COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION ISSUES OAS/Ser.W

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CONCEPT NOTE

THEMATIC SESSION

"MIGRATION, NATURAL DISASTERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE" AND

"THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN THE RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION OF MIGRANTS"

(June 22, 2022)

(Prepared by the Chair of the CAM with the support of the Technical Secretariat)

1. "MIGRATION, NATURAL DISASTERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE"

Every year, the climate emergency causes millions of displacements. This factor along with poverty, food insecurity, and conflict are increasingly interconnected, causing more people to seek safety and protection. Since 2008, on average[[1]](#footnote-1), annually, more than 20 million people have been forced from their homes by extreme weather events, many of them exacerbated by climate change, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). According to their estimates, between 31 and 72 million people in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America will be displaced by 2050 due to water scarcity, rising sea levels, and crop failures.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In addition, climate change will cause mass migrations across not only borders but also small-scale and localized displacement. In 2020 alone, there were 30 million internal climate-related forced displacements.[[3]](#footnote-3) According to the World Bank, by 2050, there could be as many as 216 million internally displaced people worldwide, of which 17 million would originate in Latin American countries.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In relation to disaster displacement, in 2020, at least seven million people were internally displaced by disasters in 104 countries and territories. According to IDMC, such displacements result from a complex process with many demographic, historical, political, social, and economic drivers. "Climate change interacts with all of them, not necessarily triggering displacement directly, but as an additional stressor when natural and social resources and the capabilities of humans and systems are already at their limits."[[5]](#footnote-5)

During the 2017 hurricane season, for example, 3 million people in 16 Caribbean countries and the United States were displaced by Hurricanes Irma, Harvey, and Maria. Similar effects of Hurricane Dorian in 2019 displaced 46,5,000 people in seven countries.  In 2020, Hurricane Laura would have caused damage to thousands of homes and 24 deaths in most of the Caribbean.  In this regard, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), "it is undeniable that the impacts of climate change on Small Island Developing States throughout the Caribbean could accentuate the displacement and forced movement of people in the region."[[6]](#footnote-6)

For its part, the Central American region has been characterized by being especially vulnerable to the impacts of environmental and climate change. In the Dry Corridor, an arid space that occupies much of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, subsistence agriculture is regularly affected by drought. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), drought-related food insecurity in Central America's dry corridor has left 3.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. In 2019, 2.2 million people in Central America lost their crops due to erratic weather, and 1.4 million needed urgent food assistance.[[7]](#footnote-7) Likewise, the devastation caused by hurricanes Eta and Iota, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), points to almost US$3 billion in damage. [[8]](#footnote-8) In addition, it is estimated that by 2050, the number of people who would be displaced from Central America to the United States could reach 30 million, mainly as a result of food insecurity due to the effects of the climate crisis.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Human mobility in the context of climate change is often multicausal, as the latter interacts with a wide range of other factors to influence the decision to move and the extent to which this decision is voluntary. In some cases, this interaction can make a person unable or unwilling to move, despite facing increasing environmental challenges. People can also move as a way to adapt or proactively avoid severe impacts.  This means that the vast majority of displacements related to environmental factors are not totally forced or voluntary but are located at an intermediate point between both categories, with multiple factors that contribute to a person moving.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In this regard, IOM has adopted the following definition of climate migration: "they include the transfer of a person or groups of people who, predominantly due to sudden or progressive changes in the environment due to the effects of climate change, are forced to leave their place of habitual residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a state or across an international border." From this concept, the classification of two types of changes in the environment that promote climate migrations emerges: sudden climatic events; such as hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, floods, drought, earthquakes, tornadoes, forest fires, landslides, and storms; and long-lasting progressive processes, such as sea-level rise and desertification.

Against the context set out above, depending on the collective actions that the world adopts today, in the next half-century, the trajectory of climate migration could be reduced by up to 80%. To this end, climate [[11]](#footnote-11) change mitigation and adaptation measures will also need to facilitate safe, orderly, and regular migration for people affected by climate change, through the expansion, availability, and accessibility of regular migration pathways and ensures decent working conditions for migrant workers. This, in turn, will help prevent people from resorting to irregular migration routes, exposing themselves to human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

In addition, the United Nations Migration Network has recommended that   it be ensured that human mobility is mainstreamed into national climate change plans, based on consultations and assessments of the effects of climate change on population movements and  the migrant populations themselves, thus ensuring the collection of relevant data disaggregated by age, sex and migration status, among other characteristics;  develop and strengthen inclusive mitigation and adaptation measures and plans to avoid, reduce and address the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation on local communities, while respecting the human and labor rights of migrants;  involve populations affected by disasters, climate change and environmental degradation, especially young people at risk of migrating for reasons related to climate change, in the planning and implementation of national and local responses, and promote their effective and informed participation in related decision-making processes,  risk assessment, planning and implementation of work-based human rights-based measures; safe, orderly and regular migration is encouraged, protecting, promoting and giving effect to the rights of  migrants and their communities, and expanding the availability of regular migration pathways, among other measures.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Examining the impact of climate change and natural disasters on migratory movements is of interest to the Committee on Migration Issues.  This session is expected to address this issue and open the space for interventions by member states to share information on this topic.

