Modern Slavery
Issue Brief

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Climate- and conflict-induced migration and modern slavery: challenges and opportunities for action

The number of forcibly displaced people within and across borders has nearly doubled in the last 10 years, reaching its highest level since the end of the Second World War.[1] Climate change and armed conflict are becoming increasingly relevant determinants of this drastic increase in forced migratory flows, driving millions of people facing economic, social, and existential threats to leave their homes each year. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), at the end of 2021 a record 59.1 million people were internally displaced due to violence and natural disasters[i]; this figure is predicted to exceed 200 million by 2050.[2] Although precise estimates of the cross-national migratory flows associated with conflict and climate disasters are not available, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that an increasing number of people also turn to international migration as a means of adaptation to environmental impacts as well as to escape violence.

Individuals forced into distress migration and displacement due to conflict and environmental disasters usually lack family and community networks and have limited opportunities for income generation in their new destinations. Additionally, conflict- and climate-induced migrants crossing international borders often become "undocumented" migrants, with limited access to government support, legal and labour protection in transit and destination countries. The socio-economic vulnerabilities of these internal and international migrants - most of whom come from low- and lower-middle income nations - are thus intensified as a result of conflict and natural disasters, which exacerbates their

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i The United Nations defines internally displaced persons (IDPs) as "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border."

Key Findings and Recommendations

- Climate change and armed conflict are becoming increasingly important drivers of internal displacement and cross-national migratory flows.

- Individuals forcibly displaced due to conflict and environmental disasters face heightened vulnerability to modern slavery and human trafficking – exacerbated by systems invariably overwhelmed by the crisis.

- Conflict and climate change further interact to create a "double vulnerability" to exploitation among populations in war-torn regions.

- Research shows unscrupulous brokers and employers take advantage of those searching for opportunities to restore their lives as they resort to high-risk behaviours and potentially dangerous coping strategies.

- Programmatic responses aimed at systematically tackling the key factors that put climate migrants and conflict refugees at risk of modern slavery victimisation are still in their infancy.

- Current humanitarian responses to climate- and conflict-induced crises frequently fail to address – or even account for - the risks of exploitation among IDPs and refugees, despite evidence of added vulnerability.

- Greater awareness and educational campaigns on modern slavery and human trafficking amongst front-line aid workers is needed to improve the detection and protection of migrants in potentially exploitative situations.

- It is also critical to provide people in IDP and refugee camps with education and training opportunities allowing them to access income generation and employment opportunities, as well as enrolling children in formal or informal educational activities

- The establishment of temporary labour pathways for migrants displaced by conflict and natural disasters could reduce the risk of modern slavery victimisation in these settings.

- More research is needed on the links between climate- and conflict-induced migration and modern slavery victimisation. Much of the literature is context- and location-specific, with limited generalisable findings. To scale-up existing research and design global and cooperative solutions, it is critical to strengthen collaborations between all relevant stakeholders, sharing and harmonising data and analyses to inform policy-making.

risk of falling victims of modern slavery.[ii] Concomitantly, government support and law enforcement systems that struggle to deal with modern slavery in "normal" times become quickly overwhelmed in times of crisis, leaving many of these populations unprotected. This helps to explain why, as noted by the IOM, "Migrants who reported war, conflict or natural disasters as the main reason for leaving their places of origin are predicted to be more vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking on their journey than migrants who left for other reasons."[3]

In this issue brief, we survey the existing literature and available evidence discussing the connection between conflict and climate-change induced migration and modern slavery. We then explore the policy responses that have been promoted by governments, international organisations, NGOs and civil society actors to combat modern slavery among these forcibly displaced populations. We conclude by pointing to possible future steps policy-makers, practitioners and other relevant stakeholders could undertake to address the links between modern slavery, conflict- and climate-change induced migration.

