

Climate-related displacement

CLIMATE CRISIS HEIGHTENS INEQUALITIES, DRIVES PRECARIOUS MIGRATION

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While climate change and migration have often been treated as distinct issues, the intersection today has become undeniable. Three years after approval of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), climate realities have accelerated at a faster pace than most experts had predicted, heightening adverse impacts and dire consequences. The climate crisis is steadily emerging as a key driver of population displacement as well as cross-border migration for the foreseeable future.

The actual number of migrants on the move directly attributed to climate-related factors is hard to pin down. As described in the Mixed Migration Review 2021, “...the ways in which climate change and human mobility collide are complex, dynamic, and rooted in local landscapes, including policy decisions. Climate change acts as a threat—or vulnerability—multiplier, exposing and exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities of those affected, rather than creating them outright.”

The GCM provides an initial foundation to address climate change and migration, particularly under Objective 2, to ‘minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin’. Other elements of the GCM, such as Objective 5(h), concern path-

Negative, racist, and violent hostilities against so-called ‘climate migrants’, frame climate-displaced migrants as ‘security risks’. This is especially concerning with the economic and social pressures of the global health pandemic, where migrants have been scapegoated for the spread of the virus, leading in some cases to more restrictive immigration policies.

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Intersecting discrimination intensified by climate crises

With the advance of the climate crisis, women, men, and children are experiencing heightened risks, especially at the intersections of inequities laid out in the overview. Those living on the frontlines of the severe impacts of the climate crisis may have fewer resources and capacities to sustain themselves and their families. Having lost land, access to fishing, housing, and jobs, they may experience food insecurity and have little or no access to healthcare, at a time when health risks are heightened. Children may be unable to attend school.

These people and communities are at the greatest risk of displacement when governments fail to provide for their well-being, safety, and rights. Climate-related internal displacements were the overwhelming majority of new displacements in 2020 in 145 countries (an estimated 30.7 million of a total of 40.5 million), according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC). As noted in International Organization for Migration’s World Migration Report 2022, this data focuses on new displacements generally caused by sudden-onset events. Data on internal displacements and cross-border migration due to slow-onset climate-related factors such as drought is more difficult to ascertain.

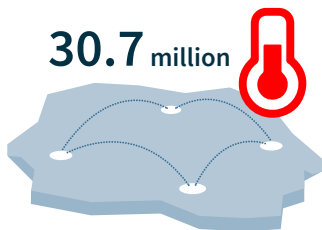
Nonetheless, the phenomena of climate-related internal displacement spotlight the concerns for the safe-

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ways for people displaced for climate-related reasons, as well as objectives addressing vulnerabilities in migration (Obj. 7). Access to services (Obj. 15), discrimination (Obj. 17), and skills development (Obj. 18) are also especially relevant to address the situation of climate-related displacement and migration.

Moreover, minimizing drivers of international migration dovetails with the urgent demands to address the climate crisis through strategic plans and investment in mitigation and adaptation, as well as accounting for permanent and long-term losses with support for loss and damage.

ty and rights of not only the displaced, but for local populations more generally. Rural-displaced populations have moved to urban areas, raising the urgency for social protections, labor rights, and economic support to poor and marginalized communities, and to act on policies and resources to address climate-related impacts.



In 2020, an estimated 30.7 million of a total of 40.5 million internal displacements were climate-related displacements.

Regional realities

Bangladesh is often cited as one of the most ‘climate-vulnerable’ countries in the world, with low-lying geography and high population density. The Environmental Justice Foundation estimates that by 2050, one in every seven people in Bangladesh could be displaced by climate-related factors—with upwards of 18 million people needing to move because of sea-level rise alone.

The organization Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra (BNSK) recently conducted research among climate-displaced women who had moved to Dhaka, where they are among hundreds of thousands of slum dwellers. Their study revealed the disparate impact of displacement on women, who shared their concerns about the lack of work and healthcare, fears for their physical safety, and the lack of education for their children. Such conditions exemplify the insecurities of many internally displaced populations—who may need to move again.

