepared on behalf of the Platform on Disaster Displacement and endorse it in full. In particular, we echo its key messages that we must ‘be better prepared, invest more in prevention, and work early on towards solutions, including with much more attention on restoring livelihoods’. The driving imperatives should be to reduce climate change-related hazards, to assist at-risk populations to stay in their homes where they so desire, to help them move out of harm’s way where remaining in place is not possible, and to protect people who are displaced. In all cases, respect for human dignity and agency should be front and centre.

Our submission addresses the following matters:

- Key issues to be prioritized
- Catalyzing and supporting effective solutions
- Developing more integrated approaches by a range of actors
- Strengthening the effectiveness of normative frameworks

2 Key issues to be prioritized

The adverse impacts of disasters and climate change are already prompting millions to move each year. Disasters displace more people within their countries than conflict: nearly three times as many people (24.9 million) were newly displaced by disasters than by conflict (8.5 million) in 2019 alone. At the same time, some people are moving in anticipation of the longer-term adverse effects of disasters and climate change which may render their land uninhabitable and/or livelihoods very difficult. And in yet other cases, people are being permanently relocated away from unsafe areas in the hope that they can rebuild their lives more securely elsewhere.
In these contexts, the impacts of climate change are felt in a variety of ways. First, climate change increases the frequency and/or severity of some sudden-onset disasters (e.g. cyclones), transforming them into ‘disasters on steroids’. Secondly, climate change contributes to slower-onset processes of environmental degradation or risks (e.g. drought, sea-level rise). Thirdly, there is an interaction between the first two categories (described in the PDD submission as ‘multi-hazard’): for instance, cyclones drive storm surges, which can cause extensive flooding of coastal areas. Rises in sea levels mean that there is a higher volume of water riding on a storm surge, which, in turn, means flooding is more extensive and severe. Similarly, while drought is regarded as a slow-onset process, it may have more immediate triggers, such as food insecurity turning into famine.

Finally, climate change and disasters can intersect with conflict, and reduce people’s resilience. In 2017 and 2018 for example, more than 30 countries faced internal displacement associated with conflict and disaster. In 2019, more than 40 countries experienced the same predicament. As the PDD submission notes, people who have already been displaced by conflict may find themselves particularly susceptible to secondary displacement from disasters because they are living in precarious conditions. Resource scarcity linked to the impacts of climate change on crops, fresh water and other supplies may incite local-level conflict and contribute to displacement as well. In other cases, people may be displaced by conflict in one part of the country and by disaster in another. In the Philippines, for instance, 4.1 million people across the country were displaced by storms and earthquakes in 2019 alone, and tens of thousands of people are displaced annually by conflict in the southernmost region of Mindanao. Similarly, in Colombia there were 35,000 displacements triggered by floods, landslides, wildfires and storms, and 139,000 new displacements related to on-going conflict; western departments of Chocó and Nariño experienced both conflict and flood-related displacement. These examples show that many countries face complex, multiple drivers of displacement that may create or exacerbate internal displacement, including protracted displacement.

It is therefore too simplistic – and empirically inaccurate – to suggest that climate change causes displacement. It does not; it always interacts with other factors. Climate change amplifies the threats already posed by disasters. But it also acts as a ‘threat multiplier’ when it comes to people’s exposure to risk and capacity to cope. Generally, the people who will be most detrimentally affected are those already in precarious circumstances – such as the poor, the landless, the under-resourced, those living in environmentally-vulnerable areas, those who are already displaced, and those without extensive social networks or resources. When climate change is overlaid on these existing stressors, it may become the straw that breaks the camel's back.

A helpful way to understand this is in terms of ‘tipping points’ – in other words, when does the cumulative impact of various stressors tip people over the edge, such that they consider moving away preferable to staying put? Tipping points vary from individual to individual, and from context to context. This means that it is impossible to predict exactly who will move and when, which is why pre-empting and planning for movement is essential, based on scientific data about disaster risk and historical movement patterns of particular communities, among other things.

Against this backdrop, the Panel could make a useful contribution in: (a) identifying the scope of displacement linked to slow-onset hazards; and (b) understanding the relationship between internal and cross-border movement in the context of disasters and climate change.
(a) Slow-onset hazards

The IDMC has noted that it is difficult to monitor movement away from slow-onset processes because ‘it encapsulates a wide range of phenomena, drivers, triggers, impacts and movement types’ and can be hard to distinguish from internal migration. However, this lack of data means that existing estimates are ‘very conservative’, and there could be far more disaster displaced people on the move than is realized.