Exploring the link between climate change, conflict, migration and modern slavery

There is increasing evidence that environmental and climate change induces high-risk migratory patterns as a response to both sudden natural disasters and slow-onset processes such as sea-level rise, changes in rainfall patterns and droughts. The vast majority of climate-induced displacements take place internally or regionally, rather than internationally. Natural disasters were the cause of most (62%) internal displacements worldwide in 2021, the vast majority in low- and middle-income countries that typically lack resources and infrastructure to provide the humanitarian, economic and social protection required by these forcibly displaced persons.[4] In the long run, many of these internally displaced "environmental refugees" become economic migrants, and many of them travel to foreign countries as labour migrants.[5] Some authors further predict that the coming years will witness an increase in the number of asylum claims in high-income countries from people leaving climate-affected low and middle-income countries.[6]

Evolution of internally displaced people due to climate disasters and conflict
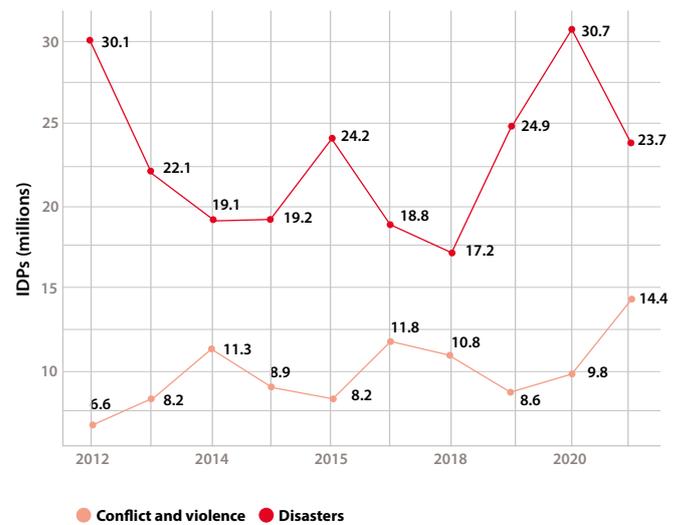
Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2022).

These climate-induced displacements heighten existing risks to modern slavery. As is well known, migrants' vulnerability to modern slavery victimisation is shaped by various individual and contextual factors, including poor economic conditions (poverty, unemployment, lack of education, low skill levels and high indebtedness), the lack of support systems faced by individuals evacuated from their communities and isolated from their families and social networks, malfunctioning of the rule of law, poor governance structures and – in the case of international migrants – restrictive migration policies in their destination countries.[7] Climate change acts as a "risk multiplier" that interacts with these social, economic and political variables, exacerbating – already – vulnerable individuals' exposure to exploitation and slavery-like practices. Some estimates suggest that vulnerability to human trafficking increases by 20 to 30% when climate-related disasters take place.[8]

The links between climate change, migration and modern slavery are especially marked among populations living in precarious or uncertain economic conditions. The most severe impacts of climate change are not necessarily in areas exposed to the greatest environmental threats, but in places where communities' capacities to cope with these threats are lacking and populations are already struggling and have limited resources to overcome the consequences of extreme weather events. The effect of economic marginalisation – poverty, unemployment, lack of education, low skill

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[ii] According to the IDMC, almost three quarters of the people displaced by conflict and natural disasters are located in the East Asia and Pacific region and in Sub-Saharan Africa.

levels – is compounded among individuals whose sociodemographic characteristics (above all, gender and age) further restrict their educational and employment opportunities, making them a priori more vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. UNICEF reports that climate change increases the risk of women and young girls being pushed onto unsafe migration or displacement pathways that can heighten their risk of sexual exploitation and physical abuse. The relationship between crises-related displacement and forced marriage is well documented, as is the fact that the risk of child marriage increases when families are faced with economic hardships caused by climate change.[9]

Among these socio-economically vulnerable popula-tions, sudden-onset natural disasters can cause unex-pected destruction of assets, loss of lives and means of livelihoods that aggravate the incidence of poverty, lack of economic opportunities and gender discrimination. Households and communities who base their economic subsistence on natural resource-based occupations (e.g., fishing, agriculture), in particular, may be thrown into poverty and entrapped by debts following droughts or floods that reduce the yields necessary for subsistence. In the absence of viable local options of making a living, these populations may be forced to search for alternative sources of income.