While the vast majority of climate-displaced people migrate internally, circumstances in which people must move across borders are increasing. For populations in low coastal areas, relocation has already become unavoidable. This is the case among small island states, such as Kiribati,



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Tuvalu, and Fiji in the Pacific. While the entire Pacific region contributes only 0.03%¹ of the greenhouse emissions that fuel global warming, they are on the frontlines of the climate crisis, experiencing more extreme weather; sea-level

rise; increased sea and land salinization; loss of land, fishing, and livelihoods; and more.

In these countries, people in rural areas have already been forced to move to urban settings, seeking employment, housing, and basic survival. Population density has dramatically increased, as has more pervasive poverty, a lack of economic and social support, and pressure towards out-migration.

Even in such dire circumstances, many impacted populations strive to ‘cope’ with their situations, resistant to moving from their homes and communities. Those that are internally displaced, as in the BNSK study, feel the loss of community, culture, family contact, safety, and more.

In 2021, the World Bank projected a potential 86 million climate-related migrants in Africa by 2050, displaced within and among countries. According to the IDMC, almost one-third of all internal displacements worldwide take place among African nations, noting that such data can reflect displacements by rapid-onset disasters such as floods, but may not reflect (and thus under-report) displacements due to slow-onset changes such as droughts and desertification.

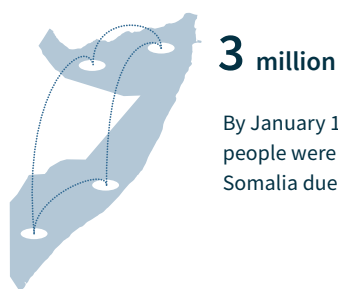
According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by January 1, 2021, almost 3 million people were internally displaced in Somalia due to conflicts and disasters, and almost a million had crossed into neighboring countries. By the end of 2021, some 3.5 million Somalis were projected to experience food insecurity due to a three-year drought, further fueling displacement and cross-border migration.

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Cross-border migration due to persistent climate-related factors has been on the rise in Central America. Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador are high on Germanwatch’s Long-Term Global Climate Risk Index, according to La Ruta del Clima. Countries like these located in the Central American Dry Corridor, are prone to persistent droughts, irregular rainfall, higher and more extreme temperatures, and flooding related to climate change.

A long drought has led to crop failures over several years, stimulating migration from rural to urban areas. Multiple major hurricanes in the region have accelerated these desperate conditions and fueled out-migration, particularly to Mexico and the US, as these forced migrants have sought shelter and safety, embarking on dangerous journeys only to be repelled at borders. Many survive in camps prone to further violence and exploitation, without work, health

care, and education for children. The World Bank's 2021 Groundswell Report projects that some 3.9 million people could be displaced by 2050 in this region; UNHCR reports that less than a million are internally displaced or have sought refuge within the region.



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Climate change impacting migrant communities

Having crossed borders, migrants displaced by climate factors may continue to experience climate impacts and other vulnerable situations. As irregular migrants, they may endure difficult living and working conditions owing to their undocumented status and racial identity, and the constant threat of arrest, detention, and deportation. Their lack of immigration status is a barrier to decent work, and they often lack access to social services, healthcare, and access to public safety and justice programs. Their freedom of movement may even be restricted.

In destination countries, these climate-displaced irregular migrants may once again feel the effects of the climate crisis. Along with other migrants, they are more prone to live in localities that are already environmentally degraded, like some areas in the Southeast and Southwest regions in the US—poorer neighborhoods and housing that may be temporary, substandard, and constructed without permits. In the wake of disasters², they may not have access to relief like housing, meals, or medical assistance, or are fearful of accessing such support, if available.

In the US, climate-related mega-fires raged since 2018 in California, where undocumented immigrants and

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farmworker families living in affected areas had little access to information, initially available only in English although Latinos make up almost half the population there. They were excluded from emergency support, and farmworkers were even forced to work in smoke-filled fields to save agricultural produce from rapidly advancing fires³.

