

Migration, Climate and Resilience

An Interview with Tiziana Bonzon,
Manager, Climate, Migration and Resilience, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)

EDITORS' NOTE Tiziana Bonzon has more than twenty years of experience with the IFRC, during which she coordinated and provided operational support for the response to large humanitarian crises in several countries, led the negotiation, design and implementation of global institutional funding agreements, and carried out several thematic evaluations at country level. Prior to her current position, she has served as Global Lead, Migration & Displacement; Head of Country Cluster Central Africa in Yaoundé; Unit Manager, Policy and Programme Support; Senior Officer, Planning and Grant Management; and Officer, Disaster Management Information Systems. Bonzon earned a Bachelor's degree in foreign languages, interpreting and translation from the University of Novara/Fédération Européenne des Ecoles, Zurich; a diploma (IDHA) in humanitarian assistance from The Center for International Health and Cooperation at Fordham University, and from the University of Geneva; and an MBA in leadership and sustainability from the University of Cumbria.



Tiziana Bonzon

Reference Centers and IFRC technical and regional experts. This includes building capacities and developing tools and methodologies so that National Societies can deliver appropriate services that are relevant in their communities; investing in research and analysis to improve our collective understanding of migration and resilience trends and patterns; pursuing innovative approaches that enhance service delivery and positioning; and promoting coordination and cooperation with all RCRC Movement components as well as with external actors.

What are IFRC's priorities in regard to the issue of migration?

The movement of people, whether voluntary or involuntary, is one of the defining features of the 21st century. People are on the move for a variety of reasons – some have chosen to move to new countries to be with family, for employment, for education, for a better quality of life or because of local beliefs, while others are displaced within and across borders by disasters, the adverse effects of climate change, war, violence, conflict, and persecution. In many cases people move due to a combination of choices and constraints.

These events cause great hardship and traumas, often resulting in the death of people affected by these situations. People are also moving in an irregular way across countries and regions. While such movements may not be framed as “crises,” human suffering exists because people are exposed to a variety of risks (abuse, trafficking, exploitation) in a context where restrictive policies are in place to stem the flows of migrants and amidst polarized public perceptions.

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has a long-standing commitment to working with and for migrants and displaced persons. Our RCRC national Societies present in 192 countries play a crucial role in addressing the humanitarian consequences of migration and displacement around the world, both in emergency and non-emergency contexts, and to strengthen the resilience of migrants, displaced persons, and host communities. The presence of the IFRC in all countries along migratory routes means that we are uniquely placed to engage with and address the needs of migrants and displaced

populations during their journeys, and ensure they have access to essential services, whatever their legal status.

Much action by the IFRC is tailored to emergency contexts. This includes situations of disasters due to natural and technological hazards causing the displacement of people within countries, as well as more complex situations leading to large scale cross-border population movements, including refugee flows, as exemplified by the response to the influx of displaced persons from Myanmar to Bangladesh, in the context of the Venezuelans migrant and refugee crisis, and in Turkey, among others.

In non-emergency contexts, the presence of well-known and trusted National Societies in virtually every country in the world and along the migratory routes allows us to engage with and address the needs of migrants and displaced persons at all stages of their journeys, keeping into account the needs of host communities and the families who stay behind. In such contexts, IFRC globally engages in a range of activities to promote migrants' engagement, access to services, social inclusion and protection.

What role does xenophobia play in your migration work around the world?

Migrants often face suspicion, hostility and xenophobia. We have seen over the last few years a rise of anti-migration sentiment in host countries, with migrants being portrayed as “stealing” jobs and draining social services. There has been an extremely worrying rise in the use of demeaning language to describe migrants, and of threatening or disaster imagery to describe migration – invasion, flows, floods, mass influx, hordes, etc.

Narratives around migrants can and do impact on how people are treated by communities through which they travel or where they live, can impact on laws and policies, facilitating or undermining the ability of neutral humanitarian actors like ourselves to provide assistance to people in need. Those in need are children, pregnant mothers, young men and women with families, older people, people who could contribute skills and ideas and energy to societies. What they need are to be rescued if lost at sea or in the desert, basics like food and healthcare and shelter. But laws and policies, often influenced by public perceptions, are making providing these basic services itself a criminal act. From our perspective, saving a life should never be a crime.

Will you provide an overview of your role as Manager, Climate, Migration and Resilience for IFRC?

My role is to provide leadership in the field of migration, climate, and resilience in close collaboration with our Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) National Societies,

Media attention to the issue of immigration is polarized and migration is often discussed in terms of national interest and security consideration. Political rhetoric on migration most often does not reflect reality and ignores facts and figures. Such rhetoric shapes public perceptions of migration.

The IFRC plays an important role in countering xenophobia and promoting social inclusion of migrants, both in acts and speech. National Societies can help overcome barriers of exclusion and discrimination and reduce the potential for community tensions. Public authorities, other institutions and the general public may have assumptions about migrants that differ from what the migrants themselves see as their interests, needs and capabilities. Equally, migrants can have misperceptions or misunderstandings regarding the laws, customs and conditions in their host country. National Societies can reduce these gaps.

In response to an increase in xenophobia and racism in some communities, many National Societies are taking steps to promote enhanced cooperation with public authorities to promote respect for diversity. Social cohesion programs, awareness raising campaigns, school education, volunteering activities and community engagement frameworks have been developed to enhance respect for diversity, cultural awareness and to benefit the psychosocial and physical well-being of migrants.

