

Confronting Climate-Induced Displacement

POLICY BRIEF APRIL 2024

Summary

This policy brief provides an overview of climate-induced displacement and highlights actions the U.S. government should take to 1) prevent further displacement and 2) protect those who are already displaced. The term “climate-induced displacement” describes the situation of people who are forced to leave their homes, lands, and sometimes countries, in whole or in part, because of the adverse impacts of climate change.

The following brief examines the interplay between climate change and displacement, the scale of the problem, and the vulnerabilities faced by certain groups. It then describes how Catholic Relief Services (CRS) seeks to prevent climate-induced displacement and respond to the needs of displaced people. Finally, it concludes with an analysis of recent U.S. government approaches and makes policy recommendations accordingly.

Background

Displacement is on the rise: today, more than 100 million people are displaced, with most relocating within their home countries.^{1,2} While conflict is the main driver, climate change plays a key role in this increase.³ According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the first decade of the 21st century experienced five times as many weather-related disasters as the 1970s.⁴ The increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events is a direct result of climate change and has significantly shaped global movement.⁵ Between 2010 and 2020, it is estimated that climate disruptions displaced 20 million people *per year*⁶. The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEDP) predicts that by 2050, around 1.2 billion people could be displaced due to natural disasters and climate change.⁷



Community members constructing a sandbag embankment in the Banke district of Nepal. In October 2022, flooding in the district displaced over 1,000 people and swept away 50% of paddies. [Bibek Shrestha for CRS]

¹ U.S. Department of State. “U.S. Refugee Admissions.” Accessed June 14, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/refugee-admissions/>.

² White House. *Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration*. 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ World Meteorological Organization. *WMO Atlas of Mortality and Economic Losses from Weather, Climate and Water Extremes: 1970-2019*. 2021. <https://library.wmo.int/records/item/57564-wmo-atlas-of-mortality-and-economic-losses-from-weather-climate-and-water-extremes-1970-2019>.

⁵ IPCC. *Climate Change 2023 Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers*. 2023.

⁶ Oxfam. *Forced From Home: Climate-fuelled Displacement*. 2019. <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620914/mb-climate-displacement-cop25-021219-en.pdf>.

⁷ Institute for Economics & Peace. “Over One Billion People at Threat of Being Displaced by 2050 Due to Environmental Change, Conflict and Civil Unrest.” 2020. <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Ecological-Threat-Register-Press-Release-27.08-FINAL.pdf>.

Climate-induced displacement can be caused by sudden extreme weather – such as in 2022 when intense flooding in Pakistan pushed millions from their homes – or by slow-onset events like long-term drought or sea-level rise. Slow-onset events can be particularly devastating when combined with fragility and conflict, as in Somalia where five failed rainy seasons are forcing families into camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) to secure food and water.⁸ Other communities face a combination of quick *and* slow-onset climatic events: in parts of Central America, long-term drought and severe flooding are linked to rising migration as farm families struggle to produce sufficient food.⁹

Whether the hazard is sudden or slow-onset, relocation is generally a measure of last resort for people who are facing intolerable levels of risk and who do not have the ability or the resources to cope with dangerous conditions where they live. Most people prefer to stay in their home communities. Alirio Martinez, a farmer in Guatemala, noted that “Nobody wants to leave – it’s so risky. They do it out of necessity because there are no harvests.”¹⁰

Climate-induced displacement is driven by vulnerability and poverty. People whose lives rely on the health of ecosystems and the availability of natural resources, such as pastoralists and indigenous peoples, are more sensitive to the increasingly unpredictable climate.¹¹ Refugees and migrants living in “climate hot spots” and lacking the resources to adapt to extreme weather are also at great risk of further displacement due to climate impacts.¹² Even after displacement, differences in vulnerabilities continue to manifest. Women and children are more likely to face human rights violations as they move within national jurisdiction or cross international borders. And in many places, women experiencing displacement find it particularly difficult to access land in host communities.¹³



Rain-proofing a building in a Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh. Bangladesh hosts close to 1 million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, and is one of the most risk-prone countries to climate disasters. [Ismail Ferdous for CRS]

⁸ Catholic Relief Services. “Climate Change and Drought Create Crisis in Somalia.” 2023. <https://catholicreliefservices.exposure.co/climate-change-and-drought-create-crisis-in-somalia>.