1. "THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN THE RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION OF MIGRANTS"

Historically, migration and asylum or international protection policies have been defined by national governments, however, the first territorial unit that receives migrants and refugees at the time of their arrival in a new State are localities, municipalities or cities. They are often the ones who must give the first response to the people who arrive in their territory and have the opportunity to provide support to ensure a trajectory of well-being, security, and respect for their rights, and in particular, to accompany, through public policies, programs, and services, the processes of integration[[13]](#footnote-13).

At the same time, the challenges faced by migrants relate to the reception at borders, access to documentation, regularization, access to international protection, socio-economic and cultural integration, and equal access to public rights and services in countries of transit and destination, are intensified at the local level, especially in border municipalities and peripheral cities. This is partly due to the remote and isolated location of these cities and, to some extent, to the lack of government presence in these territories, which generates greater limitations in terms of the integration of these people and their host communities.

Also, another challenge they face, for example, in receiving applicants for refugee status is that local governments are not the ones who determine whether those people will be able to stay in their cities and for how long, however, by respecting the rights of these people, local authorities can have a positive impact on the resettlement of these populations, even in the face of scenarios of hostility and xenophobia.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Local governments are the main political bodies charged with governing cities. As such, they are responsible for the delivery of essential services and are in a unique position to bring about meaningful change. Therefore, in their actions, local authorities must provide services through a human rights approach. Local authorities can also initiate or give impetus to migrant integration initiatives, coordinate and facilitate integration measures, provide a space for activities, bring people from different communities together and connect them with organizations that can support them in meeting their needs. In addition, together with civil society organizations, they can equip these populations with the necessary skills to integrate into their cities (language learning, civic orientation, skills development, among others), and inform, educate, and support the local population in the process of receiving migrants.[[15]](#footnote-15) [[16]](#footnote-16)

At the same time, cities and their governments have had to bear a significant cost in receiving and integrating the massive movements of migrants and refugees. One of the main challenges facing cities as a result of increased migration "corresponds to their ability to provide social housing, education and health services, transport infrastructure, integration, and social cohesion." In addition, local authorities face several challenges in the inclusion of migrants and refugees, ranging from insufficient financial resources and technical capacities to the lack of alternatives for the integration of migrants, the care of migrants and refugees in street situations, to the lack of adequate coordination between national and local governments. Also, the lack of attention to the needs of migrants, especially those who are in a situation of extreme vulnerability, could generate tensions with the local population.[[17]](#footnote-17) [[18]](#footnote-18)

In the last two years, cities have been epicenters of the development of the COVID-19 pandemic, due, above all, to their population density, and although local authorities have played an important role in the management of the pandemic, the preparation of cities for outbreaks of diseases varies between them, since this depends on their level of development and their socioeconomic situation. This has represented an additional challenge for cities that receive massive movements of migrants and refugees. [[19]](#footnote-19)

Despite the above challenges, migrants and refugees contribute significantly to the human and productive development of host countries, such as to GDP growth through increased consumption and the young and skilled workforce; as well as the transfer of knowledge and the enrichment of cultural and social heritage. Thus, between 2000 and 2014, migrants contributed 9.4% to global GDP, equivalent to 6.7 trillion dollars. It is even estimated that greater integration into local economies could raise migrants' contributions to $1 trillion annually.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Likewise, the arrival of migrants and refugees contributes to strengthening the cultural and social enrichment of receiving countries. Human mobility brings a diversity of ideas, traditions, and customs, contributing to innovation and the emergence of intercultural cities, promoting the construction of dynamic and creative societies. It is therefore essential to support governments to harness the full potential of the arrival of migrants and refugees and to help them demystify migration as a "negative phenomenon".[[21]](#footnote-21)

In addition, successful integration is not only a local issue but can have a great scope and international involvement. For example, international migration can help countries of origin through the transfer of remittances and knowledge, as well as the creation of new transnational networks to facilitate trade and investment.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In this regard, it is necessary to improve local capacity for the reception and integration of these people, through the equipment and hiring of public officials to guarantee adequate access of migrants to services, and to train these workers in the fight against discrimination and protection of human rights; to establish mechanisms to exchange information and coordinate activities with migrants and refugees,  civil society organizations, the private sector, and other municipal administrations; data collection and management; increase funding for integration and invest in communication, spaces, and events related to inclusion; among other measures.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Reviewing the role of local authorities in the reception and integration of migrants and refugees is of interest to the Committee on Migration Issues. This session is expected to address this issue and open the space for interventions by member states to share information on this topic.

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