

POLICY REPORT

Climate Change and Mobility: An Agenda for the United States





Climate Change and Mobility: An Agenda for the United States

By Susan Martin

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COVER PHOTOS:

Left: Waves crash into an abandoned house north of Pekalongan, Indonesia. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Pekalongan is experiencing a land subsidence of six centimeters annually, which is caused in part by climate change. (ADITYA IRAWAN / Getty Images)

Right: The foundations of once-submerged buildings are visible near Lake Isabella, California. A continuing drought has left the Kern River carrying about a quarter of its average Sierra Nevada snowmelt to the lake. The lake’s water level is below 16 percent capacity. (DAVID MCNEW / Getty Images)



Executive Summary

■ In August 2021, the Biden administration will issue a multi-agency report on climate change and human mobility, as per an executive order issued by the president in February.¹ Among the issues to be addressed are the international security implications of climate-related movement; options and mechanisms to protect and, if necessary, resettle individuals displaced by climate change; proposals for the use of U.S. foreign assistance to reduce the negative effects of climate change; and opportunities to work collaboratively with others to respond to these movements. The order is a welcome step toward improving responses to one of the principal human consequences of climate change.

■ After a discussion of the forms of human mobility that could be affected by climate change, this analysis examines the four areas to be addressed in the administration's report:

■ **Responding to the international and human security effects of the movements of people related to climate change:**

There appears to be little evidence that such movements are now or will be an inherent risk to international security. Rather, it seems that certain forms of mobility could reduce international security threats by enabling climate-affected populations to adapt to changing conditions. However, there are situations in which mass dis-



Rescuers pull a rubber boat carrying residents through a flooded street after Typhoon Vamco hit in Marikina City, Philippines, in November 2020. (TED ALJIBE / Getty Images)

placement and poorly designed relocation schemes can increase human insecurity.

■ **Adopting new U.S. immigration policies for those who are at highest risk from a changing climate:** This would include reforms that would allow immigrants facing dire environmental conditions in their home countries to enter the U.S. and possibly enable those already in the U.S. to remain in the country, either temporarily or permanently.

■ **Ensuring that U.S. foreign assistance is used to help people remain in their homes when possible and move**

securely when necessary, and finding durable solutions that allow them to prosper despite a changing climate:

This would include disaster risk reduction programs and migration and relocation programs that empower people to choose when and where they will move or be relocated. This same focus should apply to domestic programs that help U.S. residents.

■ **Building the mechanisms needed to ensure effective international cooperation to tackle these crucial issues:**

The U.S. could lead by example by adopting domestic policies that respect the rights of those who move, and Washington could support adaptation and sustainable development programs and exert leadership in global platforms working on climate change and climate-driven mobility.

■ Policy recommendations in this report include improving the evidence base for assessing climate change-driven mobility in relation to human security; introducing a new humanitarian admissions category for immigrants in the U.S.; re-engaging with international organizations and processes focused on climate change-induced mobility; and reforming Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to make sure that beneficiaries can return home if possible or adjust to permanent residence in the U.S. if environmental conditions in their home countries do not improve within a certain period.



Introduction

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projects that extreme weather events are the most direct way that climate change will lead to movements, but in the longer term, significant migration will result from slow-onset processes such as sea level rise, coastal erosion, warming, water stress, and loss of agricultural productivity.² Developing countries are likely to feel the greatest effects of climate change, and they have the least capacity to respond. The World Bank has projected that by 2030, 140,000 more people in Sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, and South Asia will be forced to move within their own countries than otherwise expected because of slow-onset processes of climate change.³ This does not consider those who will be displaced by acute natural hazards associated with climate change or those who move across international borders.