⁹ Masters, Jeff. “Fifth Straight Year of Central American Drought Helping Drive Migration.” *Scientific American*, 2019. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/eye-of-the-storm/fifth-straight-year-of-central-american-drought-helping-drive-migration/>; Bermeo, Sarah and David Leblang. *Honduras Migration: Climate change, Violence and Assistance*. DCID, 2021. <https://dcid.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/01/Honduras-Migration-Policy-Brief-Final.pdf>; Bermeo, Sarah et al. *Policy Brief: Root Causes of Migration from Guatemala*. DCID, 2022. <https://dcid.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/03/Migration-Policy-Brief-Guatemala-FINAL.pdf>.

¹⁰ Catholic Relief Services. *Healthy Soils, Strong Roots: Water Smart Agriculture for Resilience in Rural Mesoamerica*. 2021. https://asa.crs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ASA-Climate-Resilience-Brief_1015_2022.pdf.

¹¹ Caritas Internationalis. *Displaced by a Changing Climate*. 2023. https://www.caritas.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/caritas_climate_displacement.pdf.

¹² UNHCR. “Climate Change and Disaster Displacement.” 2023. Accessed June 14, 2023. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/what-we-do/how-we-work/environment-disasters-and-climate-change/climate-change-and-disaster>

¹³ Caritas Internationalis. *Displaced by a Changing Climate*. 2023. https://www.caritas.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/caritas_climate_displacement.pdf.

Overall, those who live in least-developed countries (LDCs) are disproportionately affected by climate-induced displacement. Indeed, the vast majority of climate-induced movements take place in these areas.¹⁴ Most countries struggling to care for people displaced by climate change contributed very little to the problem itself. The 46 LDCs, which account for most of the climate-vulnerable countries, are responsible for only 3.3% of total greenhouse gas emissions (GHG).¹⁵ Expecting these climate-vulnerable countries to shoulder the impacts of a problem they did not cause historically, and to which they contribute minimally today, is neither feasible nor just.

As it stands, the scale of climate-induced displacement is outpacing efforts to mitigate further displacement. This is because, collectively, governments are not cutting emissions fast enough and are falling short on needed investment. Moreover, finance to support developing countries to adapt to climate change is woefully short of what is required.¹⁶ The slow progress on mitigation and adaptation means that additional measures – such as planned relocation – have emerged as solutions to protect lives and limit the losses related to climate-induced displacement. The government of Fiji, for instance, has introduced and begun to implement a planned relocation framework for certain communities where resilience-building programs cannot stop the disappearance of land from sea-level rise.¹⁷

A related consequence of the insufficient investment in mitigation and adaptation is that losses and damages from climate change are now inevitable. Losses and damages include harmful economic impacts – such as destroyed crops – as well as non-economic impacts like loss of cultural heritage. Significant loss and damage is already happening, particularly in developing countries and small island developing states (SIDS). Displacement can result from loss and damage, and can in and of itself be considered a loss and damage with cascading impacts. After decades of advocacy, the 27th meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP27) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agreed to establish a Loss and Damage Fund to assist developing nations in addressing loss and damage. At COP28, governments agreed on the scope, governance, and eligibility of the Loss and Damage Fund. The Loss and Damage final agreement includes “safe and dignified mobility” as one of the central components of the Fund’s scope. COP28 also operationalized the Santiago Network on Loss and Damage (SNLD) to provide technical assistance to developing countries in averting, minimizing, and addressing loss and damage caused by climate change.

CRS Response

As the official international humanitarian and development agency of the U.S. Catholic community, CRS works to reduce poverty and promote the dignity of people around the world. CRS sees firsthand how climate change uproots families and complicates efforts to secure dignified livelihoods and living conditions. Addressing vulnerability is at the heart of CRS’ approach to improving systems so people can thrive. Therefore, CRS is called to support the integral human development of vulnerable populations, including communities affected by climate-induced displacement.¹⁸

Sustainable Agriculture

CRS programs aim to tackle the drivers of vulnerability, improve livelihoods, and protect communities against specific climate risks. For the millions of farmers that CRS serves, a key pillar of this work involves sustainable agriculture programs, which help communities adapt their land-use practices and increase resilience to more intense weather. As a result, when an extreme weather event hits, communities are prepared. In the Dry Corridor of Central America, CRS trains farmers in [climate-smart agricultural practices](#) and connects them with local markets to sell their harvests. And in eastern Madagascar, where agricultural livelihoods are regularly threatened by aggressive cyclones and extended droughts, CRS supports [agroecology work](#) to conserve Madagascar’s biodiversity and help

¹⁴ International Organization for Migration. *Climate Change and Migration in Vulnerable Countries*. 2019. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/climate_change_and_migration_in_vulnerable_countries.pdf.