Unscrupulous brokers and employers take advantage of those searching for opportunities to restore their lives, as they are likely to be more prone to resort to high-risk behaviours and potentially dangerous coping strategies. For instance, field research conducted in Bangladesh after Cyclone Sidr in 2007 showed an uptick in human trafficking, when criminal networks began to operate in the disaster-affected region, preying on vulnerable women – e.g., widows, household heads - and men desperate to cross the border to India in order to find employment and income.[10] The female victims of these criminal networks were typically forced into prostitution, while men ended up working in sweatshops along the Indian border. Similar trends were found in a study conducted by the International Organization after Cyclone Aila struck Bangladesh in 2009.[11,iii]

Recruiters and criminal networks not only target these forcibly displaced populations in their source areas, though, but also at their destination – e.g., in the urban slums they end up being relocated to or in refugee camps established to shelter internally displaced people. "Environmental migrants" are usually hosted in overcrowded camps lacking social cohesion and security, where they remain – sometimes for extended periods of time[iv] – with limited access to social services, few employment opportunities, and competing for resources like food or water.[v] Recruiters and traffickers can capitalise on this state of disarray and assimilate into the camp environment, gaining trust among inhabitants and thus being able to better identify potential targets. Prior research has documented several cases of IDP and refugee camps turning into hotspots for modern slavery and human trafficking where climate refugees, increasingly desperate due to their unresolved protracted displacement, end up in forced labour or debt bondage, become victims of sexual exploitation, or are forcibly married.[12,13]

Like climate change, armed conflicts amplify the social and economic vulnerabilities of affected people. In fact, some authors argue that armed conflict is a stronger predictor of the prevalence of modern slavery in a country than the occurrence of natural disasters.[14] Generalised violence in conflict zones erodes the rule of law and renders state institutions responsible for protecting civilians unable to perform their duties, making it possible for actors such as members of armed groups to force or deceive civilians into exploitation or trafficking situations with complete impunity.

The disruption of livelihood support systems and social networks in conflict areas also leads to significant levels of forced displacements: there were 53.2 million people displaced by conflict and violence before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, with the highest ever number of conflict-related internal displacements in a year recorded in 2021 (14.4 million).[15] Individuals fleeing war and prosecution typically have very limited access to financial resources, education and employment opportunities, which creates and magnifies opportunities for modern

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iii According to the United Nations University, Bangladesh is one of the countries with the highest levels of environmental risk in the world, and is repeatedly being struck by disasters associated with climatic events.

iv Forced displacement has increasingly become a long-term phenomenon: according to statistics from the European Commission, displacement lasts 20 years on average for refugees and more than 10 years for most IDPs.

v The IOM defines an "environmental migrant" as "a person or group(s) of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are forced to leave their places of habitual residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move within or outside their country of origin or habitual residence." The use of the term "migrant" has been subject to some criticism in this context, as it may suggest a degree of volition in the decision to move that is not necessarily present. Hence, some authors and agencies prefer the terms "climate refugee" or "environmentally/climate displaced person".