As recognized in President Joe Biden's executive order, it is in the United States' national interest to address climate change mobility substantively and constructively. The U.S. itself is not immune to climate-related movements, as seen in the large-scale and too-often protracted displacement of people during and after acute hazards within its own territory. Just in the past few years, such displacement occurred after highly destructive hurricanes in Texas and Puerto Rico, tornadoes in the Midwest, and massive wildfires in California and Oregon. There are also national security implications,



A displaced woman washes dishes at a displacement camp in Beledweyne, Somalia, in December 2019. Rains flooded the region, forcing thousands to leave their homes and seek humanitarian assistance. (LUIS TATO / Getty Images)

particularly when environmental factors combine with violence and political insecurity to produce mass movements, which in turn exacerbate tensions. The U.S. military has been called upon to respond in places such as Somalia and Syria, as well as on the southern U.S. border when such situations arise.

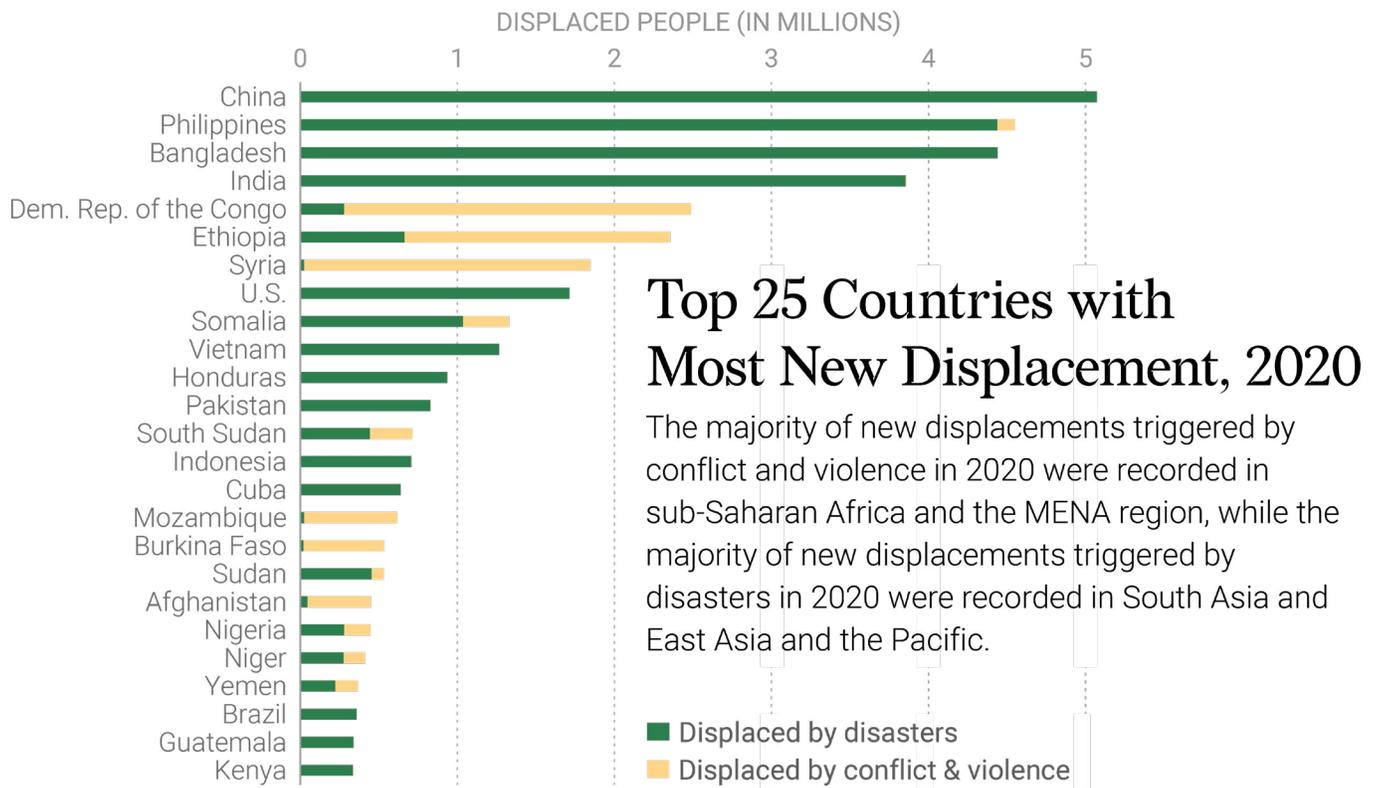
Forms of Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change