Our experience shows that in fact, communities are often far readier to help than we may realize. The process of integrating migrants and refugees into a host country is a two-way process, a mutual commitment from newcomers and the citizens of their host nation to respect and accept one another. Successful integration can also help build more secure, vibrant and peaceful communities. The recognition of the positive aspects of migration helps to address false impressions of migrants and ensure that their contribution to their host society is valued.

How does resilience factor into the migration work of the IFRC?

In countries of origin, the IFRC is committed to strengthen the resilience of individuals and communities with high levels of migration so that communities can recover from crises, and prepare for, resist and overcome shocks. Such work is undertaken to reduce the underlying causes of vulnerability on the basis of humanity and impartiality, and not with the aim of controlling migration. Resilience programs may include a range of different activities, such as community-based livelihoods and income-generating initiatives or disaster risk reduction, food security programming, integrated primary healthcare and so on. These types of activities are also extended to returning migrants to facilitate their reintegration into societies, while addressing protection issues and situations of exclusion and discrimination.

The IFRC has an increasing role to play in terms of preventing the conditions that may lead to displacement caused by disasters due to natural hazards and the effect of climate change, and by supporting preparedness for and effective response to large-scale

population movement, in camp and non-camp settings, strengthening quality and capacity, and taking account of the longer-term needs of the concerned populations.

In transit countries, the IFRC provides humanitarian support to migrants, whatever their legal status, in order to address their most urgent needs. Activities vary, but often include the provision of essential items such as food, hygiene kits and clothes, shelter, emergency accommodation, and more targeted support such as provision of information to particularly vulnerable groups. The establishment in strategic locations of Humanitarian Service Points (HSPs), a flagship IFRC initiative aimed at providing a neutral space that offers a welcoming and safe environment to people on the move, is instrumental in guaranteeing access to essential services to migrants along their journey.

In countries of destination, ensuring access to services for migrants is a key dimension of the work of the IFRC. Apart from the provision of direct assistance, IFRC supports the integration of migrants into new societies through the provision of information, assistance and services tailored to their contexts and needs, and by supporting social protection systems and community-led safety nets, which are key to building community resilience.

How do you define resilience and how critical is it when doing humanitarian work?

We live in a world of interrelated and complex challenges: the impact of the climate crisis; increasing social tensions, discrimination, exclusion and marginalization; migration and displacement due to both situations of conflict and disasters, but also to increasing poverty, precariousness and social inequalities; and health threats, including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges increase vulnerabilities and erode individual and community resilience.

Resilience has become a priority for many humanitarian and development organizations. The IFRC specifically focuses on community resilience as “the ability of communities (and their members) exposed to disasters, crises, and underlying vulnerabilities to anticipate, prepare for, reduce the impact of, cope with and recover from the effects of shocks and stresses without compromising their long-term prospects.” Our research and work has shown that resilient communities have six specific characteristics: they are knowledgeable, healthy and can meet their basic needs; are socially cohesive; have economic opportunities; have well-maintained and accessible infrastructure and services; can manage their natural assets and are connected.

To strengthen these characteristics, we work in a holistic way, recognizing that communities are multi-dimensional systems within wider systems. We also invest in enhancing the understanding of risk and its consequences and we adopt a demand-driven, people-centered and inclusive approach.

Our programming, whether related to disaster risk reduction or climate change adaptation or migration, is not a stand-alone one but

rather aims at integrating and incorporating the appropriate analysis and information (scientific data, social data, policy analysis, community-driven information) into our assessment of risk and vulnerability so that relevant interventions that are inclusive of social and humanitarian dimensions can be implemented.

How has your work around migration been impacted by COVID-19?

As local actors with a global reach, and as part of the largest humanitarian network, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies bear witness to the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and its associated control measures on migrants, including people seeking asylum and refugees, which amplify vulnerabilities and exacerbate challenges in accessing essential services. The pandemic has highlighted and compounded the specific vulnerabilities of migrants, with many of them being particularly marginalized and at risk of multiple hazards as they face increased barriers in accessing health and WASH services (water, sanitation and hygiene), and information due to their legal status, language or cultural barriers, or social stigma.

From the outset of the pandemic, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, as auxiliaries to the public authorities, have been on the ground working to prevent, address and respond to the pandemic and to reduce the economic, social and psychological impacts of the virus, while promoting and advocating for an inclusive approach.

Public health responses are only as effective as the extent to which they ensure everyone, including the most vulnerable, has access to the necessary support to comply with prevention measures. Stopping the virus is in everyone’s interest and how each country treats and supports the most vulnerable will affect how the virus spreads and how well the country recovers from the pandemic’s multiple effects, including its social and economic impacts.

Do you feel it is critical to have collaboration and strong global alliances in order to build a more resilient world?

The challenges of today are far too complex to be dealt with by a single entity or organization. New approaches and combined efforts are needed to respond and adapt to global changes. Effective collaboration and global partnerships and alliances are critical to reach scale, diversify action and achieve co-benefits for communities and the society.

The IFRC is a respected influencer in its role, analysis and policy positions on resilience as well as on migration and displacement matters at the global, regional and local levels, and it contributes as a thought leader to shaping the agenda on issues of particular importance including climate-induced displacement.

Cooperation between science and academia, humanitarian and development practitioners, as well as policy decision-makers, and the private sector is essential to reach ambitious targets, optimize resources, shape common narratives in a humane way, and coinvest in building a more resilient world. ●