Tragically, even those who flee their home countries due to climate change impacts may work on the frontlines of climate disaster recovery efforts. In fact, some undocumented workers in the US purposely head to disaster zones in hopes of finding work, performing jobs that can be dangerous and toxic⁴. These workers are now being organized by groups like Resilience Force, to ensure their rights and protections in an arena of work that has vastly expanded during the climate crisis.

Years of climate impacts have also contributed to unsustainable situations where returning to origin countries is not viable, such as Haiti, parts of Central America, and Pacific island states. In the US, Haitian and Salvadoran migrants received Temporary Protected Status (TPS) following major earthquakes and hurricanes. This status was renewed numerous times over the years, as subsequent weather events heightened by climate change continued to devastate the countries, along with political and broader economic instability. Many years later, these migrants still

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Conclusion

COP26 in 2021 concluded without the bold commitments needed to mitigate the rapidly advancing consequences of the climate crisis, despite having reaffirmed the goal to limit global warming to a 1.5°C rise. Countries will regroup in 2022 with updated national plans, but loopholes in the carbon market rules may allow for ‘business as usual’ in the continued use of fossil fuels. Pledges for more adaptation funding have increased, but more rapidly-deployed funds are needed for struggling countries. While the importance of financing for loss and damage received much more attention in 2021, resistance by much of the Global North continues.

These shortcomings and failures to address the climate crisis, combined with longstanding problems of economic development, lack of social protections, political chaos, gender and racial inequity and more, undermine promises to address the ‘root causes’ of population displacement and the structural and adverse drivers of migration.

Addressing these root causes involves recognition of ongoing global inequities stemming from the colonial era and the necessity of global cooperation in the context



of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC) of nations, affirmed by the UNFCCC⁵. It requires an integrated approach to sustainable development and migration policy that is commensurate

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with the urgency of the moment by welcoming climate-displaced migrants with full rights.

The acceleration of the climate crisis, in collision with the ongoing global health crisis, has sharply revealed the traumatic and desperate conditions of climate-displaced migrants crossing borders without the benefit of immigration documents. When there are few options for regular pathways for climate-displaced migrants, people are forced over dangerous land or sea routes, to live as irregular migrants in countries of destination. Without financial support and increased capacities to reverse or strategically adapt from climate-related damages to lands, resources, and economies (especially for regions in the Global South), the possibility of 'return' for these migrants is ever more unlikely.

Recommendations

In accordance with GCM Objective 2 on minimizing adverse drivers, states must:

- **Provide rights-based, gender-responsive, and permanent regular pathways for climate-displaced migrants** that are consistent with rights and protections in international human rights law and established labor standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO).
- Address the adverse drivers of migration by **contributing to climate-related financing for mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage**. Address structural factors underlying migration decisions.
- **Facilitate human mobility** and provide economic and social support for displaced peoples, including migrants, and access for safe migration and stay.
- **Provide grants, not loans, for loss and damage in the Global South**, which shoulders the brunt of climate change's traumatic impact. This is a particular obligation for China, the EU, and the US, which account for 41.5% of all greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Cancel debt as a form of 'reparation' for the historical ecological damage**, to help countries transition to just, sustainable economies.
- **Recognize the uneven circumstances of those forced to migrate due to climate-related factors**, including those who may not 'fit' existing criteria for protection or migration visas.
- **Give access to safe passage, residency, services and work authorization, and citizenship** in addition to humanitarian assistance.
- **The IMRF Progress Declaration should call for agile mechanisms that facilitate coherence within the UN system on climate, migration, labor, and development processes**. Climate-migration and its causes must emerge as a key priority for global migration policy.



Watch this video and learn how climate change amplifies inequalities and precarious migration – and how the international community should respond.

www.spotlightreportmigration.org/spotlight-videos/