When it comes to protection, there could be a whole segment of the population whose rights and needs are not being met because they are either not recognized at all, or because they are assumed to be ‘voluntary migrants’. Some drought-related movement, and seasonal or circular movement to access natural resources or alternative livelihoods, may not be recognized as forms of displacement because they reflect historical patterns of internal migration. However, increasing variability in rainfall and other climate change impacts are changing the frequency and patterns of such movement, disrupting the sustainability of pastoralist livelihoods, as well as increasing the vulnerability of populations on the move.

In the context of slow-onset hazards, the already blurry distinction between forced and voluntary movement makes it even harder to disaggregate the reasons why people move. A more nuanced understanding of the nature and drivers of movement in this context is critical to identifying and responding to people’s protection and assistance needs.

(b) The relationship between internal and cross-border movement

A presumption is sometimes made that increased internal displacement on account of the impacts of disasters or climate change will mean more cross-border displacement as well. While it can reasonably be assumed that there is some connection, much remains unknown.

There are a number of reasons for this information gap. First, there is no single term or definition applied to people who move across borders in the context of climate change and disasters, which makes identifying them very difficult. Secondly, and relatedly, very few visa categories specifically ‘count’ people on this basis. Thirdly, people may cite a variety of reasons for moving, in which climate change and disasters feature more or less prominently. And finally, as noted above, it is difficult to capture data where slower-onset processes mean that ‘continuous exposure to hazard may increase people’s vulnerability over time, leading eventually to their leaving the country’.

We do know that internal displacement may transform into cross-border displacement if people cannot find durable solutions in their home country. This is why addressing displacement in the context of disasters and climate change must be a recognized priority of national governments. Indeed, this is another way that prevention can enable protection.

Equally, we know that cross-border displacement may result in internal displacement if people who have sought protection in other countries are sent home without a safe place to go – but again, we lack detailed information about this.

3 Catalyzing and supporting effective solutions

The way humanitarian and disaster response actors typically think about solutions to internal displacement is inherited from previous decades and other purposes. Initially conceptualized for refugees fleeing persecution across borders and then adopted for internal displacement primarily related to conflict, the ‘durable solutions’ paradigm may not be sufficient when it
comes to responding to those displaced in the context of disasters and climate change. It is therefore worth re-examining the assumptions that underpin these traditional solutions in order to ensure that they are fit for purpose.\textsuperscript{18}

Climate change necessarily affects what solutions are viable in a given context. For instance, evacuating people from a disaster-affected area – which is meant to be an immediate and short-term measure – may become protracted displacement if return is not possible.

As highlighted by the PDD's submission, one commonly held but problematic assumption is that IDPs will return to their homes shortly after the disaster has passed. Return is privileged as the optimal solution – correcting the 'wrong' of displacement as quickly as possible and enabling people to restore the status quo of prior conditions. However, the evidence shows that this is not always possible. As of 31 December 2019, at least 5.1 million people were still displaced on account of disasters in 95 countries and territories.\textsuperscript{19} While around 90 per cent had been displaced during 2019,\textsuperscript{20} some had been displaced for much longer, suggesting that they might be in need of alternative durable solutions.\textsuperscript{21} Moreover, as noted above, data challenges in the context of disasters and climate change mean that these figures are 'an underestimate, because little data is collected on how long people are displaced for following disasters'.\textsuperscript{22} The number of people living in protracted internal displacement following a disaster, or experiencing repeated displacement in this context, is likely to be much higher. As the IDMC has observed, hundreds of thousands of people remained in protracted displacement for years after the Haitian earthquake of 2010, and the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan.\textsuperscript{23}

There are multiple reasons why return may not be possible: a volcanic eruption may have irrevocably altered land, making physical return impossible; saline intrusion may have destroyed agricultural livelihoods; the government may have declared land a 'danger' or 'no build' zone; or discriminatory policies may prevent return. For example, after the Philippines city of Tacloban was devastated by Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda), the government declared a 'no build zone' preventing residence within 40 metres of the coastline, which raised concerns given its disproportionate impact on poorer fishing communities.\textsuperscript{24}

Furthermore, even if return is possible, it may mean moving back into the same set of environmental, socio-economic and political conditions that heightened the risk of displacement originally. As climate change intensifies the frequency and/or severity of certain sudden- and slow-onset events, the viability of return as the preferred durable solution is further called into question.

Durable solutions need to be conceptualized as opportunities to not only resolve past displacement and return to (or ideally enhance) the status quo, but equally to avert future displacement. Responding effectively to internal displacement related to disasters and climate change impacts will require shifting our thinking about solutions from a reactive approach – responding to displacement that has already occurred – to a proactive approach which involves measures to avert and minimize future displacement.

Preventing and resolving protracted displacement therefore requires a collaborative and comprehensive approach. Development, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation actors play critical roles in this regard and may need to be more proactively incorporated into solutions planning.