slavery exploitation. For instance, recruiters and unscrupulous employers have been known to promise these individuals safe migration routes, employment opportunities and education or skills training in order to deceive them into exploitative situations.[16]
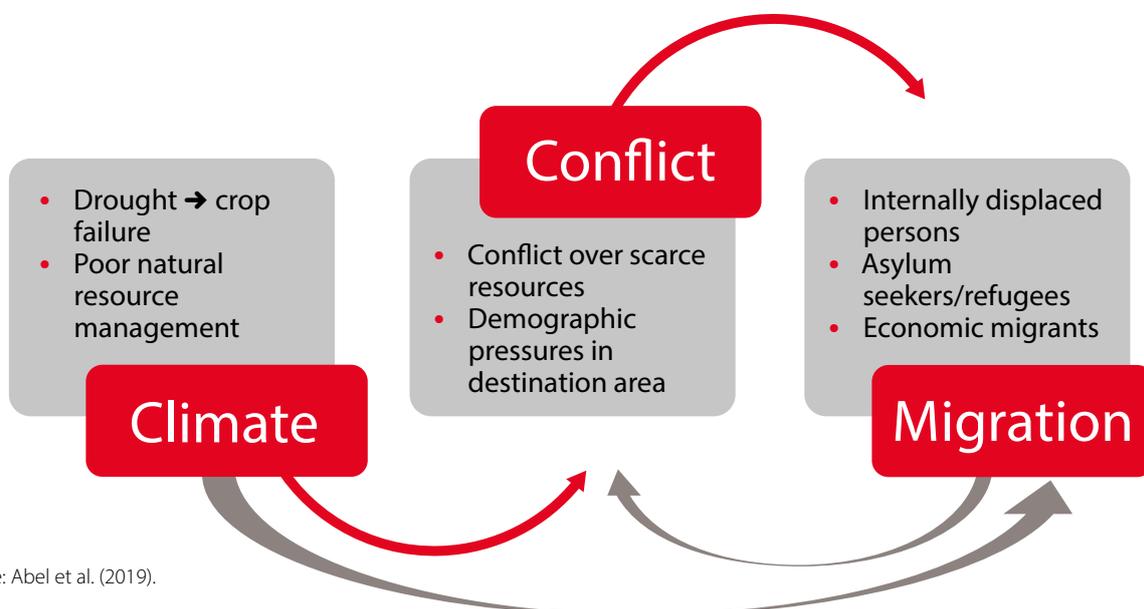
A double vulnerability

Besides these direct impacts on modern slavery, violent conflict can also interact with climate change to create a "double vulnerability" to exploitation among populations in war-torn regions. On the one hand, armed conflict can lead to water, soil and land contamination, create new sources of greenhouse gas emissions, and compromise people's access to food and water. Key assets, critical infrastructure, and environmental services - such as basic early warning systems - are also destroyed during conflicts, which undermines states' capacity to respond to sudden climate disasters. Additionally, the institutional and societal breakdown brought about by conflict significantly erodes societies' ability to implement longer-term measures – e.g., the adoption of relevant legal frameworks and social protection mechanisms, the development of alternative livelihood options - aimed at strengthening resilience and mitigating the effects of slow-onset environmental degradation. The immediate and long-lasting consequences of violence determine that communities faced with armed conflict are especially ill-equipped to deal with the adverse effects of climate shocks and environmental changes.

On the other hand, climate change may affect rainfall patterns and induce environmental stress, intensify tensions regarding the management of natural resources, increase the competition for such resources among different populations or ethnic groups, and facilitate recruitment by armed groups offering alternative sources of income for individuals whose subsistence is at risk due to weather-related events. Hence, while there is no systematic evidence that climate change is a key driver of armed conflict, it may aggravate pre-existing grievances and security risks.[17]

The relationship between climate change and conflict is thus characterised by a feedback loop: armed conflict makes societies more vulnerable to environmental disasters, and such disasters make societies more prone to violence.[18] It is no coincidence that 14 of the 25 countries most vulnerable to climate change are mired in conflict.[19]

The threats to human life, loss of income, food insecurity, and economic uncertainty resulting from the convergence of climate risks and conflict further contribute to forced population displacements and render them particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, forced marriage and forced or bonded labour. For instance, in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam, conflict over land and identity between local populations and migrants from Bangladesh has resulted in periodic violence over the past 20 years. The enduring conflict, coupled with the recurrence of floods and high rates of soil erosion in the region, are key factors that help explain the high prevalence of human trafficking in Assam. People eager to move out of this region in search of safety and livelihood are lured by intermediaries and agents and sold to illegal placement agencies. Women are the main victims of these agencies, which sell them as domestic help, forced labour and even brides for forced marriages.[20]

- Drought ➜ crop failure
- Poor natural resource management

Climate

- Conflict over scarce resources
- Demographic pressures in destination area

Conflict

- Internally displaced persons
- Asylum seekers/refugees
- Economic migrants

Migration

Source: Abel et al. (2019).

