Internal displacement in the context of the slow-onset adverse effects of climate change – Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons

Submission by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and International Centre of Excellence on Transforming Development and Disaster Risk (ICoE-TDDR)

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This submission for the Report of the Special Rapporteur is made by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and the International Centre of Excellence on Transforming Development and Disaster Risk (ICoE-TDDR). SEI is an international non-profit research and policy organization that tackles environment and development challenges.[[1]](#footnote-2) ICoE-TDDR, hosted by SEI in partnership with the Integrated Research on Disaster Risk (IRDR) programme,[[2]](#footnote-3) focuses on enhancing scientific and policy understanding of the relationship between development and disaster risk, including in the realm of climate- and disaster-related migration and displacement, and how policies and action can be transformed for more equitable, resilient and sustainable development outcomes (Boyland et al., 2019).

The information presented in this submission is based on peer-reviewed research and technical studies conducted by SEI, often in partnership with other research institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UN agencies. Insights are offered in response to the questions posed in the call for inputs,[[3]](#footnote-4) and citations are used to refer to publications. Overall, SEI and ICoE-TDDR supports these efforts to enhance the rights of internally displaced persons, particularly in the context of climate- and disaster-related risks, and we will continue to work to enhance decision-makers understanding of these issues – see Johnson and SEI (2019) for details of our recent and ongoing work on climate- and disaster-induced migration and displacement.

1. *Examples of national and/or regional laws and policies relevant to internal displacement in the context of disasters and climate change.*

While the focus of this call for inputs is internal displacement in the context of slow-onset risks associated with climate change, we recognize that much work on displacement in the context of extreme events or major disasters has relevance for the Special Rapporteur’s upcoming report. In Asia and the Pacific, where the majority of disaster-related displacement is occurring, recent years have seen various examples of impacts and policy responses, from local to national to transboundary/regional.

For instance, following Typhoon Haiyan which struck the Philippines in 2013 and displaced hundreds of thousands of people, government and non-government actors have implemented ‘planned relocation’ policies on a large scale, particularly in Tacloban City (Tuhkanen et al., 2018). In order to “build back better”, the government designated the devastated coastal areas as “no build zones”, and have slowly relocated several densely-populated informal fishing communities in the coastal areas to other sites further inland, in the north of the city. While such measures may reduce exposure to typhoons, coastal flooding and sea-level rise, in Tacloban, they have created issues of access to livelihoods, natural resources and basic services (ibid). Further, they have led to cascading displacements, as allocation of farmland for the relocation sites displaced farming communities. In some cases, residents were evicted because their houses were directly in the resettlement zones, while others were able to keep their homes but lost their farmland, causing livelihood disruptions and impacts on social cohesion (Johnson and SEI, 2019).

Lessons learned from responses to internal displacement following disasters need to be heeded when it comes to policies for displacement in the context of slow-onset events.

1. *Available data and evidence on internal displacement linked to slow-onset natural hazards in the context of the adverse effects of climate change (globally or in a specific region or country), trends and/or challenges and gaps with regards to data collection, analysis and use.*

The mobility dynamics in most developing countries, that are also the hardest hit by slow onset events, are characterized by the prevalence of internal movements from rural to urban areas, and from rural to rural areas. When people move in the context of desertification, land degradation and drought, studies have found that, while seasonal and short-distance migration increase, long-distance migration to urban and international destinations tends to decrease (Findley, 1994; Henry et al., 2003). This is because people tend to use the limited resources and assets they have left to cover immediate basic needs, and lack the necessary capital to embark on long-distance migration journeys (Vigil et al., 2019). However, there is also evidence that international migration in search of employment can increase during droughts, especially in places with strong migration networks or traditions (ibid).

The specific impacts of slow onset events such as desertification, land degradation and drought on migration and internal displacement depend not only on people’s geographical exposure to risk, but crucially also on their pre-existing vulnerabilities. Within local populations impacted by the same environmental threats, vulnerability and likelihood to migrate are determined by a combination of factors, including socio-economic status, demographic characteristics (notably age and gender) and the migration, environmental, and resource management policies in place (Vigil et al., 2019).

Although migration has always been a vital strategy to cope with the impacts of slow onset events, in its forced forms, it can also contribute to further socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities. A recent review of good practices found that, in the context of desertification and drought, sustainable land management policies can minimize the need for forced migration, providing that they: i) Protect and restore fragile ecosystems through participatory approaches; ii) Create abundant and dignified livelihood and employment opportunities; and iii) Tackle pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities (Vigil et al., 2019).

1. *The impact of climate change-related internal displacement on the enjoyment of human rights by specific groups, such as indigenous peoples, minorities, children, older persons and persons with disabilities.*

Climate change is having disproportionate impacts on different social groups and people – particularly those that have been vulnerable and marginalized for some time. Children and youth (or young people) face unique displacement-related risks associated with the impacts of climate change. Research in ethnic minority communities in northern Thailand shows that water scarcity, drought, and other climate-related shocks and stresses are leading to increased internal and international migration (Johnson and Boyland, 2018). Driven by declining agricultural yields and revenues in poor communities, men in particular are increasingly engaging in temporary or semi-permanent migration in search of alternative sources of income, typically to work in urban areas in construction, manufacturing and tourism. The absence of men and a stable income increases the burden on women and children in terms of farm work, household work, and childcare, which in turn impacts children’s attendance at school. These cascading impacts of slow-onset events such as droughts impacts children’s right to education. Further, our research found an increased risk and impact on girls, particularly regarding increased household and caregiving responsibilities in cases where parents have migrated in search of work (ibid).

Despite growing urbanization in poor agrarian-based economies, many urban areas in developing countries have not been able to create employment at the rate necessary to absorb the workforce arriving from rural areas and entering the labour market. The additional stress that slow onset events bring amplifies an already difficult reality, upon which the distribution of, and access to resources as diverse as land, water, and employment, play decisive roles (Vigil et al., 2019). People’s rights to health and an adequate standard of living, for instance, are threatened in these contexts.

**References**

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1. <https://www.sei.org> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <http://www.irdrinternational.org> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/IDPersons/Pages/CallforInputs_IDPs_climate_change.aspx> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)