



Addressing Human Mobility in National Climate Policy: Insights from Updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in South America

Summary

Whereas South American countries are experiencing increased population movements in the context of climate change, the international climate governance agenda calls for the adoption of specialised legislation and for enhanced cooperation among different policy frameworks. The revision and update of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) provide a window of opportunity to mainstream human mobility discussions in climate policy frameworks and, thus, support the uptake of effective measures to address the topic.

This briefing paper provides an overview of how the climate change–human mobility nexus has been addressed in the NDCs submitted thus far by South American countries and identifies pathways towards improved management of population movements in revised NDCs. To date, a partial integration of the human mobility perspective prevails: References to the topic indicate a slow – but progressive – acknowledgment of the impacts of a changing climate in vulnerable communities, which may include human displacement.

Given the urgent need to move forward from the recognition of the topic to the establishment of effective measures to tackle forced population movements associated with the impacts of climate change, the updating of NDCs – currently under way in the region – entails an opportunity to incorporate strategies aimed at enhancing the management of human mobility. Ongoing

discussions linked to the inclusion of the human mobility dimension should happen in a holistic manner, taking socio-environmental approaches into consideration. Human displacement and adaptation to climate change are akin processes that need to be aligned with mitigation and related measures. An improved adaptation component of NDCs depends on the participation of distinct actors (such as national departments and agencies, as well as non-governmental and civil society organisations focussed on climate adaptation) at the national level, and not only those dealing with mitigation strategies. Likewise, it should take the incorporation of practical and evidence-based measures into account. These include, for instance, methods to promote the consultation and effective participation of affected communities and strategies to strengthen their resilience.

Furthermore, revised NDCs should call for governance and legal frameworks that include a clear definition of roles and the establishment of effective measures, rooted in the commitment to protect the human rights of affected and vulnerable populations. Revised NDCs should set up policy options to prepare for and respond to human displacement, aiming to reduce communities' vulnerability and exposure. The recognition of human mobility in the context of climate change as a common challenge faced by South American countries entails a window of opportunity to enhance the development of effective measures to address the topic, as well as to foster the implementation of coherent long-term strategies that go beyond short-term political priorities.

Introduction

South America is increasingly affected by the impacts of climate change. Together with political instability, conflicts, population growth, urban sprawl, poverty, a lack of infrastructure and services, and extreme weather events, slow-onset climate processes exacerbate the vulnerability of many people and often force them to move to other locations within the region. It is estimated that approximately 12.8 million people became internally displaced due to environmental and other climate-related disasters between 2008 and 2021 in South America (see Table 1) (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2022).

Notwithstanding, the climate change–human mobility nexus is very diverse: Under certain circumstances, migration might be considered as an adaptation strategy, for example when remittances serve to compensate for climate-induced losses. At the same time, vulnerable groups such as indigenous communities and people living in areas prone to disasters might be in danger of becoming “trapped”, that is, not capable of moving. Based on that, general policy recommendations frequently include a stronger focus on the most vulnerable and a more comprehensive migration governance approach that cuts across different policy fields (Serraglio, Aleksandrova, & Schraven, 2021).

For instance, in 2018, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Task Force on Displacement (TFD) recommended the integration of the topic into the formulation and implementation of NDCs. In short, the NDCs publicly set out what each member state of the UNFCCC planned to do as part of the Paris Agreement to contribute to the international effort of keeping the global temperature rise well below 2 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels – with a preference to limit it to 1.5 degrees. Moreover, the NDCs might also provide the basis for, *inter alia*, exploring new approaches for the enhanced management of migration, displacement and planned relocation processes in updated contributions. As countries are currently revising their NDCs, there is an opportunity to integrate the growing recognition of the topic at the global level into national policy frameworks.

The acknowledgment of the human mobility perspective in domestic climate policies is key not only to raising awareness of the need for managing the human impacts of climate change, but also for defining effective measures to address population movements in this context. Building upon an analysis of how South American countries have integrated the topic into their initial NDCs, this paper seeks to identify pathways towards the improved management of mobility patterns in the revised contributions, providing an opportunity for new approaches to address the issue.

