

The impact of climate change on migrant children's rights

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This paper intends to shed light on climate-mobility issues and children's rights. Although children represent an important proportion of all migrants and refugees, we can witness an alarming lack of policies and legal frameworks focused on climate-induced migration and the protection of children.

1. Definition of environmental migration:

As of today, there is no legal definition for persons on the move due to environmental reason. However, IOM tries to provide a working definition:

“Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad”.

2. Climate refugees: a misleading definition

The term “climate refugees” is used to describe populations who become displaced due to climate-induced disasters.

However, such term does not reflect the complexity of the issue. In fact, this definition could overlook the reasons of movement and the type of movement. In the attempt to draw political attention on the impact of climate change on migrants, this term can be reductionist and self-defeating.

The definition 'climate refugee' frames those who move as victims, forced to flee their countries, such as in times of war or persecution, not taking into account who move within the country borders for environmental reasons and that the majority of climate-driven mobility occurred at the country or regional level.

The exact causal relationship between climate change, displacement and migration is hard to quantify due to the complex interaction of climate change with other social, economic, political and cultural drivers.

It is also necessary to point out that the relationship between climate change and human mobility is not linear. For example, the same climate change manifestation could produce different mobility responses, depending on the geographic settings. Furthermore, some populations are unable to choose whether move or not: the so-called “trapped populations”.

Indeed, the Cancún Adaptation Framework, in recognizing that the dynamics of human mobility develops in the context of slow-onset hazards, distinguishes between forced displacement and voluntary migration, and also from planned relocation, which can be either voluntary or forced. However, distinguishing between forced and voluntary movements in slow-onset hazard contexts is difficult yet critical in its implications for policy.

Moreover, migration associated with the gradual impacts of climate change may also be an adaptation strategy used to cope with deteriorating environmental conditions.

3. Migrant children and climate change

Nowadays, there is a growing awareness that climate change contributes to increase temporary and permanent migration and displacement.

Indeed, a relevant number of children lives in areas vulnerable to climate-related disasters. More specifically, half a billion children lives in extremely high flood occurrence zones and nearly 160 million children lives in areas experiencing high or extremely high drought severity; moreover, the percentage of migrant children is higher in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, which are particularly vulnerable to climate impacts.

In addition, according to the Global Report on Internal Displacement 2021, 55 million people are living in internal displacement, 7 million of which were internally displaced by disasters as of 31 December 2020. Furthermore, the report illustrates that the age of 30,5 millions of internally displaced persons is comprised between 0 and 24 years.

However, these data can depict just a partial overview of the impact of climate on the mobility of children, as it is difficult to evaluate how many of them are moving directly or indirectly because of climate change. Indeed, little research has been done to investigate the experiences of children in this context; therefore, the lack of reliable and extensive research on this regard translates into ineffective policies on the protection of children involved in climate-induced migration and displacement.

4. Specific Vulnerabilities of migrant children

It is common knowledge that children are particularly exposed to the consequences of climate change but, at the same time, are among the least empowered groups on environmental issues. In fact, children are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change largely because of the early stage of their physiological and cognitive development, which makes them less-equipped to deal with climate-related shocks.

While children and young people are least responsible for climate change, they are among the most vulnerable to its effects. However, “the specific vulnerabilities of migrant children and young migrants in the context of climate change remain underexplored” according to IOM.

Despite the lack of data in this regard, a research from UNICEF UK (“No place to call home”) shows the specific vulnerabilities that could affect children in the context of climate-driven mobility:

- Displaced children and their families lose not only shelter but also access to health care, education, livelihoods, social services and networks, religious community, political autonomy.
- Climate-induced migration and displacement pose a risk for the health of the children, who may experience reduced availability of food clean water, exposure to diseases.
- Children and young people are also among the most likely to be sent away to seek work elsewhere due climate-related events.
- Many children are forced to living in temporary shelters which often lack access to clean water, sanitation facilities and basic hygiene.
- Education is often neglected in the aftermath of moving, and may be considered a less immediate priority by host states and humanitarian organizations, in comparison with issues such as shelter and food security.
- Children that become separated by their family, in light of climate-related events, are more likely to experience violence, exploitation and abuse.
- Children, as some of the most vulnerable, also fall in the category of ‘trapped’ populations who face deteriorating conditions and worse risks than many migrants.

5. Convention on the Rights of the Child and right to a healthy environment

Despite the aforementioned specific vulnerabilities, children’s rights have been overlooked in policies on climate-related migration and displacement.

However, it is clear that the impact of climate change undermines the effective enjoyment of the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- the rights to life, survival and development (art. 6),
- the right to family relations and not to be separated from one’s parents against one’s will (arts. 9-10),
- right to the highest attainable standard of health (art. 24),
- right to adequate standard of living (art. 27),
- right to education (art. 28),

- freedom from any form of violence or exploitation (arts. 19, 32 and 34-36)
- right to recreation and play (art. 31)
- right to the enjoyment of one's culture (art. 30).

It is important to point out that, although there is no a specific right to a healthy environment in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the treaty recognizes environmental issues in two provisions:

- **Article 24: on the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health** provides that:

“States Parties shall pursue full implementation of this right and, in particular, shall take appropriate measures: [...] to combat disease and malnutrition [...] taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution.”

- **Article 29: on the aims of education** which stresses that the right to education must include:

“... the development of respect for the natural environment.”

6. Possible solutions

1. **Reject oversimplified definitions and narratives, and promote more insightful understanding of all the nuances of climate change:** A reductionist portrayal of climate-related mobility could misconstrue the reality, preventing from adopting effective policies. Moreover, there is no linear nexus between climate and mobility, therefore climate change manifestations and human mobility responses are highly unpredictable.
2. **Undertaking research for children and filling data gap in the attempt to produce more effective policies:** Those who move due to climate impacts are not a homogenous group of ‘climate migrants’, but have different vulnerabilities, requiring different type of support. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the understanding of the relationship between climate change and children’s rights through disaggregated data collection.
3. **Promote participation of children:** It is essential to ensure the participation and the inclusion of children in the public debate, allowing them to articulate those rights according to what they see is relevant. The “Fridays for future” initiatives demonstrate how youth activism can effectively influence the political debate. However, it is also necessary to guarantee participation even to children from climate vulnerable communities.

4. Guarantee children's access to remedies: Finally, the right to a healthy environment should be integrated in national constitutions and it would be essential to ensure that children have access to justice, including effective remedies for and reparation of human rights violations due to environmental harm.

7. *Conclusion: the Vanuatu's Approach*

The Vanuatu's National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement constitutes a model strategy to safeguard the well-being of their populations in the context of climate-related disasters.

Indeed, the Pacific Islands are experiencing an inevitable loss of their habitable areas, due to the sea level rise; in response to this situation, the policy tries to alleviate the drivers of displacement, from sudden and onset disasters.

The policy highlights the protection of the most vulnerable people, including children, women, elderly and people with disability; particularly, the policy takes into account the necessities of children, guaranteeing them access to health care, education, and supports the collection of disaggregated data on the numbers of minors affected by climate mobility.

This approach encourages consultations with those affected by climate-mobility events, both displaced populations and host communities and, whereas the staying in the place of origin could be no longer possible, supports migration and internal migration.