¹⁵ Keo, Kalyan and Yihong Liu. *The State of Climate Ambition*. UNDP, 2022. <https://www.undp.org/publications/state-climate-ambition-snapshots-least-developed-countries-ldcs-and-small-island-developing-states-sids>.

¹⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *Adaptation Gap Report 2022: Too Little, Too Slow – Climate Adaptation Failure Puts World at Risk*. 2022. <https://www.unep.org/adaptation-gap-report-2022>.

¹⁷ Mycoo, Michelle, et al. “Small Islands” in: “Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability”. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. IPCC, 2022. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_Chapter15.pdf.

¹⁸ Heinrich, Geoff, David Leege, and Carrie Miller. *A User’s Guide to Integral Human Development (IHD)*. Catholic Relief Services, 2008. <https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/users-guide-to-integral-human-development.pdf>.

farmers grow crops. Amid evolving climatic challenges, bolstering farmers' abilities to produce reliable harvests is key to mitigating displacement and promoting dependable livelihoods.

Urban Resilience

CRS also works in urban settings to address the root causes of climate-induced displacement. [Climate Resilient Cities](#) (CRC), a USAID-funded program, exemplifies CRS' approach to building urban resilience. In partnership with six local governments across the Philippines, CRS not only implements adaptation projects, but also works with municipalities to access climate data for planning, as well as financing for future climate projects. These development efforts highlight CRS' primary focus of preventing displacement so people can thrive in their own communities.



As part of the Climate Resilient Cities project in the Philippines, locals from Cotabato city plant mangroves on the coastline to mitigate the impacts of typhoons. [Benny Manser for CRS]

Disaster Risk Reduction

Another core element of CRS' work-- disaster risk reduction (DRR)-- can help mitigate displacement. DRR aims to strengthen local disaster-preparedness plans and diversify livelihoods, so that people can minimize the negative impacts of climate shocks. As part of a [DRR program in Bangladesh](#), CRS is helping a local fishing community prepare for recurrent cyclones by supporting their creation of risk management plans and improving their access to savings and loans. When a community-led assessment determined that a lack of lifebuoys on fishing boats was a critical gap in local risk-management, CRS supported the production and distribution of an affordable lifebuoy that effectively reduced deaths.

Humanitarian Assistance

Alongside efforts to address root causes, CRS delivers humanitarian assistance to meet the immediate needs of people displaced by climate change. In the case of Somalia, where drought has pushed families into IDP camps, CRS provides water, sanitation, and hygiene services to IDPs and host communities by trucking in clean water, constructing solar-powered shallow wells, and distributing hygiene kits or vouchers to 1,200 families.

Research and Advocacy

Finally, CRS advocates for better policies and financial resources to address the underlying causes of displacement. CRS staff conduct research to understand the drivers of mobility and displacement, and then use this evidence for advocacy. For example, CRS' landscape restoration work in Central America draws upon [field research](#) which shows that the ability to sustain harvests in the face of climate change helps people stay in their communities.¹⁹

U.S. Government Policy Related to Climate-Induced Displacement

Before 2020, U.S. government-funded foreign assistance programs did not explicitly address the link between the two issues; instead, programs addressed the impacts of climate on development more broadly.²⁰ In the last few years, however, the US government has taken small steps to narrow in on the climate-migration nexus. A White House report released in 2021 called for a standing interagency process that would coordinate the government's response to climate-related migration.²¹ USAID's 2022 Climate Strategy noted that the agency would increase its focus on climate-related migration through research and program responses.²² And in 2023, the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (BPRM) announced that it would expand efforts to tackle climate-related displacement, guided by the four pillars of protection, partnership, multilateral engagement, and coordination.²³ The Administration has since publicly committed funds to support these efforts, such as \$4 million to support migrants, refugees, and host communities impacted by climate events in Kenya.²⁴

