

Climate Crisis, Global Migration, and Disaster Research

Social Work as a Bridging Agent

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The man-made climate crisis has a devastating impact on opportunities and resources of people's wellbeing. Climate induced disasters are major causes of displacement and trigger damages and losses for millions, in particular for poor communities in the Global South. Moreover, a significant, but unknown number of people are forced into displacement as a consequence of slow-onset and cascading disasters (UNDRR/UNU-EHS 2022), caused by climate change such as droughts, cyclones, hurricanes, desertification, rising sea levels and etc. Climate change-induced migration and displacement, environmental degradation and disasters expose communities to high levels of risks (IOM 2020; Schmelz 2019). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) forecasts that by 2050 200 million to 1 billion people will be forced to leave their home due to environmental changes. Moreover, natural and man-made hazards negatively impact over 143 million persons in Africa, Asia and Latin America. According to the Global Report on Internal Displacement (IDMC 2021) climate related disaster events have doubled in the last 20 years due to increase in greenhouse gas emissions. An estimated 7 million people are to be uprooted by disasters (Medina et al. 2022: 75). While there are criticism for the high estimates of impacts of climate change, it is impossible to refute the substantial body of scientific evidence exposing the rapid changes of earth's eco and climate systems. People living in the poorest countries are the least responsible for the global warming and environmental crisis, but often suffer the most from lack of coping capacities and a disproportionate

disaster exposure (Xu et al. 2020; Markkanen/Anger-Kraavi 2019; Eckstein et al. 2021).

This article has a few key aims: (a) To provide insights into the nexus of climate crisis, climate induced disasters and forced migration, (b) Outlining the role of key stakeholders of climate change adaptation and global governance strategies, (c) Showcasing the role social work can play as a bridging agent between vulnerable people, disaster response and relief services, and the inter/national governance of disasters and relief and rehabilitation efforts, (d) Lastly, the article introduces the international and inter-disciplinary network *Connect4Resilience* formed in 2022 to facilitate, enhance and to call attention to knowledge and practice gaps relevant to climate crises induced social impacts such as forced migration and displacement. The network brings together researchers, practitioners and policy stakeholders to advocate the use of social work to strengthen social science approaches towards climate crisis, inter/national disaster governance and disaster response and relief efforts. The network facilitates co-creation of solution-oriented, transformative and policy relevant knowledge generation. The article concludes with a short outlook.

Climate Crisis, Migration, and Disasters

Global Migration studies reveal that displacement within and across borders in contexts of climate crisis and environmental degradation intersectionally aggravate vulnerabilities of disadvantaged groups, particularly women and children, elderly and people with disabilities (e.g. Balsari et al. 2020; Powers et al. 2018). For instance, disasters increase the risk of all forms of violence—especially gender-based violence, risk of family separation and issues relating to land, housing and property right. Moreover, some vulnerable groups are exposed to multi-dimensional impacts due to forced migration. One such group are children that are forced to migrate. A study by Malith De Silva (2023) reveals that children that were involuntarily relocated experience reduced quality of life due to lack of access to common infrastructure, physical and psychological mistreatment, sexual abuse, social exclusion, reduced access to recreational activities and education. De Silva (2023) further showed that children also suffer due to the challenges and difficulties experienced by parents or guardians such as social exclusion, clashes with host communi-

ties and negative impacts on their livelihoods. Furthermore, loss of personal documents undermines overall the access to support services and political rights. Natural and man-made displacement often lead to resettlement or relocation of affected communities. Studies (Fernando 2010; Ruwanpura/Hollenbach 2013) emphasize that displacement and relocation of individuals exposes them to additional vulnerabilities such as reduced quality of life, disrupting social support networks, increased morbidity, labelling, and social discrimination. Moreover, inter/national displacement and relocation/resettlement can create a vicious cycle of poverty transferring vulnerabilities and poverty trans-generationally. At the World Climate Conference in November 2022 the Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility (AGCC) called for immediate action. Both, climate-related sudden- and slow-onset disasters are underpinned by challenges such as unsustainable ecosystems, conflict and war, urbanization, and water shortage. These further increase complex cascading risks. The AGCC describes the current interconnections of climate crisis and global migration as follows (AGCC 2022):

