

Climate change, conflict and displacement: five key misconceptions

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Key messages

The links between climate change, conflict and displacement are complex, context specific and contested, as well as characterised by multi-layered drivers and outcomes.

Climate-related risks are dependent on compounding vulnerabilities that are created by underlying social inequalities and political will. Recognising this will help address vulnerabilities in relation to wider socioeconomic pressures, power dynamics and historical injustices.

Climate- and conflict-related displacement trends overlap with existing patterns of mobility. Policy-makers and practitioners should understand these pre-existing practices and leverage opportunities for building adaptation and resilience.

People displaced by climate change and conflict are more likely to move internally, within their own country. Understanding this will help combat the alarmist and self-serving narratives of 'climate refugees' and will shift the focus to the experiences and needs of internally displaced persons.

People are constantly adapting to their changing circumstances, even after displacement. Aid actors should incorporate the strategies already used by displaced people into their policy and programming, but without leading to an adaptation burden where the onus to act is on displaced people.

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Introduction

Many of today's displacement crises are driven by a complex mix of climate and environmental change, disasters, conflict and fragility. While nuanced debates exist in academia around whether, and how, these may trigger and drive each other, media and policy attention has often taken a more alarmist tone. This has contributed to the popular narrative that climate change will lead to mass-scale displacement, which in turn will lead to increased conflict (see Box 1 for definitions). While the causal linkages between conflict, climate and displacement are real, they are not inevitable, and are often bound up in wider pressures and politics. Nevertheless, this prevailing narrative has changed little since the early 1990s and has been 'cited uncritically from one source to the next', with repeated claims building on their predecessors, rather than grounded in new evidence (Gleditsch et al., 2007: 4; Boas et al., 2019).

Box 1 Definitions of climate change, conflict and displacement

For the purposes of this paper, 'climate change' is understood as defined by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Article 1 as 'a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity ... [and] is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods' (IPCC, 2019: 808).

'Conflict' refers specifically to violent conflict but is not limited to conflict between states. It encompasses 'civil war, ethnic war, and interstate war at high and low intensities as well as violence that falls short of war, such as militarised disputes, terrorism, and riots or strikes' (Avis, 2019: 2).

'Displacement' is a forced movement born of 'persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order' (UNHCR, 2022: 2). It encompasses temporary and permanent movements, within and across borders (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2017). For the purposes of this paper, displacement can occur due to conflict or to the negative impacts of climate change.

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This repetition has given rise to a series of misconceptions about conflict, climate and displacement that continue to resurface and reverberate in an echo chamber of headlines, press releases and funding campaigns:

- Misconception 1: The links between climate change, conflict and displacement can be universally understood.
- Misconception 2: Climate-related risks are natural and inevitable.
- Misconception 3: A new chapter of displacement is emerging in the context of climate and conflict urgency.
- Misconception 4: People displaced by climate change and conflict will inevitably cross borders to become refugees.
- Misconception 5: Displacement renders people passive and unable to adapt to their situation.

What is particularly striking about these misconceptions is their durability. They are reframed versions of myths and assumptions that have been circulating for decades. What is more, most have been repeatedly unpacked and dismissed by scholars and experts who maintain that the relationship between conflict, climate and displacement is complex, contested and context specific (Zickgraf, 2021; Piguet, 2022). As Peters et al. (2021a: 4) note:

While there is no shortage of grey literature conveying the ‘vicious cycle’ of climate shocks, conflict escalation and mass displacement, the empirical basis of this evidence varies.

Why do these misconceptions continue to resurface in mainstream discourse? One explanation is that, while deep and growing knowledge bases exist within particular fields, a cross-disciplinary pollination of ideas and findings has not been forthcoming. Deep-seated disconnects persist between the development and humanitarian sectors, migration and displacement studies, and the social and natural sciences. A similar disconnect persists between policy and practice, and academia. This limits opportunities for disseminating and translating knowledge across institutional settings and has contributed to methodological challenges and patchy data (IDMC, 2021). Climate change, conflict and displacement are multi-faceted topics that straddle these sciences, sectors and studies. In a siloed context, however, analytical blind spots emerge and misconceptions go unchecked. A more multi-disciplinary approach is needed whereby actors from across institutional and disciplinary divides come together, share knowledge, build trust and find consensus.

