

Climate Migration Governance in the MENA Region: Urgent Action Needed

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Climate change impacts are increasingly affecting drivers of migration, requiring action from nation states and in particular regional organizations like the OSCE. The MENA region, including the six partner countries of the OSCE, is highly vulnerable to further warming effects. Proactive approaches on mitigation, adaptation and migration governance are needed.

Migration can be a collective act of hope: towards liberation from autocratic suppression or the shackles of poverty, freedom from fear. In the context of climate change, migration can be a means to ensure survival, prevent losses and damage and adapt to shifting climatic zones. As all emissions pathways point to further short-term warming, migration will remain a necessity to secure livelihoods. Too often, however, movements of vulnerable populations result in deepening poverty and persistent insecurity. The determinants of the outcomes of migration frequently do not lie with the mobile individuals or households themselves, but rather depend on governance and policies on multiple levels that can enable benefits for sending and receiving communities and people on the move. For this reason, the OSCE could have an important role in shaping political commitments to increase foresight activities to anticipate and avoid forced climate displacement as well as in preventing societal friction, which could evolve from large numbers of displaced people. Furthermore, it can contribute to processes improving the protection of people on the move and strengthen partnerships with countries in Northern Africa, which will experience significant levels of climate migration in the near future.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessed that all inhabited areas of the earth now have observable anthropogenic climate impacts, as the planet has warmed by more than 1°C compared to preindustrial temperature levels (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023). The most apparent effects are more frequent and intense sudden-onset extreme weather events, like floods, droughts, or tropical cyclones. Such climatic ex-

extremes are displacing increasing numbers of people. In 2022, disasters caused more than 32.6 million new displacements, and according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, it was the highest number of disaster displacements in the past ten years (IDMC, 2023). Not all of these displacements are attributable to climate change. In natural climate variability disasters also occur. However, weather-related disasters, which caused 98% of disaster displacements in 2022, are becoming more frequent and severe, and larger numbers of people live in the exposed areas. Between 2016 and 2021, 134.1 million people were displaced by extreme events, especially by storms and floods. Among them were 43.1 million children, whose lives and education were disrupted (UNICEF, 2023).

A diversity of movements requires a diversity of responses

Migration in the context of climate change can take many forms. From adaptive movements, to forced displacement, migration decisions can range across a continuum of voluntary to involuntary (Vinke et al., 2020). Moreover, migration can occur over varying distances, from rural areas into nearby cities, or across international borders. In addition, the temporal scales diverge from people moving short-term and returning after the calamities to those who move seasonally in the agricultural off-season, or those who leave their places of origin permanently. Besides people who move under the impacts of climate change also exist those who do not move. Either by choice or involuntarily, people remain in areas under high climatic stress. Factors determining immobility can include place attachment, financial resources, family ties, gender, age, or disabilities (Upadhyay, Vinke, & Weisz, 2023). This diversity of mobility in the context of climate change highlights that no single policy can fully address the spectrum of climate migration. Also, different age groups, genders and marginalized persons may require tailored solutions to overcome systemic barriers to support. Therefore, a variety of measures is necessary to reap the potential benefits of increased mobility and counter challenges along the cycle of migration.

The IPCC has continuously covered migration since their first assessment report in 1990 (Vinke, Einsporn, et al., 2023). Until today, more than 1900 academic publications have been written on the subject of climate-related migrations (University Neuchatel, 2023). While there are still regions that have been understudied, the relationship between climatic and environmen-

tal hazards and the movement of people has been documented in a variety of socio-economic and geographical conditions (Hoffmann et al., 2020). A meta-study identified a strong climate migration nexus in research on middle-income countries with high agricultural dependence (Hoffmann et al., 2020).

Migration can be a form of adaptation to climate change (McLeman & Smit, 2006). Through the sending of remittances, migrants can strengthen the adaptive capacities in their places of origin. Money transfers can be used to increase food security or enable infrastructural investments that can foster resilience. Hence, adaptive migration can also be a coping mechanism to break the cycle of deteriorating conditions and thereby potentially prevent forced displacements.

While poor populations are worst impacted by the changes, also industrialized countries are struggling with higher needs for disaster risk reduction. Under extreme climate impacts, potentially anyone could be displaced, inter alia by severe floodings, wildfires or storms that may destroy even robust infrastructure. For example, popular tourist destinations, such as the Greek or Hawaiian Islands were hit by wildfires, which resulted in deaths and desperate escapes of locals and tourists alike.

Some regions like the South of Bangladesh have benefitted from infrastructural adaptation and disaster preparedness and could through this reduce their vulnerability over the past decades. But as long as global emissions are not drastically decreased, the ramping up of adaptation is a losing battle against increasing shocks. People with livelihoods that directly rely on healthy ecosystems are often the first to suffer from climatic changes. Especially affected are subsistence farmers or fisherfolk. Furthermore, these populations often do not have the skillsets to position themselves well in labour markets outside of agricultural production. If climatic pressures reinforce rural-urban migration patterns, it may be difficult for people to find employment and reestablish a dignified life after relocation. Lack of access to training and education can make work in the informal sector the only viable option.