In 2010, the Conference of the Parties to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change adopted the Cancun Adaptation Framework, which called on all countries to take “measures to enhance understanding, coordination and cooperation with regard to climate change induced displacement, migration

and planned relocation, where appropriate, at national, regional and international levels.” The resolution reflected growing awareness that environmental change, and climate change in particular, was already having a profound effect on the mobility of people and was likely to have still more effects in the years ahead.

In differentiating among displacement, migration, and planned relocation, the framework set out three markedly different responses to environmental processes and events:

Displacement is generally reactive and potentially disastrous for the populations affected. It may be preceded by mass evacuations after cyclones, earthquakes, floods, and other natural hazards. When people are unable to return



Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

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home, the displacement can become protracted.

Migration, by contrast, is often anticipatory of worsening conditions. The decision to migrate is usually made by individuals and households. When used as a risk management strategy, migration allows people to find alternative sources of livelihood. The migrants may send remittances to family members remaining in the community. In such cases, migration due to environmental drivers is likely to resemble other forms of labor migration and treated as such. Such movements are potentially beneficial if people can move in a safe and orderly process. If the pathways involve irregular migration, however, the

risks may outweigh the benefits of the movements.

Planned relocation is defined as “a planned process in which persons or groups of persons move or are assisted to move away from their homes or places of temporary residence, are settled in a new location, and provided with the conditions for rebuilding their lives.”⁴ It is generally carried out under the authority of the state, generally as a last resort when people may otherwise be trapped in place when they can no longer live and work in their home communities. In some cases, the government initiates the relocation; in others, communities request help to relocate. They may move together to a new destination or

obtain financing and other forms of assistance to move to new locations on their own.

Most experts believe that mobility in the context of climate change will be primarily internal (except for low-lying small island states without higher elevations) or movement into neighboring countries.⁵ Such mobility may be particularly challenging for receiving communities and countries with few resources, legal structures, or institutional capacity to respond to the needs of the migrants and host populations. Geographical proximity may also mean that destination areas face some of the same environmental challenges as areas of origin (e.g. drought, desertification, acute



natural hazards) and may offer little respite or even exacerbate conditions in destinations. Some long-distance movements are inevitable as well, given the scope of migration today; the countries of North America, Europe, and Oceania, as well as regional economic powers within developing countries, will no doubt experience increased migration at least partly caused by environmental drivers, amplified by a changing climate.

Climate Change, Migration, and Security

The Biden executive order specifies that the multi-agency report assess the security implications of movements resulting from climate change. Climate change is often thought of as a threat multiplier that could instigate conflicts over scarce resources. For example, briefing the U.N. Security Council in July 2020, Assistant Secretary-General for Europe, Central Asia and the Americas Miroslav Jenča concluded that “the failure to consider the growing impacts of climate change will undermine our efforts at conflict prevention, peacemaking, and sustaining peace, and risk trapping vulnerable countries in a vicious cycle of climate disaster and conflict.”⁶ U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres followed up these remarks in February 2021, stating: “Where climate change dries up rivers, reduces harvests, destroys critical infrastructure, and displaces communities, it exacerbates the risks of instability and conflict.”⁷ Guterres further noted: “The forced movement of larger numbers of people around the world will clearly increase the potential for



U.S. envoy for climate John Kerry (left), Secretary of State Antony Blinken (center), and President Joe Biden (right) listen as U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres speaks (on screen) during a climate change virtual summit from the White House campus in April 2021. (BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / Getty Images)

conflict and insecurity beyond their suffering.”⁸ Climate change may also negatively affect peacekeeping efforts. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute found that 60 percent of the 10 countries hosting the largest multilateral peace operations were highly exposed to climate change.⁹

Research does not fully support the assumption that there is an inevitable link between climate change and conflict.¹⁰ Studies show little likelihood of international conflict and project that most internal conflict over resources will be at the community, not national, level. More effective social and economic support systems can reduce the risks at the local level. Poor communities, especially

those in which tensions over resources already exist, may well need external aid.