Addressing climate- and conflict-induced migration and its links to modern slavery: Policy responses

Scholars, policy-makers, practitioners, NGOs and international organisations have paid increasing attention to the nexus between climate change, conflict and migration. The Cancun Adaptation Framework (CAF), adopted during COP16 under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2010, recognised the growing prevalence of migration, displacement and planned relocation due to climate impacts, while the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change makes a passing reference to migrant rights. The Ukraine war, which created almost 7 million new refugees in Europe, also reminded the public opinion that wars have devastating consequences beyond their direct death toll, displacing populations and upending livelihoods.

However, relevant regional and international agreements do not always make explicit the links between conflict- and climate-related displacement and vulnerability to modern slavery or human trafficking. For instance, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015) notes the need to provide displaced persons with shelter, food and alternate livelihoods, but does not explicitly consider modern slavery. More recently, the UN Global Compact on Migration (2018) aims to both eradicate trafficking in persons and support climate-related migration, but does not link the two.

It is therefore hardly surprising that programmatic responses aimed at tackling the key factors that put climate migrants and conflict refugees at risk of modern slavery victimisation are still in their infancy, and that policy actions are dominated by other, "more immediate" priorities – such as providing humanitarian relief for refugees and IDPs – and are shaped by domestic political agendas.

Relief and recovery responses in the aftermath of climate disasters or armed-conflict outbreaks is overwhelmingly skewed towards meeting displaced populations' immediate needs after climatic or conflict shocks, like the distribution of food or cash and the provision of basic health services.[21] Anti-slavery measures and counter-trafficking efforts are not necessarily understood as critical in such emergency situations – even though, as noted above, refugee camps and formal and informal holding sites for stranded migrants and displaced populations can be a source of new victims for traffickers and criminal networks looking for a cheap or free workforce, sexual services and other exploitative activities imposed on populations receiving humanitarian assistance.[22]

At a more structural level, the "securitisation" of climate- and conflict-induced migration that has taken over government establishments in the West has increasingly led public officials to see cross-border migration related to environmental factors and armed violence as a threat to be prevented, controlled or managed.[23] Climate and war refugees tend to be viewed – especially, but not only, in high income countries - as a potential threat to national security that will induce resource scarcity (e.g., over-burdening the economic and social security system) and/or spur conflict (or crime) in the receiving countries, leading states to prioritise border control, harsher immigration restrictions and criminal justice approaches.[24] Such approaches not only pull attention and resources away from strategies aimed at preventing the exploitation of vulnerable population and protecting victims of modern slavery but, as noted in our previous Issue Brief, Addressing vulnerability to modern slavery in a growing tide of migration, they may aggravate displaced populations' risk of victimisation, pushing migrants into illegality and fostering the emergence of clandestine and/or illegal migration industries.

Previous research has highlighted scattered examples of innovative policy and programmatic alternatives at community and sometimes national levels attempting to break the link between climate- or conflict-induced displacement and modern slavery. For instance, in Bolivia, the Pan-American Development Foundation has launched the "community defenders" project aimed at empowering and training of poor women in rural communities – those most vulnerable to climate change-induced displacement and modern slavery victimisation - to educate, advocate, and coordinate anti-trafficking actions, as well as to cooperate with government agencies in the prevention, investigation and response to trafficking in persons. However, these strategies are typically limited in scope and scale. [25]

The complex and intersectional nature of the challenges posed by climate- and conflict-induced displacement for all the stakeholders involved in the fight against modern slavery require "comprehensive and coordinated responses that extend beyond the capacity of affected communities acting alone".[26] Without effective, state-led and globally coordinated interventions and support programmes aimed at tackling modern

slavery victimisation among migrants and IDPs, the effects of climate change and conflict are bound to worsen existing vulnerabilities and increase the risk of exploitation for those affected by these phenomena.

