

The future is now

Craig L Johnstone

Our generation has failed to live up to its obligations to prevent climate change and any steps we take now, however welcome, will not totally reverse the trends. We need urgently to prepare now for the human consequences of climate change.

Firstly, we are in desperate need of a better understanding of the size and the characteristics of this issue. We need data to help us plan effectively. We have hit an analytical stone wall in terms of understanding what the consequences of this issue are and we are going to have to deal with extraordinary levels of ambiguity. Climate change can take so many different forms in terms of how it impacts on migration or even on refugee flows. The first requirement is to get better analysis.

The second issue is who is actually going to handle this issue. This is a global problem which will require action at the national, sub-regional, regional and international level. The UN clearly has a role to play, and the Secretary-General has made this a system-wide priority.

UNHCR has a clear mandate to protect and assist refugees and stateless persons. Some substantial percentage of the people who will be displaced will be escaping conflict or persecution brought on by civil strife caused in turn by climate change. Those who flee their country because the country no longer exists may well become stateless and therefore become charges of UNHCR. In all of these situations UNHCR has the mandate and responsibility to assume the responsibility to protect.

But UNHCR is called upon frequently to assist in international emergencies

caused by natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods and violent storms, not because the people affected by these events fall under the UNHCR mandate but because UNHCR has the experience and capability to assist and has a humanitarian obligation in these situations to do what it can. By



extension, it is hard to envisage a true international emergency of forced displacement precipitated directly or indirectly by climate change in which UNHCR would not play a key role. So we have to be ready to assume our share of this responsibility. We will need to consider whether or not additional international legal frameworks are necessary to tackle the issues or whether existing mechanisms coupled with intense and careful coordination will suffice.

Who is going to cover the costs? It has been proposed that the costs should be borne by those who have caused the problem. And, although no country or group is free from

blame on this issue, the industrialised countries of the world clearly bear the greater part of this burden. I would argue, however, that rather than assigning blame we achieve the same result by asking those who have the funds and the technologies to rise to the occasion and carry out their duty to humanity. Recent studies show that though the investment required may be large, the payback in economic terms can also be large. In sum, the developed countries of the world should be able to shoulder this burden if the will exists to do so. If funding is available I am confident

we can find the international mechanisms necessary to address the problem. But funding availability will be problematic.

Another – very pressing – issue of concern is who will accept these forced migrants when they can no longer live in their own countries? On the basis of our experiences to date, I predict that dealing with the

resettlement of those who have been forcibly displaced by climate change will be a formidable, and possibly insurmountable, task.

We are not talking about an issue that will begin to affect us in the future. The future is now. We are dealing with a global crisis and we need a unified call to action.

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