Climate Change, Migration, and Emergencies: In Search of a Policy Framework

Climate change has the potential to fundamentally transform the nation’s understanding of homeland security and public safety and to affect capabilities to adapt to emergencies. In response, CNA examines the impact of climate change on U.S. policy in such reports as Climate Change, Migration, and Emergencies: In Search of a Policy Framework. This report specifically focuses on how climate change will interact with migration, both as a cause of large-scale population displacements and, in turn, as a consequence of shifting settlement patterns.

For the United States, the future of climate change-induced migration is deeply intertwined with the economic and social infrastructure of its “near perimeter,” an area encompassing the southern rim of the U.S. mainland from San Diego to Miami, and including the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America. Although often ignored, the near perimeter is a highly interdependent region; what happens in one part of it will directly impact another.

Policy debate on these issues will involve at least three broad sets of strategic issues. First, the debate will need to focus on the “near perimeter” region as a whole. A feature of climate change is its capacity to generate multiple, simultaneous crises in various parts of the region, putting as much strain on the interdependencies in the region as on any particular community. Second, the new debate will require a focus on institutional change. The complexities of climate change call for crosscutting perspectives and initiatives that are multi-agency and multi-disciplinary. Third, adaptation planning will need to carefully reconsider the value of migration within a region affected by climate change.

Migration itself is a powerful, viable adaptation to crises. Yet, it has both positive and negative consequences that do not necessarily or easily align with recovery needs.

Following are potential courses of action for U.S. policymakers to consider as they pursue a dialogue on these three sets of issues. In each case, homeland security and emergency management communities have a primary role, although in many situations, that role will be in support of broader economic, social or political goals. A more detailed discussion to help policymakers begin a dialogue on the potential courses of action is included in the main body of this report.

Regional Cooperation

U.S. strategists will need to strengthen the ability to work with regional allies to effectively plan for adapting to a complex and unpredictable future. These region-wide efforts should include the following:

- Improve and coordinate disaster response.
- Develop a common framework for assessing risk.
- Include social adaptation consequences in broader climate change adaptation strategies.
- Consider local gender roles in broader climate change adaptation strategies.
- Strengthen coordination between law enforcement agencies throughout the region.
- Re-evaluate security cooperation strategies for the impacts of climate change on border-line “failed states.”

**INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

By its character, climate change cannot be the purview of any particular agency or issue-driven agenda. Interagency-wide coordination is needed to catch up to the U.S. intelligence community’s own understanding of the risks of climate change, and to the international community’s pursuit of new approaches. Interagency initiatives should include the following:

- Address how agencies within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should coordinate to adopt climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies.
- Encourage the Federal Emergency Management Agency to take on a broader role in climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies for the “near perimeter” region.
- Urge DHS to take a lead role in developing law enforcement strategies for climate change.

**ADAPTATION PLANNING FOR POPULATION DISPLACEMENTS**

Discussions of climate change and population displacements are typically confined to the current framework of debates around immigration admissions policies—who and how many migrants will countries allow to resettle inside their territory if climate change creates large displacements? Much work needs to be done to make a transition from this “admissions” framework to one that focuses more on the complex role of migration in fostering the region’s resilience overall. New perspectives should include the following:

- Integrate population displacement into regional adaptation planning.
- Factor future population displacements into large-scale investment strategies.
- Review the legal framework for migration due to climate-change.
- Incorporate labor migration programs into regional adaptation planning.

**CONCLUSION**

Climate change and migration are likely to be the core of complex interdependencies that determine the fundamental well-being of communities throughout the North American region. People will increasingly face risks to food and water supplies, to the ability to maintain stable families and communities, to public safety, and perhaps to national security. A climate change-oriented adaptation strategy needs to develop a risk-based approach to migration issues that focuses on identifying and creating alternatives to existing patterns. If nothing else, climate change will create a number of unpredictable situations that require new core principles, values, and possibilities as understood throughout the region to adapt to circumstances as they arise.

Past and current policy frameworks are unlikely to guide us in anticipating and planning for these changes. Rather, it will take the full engagement of the diverse leaders and communities throughout the region to find ways to continuously work together so that those caught up in crises will be able to successfully resist the worst impacts, recover, and resume their lives quickly. The collective goal should be to renew communities in ways that offer even more opportunities for advancement than they had before.