Moving Forward

Addressing the key socio-economic and contextual factors rendering climate- and conflict-induced migrants and IDPs vulnerable to modern slavery is a formidable task. National governments across the world have in the last decades signed various international commitments pledging to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, fund climate adaptation, support migrants, prevent abuse and exploitation and penalise those who profit from such exploitation. As argued by Anti-Slavery International, it is now the time to make good on those promises.[27]

Alongside systematic and internationally coordinated policies aimed at achieving these macro-level, long-term goals, government authorities, international organisations and NGOs need to implement immediate programmatic interventions to provide vulnerable communities affected by climate change and conflict with a suite of supports that attend to this heightened risk of modern slavery victimisation.

In this direction, we noted above that current humanitarian responses to climate- and conflict-induced crises frequently fail to address – or even account for - the risks of exploitation in IDP and refugee camps, leaving potential victims of modern slavery unassisted. Authorities of transit and destination countries, in coordination with the humanitarian community and relevant UN agencies, should raise awareness and education on modern slavery and human trafficking amongst front-line aid workers in order to enhance their sensitivity to potentially exploitative situations. Such campaigns need to be complemented by rapid assessments - undertaken by trained staff to assess the scope, scale and risk factors to trafficking in these settings - and by the establishment of emergency

referral pathways and mechanisms - defining the roles and responsibilities of actors to ensure effective assistance to at-risk populations.[28]

Given that displacement situations are becoming increasingly protracted, it is also critical to provide people in IDP and refugee camps with education and training opportunities allowing them to access income generation and employment opportunities, as well as enrolling children in formal or informal educational activities. Failing to do so will not only entrap displaced people in vulnerable situations (e.g., poverty, unemployment, indebtedness), but also put them at risk of traffickers and criminal networks who have been known to recruit IPDs under false promises of jobs and free education.[vi]

The IOM has also proposed the establishment of temporary labour pathways for migrants in situations of vulnerability, such as those displaced by conflict, natural disasters and the effects of climate change.[29] Some regional and national-level government authorities have already taken steps in this direction, implementing right-to-work for conflict-induced migrants impacted by the Ukranian war.[vii]

Additionally, several governments have begun to consider policies aimed at facilitating safe and regular migration pathways for people affected by climate change. The new special humanitarian visa regime introduced in Argentina in 2022 is an example of such promising measures: it grants nationals and residents of 23 countries of the Americas - previously not eligible for residency in Argentina - humanitarian leave to remain for a three-year period in the case of displacement by environmental hazards. This is the first effort at a "climate refugee" visa since New Zealand abandoned its own short-lived trial in 2018, and seems to have sparked the consideration of similar initiatives in other countries.[30,viii]

While policy-makers in many receiving countries face political pressures and public demands for tighter immigration and border controls, careful instrumentation

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vi For example, the IOM (2015) reports a case involving a number of Syrian girls who were deceptively recruited from a refugee camp in the Middle East under the false promise of an educational opportunity. The girls were taken from the camp to the capital city where they were instead trafficked for sexually exploitative purposes.

vii The EU has granted Ukrainian refugees the right to reside and work in its 27 member countries for up to three years. Similarly, people arriving in the UK under the Ukraine Family Scheme or the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme are granted leave to remain in the country – and to work and access benefits and public services - for 3 years.

viii Peru is in the process of creating a policy on climate-affected migration, Chile is also contemplating one, and the United States is evaluating reforms to temporary protected status in the context of climate change.

of these temporary labour and migration pathways could open up opportunities for migrants and IDPs to make a living and reduce their vulnerability to modern slavery victimisation while helping meet short-term labour needs in these host countries.

These initiatives could be part of a broader battery of measures aimed at facilitating safe internal and international migration and attenuating the risk of modern slavery victimisation among marginalised and vulnerable migrants. As detailed in our last Issue Brief Addressing vulnerability to modern slavery in a growing tide of migration, these includes: reforming visa systems that put migrants at the mercy of employers and recruiters; separating labour enforcement from immigration control; prohibiting recruitment fees in domestic legislation and ensuring recruitment agencies are not complicit in or directly benefiting from abusive practices; strengthening identification and support systems for migrant victims of modern slavery; implementing initiatives that promote safer migration such as skills partnerships and cash transfer programmes; and adopting promising practices that provide greater social and institutional support for migrants.