Politics also play a role. The perpetuation of common misconceptions about climate change, conflict and displacement suits specific agendas and interests. Policy-makers, for example, are adopting an increasingly securitised narrative that frames climate change and displacement in terms of chaos, conflict and global insecurity (Trombetta, 2008; Youngs, 2014; Peters and Mayhew, 2016; Warner and Boas, 2017; Peters, 2018). This narrative of crisis and escalation reinforces anti-immigration policy agendas that have taken root in some countries. Counterintuitively, these same alarmist narratives are often used by humanitarian

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and development actors seeking to attract funding for neglected displacement settings. By tapping into the same narratives that appear in headlines and drive anti-immigration policies, humanitarians can justify additional funding for conflict and displacement settings that can be linked either directly or tangentially to climate change.

Another explanation is that our everyday assumptions about displaced people – who they are, what they look like, which routes they take, what resources they have at their disposal, what they aspire to, etc. – have helped to perpetuate common misconceptions. The popular image of displaced people as inherently passive has persisted for decades, and arguably reproduces colonial and racialised tropes (Hartmann, 2010; Bettini, 2013; Baldwin, 2013; 2016). While this may reflect the forced and often traumatic nature of their initial move, it nevertheless overlooks the heterogeneity of displacement and the adaptive capacity of displaced people, many of whom respond to their situation with innovation and agency. Turning this imagery on its head, in many cases movement reflects agency and adaptation, while it is often those who are unable or unwilling to move who experience the greatest risks and vulnerability.

Unchecked, narratives such as these influence the tone and direction of policy and programmes, with real-life repercussions for those affected by climate, conflict and displacement. This paper calls for a series of climate change, conflict and displacement ‘reality checks’ to nuance the mainstream narrative and popular logic behind these misconceptions.

- Reality check 1: The links between climate change, conflict and displacement are complex, highly context specific and contested.
- Reality check 2: Climate-related risks are heavily dependent on underlying vulnerabilities, created by social inequalities and political will.
- Reality check 3: Climate- and conflict-related displacement trends overlap with existing patterns of mobility.
- Reality check 4: People displaced by climate change and conflict are more likely to move internally, within their own country.
- Reality check 5: People are constantly adapting to their changing circumstances, even after displacement.

Misconception 1: The links between climate change, conflict and displacement can be universally understood

Reality check 1: The links between climate change, conflict and displacement are complex, highly context specific and contested

Much time and energy has been spent researching the multi-directional links between climate and migration, conflict and migration or climate and conflict, with growing focus on the relationship between all three areas of climate change, conflict and displacement (Peters et al., 2021a). There is now common consensus that these relationships are contested, complex and context specific (Gleditsch et al., 2007; Burrows and Kinney, 2016; Abel et al., 2019; IPCC, 2022). The focus of enquiry has subsequently shifted from identifying causal linkages to developing a more nuanced understanding of this relationship in general. This reflects a shift in the narrative away from ‘causes and drivers’ towards ‘multi-causality’, ‘threat multipliers’ and ‘tipping points’ (Peters and Vivekananda, 2014; Burrows and Kinney, 2016; Schaar, 2018; Peters et al., 2019a; 2020; 2021b).

While the axis of the debate may have shifted and softened, the terrain remains much the same. It still reflects an enduring ambition to pin down ‘once and for all’ the links between climate change, conflict and displacement. This ambition is understandable: it is a first and important step for prevention and planning, and for forecasting ‘worst-case’ scenarios of population movements. In practice, however, decades of enquiry have shed little light on this matter. In the words of Abel et al. (2019: 240):

There is no scientific study that has empirically established the links between climate change, conflict and migration and identifies the causal pattern in a convincing manner, partly due to the inherent complexity of the task.

