

'We're talking millions'

Climate-induced displacement is a neglected issue, says international lawyer Walter Kälin. As a member of the Nansen Initiative, he is campaigning for protection of climate refugees.

Extreme weather events are occurring more frequently, depriving people of their livelihoods and displacing them in growing numbers. Can you estimate how many are likely to be displaced by climate change in future?

That's not something we can predict, but we do know that the numbers are increasing. Much will depend on how well countries adapt to the impacts of climate change and whether they take timely action to resettle communities at risk, for example. Prompt action can do much to reduce the number of people affected. If we take no action, we must expect large numbers of refugees. We already have an average of 27 million people a year being displaced by natural disasters, although not always as a result of climate change: the figure includes people displaced by earthquakes, for example, and of course floods occurred in the past as well. Nonetheless, there is a clear upward trend. Climate-induced displacement is increasing. We're talking millions of people.

So this is already happening?

Yes, it's already happening. In my view, the international community has yet to sit up and take notice, probably because most people are displaced within their own country and the problem mainly affects the poorer countries.

Where is climate-induced displacement most apparent?

In Africa, mainly in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region. During the drought in Somalia in 2010 and 2011, for example, almost 300,000 people left their homes in order to avoid death by starvation. And in Central America, people often seek refuge in neighbouring countries after being displaced by disasters. In Asia, floods are increasing, and storms are becoming more frequent and more devastating, causing the displacement of large numbers of people. At present, most of these dis-

placed persons remain in their home country or region, but that may change.

Are these the world regions where we must expect the largest increase in the number of climate refugees in future?

In principle, yes, but the actual extent and regional distribution will very much depend on whether the international community reaches agreement at the climate summit, whether it manages to significantly reduce emissions of harmful greenhouse gases, and whether it provides enough funds to mitigate the impacts. If it does so, the numbers will fall and migration flows will be easier to manage. If not, we must expect this to become a major problem. That's why all eyes are on Paris.

How can and must we help the affected countries?

We must invest in three areas. Firstly, we must identify all the regions at risk and launch appropriate adaptation programmes. That can include measures such as dike construction and targeted resettlement, but it can also mean restructuring agricultural systems, for example by switching to salt-resistant crops. Secondly, we must facilitate legal out-migration, both temporary and permanent, from these regions. And thirdly, we must offer adequate protection to people who are displaced from their homes while also providing support to host communities, whose resources will otherwise quickly become overstretched.

All this costs money. What role can the Green Climate Fund play here?

It will cost billions. No one can say for sure, at this stage, exactly how much, but it's money well spent. The Green Climate Fund has a key role to play because it provides



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funding for climate change mitigation and adaptation in poorer countries. However, the issue of climate-induced displacement has not yet been adequately incorporated into the Fund's mandate. In the Nansen Initiative's view, that has to change.

At present, climate refugees find themselves in legal limbo. They are not protected by the 1951 Refugee Convention. Do we need an international agreement?

Yes, ideally, because these refugees genuinely have no rights whatsoever. But I think there is little chance of that at present. The problem would have to be recognised at the international level, and that is not happening at the moment.

Interview: Friederike Bauer



The full transcript of this interview with Walter Kälin can be accessed using the [akzente app](http://www.giz.de/akzenteapp).
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