The climate change–human mobility nexus in the current South American NDCs

Mentions of human mobility in the first round of South American NDCs were generic: Only 4 out of 12 (see Table 1)

countries integrated the topic into their official documents (Ecuador, Colombia, Suriname and Uruguay). When analysing the four documents, the lack of a common approach to the incorporation of the subject becomes evident. Whereas Ecuador calls for the development of policies and strategies to deal with temporary and/or permanent population movements associated with climate change, Colombia emphasises human displacements linked to conflicts and the increased pressure on natural resources as a result. Likewise, Suriname and Uruguay raise the issue of planned relocation processes. Thus, gaps can be identified from the analysis of available NDCs.

i) The lack of a clear framing of the climate change–human mobility nexus: References to the topic do not specify whether they refer to internal or international population movements, whether they are temporary or permanent, or whether they are seasonal and/or circular forms of mobility. Similarly, despite identifying planned relocation as a possible adaptation strategy (e.g. National Resettlement Plan – Uruguay’s NDC), the inclusion of detailed guidance, as well as the allocation of responsibilities and resources, are still needed. This lack of clarity may result from the current open debates on the matter at the international level, as well as from the absence of a specific agenda dealing with the climate change–human mobility nexus. The theme is usually presented in a cross-cutting manner in distinct policy frameworks, meaning that national climate and migration agendas often tend to address the subject in an independent manner, without common and harmonised coordination. For instance, progress has been made in acknowledging the climate change–human mobility nexus through the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). The GCM calls for policy coherence and has become a milestone towards the integration of human mobility, environmental, disaster and climate change policy frameworks.

ii) A focus on extreme events and disaster displacement: Mobility patterns are usually only addressed in the context of rapid-onset events such as hurricanes, flooding and landslides. There is little recognition of population movements associated with slow-onset processes – at most, these are related to sea level rise. As a result, attention is mostly given to displacement, leaving other modalities of the human mobility dimension – such as migration and planned relocation – behind. The limited attention given to slow-onset processes can be potentially related to the fact that their impacts take years or decades to be perceived and acknowledged.

iii) Limited acknowledgment of broader climate-related impacts: Impact areas are mainly linked to economic losses caused by extreme weather events (e.g. damages to critical infrastructure, loss of income and/or livelihoods), with less attention being given to non-economic losses (e.g. cultural heritage, social cohesion, human mobility). The lack of data and comprehensive analysis hinders the possibility of planning holistic and long-term actions related to the human

mobility dimension. According to the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on climate change impacts and adaptation, this could lead to the prioritisation of short-sighted interventions that, in turn, result in adverse outcomes – what is known as “mal-adaptation”. Such processes further deepen existing social inequalities and increase the vulnerability of those at risk of displacement (IPCC, 2022).

iv) The lack of proactive measures and comprehensive management: NDCs that have included the climate change–human mobility nexus focus mainly on reactive response measures rather than on managing population movements in advance. For instance, effective measures to prevent forced mobility patterns related to the impacts of a changing climate are non-existent to date.

Country	Disaster events reported (2008-2021)	Disaster internal displacement (2008-2021)	Initial NDCs		Revised NDCs	
			Submission year	Refers to human mobility	Submission year	Refers to human mobility
Argentina	98	159,900	2016	No	2020	Yes
Bolivia	45	430,700	2016	No	2022	Yes
Brazil	153	2,800,000	2016	No	2020	No
Chile	76	4,100,000	2017	No	2020	Yes
Colombia	525	3,600,000	2018	Yes	2020	Yes
Ecuador	56	333,700	2019	Yes	Not yet submitted	
Guyana	6	579	2016	No	Not yet submitted	
Paraguay	19	376,300	2016	No	2021	Yes
Peru	194	674,300	2016	No	2020	No
Suriname	3	12,800	2019	Yes	2019	Yes
Uruguay	32	73,500	2017	Yes	Not yet submitted	
Venezuela	20	222,100	2018	No	2021	No

Source: Authors

As such, the analysis of the initial South American countries' NDCs reveals a marginal integration of the human mobility perspective into the national climate plans. Nonetheless, the uptake of the topic is a sign of increased awareness and a political will to manage the impacts of climate change in vulnerable populations, including those related to human mobility.