The further links among climate change, displacement, and conflict are not well understood as to scale, timing, or causal direction (is displacement a cause or effect of a climate change-conflict nexus).¹¹ Improving the evidence base for assessing climate displacement as a force multiplier for conflict is essential moving forward to avoid the generalizations that now appear to be driving policy assumptions. More specific case studies as well as more precise forecasting tools are needed to assess the actual risk prior to action.



U.S. Immigration Policy Reforms: Admissions and Removals

The U.S. has few pathways for admitting people affected by environmental drivers of migration. Current policies focus primarily on entry for family reunification and employment. In both cases, immigrants are admitted because of preexisting ties with U.S. sponsors — citizen or permanent resident relatives in the case of family-based, and employers in the case of employment-based ones. In addition, immigrants are admitted through the diversity program for applicants from countries with relatively few persons previously admitted to the U.S.; these are allocated through a lottery system. While some people affected by climate change may qualify for these three categories of visas, the majority of those who would seek entry as climate migrants or displaced persons would not fit the qualifications for these programs.

The most likely pathway for admission is the humanitarian visa route. Within this category, the most formalized program is for resettlement of refugees — persons with a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular group, or political opinion. Some climate migrants and displaced persons may meet the definition of a refugee — for example, if they were denied assistance or protection by their own government because of one of the protected grounds listed above. When such denial rises to the level of persecution



A child carries a bag in a displaced persons camp in Werder, Ethiopia, in June 2017. Drought forced hundreds of thousands into camps after wells dried up and livestock died as a result. (CHRIS STEIN / Getty Images)

(that is, it is a serious threat to their lives), persons affected by climate and other environmental changes may be eligible for refugee status.¹⁷ Most climate migrants and displaced persons will not meet the criteria, however. Their governments may, in fact, be trying to assist and protect them but cannot overcome the negative effects climate change is having on the lives of their citizenry.

A humanitarian admissions program that permits entry to selected persons harmed by life-threatening conditions would help fill the policy gap. The program could be broadly defined to include a range of humanitarian crises, or it could be more specific to climate change.¹⁸ As with the refugee resettlement program, an annual admissions ceiling would be set by the president, in consultation with Congress, based on an assessment of need.¹⁹ It would target for admission persons who are of “special humanitarian concern” to the U.S., using language

already codified in the Refugee Act of 1980 as the basis for refugee resettlement.

Those admitted under the humanitarian admission program could be folded into the domestic assistance program already in use in resettling refugees to ease their transition into the country. Also, as in the resettlement program, they would be able to adjust status to legal permanent residency (green card status) 18 months after admission and apply for citizenship five years from admission. A humanitarian admission program of this type would not address the needs of the vast majority of those adversely affected by climate change. It would, however, be lifesaving for those of special concern to the U.S. and serve as a model for other countries to broaden their admission categories.

There is also a need for new policies governing removal of people to countries experiencing severe effects of climate change (or



“ TPS has proven to be problematic in a number of ways. There is little transparency as to the criteria for granting TPS to nationals of one country but not to those of other, similarly situated countries. ”

other life-threatening situations). In 1990, the U.S. adopted legislation granting the federal government the authority to defer removals of people from countries experiencing conflict or the consequences of disasters (in the latter case, upon request of the government of the country of origin). The decision to grant Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is discretionary, based on the judgment of the secretary of state and the secretary of homeland security. At present, nationals of a dozen countries are covered by TPS.²⁰ The status is available only to persons already in the U.S. They may have entered legally to work or study and cannot return safely when their status expires, or they may have entered illegally or worked in violation of their immigration status and would otherwise be deportable. The grant of TPS is generally for 18 months but can be extended as long as the government determines that conditions in the country of origin still pose dangers to the migrant. TPS not only protects migrants from deportation but also authorizes beneficiaries to work in the U.S. It does not allow them to bring in family members or to adjust to permanent residence except under certain specific circumstances.

