

Profiling displacement in the context of slow-onset environmental degradation

An analysis of hazards, policies, and mobility patterns toward the development of a typology

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1. Executive Summary

The aim of this project was to develop a typology of displacement in the context of slow-onset environmental degradation linked to climate change (desertification, droughts and increasing temperatures, sea level rise (SLR), loss of biodiversity, land/forest degradation, and glacial retreat). The objective was to identify and differentiate regions under environmental threat according to their social vulnerabilities, mobility patterns, and related policies. We identified twelve types of vulnerability/policy/mobility combinations within various geographical contexts.

The project is based on a synthesis of 321 scientific case studies on displacement and slow-onset environmental degradation, representing a comprehensive collection of relevant literature published since the 1970s.

The project yielded three kinds of results: 1) specific to the 12 types of identified phenomena, 2) regarding the processes in general, and 3) an assessment of research gaps. General results are synthesised here; more specific results are detailed in the report, and research gaps are addressed in the conclusion.

Regarding the processes in general, we observe that vulnerability is especially critical in small island and coastal contexts as well as in mountainous zones (profile 1) and desert regions (mainly sub-Saharan Africa). Other zones, processes, or hazards—such as biodiversity loss and land/forest degradation—have been neglected so far, possibly because the impacts of environmental degradation on human migration remain limited.

Migration processes are often not visible in areas affected by environmental degradation. When they do occur, they remain mostly internal and oriented towards urban centres with occasional rural-to-rural migration. Non-mobile people, as well as those who depend on natural resource industries for their livelihoods, are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Persons with lower levels of education are more likely to respond to environmental shock through short-distance migration, whereas highly educated individuals may opt to migrate over longer distances.

Policies that directly address mobility in relation to climate change are rarely implemented and seldom mentioned in the literature, making them difficult to comprehend. When they are mentioned, it is mostly in terms of relocation. Mobility is often perceived as a symptom of the problem and a last-resort solution, whereas a growing body of research approaches mobility as an adaptation strategy with the potential to be promoted through appropriate policies.

Overall, this typology will provide a global overview of displacement in the context of slow-onset environmental degradation and pave the way for further, more detailed research.