- Climate-induced disasters trigger the flight of millions of people from their homes each year. In 2021, hazardous weather events displaced 22 million individuals. The majority of displaced persons remain in their own country, whereas in other situations displaced leave the country in search of safety.
- Most serious forms of displacement occurs in the Global South, but storms, floods and fires in Australia, Europe and North America also force people in these world regions to flee from their homes. Forced migrants and previously displaced people live under high risks and in extremely vulnerable conditions, suffering mostly from climate emergencies. The same is true for ocean and ocean-dependent communities.

In addition, the 6th Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2022) points out that climate change is increasingly responsible for humanitarian crisis in vulnerable contexts. Extreme climate and weather events increase displacement in every part of the world. The IPCC report projects an increase of 200 per cent for human displacement in case of 1.5 °C warming across Africa and a rise of 600 per cent in case of 2.6 °C of warming. These facts and warnings underline the accelerated risks of climate-induced migration and displacement and call for immediate international cooperation

with the aim to limit global warming to 1.5 °C related to pre-industrial levels in order to prevent future displacements and risks, involved impacts and socio-economic as well as human costs. IPCC proposes adaptation measures as for example migration, planned relocation and resettlement emphasizing that human-rights based adaptation strategies have to sustainably increase the resilience of individuals and nations, but also reduce vulnerabilities of populations that lack resources to move out of highly risk prone areas. In case displacement cannot be prevented, advanced human-centered and demand-driven planning, technical support and capacity building on various scales need to be offered and promoted within the most affected and risk exposed countries to avoid human, social and economic loss and damage (ibid.).

Global Governance Actors and Strategies

In global governance, climate change adaptation and the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions are the principal strategies to reduce vulnerabilities regarding climate-related displacement (Mokhnacheva 2022). In the *Sendai Framework of Disaster Risk Reduction* (SFDRR)—the most recent international strategy in that field (UNISDR 2015: 10)—all signing nations recognized that climate-related disasters are a central driver of inter/national displacement. The Sendai Framework (2015–2030) pleads for focused actions within and across sectors at local, national, regional, and global level targeting four priority areas:

- (a) understanding disaster risk
- (b) disaster risk governance
- (c) investing in resilience and
- (d) build back better.

With the SFDRR the focus of international governance changed from a narrow perspective of response towards a wider perspective including preventive measures and reduction of existing socio-political and economic vulnerabilities. Therefore, strongly interlinking disaster risk reduction (DRR) with successfully achieving global social and sustainable development as outlined in the Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other

relevant international agreements (IOM 2020) highlighting specifically the necessity of needs-driven bottom-up and community-centered approaches. These advancements demonstrate a shift from government to governance and from centralization to decentralization and answer to the increase of “trans-system social ruptures” demanding for more flexibility, adaptiveness and multi-sectoral cooperation (Wachtendorf 2009: 379; IPCC 2012; Pelling 2011). The IOM in particular is engaged in the inclusion of forced migrants in disaster risk management as they often lack access to services, resources and information that affect their lives and security in regular times and in disaster situations. These include for example limited language proficiency, lack of trust in authorities, restriction on mobility, discrimination and racism (Guadagno et al. 2018).