Therefore, some climate-related movements, in particular those, which are reactive and not planned movements, can push people into a poverty spiral.

Through these movements, migrants may be able to ensure their survival, but they may not be able to uphold or improve their standard of living, which would be considered an effective adaptation strategy (Vinke, 2019). If such negative patterns are fortified by unabated climate change, humanitarian crises may evolve, leading to adverse impacts on human security in severely affected regions.

The human security implications of climate migration

Though voluntary proactive movements may improve human security by enabling access to resources and social infrastructure, forced migration in the context of climate change can worsen the situation of those displaced, as both financial and non-economic losses can occur. The latter can include, for example, the disintegration of communal structures, the loss of cultural ties or adverse mental health effects such as alienation. Immigration can lead to positive economic outcomes for hosting states. But integration into labour markets, health systems, adequate housing and local socio-cultural systems are key factors for migration outcomes (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016). If policies to facilitate integration are not effective, polarization over certain resources such as employment opportunities or housing can occur between incoming migrants and host populations. Moreover, ill-governed poor settlements in larger urban centres can be prone to health risks from lacking sanitation and overcrowding. In some regions, urban slums have been associated with a higher prevalence of crime. Politics of exclusion of vulnerable groups aggravate inequalities and can ignite social strife, especially when additional resource pressures emerge from extreme events. If there are no sufficient resources allocated to host communities, humanitarian crises materialize when large numbers of people are displaced.

Besides these direct human security implications, the wider nexus of climate and migration also requires further analysis. More than 70% of IDPs and refugees originate from the states most vulnerable to climate change (UNHCR, 2023). Moreover, climate change hotspots are also home to large refugee populations, such as is the case in Bangladesh, where nearly one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar took shelter in areas highly exposed to climate impacts. Where violence and extreme weather events coincide, the situation of conflict-displaced persons may be particularly perilous and can be aggravated when hunger is weaponized by conflict parties.

In line with the OSCE's comprehensive view on security, which allows for the consideration of non-traditional security challenges, the nexus of climate change and migration should be reflected as an action field for deepened collaboration (OSCE, 2021).

Multilevel governance approaches to the protection gap

People who are displaced by climate change are facing a protection gap. The non-binding guiding principles on internal displacement, which could serve climate migrants, are insufficiently integrated into national legislation and often lack practical applications in areas that see high displacement numbers (OCHA, 2004; McAdam, 2018). With regard to cross-border movements, even extreme climate impacts currently do not legally justify a right to asylum because existing regimes do not account for climate change as a driver of cross-border displacement. The cornerstone of international protection, the Geneva Convention, defines the right to protection for cases in which people are persecuted for their political orientation, race, nationality, religion or because they belong to a specific social group (UNHCR, 2010). The convention hence cannot serve the protection needs of people who migrate primarily on grounds of existential climate risks.

In the absence of a framework for the global governance of climate migration, the application of existing legal frameworks and policies to those migrating in the context of climate change is key. This requires action on multiple levels of governance, from building practical solutions on the international level to measures enacted in cities and rural communities. Moreover, the development of mechanisms for better protection of those displaced by climate change in the future is necessary. Importantly, each level should create policies that develop capacities at the respective level. Across all levels of governance, evidence-based messaging on migration motivations and outcomes can help counter populist anti-immigration arguments, which have furthered the criminalization of migration. Public awareness, participation and communication can be crucial for the successful implementation of governance instruments and enhancing protection.

The Global Compact for Migration provides a basis for further action regarding climatic and environmental drivers of international migration (International Organization for Migration, 2018). Widely recognized, the compact

identifies climate change as a factor for consideration in international migration governance. It points to the work of the Platform on Disaster Displacement and the Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change (The Nansen Initiative, 2015; PDD, 2019). In the 2015 agenda, the need to provide lasting solutions for people displaced by climate change is outlined, including allowing entry into other countries and applying the non-refoulement principle for people who have already sought safety in another country.¹ Though the calls for protection have multiplied, concrete actions remain rare.

The German Expert Council on Migration and Integration suggests three instruments to close the protection gap for people moving because of climatic extremes, which differentiate between impact-types and intensity (Expert Council on Integration and Migration, 2023). For cases of uninhabitability, the council echoes previous calls from the German Advisory Board on Global Change and other scientists to create a passport, with unlimited rights to stay (WBGU, 2018; Heyward & Ödalen, 2013; Vinke, Gardiner, et al., 2023). In cases of large-scale damage, where temporary outmigration may be necessary, they suggest a climate card, offered on a quota basis and applied similarly to a humanitarian visa. For people affected by slow-onset degradation in their places of origin, the council suggests a climate work visa, which would facilitate access to labour markets in industrialized nations, like Germany.