Context is everything, and in a world of complexity, shifting power dynamics and climate changes, research into the climate–conflict–displacement nexus has struggled to keep up.

Therefore, the key question for policy-makers and practitioners – particularly those with a mandate to help people who have been displaced – is not how these three strands intersect, but rather the compounding vulnerabilities that climate change, conflict and displacement create for people when they occur at the same time in the same location. This means focusing on complex, multi-layered outcomes, as well as drivers. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), ‘95 per cent of all internal conflict displacements in 2021 occurred in countries that are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change’ (UNHCR, 2022: 11). Moreover, ‘the most

severe impacts of climate change are not necessarily in areas exposed to the greatest changes in climate, but in places where people's capacities to cope with these changes are lacking' (Peters et al., 2019b: 5).

Misconception 2: Climate-related risks are natural and inevitable

Reality check 2: Climate-related risks are heavily dependent on underlying vulnerabilities, created by social inequalities and political will

Climate-related risks – the potential negative outcomes should a hazard event occur – are often interpreted as natural and inevitable events. In this framing, vulnerability and marginalisation are the outcome of the 'uncontrollable', 'unstoppable' force of climate change, rather than wider social inequality and proactive political will. This one-dimensional focus on climate only tells part of the story. It ignores how climate-related risks are heavily dependent on underlying vulnerability and exposure contexts: histories of colonisation, social inequalities, insecure land tenure and resource rights, weak governance, corruption and so on (Adger et al., 2001; Eriksen and Lind, 2009; Arnall et al., 2014; Eriksen et al., 2015). For displacement specifically, policies and practices may mean that displaced people end up in precarious positions at the margins of society, which in turn impacts their ability to respond to shocks such as climate hazards and conflict.

It is often these kinds of past and present structural drivers of fragility – more than the hazard itself – that explain why some groups of people are more vulnerable to climate events than others (Wisner et al., 1994). The climate hazard can be relatively mild from a statistical standpoint, but can cause significant damage because livelihoods are highly exposed, infrastructure is poorly maintained, and households have few savings with which to insulate themselves from climate shocks and stressors. Under these circumstances, households can become increasingly vulnerable to even small climatic variations, particularly if they are already affected by conflict or displacement.

For example, Watts (1983: 252) found that Hausa peasants in Nigeria were becoming 'increasingly vulnerable to even small variations in rainfall' and 'relatively slight oscillations in harvest quality' due to the wider, structural vulnerabilities brought about by British colonial rule. While the importance of wider vulnerabilities has been recognised for many years, it is environmental factors that continue to garner most attention, especially in the context of the 'climate emergency'.

This placing of power and politics at the centre of climate change analyses can help to unmask the risks behind the rhetoric. For example, the resurgence of adaptation as a climate change strategy has been critiqued for putting the onus of change on the individual rather than the state (Felli and Castree, 2012; Bettini and Gioli, 2015; Watts, 2015; Bettini et al., 2017; Farbotko et al., 2018). There is concern that the kinds of adaptation envisioned are about individuals absorbing and conforming to an existing status quo rather than local, national and international actors seeking to transform or challenge in a more radical and collective way the structural conditions giving rise to vulnerabilities in the first place.

This calls for a move away from an apolitical climate analysis to one that is embedded in everyday power relations and inequalities of people's livelihoods and lived experiences. For policy-makers and practitioners, this means addressing vulnerabilities in relation to wider socioeconomic pressures, power dynamics and historical injustices, as well as environmental change. Doing so would shift the narrative beyond superficial technical fixes towards a deeper debate about climate justice (Okereke, 2010; Sultana, 2022; Wilkens and Datchoua-Tirvaudey, 2022). In other words, this raises questions of why people are vulnerable to climate hazards in the first place, how this plays out in situations of conflict and/or displacement, and who (rather than what) is responsible for this.