Despite incremental progress on the policy side, existing U.S. legal frameworks fail to adequately address climate-induced displacement. "Temporary Protected Status" (TPS) may be granted to nationals of countries that have experienced "environmental disaster," but eligibility is limited to those who already reside in the United States.²⁵ As it stands, TPS does not address the needs of those who may need to leave their country following environmental disaster.²⁶ Furthermore, although international law offers protection from persecution through the established refugee regime, there is no equivalent framework for people who are displaced by climate impacts.

¹⁹ Catholic Relief Services. *Rootedness to Prevent Forced Migration*. 2021. https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/202102_crs_migration_policy_brief_5p.pdf.

²⁰ Gootnick, David and Brian Lepore. *Climate Change: Activities of Selected Agencies to Address Potential Impact on Global Migration*. GAO, 2019. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-166.pdf>.

²¹ White House. *Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration*. 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>.

²² USAID. *Climate Strategy 2022-2030*. 2022. <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/USAID-Climate-Strategy-2022-2030.pdf>.

²³ U.S. Department of State. "The Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Announces New Approach to Address the Impacts of Climate Change on Migration and Displacement." Press Release. June 21, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/the-department-of-states-bureau-of-population-refugees-and-migration-announces-new-approach-to-address-the-impacts-of-climate-change-on-migration-and-displacement/>.

²⁴ U.S. Department of State. "Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry Announces \$4 Million to Address Climate Mobility in Kenya." Media Note. September 7, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/special-presidential-envoy-for-climate-john-kerry-announces-4-million-to-address-climate-mobility-in-kenya/>.

²⁵ White House. *Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration*. 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>.

²⁶ Ibid.

Recommendations

Climate-induced displacement currently affects millions of people and will continue to grow as climate change decreases opportunities for dignified livelihoods. The U.S. holds an important leadership role in addressing the effects of this climate shift. Policy responses need to address the drivers of displacement, and protect and support people who are forced to move. CRS urges the U.S. government to adopt a policy framework which does the following:



Scale up action to avert and minimize climate-induced displacement by investing in adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and development programs.

- a. Scale up bilateral investment in adaptation efforts that focus on nature-based solutions, such as regenerative agriculture practices and land restoration. As part of the U.S. government's commitment to advance locally-led development and humanitarian response, including the Grand Bargain, prioritize funding local entities on the frontlines of the climate crisis.
- b. Fund the Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund, and Least Developed Countries Fund - multilateral accounts that provide resources for adaptation projects and sustainable landscapes.
- c. Provide financing for the Loss and Damage Fund established at COP28.
- d. Invest in emissions reductions to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).
- e. Advance efforts within USAID and State Department to further integrate climate change considerations across programs.



Provide compassionate protections for people who are displaced by climate impacts.

- a. Enhance existing U.S. protection mechanisms to ensure that those who are displaced across borders receive adequate protection. This could include prioritizing and expediting the processing of regular migration categories for those coming from disaster-affected countries.



In global fora, advocate for the integration of climate and displacement considerations within international and national frameworks and funding arrangements.

- a. Support advancements in the international legal architecture so that it comprehensively addresses climate-induced displacement and protects the rights of climate-displaced people.
 - i. Assist in identifying synergies and gaps between existing institutions and legal frameworks to ensure better coordination and increase the effectiveness of responses.
- b. Support other countries to include human mobility considerations in their national climate change policies, strategies, and disaster risk reduction plans.
- c. Given that most climate-displaced individuals move *within* borders, support efforts to uphold global guidance on internally-displaced persons, as enumerated in the 1998 [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#) and the 2021 [UN Secretary General's Report on Internal Displacement](#).
- d. Given that refugees and migrants are especially vulnerable to further displacement by climate impacts, encourage the international community to increase development and emergency assistance to states that host large numbers of refugees and/or migrants.
- e. Support countries in considering the use of planned relocation (as appropriate) to protect the human dignity of their population.

CRS continues to synthesize learnings around climate change impacts, displacement, and the resulting policy implications. This brief will be reviewed and updated accordingly.