Beyond these policy initiatives, further research is needed regarding the link between climate- and conflict-induced migration and modern slavery. Academics and antislavery experts have noted that data on the social and psychological drivers of climate- and conflict-induced displacement and on the consequences that such displacement have on modern slavery is still scant and scattered. Better data and analysis in this area can help develop policy recommendations on how to provide adequate preventive and coping mechanisms for at-risk populations.[31]

More generally, while there is a growing body of literature on climate- and conflict-induced migration as well as on the key factors driving vulnerability to modern slavery, the two strands of research are still largely disconnected.[32] Much of the research that specifically links crises-related displacement with modern slavery is context- and location-specific, with limited generalisable empirical evidence. There is therefore a need to scale-up existing research, systematically considering the commonalities across geographies in order to design global and cooperative solutions to these issues. In order to achieve this, it is critical to strengthen collaborations between relevant stakeholders - NGOs, anti slavery organisations, environmental organisations, governmental actors, international agencies and businesses – to collect, share, harmonise, process and analyse data from multiple sources and turn that information into actionable intelligence to inform policy-making.[33]
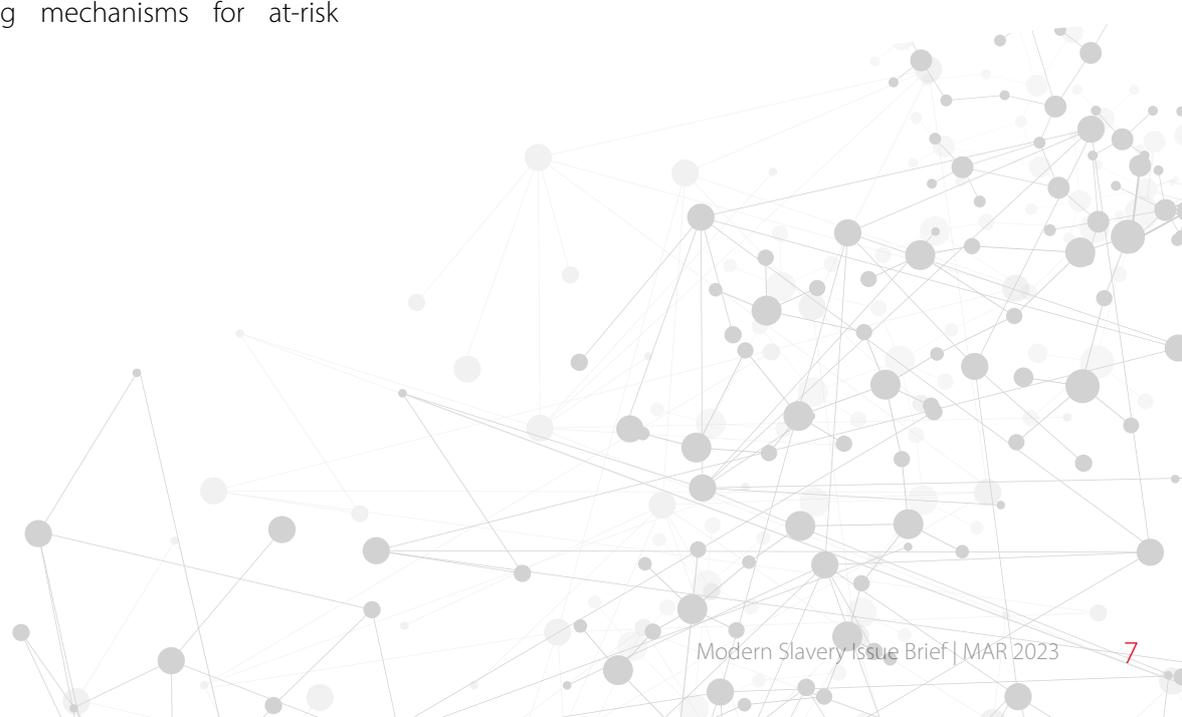
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