Misconception 3: A new chapter of displacement is emerging in the wake of climate and conflict urgency

Reality check 3: Climate- and conflict-related displacement trends overlap with existing patterns of mobility

Climate-change impacts are mounting and increasingly visible. East Africa, for example, experiences recurring droughts of growing intensity and the risk of potential famine as poor rainfall continues over successive seasons (FEWS NET, 2022). Conflict and political instability have also escalated in places such as Ukraine, Ethiopia and Sri Lanka – to mention just a few – resulting in widespread suffering and displacement within and across borders. Contemporary displacement is intensifying, with annual increases in the global number of people who are forced to move (UNHCR, 2022).

In this context of change and urgency, it is assumed that a new chapter of climate- and conflict-induced displacement is emerging – a looming crisis on the horizon that will lead to unprecedented impacts (Randall, 2018). But is this really a new chapter, or an extension and escalation of existing practice and trends? In many (if not most) instances, climate- and conflict-related displacement trends overlap with existing patterns of mobility. Depending on the circumstances, displaced people can build on pre-existing practices of mobility to their advantage, especially for households for whom migration and mobility already represent part of their way of life. But when climate change and conflict intersect with existing pressures and vulnerabilities of displacement, outcomes are varied and context specific, as illustrated by the cases of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and Somalis in Kenya.

Following their displacement from Myanmar, the Rohingya in Bangladesh face increased risks of flooding and landslides during Bangladesh's monsoon season, due in large part to the unsuitability of the land on which they settled. Cox's Bazar is located on the coast and is susceptible to cyclones and storm surges – conditions that have been worsened by mass deforestation and soil erosion following the construction of the refugee camps (Ahmed et al., 2021). The Rohingya situation is thus an example of how climate change and conflict can intensify ongoing vulnerabilities of those who are already displaced, due to their increased marginalisation as displaced persons (Peters et al., 2021b).

By contrast, research from Kenya suggests that refugees there can build on pre-existing practices of mobility to increase options and strengthen resilience. Some Somali refugees make use of familiar networks, resources and routes to engage in circular, back-and-forth movements across the Somalia–Kenya border, and between camps and places of origin (Manji, 2020). This enables them to diversify livelihoods constrained by harsh environmental conditions and maintain access to humanitarian support in the camps, whilst also securing assets back in Somalia (ibid.).

For policy-makers and practitioners, these two contrasting examples highlight the need to recognise links and continuity between climate change, conflict and displacement – not just in terms of planning for risks and vulnerabilities of displaced people, but also for leveraging opportunities for building adaptation and resilience. Addressing people's lived experiences with effective assistance requires a strong understanding of how pre-existing practices of mobility and intersecting pressures affect subsequent vulnerabilities and opportunities. Displacement is often about continuity and connection: recognition of how climate change and conflict intersect with pre-existing displacement patterns helps to challenge popular narratives of 'climate refugees' as a separate category of people, with new and distinct experiences.

Misconception 4: People displaced by climate change and conflict will inevitably cross borders to become refugees

Reality check 4: People displaced by climate change and conflict are more likely to move internally, within their own country

The persisting narrative that climate change will lead to large-scale displacement and unsustainable numbers of ‘climate refugees’ moving towards Europe in the next decade has been often repeated in headlines and by the humanitarian sector in an attempt to motivate people in the ‘Global North’ to ‘do something’ about climate change (Randall, 2018).

