Climate Change and Human Mobility in the Pacific

Climate change is now recognised as a factor driving the movement of people around the world - Internationally, migration, displacement and human mobility are recognized in the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage, and further reinforced through the Paris Agreement in 2015. As Pacific Island countries increasingly experience the effects of climate change, more Pacific governments will need to consider options for dealing with human mobility.

Pacific Islands Forum countries have been a leading voice on the global stage on the issue of climate change and human mobility, and will have at least three opportunities in 2016 to engage in policy advocacy that influences the way human mobility is conceptualised and resources mobilised, for the region. They are the World Humanitarian Summit (23rd-24th May), the UNGA Summit on Migrants and Refugees (September 19), and COP22 (7th-18th Nov). It is critical that the Forum Island Countries establish a united position on human mobility in order to support coordinated policy advocacy at these different global forums.

Currently there is little evidence to suggest that the movement of people in the region can be attributed exclusively to the impacts of climate change. The majority of human mobility in the region is linked to development opportunities and the impacts of disasters from natural hazard risk events such as tropical cyclones, flooding and tsunamis. A Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat/United Nations University study in 2015 found that reasons for choosing to migrate were not always the direct consequences of climate change but rather a worsening of living standards, including access to education and employment. Where climate change is a source of migration, it is in combination with factors such as the deterioration of lands, water and infrastructure. Such findings are consistent with statistics on the growing rates of urbanization in the Pacific, which reflect internal movement from rural to urban areas as well as issues of infrastructure and services.

Any policy response to the issue of the movement of people in the Pacific must consider the multiple drivers of human mobility. The term ‘human mobility’ is used at the international level to describe three forms of human movement: displacement, migration and resettlement. While the issue of climate induced displacement dominated the early debates on the issue - creating images of ‘climate refugees’ fleeing as their homes began to sink - more recently, the discourse of climate induced migration has gained prominence. The significance of this shift to migration is that it begins to see human mobility as an adaptation strategy rather than as a negative outcome. Furthermore, the link between migration and development is now firmly established, with a number of direct and indirect references to migration appearing in the Sustainable Development Goals. A number of governments, like those in Fiji and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, have begun to implement national policies on resettlement that focus on moving vulnerable communities to safer locations, internally.

There are a number of key issues that arise from considerations of human mobility in the region. Firstly, as discussed above we must understand the drivers of mobility in order to better envisage options for preventing unwanted or forced displacement of people. Secondly, once people do move, then consideration must be given to the socio-economic factors in the host community or country, including opportunities for meaningful work, consideration of cultural differences, land issues, urbanization, and the potential for conflict. At present, there are few government programs to assist migrants in the region. For example, PIFS-UNU research found that migrants in the region found assistance mostly in family and social networks rather than from community leaders, governmental or other official frameworks of reference.

What can be done?

A finding that seems to apply universally across the world is that there is a need for countries to develop comprehensive policies on governing the movement of people within and between countries.
There are existing policies and initiatives at global, regional and national levels that we can learn from in developing an appropriate regional response to human mobility.

**Global**

At the global level, human mobility is recognised in the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda for development financing. Each of these global policy and action frameworks will offer opportunities for learning, for capacity development, and for mobilizing resources that would enable implementation.

**Regional Level**

In 2015 the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, in collaboration with other regional and international agencies initiated a Pacific Network on Climate Change Migration, Displacement and Resettlement, with the aim of ensuring coordinated and high quality policy advice to Pacific Island governments. Members include Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Pacific Island Development Forum (PIDF) and the Pacific Conference of Churches. All of the participating agencies are involved in regional research and activity around climate and human mobility and therefore have a wealth of information to draw from.

Given the multifaceted nature of human mobility, a challenge for the region is where best to situate the policy discussion. At present, the issue of mobility in the Pacific is dominated by efforts to increase labour mobility. While labour mobility is an important aspect of enabling migration as a development opportunity, it only addresses a small part of the issue. It tends also to place emphasis on development, as driven by individuals and communities rather than it being an obligation of states towards citizens. Regarding disaster risks and climate change, the draft Strategy for Resilient Development in the Pacific: An Integrated Approach to Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management (SRDP) recognizes the need to “integrate human mobility aspects into climate change adaptation and disaster risk management plans and strategies”.

It may be prudent for States to integrate migration into their National Sustainable Development Plans. The government of Tuvalu is leading the way in this regard, having already integrated migration into their National Sustainable Development Plan or Te Kavengia. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, there are social, economic, and environmental aspects of migration that fit squarely within the pillars of sustainable development. Secondly, situating migration within the SDG agenda puts vulnerable people at the heart of the issue and encourages a human rights-based approach to human mobility in the region. While SDG goal 10 focuses on inequality and is the key reference to human mobility, goal 5 and goal 8 also have important targets for the protection of labour migrants.

**So where to from here?**

At the regional level there are several key initiatives and activities that could assist countries to integrate mobility into their sustainable development policies and programs, including:

- Conducting research in order to gain a deeper understanding of human mobility in the region, and particularly as it links to issues of loss and damage, as well as distinguishing between different types of mobility in the region;
- Identifying opportunities at the regional level to find synergies and common themes between SDGs and where greatest impact could be achieved by regional action. This could be supported by establishing model legislation, mobilizing resources, and monitoring and statistics specifically for assisting with mobility as a development issue;
- Developing a regional legal and political framework on human mobility to address the movement of people at the regional and national levels. A human rights-based approach would be an essential component of this.

**Key messages**

- The term ‘human mobility’ is used at the international level to describe three forms of human movement: displacement, migration and resettlement.

- Climate change is now recognised as a factor driving the movement of people around the world.

- Any policy response to the issue of the movement of people in the Pacific must consider the multiple drivers of human mobility.

- The link between migration and development is now firmly established, with a number of direct and indirect references to migration appearing in the Sustainable Development Goals.

- Once people move, consideration must be given to the socio-economic factors in the host community, including opportunities for meaningful work, consideration of cultural differences, land issues, urbanization, and the potential for conflict.

- There is a need for countries to develop comprehensive policies on governing the movement of people within, and between, countries. There are existing policies and initiatives at global, regional and national levels that we can learn from in developing an appropriate regional response to human mobility.

**Author:** Timothy Bryar – Conflict Prevention Adviser, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

Pacific Regionalism Papers are published regularly by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. They are intended to contribute to public debate around issues of importance to the Pacific region. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those held by member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum or the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.