This increased awareness has been reflected in the revised NDCs. To date, six (out of nine) South American countries have referred to the subject in their updated NDCs (see Table 1). The updated NDCs of Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Paraguay and Suriname present general statements on the climate change–human mobility nexus. Chile's updated NDC acknowledges that the ability of local communities to respond to the impacts of climate change is key to reducing impacts associated with sudden-onset events, and it was announced that the government commits to producing

guidelines on the effects of climate change in the phenomenon of human mobility.

Considering that the inclusion of the topic in the revised NDCs needs to be further promoted, the next section explores possible directions and presents policy recommendations for South American countries concerning the climate change–human mobility nexus in their adjusted NDCs.

Pathways towards improved management of human mobility in the context of climate and other environmental changes in revised NDCs

The advances seen in Chile's NDC constitute an important step towards the development of further knowledge on the dynamics revolving around the climate change–human mobility nexus. By committing to developing further guidance on the topic, the country facilitates the formulation of priority actions, as well as legal and policy procedures and data for decision-making. Building on the key step taken by Chile and on the lessons learnt from the initial South American countries' NDCs, recommendations can be drawn for South American countries to move forward in addressing the challenges related to climate-induced mobility.

i) The linkages between climate change and human mobility still need to be better understood in the region. The recognition of migration, displacement and planned relocation as impacts of climate change should be coupled with a set of coherent domestic policy and legal frameworks with clear definitions and dispositions, as well as defined responsibilities aimed at protecting the human rights of vulnerable populations. The scope of NDCs notwithstanding, there is a need for national comprehensive legal frameworks that include specific guidelines related to the management of the different types of mobility, as well as mechanisms of interaction between institutions and policies. In this regard, national responses can be enabled by effective global governance arrangements such as the UNFCCC's TFD. Even though a stronger acknowledgment of the topic in the TFD's agenda is still needed (i.e. the interlinkages of human mobility with slow-onset processes and non-economic losses and damages; see Serdeczny, 2017), the implementation of its second phase and respective Plan of Action (since April 2019) can play a key role to this end.

ii) It is critical that national climate plans such as the NDCs also address slow-onset processes and other dimensions of human mobility, rather than just focus on extreme events and displacement. Slow-onset processes may act as a threat multiplier for other drivers of crisis and conflict. That is, they may turn into disaster prompted by a sudden-onset event, increasing the vulnerability of communities and ecosystems to climate change and possibly triggering a cascade of hazards – often prompting forced population movements.

iii) The impacts of climate change need to be better understood to encompass broader socio-environmental impacts. Climate-risk assessments should be built upon the consultation and participation of affected people to

strengthen the resilience of communities. Commensurate policy responses should include measures that are co-created and include different perceptions of risk as a strategy to prevent maladaptation processes and to facilitate movements that enable improved adaptation to the effects of climate change, and to address migration, displacement and planned relocation when and where it occurs. A focus on reducing or avoiding unsafe and irregular migration processes becomes particularly relevant in the face of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, an imminent economic crisis can also have impacts on government efforts and investments made to protect people from climate risks and impacts. This, in turn, can lead to exacerbating pre-existent vulnerabilities, reduced resilience and adaptation capacity and, as a result, a higher risk of population movements.

iv) Establishing a strong knowledge base for data collection, management and dissemination is key for preparedness measures and the comprehensive management of (forced) mobility patterns. Gaps in existing data on the topic hamper proactive response measures and effective decision-making.

v) Ultimately, the recognition of the political nature of the commitments included in the NDCs is a key factor to keep in mind when approaching the incorporation of the human

mobility perspective into national climate plans. As such, dynamics related to government agendas and investment priorities should also be considered. In some contexts, recognising that there is a need for improved management of the impacts of climate change in vulnerable populations implies the failure of national policies and governance limitations – lack of capacities – to effectively respond to the challenges that surround the climate change–human mobility nexus.

In conclusion, the NDCs can serve as tools for moving forward from the recognition to the definition of effective measures to tackle human mobility in the context of climate and other environmental changes. The NDCs should call for the development of human mobility governance frameworks that are rooted in the commitment to protect vulnerable populations' human rights, including the gender perspective and cultural particularities. The recognition of the common challenges faced by South American countries also entails an opportunity to enhance regional and sub-regional frameworks as a strategy to achieve common and joint efforts. This can be a key step for improving awareness and mobilising resources for pertinent actions and improved governance of the climate change–human mobility nexus in South America, and also in other climate-vulnerable regions

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