Yet, overwhelmingly, people displaced by conflict and climate change undertake predominantly short-distance movements, often from rural to urban settings within national borders. When international movements do occur, these tend to be to a neighbouring country or remain intra-regional (Kolmannskog, 2008; Wilkinson et al., 2016). By the end of 2021, more than twice as many people (59 million) are estimated to have been internally displaced by conflict and disasters than had moved across borders as refugees (27 million) (IDMC, 2022; UNHCR, 2022). Findings from the World Bank’s Groundswell report forecast up to 216 million internal migrants globally by 2050 as a result of water scarcity, declining crop productivity and sea-level rise (Voegelé, 2021), although there have been doubts around the causal assumptions that have contributed to such significant forecasts (Selby and Daoust, 2021).

There are many reasons why people may be more likely to be displaced internally rather than across borders. First, many displaced people, if given the choice, prefer to travel along recognisable routes within national borders where they can make the most of family, support networks and pre-existing historical ties, or to go only as far as neighbouring countries from where returns are more accessible should conditions improve back home (Brown, 2008). Second, long-distance migration requires socioeconomic resources beyond the reach of many households – particularly those whose livelihoods and resilience have been eroded by recurring climate shocks and conflict.

In spite of the larger proportion of internally displaced persons (IDPs), relatively little attention has been paid to internal displacement, with most research continuing to focus on the experiences of refugees. Even less attention has been paid to those who are unable to move (Black et al., 2013; Farbotko, 2018; Cundill et al., 2021); who choose to remain for cultural and spiritual reasons rather than relocate elsewhere (McMichael et al., 2021); or for whom relocation may increase, not reduce, vulnerability (Farbotko et al., 2020).

What explains this limited attention to IDPs? On the one hand, much less is known about short-distance, internal movements, which are harder to track and monitor than movements across borders (Bell and Charles-Edwards, 2014). For example, as IDPs do not cross international crossing points, their movements are less likely than those of refugees to be logged by border authorities. On the other hand, a narrative of large-scale international displacement conforms to a crisis framing that has gained momentum in recent years, and which suits various agendas from across the political spectrum better than a narrative of internal displacement. Rather than focusing on people affected by climate change, the alarmist framing and the narrative of ‘environmental refugees’ centre the concerns of wealthy countries that worry about large-scale immigration across their borders without acknowledging their own role and responsibility in exacerbating climate change. As well as fuelling an anti-immigration agenda, it also suits a humanitarian/development need to raise awareness of climate vulnerability and to stimulate funding and action in response (Hartmann, 2010; Bettini, 2013; Durand-Delacre et al., 2020; Farbotko et al., 2020). These priorities and preoccupations overlook entirely the experiences and needs of IDPs themselves – an omission that policy and programmes should seek to correct.

Misconception 5: Displacement renders people passive and unable to adapt to their situation

Reality check 5: People are constantly adapting to their changing circumstances, even after displacement

The increasing likelihood of severe climate-change impacts in the absence of significant and rapid mitigations has refocused attention on adaptation (Adger et al., 2008). Recent research has emphasised mobility as a form of adaptation to climate change (Black et al., 2011; Oakes et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2020). Less research, however, has looked at how people are coping and adapting in displacement. Coping and adapting are distinct yet interlinked processes (Eriksen et al., 2005). Both concepts refer to actions or activities taken in response to changes or pressures. Adapting is perceived to be a ‘process of adjustment’ that ‘seeks to moderate or avoid harm or exploit beneficial opportunities’ (IPCC, 2014: 5), but coping can imply short-term survival or consumption at the expense of longer-term and more sustainable change.

Not only are coping and adaptive strategies of displaced people likely to be overlooked by the humanitarian sector, but they are also likely to be seen as ‘maladaptive’. For example, the strategy of splitting households across multiple locations is a familiar concept within migration studies where it is conceptualised as a ‘rational’ choice undertaken to diversify livelihoods, take pressure off limited resources, access opportunities elsewhere – often in urban settings – and

adapt to pressures at home (Rigg and Salamanca, 2011; Rockenbach et al., 2019). In displacement contexts, however, split households are predominantly understood as negative or harmful practices – the unintended separation of families during flight, forcible conscription of young boys, kidnapping of girls or the segregated detention of parents and children at borders (Miller et al., 2018; Connolly, 2019; Habbach et al., 2020; COAR, 2022).