Disasters affect people unequally. Kathleen Tierney (2019) identified racism, gender and class as crucial categories influencing vulnerability. More often than not, these dimensions of vulnerability interact and cause inter-sectional patterns of vulnerabilities (Kuran et al. 2020). The matter is consequently less, *if* a person is vulnerable, but *how* vulnerable a person is. The degree of vulnerability results from the available coping capacity of someone compared to the requirements of a particular situation. In this sense, a person or a group is not per se vulnerable, but might find herself in a vulnerable situation, if the requirements exceed the coping capacities at hand (Gabel 2019). The coping capacities available to communities are not a given, but influenceable. They depend on the recognition of needs and the inclusivity within the society (Krüger 2019). Or in other words: people are not only vulnerable, but are equally made vulnerable in particular situations. This dynamic understanding of vulnerability has become increasingly important in disaster research (Tierney 2019; Wisner et al. 2004). Furthermore, it has found its way into political conceptions of vulnerability. In this sense, the idea of vulnerable situations is presented prominently in the SFDRR and replaced the wording of vulnerable groups that has largely been used in previous international strategies (UNISDR 2015; Krüger/Gabel 2022). This shifting nature of definition is important, since it aids to better understand that it is a political duty to reduce vulnerability by providing the means—financial, political and social—to be able to cope with particular situations and challenges.

Bearing Tierney’s dimensions of disaster vulnerability in mind, all forms of involuntary migration and particularly displacement is suited to increase

the vulnerability of affected people. People who are forced to move lose their social networks, in many cases—if at all—they have only limited economic capital at their disposal and need to navigate through a relatively new and risk exposed environment. Depending on their legal status, migrants might face restrictions with regard to their access to public services or might hesitate to make use of them (e.g., in the case of undocumented migrants or asylum seekers; see: Tierney 2019: 160–162). Particularly social and economic capital, and also the legal status and cultural capital are crucial factors determining disaster resilience (Aldrich/Meyer 2015; Krüger 2019). Therefore, climate-related disasters not only cause migration, but also affect large parts of the migrant population disproportionately.

The multitude of global governance mechanisms demonstrate the international awareness of the precarious situation of people who are affected by climate-induced displacement and migration. The *Nansen Initiative Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change* (“Nansen Protection Agenda”) addresses the need for a more coherent approach to the protection of people displaced across borders in the context of disasters and climate change. It was endorsed by 109 countries including the European Union. The successor of the Nansen Initiative is the Platform on Disaster Displacement (disasterdisplacement.org).

Also, the *United Nations Secretary General’s High Level Panel on Internal Displacement* was initiated in September 2021. In June 2022, the *United Nations Secretary General’s Action Agenda on Internal Displacement* got established. Both agencies address internal displacement proactively in order to strengthen assistance to internally displaced people and to prioritize prevention and durable solutions¹.

Social Work as Bridging Agent

The thesis of this paper is that social work has a central role to play in global governance of disaster management and building resilience. The mandate of social work is the creation of inclusion, social justice and solidarity. All of these factors enhance the resilience of marginalized and deprived people. More than ever, social work is needed as a component of disaster relief.

¹ <https://internaldisplacement-panel.org>

Such an approach has been widely discussed internationally, for example in the context of Green Social Work (Dominelli 2012). Lena Dominelli sees an engagement with disasters not as a specific subfield of social work, but as central to it. For this purpose, she developed the *Green Social Work Model* and identified social workers as advocacy workers and awareness builders in the event and beyond the event of disaster. Preventive, eco-social approaches play a central role in her concept (Schmelz 2021). Moreover, another attribute of social work strengthens the proposition to integrate social work in climate change adaptation and disaster management. This attribute is the central role of social work in the case of vulnerable communities. Accordingly, social work considers and treats service users as experts. Therefore, services offered to vulnerable communities are tailor made, community-centered, and bottom-up. Therefore, the resolutions are capable of addressing the specific needs, demands and requirements of vulnerable communities. Therefore, by employing social work as a central player to cope with impacts of climate crisis disaster relief and services aimed at displaced communities can be sensitive to unique characteristics of affected groups. By doing so, social work contributes to the development of community-centric policies and regulations, in other words: social work has an unique ability to bring a bottom up approach to policy formation and implementation in disaster governance and disaster risk reduction.