TPS has proven to be problematic in a number of ways. There is

little transparency as to the criteria for granting TPS to nationals of one country but not to those of other, similarly situated countries. Individuals cannot apply for TPS if their country has not been designated. This author's discussions with asylum adjudicators in the Department of Homeland Security indicate that many of those who are denied refugee status would have good claims to TPS (for example, they have fled a conflict or disaster but do not have a well-founded fear of persecution) but are not from a designated country. Another issue with TPS is its very rationale — that persons with fear of return to conflict or disasters are temporarily displaced. In fact, conflicts are protracted, and recovery from major natural disasters often takes years. Nationals of certain countries, such as El Salvador and Honduras, have had temporary protection for decades.

A revamped program would provide greater transparency in terms of the circumstances under which TPS will be granted. It should be available on both a group and individual basis. The group basis is useful in emergency situations when the government must act quickly to ensure that people are not precipitously removed to countries struggling with

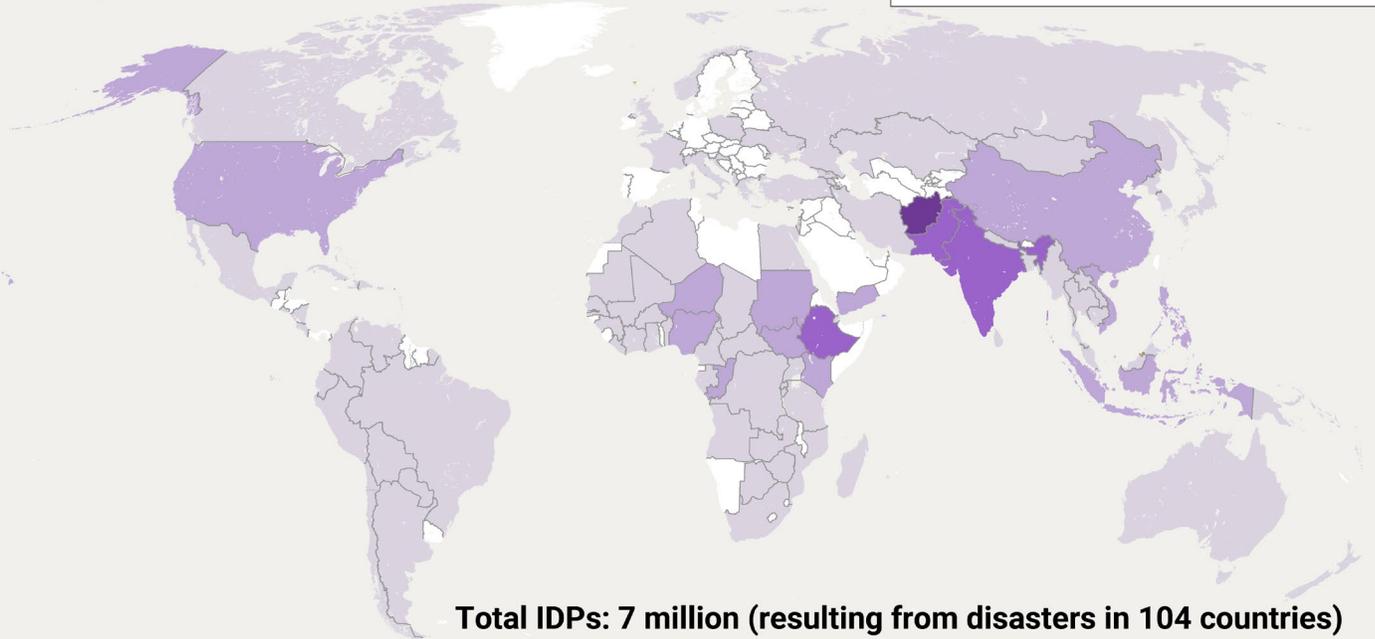
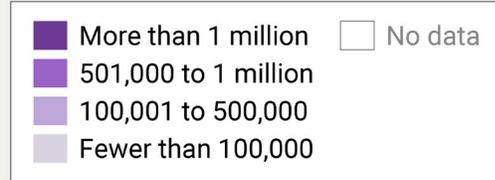
conflict or environmental crises. Individual adjudications ensure that applicants with strong grounds for deferral of removal can benefit from TPS even if their country has not been specifically designated. Importantly, reforms should seek ways to end TPS as soon as feasible to ensure its credibility as a temporary measure and provide greater stability to those who are granted the status.

