

The High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement: a vision for the future on climate change and disasters?

Jerome Elie

The High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement's recent report considers the impact of disasters and the adverse effects of climate change on internal displacement, and calls for immediate action and better forward planning. Some commentators, while acknowledging the groundwork done by the Panel, question whether the report goes far enough.

The High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement was established by the UN Secretary-General in 2019 to identify concrete recommendations on how better to prevent, respond and achieve solutions to the global internal displacement crisis.¹ It was tasked to help advance "collaboration between humanitarian, development, and where appropriate climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction and peace actors", and received inputs from consultations on disaster displacement in specific regions² and from bodies such as the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) and the Climate, Migration and Displacement Platform (CMDP).³

On 29 September 2021, the Panel published its report, *Shining a Light on Internal Displacement: A Vision for the Future*.⁴ The report highlights the devastating impact of disasters and climate change, and aims to generate political momentum and provide guidance to address internal displacement challenges. It notably underlines that "many of the countries most at risk from the impacts of climate change are among the least responsible for the emissions that drive them" (p41). The Panel concluded that the global internal displacement crisis is compounded by the concurrent global climate crisis, and that disasters and climate change trends present the international community with urgent displacement challenges as well as a pressing need to plan for the future.

Prevention, solutions or both?

However, despite the twin challenges of immediate urgency and planning for the future, the Panel's dedicated recommendations are almost all to be found

in the chapter on Strengthening Prevention. Recognising that the Panel's focus was on solutions and that it has therefore "not addressed prevention in as great a depth", the report primarily considers the effects of disasters and climate change through analysing steps that should "urgently be taken to prevent and mitigate risks of displacement" (p41), rather than considering how to mobilise solutions to existing and sometimes protracted situations linked to environmental factors.

Such an approach has elicited some misgivings among civil society and content experts. While saluting the work of the Panel, some consider that the report fails to frame the topic as an issue of climate justice, or that climate change may have been treated in a "superficial way"⁵ in the report, representing a missed opportunity to help bridge protection gaps. Others have expressed worries that this framing could "reinforce the mistaken notion that it [disaster displacement] is rarely if ever protracted and that it requires less political will and fewer sustained investments in durable solutions than displacement triggered by conflict and violence". It may also consign the issue to the realm of technical solutions rather than highlighting the need to better integrate it into larger national planning, policy processes and multilateral frameworks.⁶

It may be worth bearing in mind that the report is built around the concept of interconnectedness and the need to work simultaneously towards prevention, response and durable solutions. As such, its focus on prevention does not necessarily imply a strict compartmentalisation and disregard for protection and solutions. The central chapter

March 2022

www.fmreview.org/climate-crisis

on 'The Imperative for Durable Solutions' does include references to disasters and climate change, particularly in discussing the need for more coherent and coordinated actions. The prevention chapter itself also pays attention to the interconnection between prevention and solutions. For example, pointing to gaps and insufficiency in climate financing (relating to coverage, quantity, mechanisms and opportunities), the report urges greater funding to be directed to displacement-sensitive climate adaptation interventions. Denouncing the lack of financial investment in prevention, the Panel called for more investment in evidence-based anticipatory tools such as forecast-based financing. Similarly, while discussing the need to strengthen investment and support for early warning and community-based prevention mechanisms, the report highlights that where "no alternatives exist, States should facilitate migration out of areas at high risk or undertake planned relocation with the consent and participation of affected communities" (pp44-46).

Completing the Panel's work: catalysing action to achieve solutions

Nevertheless, the report could have examined more attentively the programmatic steps needed at various levels for providing protection and durable solutions in displacement contexts linked to disasters and climate change. Further exploration of how the Panel's recommendations on solutions may connect to the specificities of displacement situations linked to disasters and climate change would have been extremely useful. Indeed, the report may inadvertently imply that solutions programming is mainly a concern in situations linked to conflict and violence, whereas recently published resources point to the need to include considerations on climate change and disasters in comprehensive displacement solutions planning. The Bangladesh National Strategy on Internal Displacement, for example, highlights how each of the three durable solutions presents specific sets of constraints, dynamics, opportunities and

planning parameters in situations of internal displacement linked to climate change and disasters. UNHCR is also engaging with this level of programmatic complexity.⁷

Without doubt, a lot more could have been said about how the mechanisms proposed by the Panel could have a positive impact. Most obviously, given the comments made above, there should have been a clearer link between the recommended Global Fund for Internal Displacement Solutions and forecast-based financing. Similarly, the report could have better delineated the role of the proposed high-level UN official function when it comes to displacement linked to disaster and climate change.⁸ The same goes for most of the recommendations and principles outlined in the report's main chapter, such as the need to find new ways of generating and sustaining political will, both nationally and internationally, and the Panel's call to substantially increase opportunities for peer-to-peer exchange and learning (including through improved data and evidence sharing) between States.

Planning for solutions in the context of disaster- and climate-related displacement may be one of the main thematic areas where further work needs to be done to present a 'Vision for the Future' that is clearly fit for purpose and fit for the defining challenges of our times. However, it is important to note that the report and its recommendations did not set out to provide all the answers at once. There is still room to add recommendations, flesh out details and incorporate further perspectives. In particular, following the release of the report, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched a process to develop an Action Agenda on Internal Displacement.⁹ This Action Agenda aims to detail UN commitments to prevent and find durable solutions to internal displacement, while ensuring assistance and protection for those displaced. Taking the High-Level Panel's report as a starting point, this Action Agenda should also connect with the Secretary-General's priorities, particularly his Common Agenda. This Action Agenda may pay enhanced attention to situations of displacement linked to

www.fmreview.org/climate-crisis

March 2022

climate change and disasters. It may help clarify the role of UN institutions and build their capacities in this realm, while listing concrete undertakings, collaborations and planning to foster solutions. As such, the Action Agenda could also generate momentum for other stakeholders' engagement on displacement related to disasters and climate change, particularly the engagement of States and civil society.

Jerome Elie

jerome.elie@icvanetwork.org @ElieJee

Head – Forced Migration, International Council of Voluntary Agencies

1. High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement Terms of Reference (2021) bit.ly/HLP-TOR
2. For example, see Pacific Regional Consultation on Internal Displacement: Pacific perspectives and practices on climate change and disaster displacement, 11 February 2021 bit.ly/Pacific-regional-consultation-2021

3. Platform on Disaster Displacement (2020) *Internal Displacement in the Context of Disasters and the Adverse Effects of Climate change: Submission to the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement* bit.ly/PDD-HLP-submission-2020 ; Climate, Migration and Displacement Platform (2020) *Addressing the Impact of Climate Change on Internally Displaced People: Submission to the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement* bit.ly/CMDP-HLP-submission-2020

4. www.internaldisplacement-panel.org

5. See: Aycok B, Jacobs C and Mosneaga A (October 2021) 'Justice or Charity? Climate Change in the UN High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement Report', Researching Internal Displacement bit.ly/Aycok-Jacobs-Mosneaga-justice-or-charity-2021; Tweet by Kayly Ober, Refugees International, 29 September 2021 <https://twitter.com/KaylyOber/status/1443232318697709579?s=20>

6. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2021) *Building on the momentum: IDMC's commitment to carry forward recommendations by the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement*, p5 bit.ly/IDMC-momentum-2021

7. UNHCR (2021) *Practical Guidance for UNHCR Staff on IDP Protection in the Context of Disasters and the Adverse Effects of Climate Change* www.unhcr.org/617170734.pdf

8. While the Panel's report had suggested the creation of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), further developments suggest instead the possible nomination of a Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement.
9. bit.ly/SG-action-agenda-internal-displacement-draft