The future of climate migration

Summary
Climate change is threatening to displace millions of people, creating new migrant flows also across borders. The EU has a leading role in reducing global warming, mitigating its effects, improving knowledge about consequences for vulnerable populations, and working with partners to build resilience. Success depends not just on adopting forward-looking strategies, but also on adequate resources and effective implementation.

Background
In 2020, crises of various kinds forced 11.2 million people to flee; this increased the number of people forcibly displaced from their homes to over 82 million, according to the United Nations (UN) Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Around 48 million of these were internally displaced, and the rest were refugees or asylum-seekers outside their countries of origin. Shocking though this number is, it risks being dwarfed in future by the impact of climate change. If areas that today are vulnerable become uninhabitable tomorrow, this will bring permanent and international displacement on a massive scale. A UN estimate suggests that water stress could displace 700 million people by 2030. A World Bank report suggests that there could be 216 million internal climate migrants by 2050, unless remedial action is taken. This is greater than the population of Germany, France and Italy combined.

Climate migration: Trends and drivers
The trend of an increase in droughts, severe weather and wildfires associated with global warming is already in evidence. Experts also underline the possibility of tipping points, for example a sudden change of Atlantic circulation, rainforest dieback or permafrost loss. An emerging trend is that more of those displaced for climate reasons are crossing borders. It is also apparent that local conditions, geographical context, and institutional incentives will affect the impact of climate change; and that climate change may act as a threat multiplier in relation to poverty, failures of governance, and lack of human security. In turn, each of these factors hurt a society's ability to build resilience.

Key drivers of climate migration include water scarcity, extreme weather events, and sea level rise. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, climate change will add to water stress globally and will reduce food security. This has major consequences for health and livelihoods, and for internal and international conflicts. Regions like the western Sahel are especially at risk. Without preventive measures, hotspots will emerge in rural, urban and coastal areas. The Arab world is already facing serious challenges due to the tensions derived from water stress. Given the strategic dimension of this risk, the EU's role in the area is crucial, and could prevent the emergence of violent conflicts or migratory waves.

The European Environment Agency estimates that extreme weather events have cost Europe 142 000 lives and €510 billion over the past 40 years. Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of such events, bringing further damage especially to vulnerable areas with high dependence on agriculture and fisheries and low capacity to adapt.

Sea level rise is one of the most damaging effects caused by global warming. Already in 2020, the global mean sea level (GMSL) reached its highest recorded value. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that sea levels will rise by between 15 and 25 centimetres by 2050. In the long term, flooding will lead to soil erosion, amplify the risk of poverty, and disrupt economies. The threat is greatest for coastal communities, including densely populated areas of China, Bangladesh, India and Vietnam, among others. A sea level rise of 90 cm would submerge much of the Egyptian city of Alexandria – a city of 5 million inhabitants.

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PE 729.334 – March 2022

Inaction risks a grim scenario

In the absence of robust action on global emissions, the global temperature may well increase by 1.5°C or more by 2050. In a hotter world, disasters are more likely to happen simultaneously. Access to food and water will be more difficult for many. Rising sea levels, accelerated desertification, and land degradation will drive an increase in climate migration.

In this scenario, it is likely that a greater share of those displaced will seek to cross international borders. The arrival of large numbers of migrants across borders presents challenges for host regions. More specifically, it increases pressure on services and infrastructure. This in turn can lead to conflict over scarce resources. This has led experts to identify climate migration as a major geopolitical risk. Crises will be severe in the countries of origin, but will not end at national frontiers. Spill-over effects are likely across the globe. Europe, in general, faces a lower level of ecological threat than other regions, but the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is an especially vulnerable region, and is on Europe's doorstep. Both Europe and North America are likely to be the desired destinations for large numbers of climate migrants.

The EU can be central to achieving a more optimistic scenario

The prevention of future large-scale climate migration depends on effective action to mitigate climate change. The EU is at the forefront of this effort, having adopted the European Green Deal, the EU strategy on adaptation to climate change, and the European Climate Law. Long-term strategies and plans are necessary, but not sufficient; they must also be implemented systematically and effectively.

The European Parliament has acknowledged climate change to be among the drivers of migration, and its resolution on human rights protection and the EU external migration policy calls, inter alia, for funding for sustainable responses to climate change at regional level. A study requested by Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs addressed the link between climate change on displacement, and explored options for a policy framework at EU level.

EU support for vulnerable countries will be crucial. Enhanced EU partnerships with actors from vulnerable regions can help the latter forge greater climate resilience. EU investment, assistance and the transfer of technology and expertise can improve adaptive capacities in areas such as the Sahel, MENA, and the Asia-Pacific. Instruments resembling the EU civil protection mechanism could be developed to ensure a higher level of preparedness, with structures to coordinate mobilisation of assistance in the event of disasters.

Joint environmental research has a key role. Studies by the European Commission, including the Joint Research Centre, and other European organisations have extended the knowledge base on the link between climate change and migration. Projects to identify shared risks can lead towards more cooperation, targeted responses, and reduced vulnerability. The EU can share future-oriented guidelines, technical assistance and information with affected countries, and implement joint systems for monitoring the impact of climate change on migration.

EU support for a legal framework for 'climate refugees' could make a difference. The EU has a long-established human rights-based approach to international affairs. This should extend to the protection of those driven abroad by natural disasters. Through its cooperation with the countries affected, the EU can put in place safe legal pathways for climate migrants. The new pact on migration and asylum, launched by the European Commission in 2020, addresses the safety of refugees, but does not, as yet, refer to the needs of individuals affected by climate-related events. The 1951 Refugee Convention predates the global recognition of the dangers of climate change, and does not recognise climate stress as grounds to seek refugee status. It would be in keeping with its role as a leading actor against climate change were the EU to push for the recognition of the status of climate refugee.

Conclusion

Climate change is expected to lead to increasingly large-scale migration from vulnerable regions. The EU cannot overcome this challenge acting alone; it must encourage a global effort to prevent climate crises, identify the areas most at risk and help them build resilience, and deliver humanitarian relief to those driven from their homes.