Recent recommendations by diverse working groups point to the responsibility of industrialized nations with high greenhouse gas emissions towards people displaced by climate change. Also, in the context of the Loss and Damage Fund, which was agreed upon at the international climate negotiations in Sharm-El-Sheikh/Egypt in 2022, the needs of people displaced by climate change and affected by extreme weather during displacements should be considered (The Loss and Damage and Challenges of Human Mobility and Displacement Working Group, 2023).

¹ “[T]he principle of non-refoulement guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm.” (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2019, p.1).

Practical solutions for people living in displacement situations as well as knowledge building and coordination activities have already been sought by international organizations tasked with the care for refugees and migrants like UNHCR and IOM, as well as a number of non-governmental aid organizations such as Caritas (IOM, 2019; Caritas, 2023; UNHCR, 2021).

On the regional level, frameworks like the Kampala Convention of the African Union (African Union, 2009) could be applied to reduce protection gaps that have not been resolved internationally. Regional frameworks of freedom of movement have proven to enhance resilience, as for example is the case in parts of the Caribbean under the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). More research is needed in order to improve climate migration governance on the regional level, especially in the Mediterranean and Central Asian regions, which bear significant relevance to the OSCE.

On the local level, imminent needs of incoming migrants are to be met, including the provision of access to basic services and adequate housing. This requires planning capacities in urban administration and also balancing the interests of different entities. Cities can provide vocational trainings and education for incoming climate migrants, potentially targeting also other vulnerable groups in need of assistance in the receiving communities. In places with high climate mobility, researchers have argued for capacity building in so-called secondary cities in order to ease pressure from major capitals and foster polycentric urbanization (Alam et al., 2018; WBGU, 2016). The International Center for Climate Change and Development has suggested investments for building “migrant-friendly” cities to help those moving in the context of climate change (Alam et al., 2018). This approach could be considered in various contexts, for example also in the MENA region.

In addition, city governments need to plan for improving resilience of the urban infrastructure and society in order to address internally rising climate pressures. They may benefit from city partnerships, which can foster knowledge sharing and enable the empowerment of local actors. Through strong, inclusive institutions, which facilitate civil society participation in resolving contemporary challenges, urban centres can become hubs for social and technological innovation. Such potential is much needed in the sustainability sector and with regards to displacement. These innovations can influ-

ence other levels of policies, but problems of coordination may emerge. For this reason, the regional level can serve to improve inter-communal cooperation and identify broader policy needs on the local level that can be addressed by nation-states.

Climate-related movements in the MENA region

Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region can become origins, destinations and also places of transit of climate-related migration. While much of the migratory movements in the region have been linked to economic motivations, climate impacts may lead to the demise of certain livelihoods and therefore a confluence of economic and climatic drivers of climate change has emerged (Sobczak-Szelc & Fekih, 2020). High economic dependency on the largely rain-fed agricultural sector in a number of middle-income countries in the MENA region can result in higher susceptibility to climatic shocks (Waha et al., 2017; Schraven, 2023). Moreover, authoritarian governance structures, which are present in several MENA States, can reduce resilience, in particular of marginalized groups, whose interests and experiences are neglected in policy-making around disaster preparedness and climate adaptation.

In a 2°C warming scenario yearly water discharge could be reduced by 15-45% and in a 4°C scenario by 75% until the end of the century, while also facing extreme events of both water scarcity and excess (Waha et al., 2017). Besides challenges arising from increased aridity, in a 4°C warmer world which would materialize out of the continued high use of fossil fuels, temperatures in the summer would rise by 8°C in some areas, including Algeria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia (Waha et al., 2017). Urban heat islands may locally aggravate extremely hot conditions. 65% of all June/July/August months between 2071 and 2099 would see heat extremes that are so far unprecedented in the region (Waha et al., 2017). These combined effects in a high-warming scenario could pose challenges to the habitability of parts of the region in the long-term. At the same time, the population in the MENA region is expected to grow significantly over the course of this century and will double by 2050 compared to a 2015 baseline, with significant differences between countries (UNICEF, 2019).

Regarding the climate-migration nexus, the region has been largely understudied, with few academic articles focusing on specific sub-regions impact types (Ferreira Fernandes & Alves, 2022; Piguet, 2018). Some grey literature recently started to emerge (Aragall et al., 2021; Dagher et al., 2023). However, the impact of rainfall extremes in areas with insufficient infrastructural protection in the context of fragility and weak governance was already evident in the storm impacts in the coastal town Derna, Libya in 2023. Thousands of deaths and 40,000 displacements resulted from the storm which brought high precipitation that led ill-maintained dams to break.

