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JOHANNESBURG — Governments around the world are engaged in a series of talks that could fundamentally alter how the movement of people across borders is managed. One dialogue is focused on the protection of refugees, the other on migration.

These discussions, which are being led by the United Nations, will not result in legally binding agreements. But the talks themselves are a rare chance to forge consensus on contemporary migration challenges. And, most importantly, they will offer the international community an opportunity to plan for the impact of climate change, which will soon become a key driver of global displacement and migration.

At last count, there were some 258 million migrants worldwide, with 22.5 million people registered as refugees by the UN Refugee Agency. These numbers will be dwarfed if even the most modest climate-related predictions are borne out. According to the International Organization for Migration, climate change could displace as many as 1 billion people by 2050. And yet no international treaty covers climate-induced migration—a gap that must be addressed now.

Not since 1951 have international standards for refugee protection received so much attention. That year, with more than 80 million people displaced after World War II, UN member-countries ratified a comprehensive framework to standardize their treatment of refugees. The Global Compact on Refugees that is currently under discussion builds on this framework with strategies to empower refugees and assist host governments. Most significantly, it would commit signatories to protecting “those displaced by natural disasters and climate change.”

The second agreement is even more consequential for the management of climate-induced displacement. There has never been a global treaty governing migration, and past bilateral efforts have focused almost exclusively on violence and conflict as root causes of displacement. The proposed Global Compact for Migration goes beyond these factors, and notes that climate change is among the “adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin.”

This type of regulatory language reaffirms what at-risk populations around the world already know: Droughts, natural disasters, desertification, crop failure, and many other environmental changes are upending livelihoods and rendering entire communities uninhabitable. In my country, South Africa, a record drought is forcing major cities to consider water rationing. If water shortages persist, migration is certain to follow.

Resource scarcity is particularly dangerous in politically unstable states, where climate change has already been linked to violent conflict and communal upheaval. For example, disputes over fertile land and fresh water fueled the war in Darfur, and even the current crisis in Syria — one of the greatest sources of human displacement today — began after successive droughts pushed Syrians from rural areas into cities. It is not a stretch to predict that climate change will produce more bloodshed in the coming years.

The two UN frameworks could serve as a basis for planning how to manage the coming climate-induced migrations. With scientific modeling to guide decision-making, states could draft orderly, dignified, and equitable relocation strategies. This is certainly a smarter approach than the ad hoc responses to date.

But history tells us that governments are reluctant to seek out collective solutions to forced migration. This failure is visible today in the haunting and inexcusable plight of refugees around the world.

As we enter the final months of the Compact talks, what should we expect of those negotiating the global plan for managing unprecedented movements of people? The causes and consequences of climate change demand close attention. Displaced people must be able to get on with their lives in dignity. The test of world leaders will be whether the global compacts on refugees and migrants can achieve this. —Project Syndicate

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Kumi Naidoo, secretary-general-designate of Amnesty International, is a former executive director of Greenpeace International.

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