

Report Climate Displacement Seminar

October 4th, 2018, Utrecht University Academy Building

Main points

- Climate displacement is a real issue that urgently needs our attention, especially with respect to the poor that are affected. A rights-based approach is considered important.
- The issue needs a careful and nuanced approach (beyond the scare lies difference: some need to move because their habitat will disappear soon, others are less urgent, yet others will be affected in their livelihoods but can stay in place; also some need urgent considerations, others over different timescales).
- What certainly is needed is systematic inventory of the issues and planning of remedial actions. This will require mobilization of many different stakeholders, definitely including Northern and Southern governments, and the creation of institutions dedicated to the issues of climate change and related displacement.
- Policy initiatives so far are inadequate and biased. Especially adaptation measures and issues such as loss and compensation are neglected, as is the participation of those affected in policy formulation/plan making.
- Care should also be taken for knock-on effects, as infrastructure investment and land acquisition for resettlement could in turn negatively affect the lives of other groups - causing a chain of dislocations.

On October 4th, around 25 experts from academia, civil society and the public sector gathered in Utrecht for a seminar on Climate Displacement. The seminar is kicked off by Scott Leckie, who introduces the topic and starts by stressing that climate displacement is a huge problem, which has not been receiving the policy and legal attention it deserves. The number of people who will be displaced in the coming 10, 20 and 50 years are alarming. We already see some small-island states from where the richer, more educated people are already moving on their own accounts; this means that the most vulnerable people will stay behind.

Scott's foundation, Displacement Solutions, builds houses for climate displaced people. DS does not believe that building a number of houses is going to solve the immense problem, but by doing this the foundation hopes to stimulate governments and donors to take this issue way more serious while also showcasing concrete solutions. However, the work to date has shown that the issue of climate displacement seems to fall in between all existing policies, projects and programmes. By building flagship houses such as those in Bangladesh (One house one family at the time), but also through direct support to governments, for instance in Myanmar where discussions have been started about a climate change land bank. The land bank would be a facility to identify areas where climate displaced people can move to. These and other initiatives are aiming to raise the issue of climate displacement on the agenda of national governments, donors and others.

Many larger-scale resettlements of climate displaced people to date have stalled because of lack of political will. One good example highlighted by Scott comes from Fiji, where several villages made a request to the government to be resettled. So the initiative came from the bottom up. After the request, a rather democratic process of drafting the national strategy for climate displacement was initiated. Three villages to date have been resettled, the relocation sites were all relatively close to the original villages, but further inland on higher elevated areas so that the threat from rising sea levels was no longer there. In general, Scott argues, we see that resettlement works better in those places where people themselves indicated they need to move. We also see it works better when they can move somewhere nearby.

Hugo Hooijer (Oxfam Novib) highlights two points in addition to Scott's story. Firstly, the international governance dimension: the Paris Agreement presents guidance on how to deal with climate change mitigation and adaptation. So far, most interest from developing countries has gone to mitigation, since

this offers opportunities for investments. Adaptation comes second. However, whereas the Paris Agreement does mention 'loss and damage', it doesn't address how to deal with this. As a second point, he stresses that in any case, displacement should be the very last resort, only when everything else has failed.

Annelies Zoomers (Utrecht University/ LANDac) contributes by underlining the urgency of the issue, while at the same time warning us for causing fear, including fear for climate migrants. We should also be aware of those areas where people might have been part of flooding for centuries, and it is part of their lifestyle. This makes it more pertinent to make sure to take a bottom-up perspective when identifying climate-induced displacements. She therefore makes a plea to look very carefully at what exactly climate-induced displacement is and where we find areas where the situation is most pressing. Utrecht University has done research on displacements and resettlements around infrastructure development, including infrastructure for climate change adaptation. An important finding is that these projects are very often exclusive of local communities. Communities are not consulted in the process, nor part of the implementation, and their livelihood very often insufficiently restored after the process.

Questions from the audience relate to the size and magnitude of the issue. When asked about the countries that have the most pressing issues because of climate change and displacement, Scott explains that the case of Bangladesh is one of the most problematic cases: because of population growth and the lack of an integrated government approach. Other high-risk countries include small island-states, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

In relation to potential areas for these climate refugees, one participant highlights the opportunities offered by regeneration projects. Another discussion topic is whether there will also be new areas that will become available. One problem is that the amount of land becoming newly available because of climate change is expected to be much smaller than the areas becoming uninhabitable. Also, new areas are seldom located close to areas where people have to move from.

Another topic for discussion is how we define climate migrants or climate refugees. There is need to create a legal space for this group of people. They are not regular refugees and have specific needs. One participant also cautions against the blurring lines between development-induced resettlements and climate-induced resettlements. We need to be aware that climate displacement is not used to put other types of displacements as inevitable, or negatively affects the lives of other groups in a chain of dislocations.

Follow-up

- A brief summary with the main messages from this meeting will be shared with the participants, as well as with policy makers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who couldn't be present but expressed their interest in the topic.
- Utrecht University and Displacement Solutions will draft a plan for having MSc students of the International Development Studies track conduct research in some of the climate displaced areas, to collect data about conditions for success and failure of climate-induced resettlement projects in different locations. Students will be going to the field in February 2019. Findings could be shared at the next LANDac International Annual Land Conference 2019.