Two solutions should be considered. If return becomes possible within a designated period (say, five years), then the U.S. should provide aid to TPS beneficiaries and the countries of origin to permit safe and dignified repatriation to occur. If, however, return is not possible within the designated period, TPS beneficiaries should be eligible to apply for legal permanent residence if they meet carefully structured criteria. These criteria would include an assessment of the feasibility of return, family in the U.S., financial resources to support themselves and family members, a record of paying taxes on earned income, efforts to learn the English language, and other similar measures of integration. These reforms would be useful today and would help the U.S. prepare to address climate change's future impacts on displacement.



Internally Displaced Persons by Disasters

Through 2020



Total IDPs: 7 million (resulting from disasters in 104 countries)

Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

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U.S. Foreign Assistance

The U.S. plays an important role in funding humanitarian and development programs that could help people adapt to climate change. In this context, the U.S. should consider providing resources for two types of programs related to migration: those that enable people to remain in their communities of origin to the extent possible; and those that help ensure safe, orderly, and regular migration pathways when remaining in place is not prudent or feasible.

Building the resilience of communities and households is the best way to achieve the first aim. Increased resilience requires

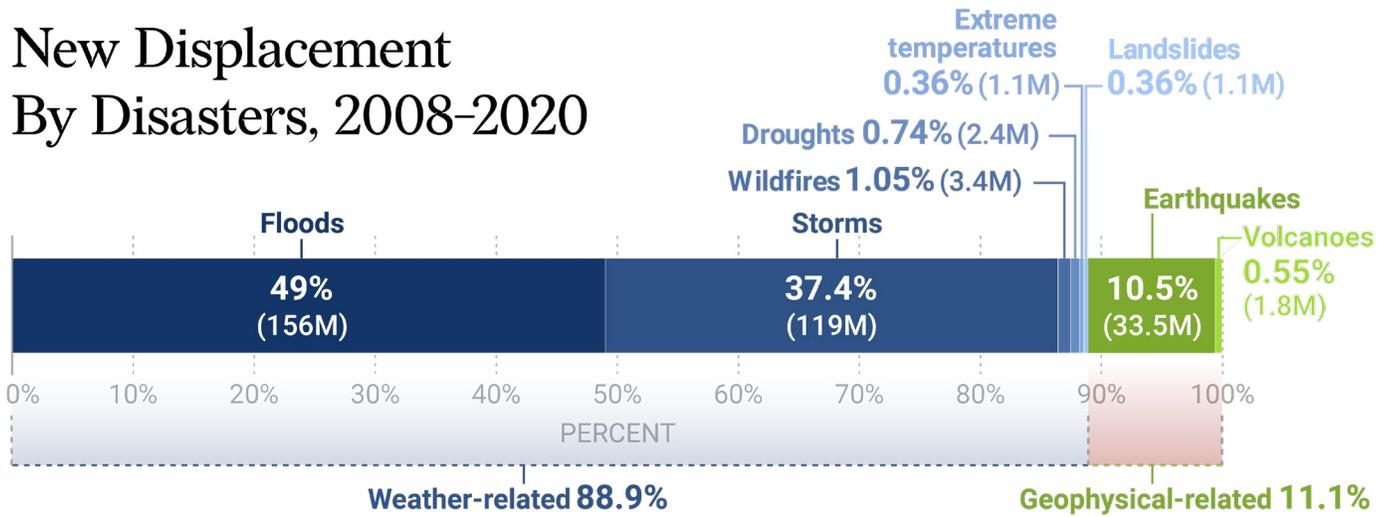
multifaceted approaches that benefit vulnerable households that do not have the capacity to adapt on their own. Special attention needs to be given to the most vulnerable groups affected by climate change, such as the elderly, those in extreme poverty, women-headed households, and the disabled. Policies related to climate mobility should follow already well-established efforts to promote sustainable development. This means addressing structural sources of poverty and unsustainable environmental practices that create vulnerabilities, especially among those dependent on subsistence agriculture. Improving access to credit, land tenure and land rights would help many affected populations remain