In general, rural-urban migration patterns may be fortified by stronger environmental drivers of mobility in rural areas. Challenges arising from inadequate housing as is currently present in parts of larger cities such as Tripoli, Casablanca or Cairo could be aggravated by intensified rural-urban migration. Cities under comparatively less water stress like Algiers, Cairo, Tripoli or Tunis are expected to become destinations for climate movements in the Northern Africa region (Clement et al., 2021).

The six OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation – Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia – have been adversely affected by climate impacts and will likely see worsening conditions in the future. Additional warming, especially in hot and arid regions can lead to agricultural and productivity losses. For Northern Africa, freshwater scarcity and sea-level rise have been identified as drivers of outmigration (Clement et al., 2021).

Climate literacy in Northern Africa is, however, generally low, with slightly higher climate literacy in Morocco and Tunisia than in the rest of the region (Simpson et al., 2021). This means that adaptive early migration may currently not be possible for many because of a lack of knowledge about growing challenges.

While pressures are greatest in agriculture and fisheries, the tourism sector, which is particularly relevant for countries such as Tunisia, Morocco or Egypt, can be adversely affected by the rising temperature extremes and thus provide less stable income sources in the future. In Egypt, for example, sea-level rise, besides posing direct risks to coastal cities could also lead to higher levels of salinity in the Nile River, with implications for adjacent agriculture and freshwater supply. In Tunisia, aggravated water scarcity may increase the need for proactive migration as an adaptation strategy (Sobczak-Szelc & Fekih, 2020).

In the south of Morocco, historical displacement due to drought conditions has been documented. However, since the early 2000s drought and water scarcity have been described as more acute, with larger outmigration occurring from some villages linked to agricultural losses (Aragall et al., 2021). Climatic drivers of migration here also mix with a lack of alternative income sources and the perception of better economic possibilities in other areas of the country (Ferreira Fernandes & Alves, 2022). The populations who stay behind are often highly vulnerable, such as the elderly with limited ability to upkeep the agricultural labour. Remittances from younger migrants who work in nearby cities function as a support system for depopulated rural areas. Besides the rural-urban migration of younger rural populations, who often take up employment with low salaries, there also exists rural-to-rural migration from small-scale farms to industrial farms, frequently owned by multinational companies. Many of these jobs taken up by climate migrants in the rural and urban areas are day-labour, often in the informal sector marked by exploitative structures and lacking occupational safety standards, as interview data from the Chtouka region suggests (Aragall et al., 2021). These different examples from the region serve as an illustration of the diverse policy challenges in the climate-migration nexus, which requires further localized assessment.

Projections of future climate migration

Because of the multicausality of human decision-making, including regarding migration, it is difficult to estimate future movements under climate change. Besides the human factor, other uncertainties persist, such as future population growth, distribution of wealth or scale and efficacy of adaptation options. The World Bank projected future internal climate migration in response to slow-onset changes, calculating three different possible scenarios. They found that in a pessimistic scenario, referencing weak emissions mitigation and unequal development, up to 216 million people could be internally displaced in the six assessed world regions by 2050 (Clement et al., 2021). In the North Africa Region up to 19 million people could be internally displaced and in sub-Saharan Africa up to 86 million people in the pessimistic scenarios. While the World Bank strictly refers to internal displacement, it is likely that in these pessimistic scenarios pressures on international borders would emerge because fewer options for internal relocation would exist in a dramatically changed climate. Therefore, the high numbers of displaced

people in sub-Saharan Africa could have implications for the whole continent including in the Mediterranean region. In a high-emissions scenario, the climate could become one of the main drivers, if not the primary driver of internal migration in the region.

However, rapid ambitious emissions mitigation can substantially reduce these numbers by up to 80% (Clement et al., 2021). This implies that whether people will lose their homes in the global south over the coming decades will largely depend on the choices of industrialized nations.

Conclusion

The complex risk landscape climate change is creating requires a number of actors to increase their ambition in financing adaptation and the protection of displaced people. Many OSCE participating States contribute significantly to global greenhouse gas emissions and are therefore responsible for emerging human security risks that climate change is fostering. Moreover, OSCE participating States and their neighbours, trade- and political partners will also be increasingly affected by climate impacts. On mitigation, adaptation and migration governance there is room for deepened collaboration, joint analysis and additional commitments beyond the UNFCCC. Without such engagement, the human capital of those living in displacement will be jeopardized and regional stability undermined. Created at a time of geopolitical division to foster cooperation, the OSCE may have the tools to contribute to averting the intensification of the climate crisis and its effects on the most vulnerable populations. Using these tools effectively will require political leadership that is willing to give attention to those who have become the scapegoats of the 21st century, migrants and refugees.

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