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United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

2021 International Dialogue on Migration

Accelerating integrated action on sustainable development: migration, the environment and climate change

Statement by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The Climate Change – Trafficking in Persons/Smuggling of Migrants Nexus

Panel 3: Examining the linkage between Migration, Environment and Climate Change and the Humanitarian, Development, Peace Nexus (HDPN)

The Problem - The fragility of natural environments and the adverse consequences of climate change increasingly push people worldwide to move from and across territories in various ways and with a range of urgency – these patterns have complex and evolving intersections to the crimes of trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants. Climate change and the consequential disaster displacement exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and create new ones, which puts people at risk of becoming commodities for human traffickers and migrant smugglers.

Impact on climate migrants - ‘Climate migrants’ are often left with no other option than resorting to unscrupulous individuals and groups associated with migrant smuggling, and, subsequently, often become entrapped in exploitation at the hands of traffickers. Criminals take advantage of their vulnerabilities, both along the migration route and upon arrival in transit and destination countries.

Organised criminal networks offer illegal services to smuggle people into destination countries, often subjecting them to horrendous violence and abuse; whilst others exploit people through trafficking, with false or deceiving promises of livelihoods and better opportunities and subjection to debt bondage. The registered incidence of human trafficking as well as the increased activity of migrant smuggling syndicates in the wake of sudden- and slow-onset disasters validate the necessity of a planned response to address these cross-cutting issues.

Some suggested solutions - To mitigate the impact of human trafficking and migrant smuggling that is likely to increase because of global climate change, it is vital to improve the resilience of communities, by addressing the socio-economic root causes, such as poverty, under development and lack of education and employment opportunities. Enhancing sustainable livelihood options to curb illicit businesses is a key factor in advancing truly sustainable development in line with the related 2030 Agenda.

Creating awareness among the communities affected by the adverse consequences of climate change regarding safe migration and the criminal intention and modus operandi of traffickers and smugglers would lead to prevention of these crimes, without compromising on their freedom of mobility. Awareness raising should also target facilitators who unwittingly or indirectly participate in the chain of events leading to the commission of human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

People’s aspirations for better lives and livelihoods and their consequent migration needs to be met by pathways that are safe, orderly and regular. It is imperative to make vulnerable people powerful agents of change. We need to listen to their stories and learn from their suffering to build a better and safe future.



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Strong state action through investigation and prosecution of crimes of trafficking and smuggling, including of the transnational organised crime that can sit behind them, would create deterrence among traffickers and smugglers and prevent them from exploiting vulnerabilities of people displaced due to the impact of climate change.

Action by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime - The UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the guardian of the international legal framework on countering trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants, works with UN partners, other international and regional organizations as well as academia, civil society representatives and the private sector, to develop comprehensive responses aimed at preventing human trafficking and smuggling of migrants, protecting those adversely affected by these crimes, and prosecuting the perpetrators.

On the occasion of the 2021 International Dialogue on Migration, dedicated to responding to the challenges posed by climate change and environment fragility to migration, UNODC calls on partners to redouble efforts to promote integrated action to respond to the threat posed by organised crime to the life, dignity and safety of migrants.

UNODC calls for action with a renewed engagement and proposes the following suggestions and recommendations:

1. Conduct in-depth research on the intersections between climate change and trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants particularly within migration flows with a high incidence of climate migrants, towards the development of informed understanding and policy making.
2. Mainstream considerations related to climate change issues into relevant trafficking and smuggling standard operating procedures, particularly addressing vulnerabilities and referral practices, and to plug policy gaps related to the human trafficking and smuggling and climate change nexus.
3. Strengthen and target awareness campaigns on human trafficking and migrant smuggling and its correlation with climate change in migrant areas of origin, transit and destination.
4. Provide targeted responses and protection measures for smuggled migrants and trafficking victims and those vulnerable to becoming the subject of such crimes throughout periods of crisis, including ensuring accessible and affordable public and social services, such as health care and care for children and older persons, and social protection measures.
5. Enhance cooperation at the regional and international levels to respond to emerging threats of climate change and the consequent trends in the smuggling of migrants as well as trafficking in persons, in particular related to the prosecution and investigation of these crimes.