safely in place.²¹ Governments should give greater attention to the potential role that the private sector and diasporas can play in financing investments in land restoration in climate-affected communities.²² Innovative technology can also play an important role in helping people adapt. For example, drought- and flood-resistant seeds could help subsistence farmers raise crops in areas affected by these two common effects of climate change.²³

Under many circumstances, migration can be an effective adaptation strategy for people who cannot remain close to home.²⁴ When movements occur in a safe and orderly way — whether internal or across borders — the effects



New Displacement By Disasters, 2008-2020



Numbers do not add up to 100% due to rounding.
Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

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can be positive. Rural households can diversify their incomes and reduce their reliance on rain-fed agriculture, for example. The U.S. can encourage new pathways for safe and orderly migration as part of its foreign assistance. For example, labor migration programs that enable vulnerable households to build resilience and adapt to changing conditions would help those who need to move. Such programs will reduce risk of severe economic harm, however, only if migrants are able to earn enough to support themselves and their families. In this context, a report published by the World Bank recommends expanding existing small-scale temporary mobility schemes the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand implement in the Pacific and encouraging the adoption of similar programs in other regions.²⁵ The U.S. can also support programs that facilitate remittance transfers to migrant households to help ensure greater resilience. Increasing access to financial literacy, financial inclusion,

and skills training programs, particularly for poorer households, will increase the benefits of migration and remittances.²⁶

Although many people will move on their own, others will require assistance to relocate or will otherwise be trapped in dangerous situations. Planned relocation programs (also known as managed retreat) can be problematic, however, when relocation sites present few opportunities for those who are relocated and/or when host populations are hostile to the newcomers.²⁷ When well planned, however, such programs can provide new homes and livelihoods. Essential to success is the involvement of communities of origin and destination in all decisions – whether a community should indeed move; if so, where, when, how and with what type of assistance; how best to consult with those who are to move as well as the residents of the destination communities; and implementing programs to ensure that both the

host community and the relocated benefit from the relocation.²⁸ Best practices in protecting and assisting people in the context of planned relocation need to be shared widely to prevent problems encountered in the past.²⁹

International Cooperation on Climate Change and Human Mobility

Unilateral policies will not solve issues related to climate change mobility. U.S. cooperation with countries that will be experiencing high levels of internal and international movements is essential to preventing distress migration and displacement while ensuring pathways of mobility that are safe and orderly. Similarly, the U.S. needs to work with other migrant destination countries and other funders of programs designed to increase resilience and adaptation to climate change in order to coordinate actions and avoid both duplication of efforts and significant gaps in response.