In German-speaking Europe in particular, this approach has so far been little established (Treptow 2007, 2018; Bähr 2014; Schmitt 2021). In order to further anchor social work as a key player of global disaster relief, we propose an understanding of social work as a *bridging agent* (Hollenbach et al. 2022). Recent disasters highlighted the value of social work as a linking partner and bridging agent working at the frontline of complex social vulnerabilities to decision- and policy-makers of disaster management and governance. Even so, social work practice has proven to be an important and relevant stakeholder, the profession has not yet found its position within the field of disaster management, disaster governance and policy making on global level. Reducing social work to a social-welfare issue for everyday life deprives it from its potential to increase disaster resilience in marginalized societal groups. This is important to mitigate the calamitous consequences of climate-induced hazards. Moreover, it strengthens the resilience of the whole society through improved and better coping and adaptation strategies regarding complex vulnerabilities.

The *Connect4Resilience* Network

In order to bring together social work capacities and to make it visible also towards and in exchange with other disciplines and professions, the „*Connect4Resilience* Network“² was founded in 2022 and is financially supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF). The network was founded by contacting individual members who were already working on the topic of social work as an agent of disaster relief in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Sri Lanka, Great Britain, Estonia and the US, and expanded internationally including interested colleagues from various disciplines and backgrounds. It understands itself as a network of action-oriented researchers and knowledge brokers continuously aiming for better understanding and building bridges between theory, practice, and policy in the field of social work, disaster research and aid governance. As Margareta Wahlstrom (2017), former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) notes:

“Social Work and DRR policy share common ground [...]. There is nothing natural about a disaster itself [...] it is the product of risk, which is in turn rooted in a combination of factors, ranging from human behavior and vulnerability, e.g. bad policy decisions and environmental degradation” (ibid.: 334).

Therefore, we do understand research as part of the larger global project achieving the SDG-Agenda 2030 and Sendai Framework of Disaster Risk Reduction. The starting point is to deepen knowledge production and bringing together individuals and institutions of different backgrounds to co-create new knowledge, stronger networks and partnerships supporting the societal and political transformation towards a more disaster resilient, disaster prepared and sustainable society. The overall aim is to connect various stakeholders from research, policy, practice, and society to:

2 *Applicants*: Pia Hollenbach & Monika Götzö; *Coordination*: Pia Hollenbach, Monika Götzö & Caroline Schmitt. *Further members*: Dilanthi Amaratunga, Victor Chikadzi, Malith De Silva, Swetha Rao Dhananka, Nishara Fernando, Olivia Frigo-Charles, Melanie Gall, Lauri Goldkind, Anke Kaschlik, Marco Krüger, Noel Muridzo, Kristi Nero, Jana Posmek, Andrea Schmelz, Katharina Wezel.

1. better prepare and plan for future disasters and crises;
2. better integrate and establish knowledge and implementation capacities for resilient and sustainable DRR planning and doing;
3. build capacity and create awareness of the role of social work and social services in disaster contexts;
4. foster societal transformation on various scales to support the achievement of the SDG-Agenda 2030.

Conclusion

The paper provided a comprehensive insight in to the nexus between climate crisis, disasters, and international and internal (forced) migration movements. Social work and disaster management still seem to be separated spheres. However, social work is able to reduce disaster vulnerability by increasing coping capacities at various scales. It is a means to prevent that migrants being treated as passive vulnerable objects, since social work aims at increasing the scope for action. Therefore, it takes the agency of the affected people seriously and therewith contributes to fostering resilience.

To further strengthen and integrate social work approaches in disaster governance and management and to promote an inter-disciplinary and inter-professional exchange, the network *Connect4Resilience* was founded. We neither promote social work as a panacea against vulnerability, nor do we want to see social work structures being made responsible for resilience-building. However, we want to emphasize the potential of social work as a bridging agent and to showcase the importance of adopting and developing the socio-political and financial requirements for social work practice to live up to its potential within disaster governance and management. We would be pleased if colleagues are interested in joining our network and contact one or several of the network members.

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