For displaced people, the potential for negative repercussions and limitations of adapting is very real. In displacement contexts, where opportunities for adapting are limited, people may be more likely to engage in ‘risky’ activities (such as early and polygamous marriage, enrolment in armed groups, sex work, home-brewed alcohol and charcoal burning) that may undermine their own and others’ protection and well-being and have environmental implications – although the line between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ adaptations remains subjective (Mosberg and Eriksen, 2015). Likewise, opportunities for adapting are limited to certain groups that are less likely to be found amid displaced people – typically those with greater access to resources, knowledge, skills and participation in decision-making power (Reuveny, 2007).

Furthermore, the adaptation narrative has been critiqued for concealing a neoliberal agenda for maintaining the economic status quo and shifting responsibility for adaptation and development away from the state to individuals, even though their contribution to climate change is likely to be minimal (Felli and Castree, 2012; Watts, 2015; Bettini and Gioli, 2015; Bettini et al., 2017; Farbotko et al., 2018). The focus is on ‘absorbing’ and ‘adapting’ to changes at the individual level, rather than seeking to ‘transform’ in a radical and collective way the underlying social, political and economic structures that lead to climate vulnerabilities, exposures and conflict in the first place (Escobar, 1996; McEvoy and Wilder, 2012; Kothari, 2014; Arnall et al., 2014).

In spite of these limitations, the binary treatment of migrants and displaced people nonetheless speaks to a wider bias. Whereas migration is increasingly characterised as a ‘transformative’ strategy and celebrated as an adaptation to climate change, displaced people are ring-fenced as being passive victims without agency. This blind spot leads to an oversight: the strategies that affected people are able to deploy themselves can be a critical determinant of their survival and recovery, particularly where humanitarian assistance is limited, unreliable or unavailable. Where assistance is available, aid actors should incorporate the strategies already used by displaced people into their policy and programming – doing more to support their ability to adapt, whilst also working on the wider structural issues to decrease vulnerability.

Implications for research

To address these misconceptions, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is undertaking a two-year research project exploring how urban IDPs adapt to climate change and conflict, as well as in response to the wider set of political economy changes they experience. The project will address three broad research areas. The central issue is how people cope and adapt to meet the compounding challenges of climate change, conflict and displacement. The second area looks at impacts and outcomes for the protection and well-being of people who are displaced, who stay behind and who host. The third area considers the implications of this for humanitarian action, including how far the humanitarian sector is currently taking these implications on board.

Humanitarian assistance is often disconnected from how people live their lives and from the relationships that support and sustain them. The research will consider how humanitarian assistance can better reflect the agency, power and relationships that affected people deploy in displacement. In the context of intersecting conflict- and climate-related risks, how can the humanitarian sector take into account and learn from IDP-led solutions and responses, whilst avoiding the adaptation burden, by which individuals are forced to do everything? What does humanitarian action in support of displaced people's own adaptations look like? What are the opportunities for humanitarian responses to build on existing skills and strategies of IDPs? And, by extension, how can the sector better support the meaningful inclusion and participation of displaced groups, as well as a more concerted overlap with development and peace-building partners?

This project sets out to understand the risks and opportunities of IDP-led responses not just for displaced people, but also for their hosts, and those who stay behind in places of origin. It aims to build the evidence base and raise awareness of the myriad ways in which displaced people choose or are forced to adapt their lives and livelihoods to meet the challenges of displacement. The research also seeks to shift the wider narrative and image of displaced people as passive and without agency. In addition to documenting a range of coping and adaptive strategies, the research aims to better understand how these influence opportunities and outcomes for protection and well-being. In doing so, the research aims to create an entry point for different actors at the local, national and international levels to protect and support displaced people in ways that reflect their lived experiences, personal preferences and future aspirations.

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