To ensure greater international cooperation, the U.S. should participate constructively in the various global mechanisms that are already considering ways to protect and assist those most affected by climate change. U.S. leadership could help ensure the adoption of policies that do indeed protect people's rights and provide them opportunities to remain at home, if they choose, and move in a safe and orderly way if migration is a better option for them. Biden is familiar with some of these, as the Obama administration fully supported them. Both the International Organization for Migration and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees have been developing plans for engagement on environmentally-driven migration. In addition, governments and other international bodies have launched several initiatives that have been breaking new ground in the understanding of this form of mobility. These include the Platform on Disaster Displacement, the successor to the Nansen Initiative's Plan of Action for the protection of cross-border migrants; the Task Force on Displacement of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, which was created under the Paris Accord; the Migrants in Countries in Crisis Initiative that the U.S. co-chaired in response to conflicts and natural disasters that required mass evacuations; the U.N. High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, which will be presenting recommendations for ensuring that those who are displaced within their own countries receive appropriate help from the international community; and the Knowledge Partnership



U.S. President Joe Biden speaks to the full Cabinet at the White House on July 20, 2021, in Washington, D.C. (DREW ANGERER / Getty Images)

on Migration and Development's Thematic Working Group on Environmental Change and Migration, which is identifying data and research gaps and new methodologies that will improve the evidence base for decision making. U.S. participation in these institutions and processes will help ensure that they are able to move from discussing best practices and policies to helping countries adopt and implement them.

While beneficial, rejoining these processes is insufficient. At present, there are so many overlapping processes that there is too great a risk that implementation of effective measures to address environmentally driven mobility will be lost among these sometimes cooperating but also competing interests. What is needed is a multi-stakeholder/multi-agency platform for identifying efficacious policies and best practices across

the climate, migration, security, development, and other sectors with interest in these issues.³⁰ The Platform for Disaster Displacement comes closest at present to serving this purpose, but, as its name implies, it is focused on one form of mobility and references the others largely as ways to avoid displacement or find solutions to displacement.

The U.S. could work with partners to expand the scope of the Platform for Disaster Displacement or fold it into a new, broader structure that would focus on all forms of human mobility at all phases, from prevention to solutions. Funding for such an endeavor would be well spent if the platform is able to improve policymaking and has the funds to jumpstart innovative ways to meet twin goals of helping people adapt in place when possible and move in a safe and orderly way when necessary.



Recommendations

The U.S. leads best by example — that is, when its own policies and practices are consistent with the highest standards and it is willing to tackle difficult global issues in partnership with other countries. Biden’s executive order represents a rare opportunity to set policies both domestically and internationally that could help millions of people adapt to climate change and other environmental disruptions at home or move safely and through legal pathways to other locations if needed.

The multi-agency report stemming from Biden’s order will tackle some of the toughest challenges ahead: responding to the international and human security impacts of climate change and related movements of people; adopting new U.S. immigration policies to admit and protect from removal those who are at highest risk from a changing climate; ensuring that U.S. foreign assistance is used to help people remain in place when possible, move safely when necessary, and find durable solutions that allow them to prosper despite a changing climate; and building the mechanisms needed to ensure effective international cooperation to tackle these crucial issues.

“ Biden’s executive order represents a rare opportunity to set policies both domestically and internationally that could help millions of people adapt to climate change... ”

To summarize, the following policy and programmatic responses could be game changers in responding to climate-induced mobility if the U.S. were to adopt or promote them:

- Improve the evidence base for assessing climate change and its connections to mobility as a force multiplier for conflict;
- Focus greater attention on the human security implications of climate change and mobility;
- Introduce a new humanitarian admissions category in the U.S. that would expand opportunities for resettlement of persons adversely

affected by climate change who are of special humanitarian concern to the U.S.;

- Reform Temporary Protected Status to ensure that beneficiaries are able to return home if possible or adjust to permanent residence if conditions do not improve in their home countries within a designated time period;
- Focus foreign assistance on a two-fold strategy: aid to countries at high risk from climate change to help their residents adapt in place, if possible; and aid to countries to help enable their residents to move in a safe and orderly manner, if that is their best option to adapt to climate change;
- Re-engage with international organizations and processes that are currently focusing on climate change-induced mobility as an area of study, policy development, and program implementation; and
- Work toward forming a global, multi-stakeholder, multi-agency platform with a robust funding mechanism that can assist countries in preparing for and responding to all forms of mobility related to climate change, including anticipatory migration, reactive displacement, and planned relocation. □



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