Planned relocation, local integration and resettlement in third countries may become increasingly relevant.\textsuperscript{25} Migration may also be considered as a fourth durable solution.\textsuperscript{26} Furthermore, those displaced may themselves pursue diverse strategies in pursuit of
solutions, relying on ‘translocal’ or at times ‘transnational’ connections. The majority of a family, for instance, may remain in a relocation site while a breadwinner goes ‘home’ during the week in order to better access livelihoods. Five years after the ‘triple disaster’ in Fukushima, Japan, displaced persons pursued ‘dual residency’ and other dynamic makeshift arrangements to find workable solutions to their situations. As disaster risk management and humanitarian actors approach strategies to support the displaced persons to find solutions, it is critical to consider the role of cyclical seasonal migration or households that are ‘translocal’ across multiple sites.

4 Developing more integrated approaches by a range of actors

In contrast to internal displacement associated with conflict, the involvement of actors from the disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, land use planning and development sectors is critical to efforts to prevent and resolve displacement associated with disasters and the adverse impacts of climate change. Their interventions can help to reduce vulnerability and exposure to hazards, and to build the resilience of populations. Ensuring these actors are attuned to the risks of displacement and the needs and rights of those who are displaced is fundamental to securing their protection. Indeed, protection needs must remain front and centre.

A case study for understanding the crucial role played by these actors is planned relocation. In contexts where land is (becoming) uninhabitable or creating intolerable insecurity, many communities have relocated or are in the process of doing so. Examples from the Americas, Asia and the Pacific demonstrate the extent to which governments and communities are considering relocation as a means of moving people out of harm’s way as a protective measure of last resort.

Planned relocation may be used both as a preventive measure to move people out of at-risk areas and thereby reduce their exposure, and as a lasting solution to enable those who have already been displaced to rebuild their lives elsewhere. The latter can assist those languishing in transitional arrangements who are unable to return home or integrate at the place where they have found interim safety.

A well-coordinated, holistic approach to planned relocation is more likely to facilitate sustainable, collective, context-specific and protection-centered processes and outcomes. It should bring together local and national (and, where relevant, international) actors from the fields of disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, land use planning and development, alongside affected communities themselves and the humanitarian actors who work to protect and assist them.

These sentiments hold true beyond the specific case of planned relocation. A cohesive and coordinated approach is fundamental in all disaster contexts. While conflict settings may be steeped in complexity, the less politicized disaster landscape gives actors from the disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, development and humanitarian sectors greater scope to develop consolidated, area-based interventions to prevent or mitigate displacement risk, and to cultivate solutions. The predictability of certain hazards, such as storms and floods, means that robust disaster preparedness, climate change adaptation and development measures – including early warning mechanisms – can reduce injury, death and displacement. Such efforts can augment humanitarian preparedness and contingency planning, and support resilience-building, voluntary migration programmes, social safety nets and protection-sensitive evacuation arrangements that are conceived to last no longer than necessary. Stronger coordination can also minimize dependence on humanitarian assistance, allowing recovery and development actors to engage early in the post-response phase, building on
cohesive efforts on risk reduction, preparedness and emergency response. In this respect, including displacement-affected communities into development programs and projects, as well as local and national development plans is fundamental.

It is important to establish coordinated legal, policy and operational frameworks so as to avoid siloed approaches that can squander the expertise and interventions of each sector. Allocating sectoral and collective responsibilities to local and national (and where relevant, international) actors to mitigate, prepare for and prevent displacement, and to foster long-term solutions, is another valuable way to improve mutual understanding, management and coordination of responses. Establishing targets and indicators to evaluate the coordination of, and outcomes related to, prevention, responses and solutions could provide shared benchmarks against which collective progress could be measured.

Ultimately, promoting greater awareness of internal displacement in the context of disasters and climate change, and fostering better coordination between the various relevant actors, will help to support governments to reduce and address displacement. This aligns with the Panel’s remit to catalyze government-led interventions and solutions and with the duty of States to protect and assist IDPs.

5 **Strengthening the effectiveness of normative frameworks**

Displacement in the context of disasters and climate change is the result of the interplay of (i) exposure and (ii) vulnerability to (iii) a natural hazard. Legal and policy frameworks requiring States to take action with respect to any of these three components may therefore assist to reduce or prevent internal displacement.

There are already a number of frameworks relevant to this context, including the Nansen Initiative’s Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change, endorsed by 109 States in October 2015; the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030; the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; the 2015 Paris Outcome on climate change; the Agenda for Humanity (annexed to the UN Secretary-General’s report for the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit); and the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

In addition, general measures for improving implementation of normative frameworks relating to internal displacement will extend to benefit those who are displaced, or at risk of displacement, in the context of disasters and climate change. However, more targeted measures may be appropriate to assist governments in identifying, and responding to, such displacement. Such measures could include:

- Promoting ratification of normative frameworks and incorporation into national law and policy;
- Providing technical advice to States in the application of normative frameworks to the disaster context, such as by identifying key provisions and giving guidance on their application in disaster situations; providing guidance on integrating national internal displacement policies with national disaster risk reduction and response strategies; and providing model legislation;
- Developing practical guidance and capacity-building activities to support the implementation of national internal displacement policies and programmes in the context of climate change and disasters – for instance, through joint training across relevant agencies and ministries; standard operating procedures for responding to such displacement; and simulation exercises for relevant agencies and officials in the implementation of internal displacement policies in this context;
• Providing additional support and capacity-building for monitoring and enforcement mechanisms established (or envisaged) under normative frameworks, including technical guidance for human rights monitoring and peer-review mechanisms.

More specifically, the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and the African Union’s Kampala Convention set out core rights and obligations that should guide States’ national policies and programmes relating to internal displacement. These frameworks address the specific needs of IDPs, including those displaced as a result of, or in order to avoid, ‘natural or human-made disasters’, and deal with all phases of displacement (prevention, protection and lasting solutions).

6 Conclusion

We urge the Panel to ensure that the predicament and protection needs of people displaced in the context of disasters and climate change remain front and centre in its work. We look forward to the Panel’s contributions to the issues outlined in this submission, and invite the Panel to contact us if we can provide any further information or assistance (kaldorcentre@unsw.edu.au).

1 Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD), ‘Internal Displacement in the context of Disasters and Adverse Effects of Climate Change’ (Submission to the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, May 2020).

2 Natural hazards are formally divided into five categories: (i) geophysical (earthquake, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, landslides); (ii) hydrological (floods, avalanches, sea-level rise); (iii) meteorological (storms, storm surges, extreme temperatures); (iv) climatological (drought, wildfires, glacial lake outburst floods); and (v) biological (insect infestation or epidemic): EMDAT, ‘Classification’ https://www.emdat.be/classification.


4 Climate Council (Australia), ‘Damage from Cyclone Pam was Exacerbated by Climate Change’ (Briefing Statement, 2015) 2 http://www.climatecouncil.org.au/uploads/417d45f46cc04249d55d59be3da62.


7 IDMC (n 3) 41.

8 Ibid 42.

9 Ibid 56.


11 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), GRID 2019: Global Report on Internal Displacement (IDMC, 2019) 73; see also v; note 18, 80. See also Kumari Rigaud et al, Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration (The World Bank, 2018) xix; and methodological concerns expressed by Ibrahim Abubakar et al, ‘The UCL–Lancet Commission on Migration and Health: The


13 IDMC (n 3) 19.


15 Ibid.

16 See Nansen Initiative on Disaster-Induced Cross-Border Displacement, Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the context of Disasters and Climate Change, vol 1 (December 2015) 39; IDMC 2019 (n 11) 41; IDMC 2017 (n 12) 9.

17 These are: (a) sustainable reintegration at the place of origin (‘return’); (b) sustainable local integration in areas where internally displaced persons take refuge (‘local integration’); (c) sustainable integration in another part of the country (‘relocation’). See Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, UN doc E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2 (11 February 1998) section V; IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons (2010).


19 IDMC (n 3) 12.

20 Ibid.


22 IDMC (n 3) 12.


26 Katy Long, ‘Rethinking “Durable” Solutions’, in Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (Oxford University Press, 2014); Global Compact on Refugees, UN doc A/73/12 (2018) paras 94–96; Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, UN doc A/RES/73/195 (19 December 2018) paras 21(g) and 21(h) and more generally Objective 5; see also para 18(l).


29 In situations where conflict and disaster interact to trigger internal displacement, an even broader set of actors will need to be engaged.


See further Guiding Principles (n 17).

See Protection Agenda (n 16) 16.

See also PDD (n 1) section III.

Protection Agenda (n 16).

Sendai Framework (n 31). Note, also, the Cancún Adaptation Framework which noted the importance of ‘[m]easures to enhance understanding, coordination and cooperation with regard to climate change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation’: UNFCCC, Decision 1/CP.16, The Cancun Agreements: Outcome of the Work of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action under the Convention in Report of the Conference of Parties on its Sixteenth Session, held in Cancun from 29 November to 10 December 2010, UN doc FCCC/CP/2010/7/Add.1 (15 March 2011) para 14(f).


Paris Agreement (n 31).


Migration Compact (n 26) Objective 2, para 18(h)–(l); Objective 5, para 21(g)–(h). Weaker language is included in the Refugee Compact (n 26) paras 8, 12, 63. See also the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, UN doc A/RES/71/1 (19 September 2016) paras 1, 18, 43, 50.