



SUMMARY

UPROOTED BY CLIMATE CHANGE

Responding to the growing risk of displacement

www.oxfam.org



SUMMARY

Climate change is already forcing millions of people from their land and homes, and putting many more at risk of displacement in the future. Supercharged storms, more intense and prolonged droughts, rising seas and other impacts of climate change all exacerbate people's existing vulnerabilities and increase the likelihood of being forced to move.

While climate change affects us all, the risks of displacement are significantly higher in lower-income countries and among people living in poverty. Oxfam's analysis reveals that between 2008 and 2016, people in low- and lower-middle-income countries were around five times more likely than people in high-income countries to be displaced by sudden-onset extreme weather disasters.¹ Women, children, indigenous peoples and other vulnerable groups are also disproportionately affected.

The loss of homes, livelihoods and ancestral lands through displacement epitomizes the human cost and the grave injustice of climate change. Those least responsible for climate change are bearing the brunt of its impacts, and have fewest resources to cope with these new realities. The disproportionate incidence and impact of climate change related displacement both stems from and further drives inequality.

Displacement is disruptive and traumatic. However, much can and must be done to minimize the risk of displacement linked to climate change, and to guarantee rights and protection for people who are forced to move.

A first priority must be far more rapid reductions in global climate pollution, in line with limiting warming to 1.5°C. At the same time, communities must be supported to build resilience to the impacts of climate change that can no longer be avoided. Developed countries in particular must rapidly accelerate the decarbonization of their economies. They must also increase the scale and accessibility of support to enable developing countries to transition to a 100 percent renewable energy future and adapt to the impacts of climate change. At the 2017 UN Climate Change Conference (COP23), governments must recommit to the goals of the Paris Agreement and substantially strengthen international action and cooperation towards ending climate pollution and building resilient communities.

While recognizing that all possible measures must be taken to avoid displacement, it is also necessary to support strategies to ensure that people who are forced to move in the future can do so safely, with dignity, and on their own terms. The negotiation by September 2018 of two new Global Compacts – one on safe, orderly and regular migration, and one on refugees – offers a critical opportunity to help ensure safety, dignity and lasting solutions for those who are displaced, or at risk of displacement, in the context of climate change.

In addition to actions and commitments at the global level, regional and national responses will play an increasingly important part in minimizing displacement in the context of climate change and ensuring that viable options are available to those forced to move.

Between 2008 and 2016, people in low- and lower-middle-income countries were around five times more likely than people in high-income countries to be displaced by sudden-onset extreme weather disasters.

HOW CLIMATE CHANGE IS DRIVING DISPLACEMENT

Climate change is amplifying the risk of extreme weather disasters by increasing the destructive power of storms and floods. At the same time, rising seas, shifting rainfall patterns, drought and other slow-onset changes are eroding people's land, natural resources and security, and magnifying existing vulnerabilities.

In 2016, a year after Cyclone Pam brought destruction to Vanuatu, Cyclone Winston displaced more than 55,000 people in Fiji and caused loss and damage worth around one-fifth of the country's GDP.² In 2017, the Caribbean and south-eastern USA experienced a truly devastating hurricane season. In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, Hurricane Irma caused catastrophic damage across several Caribbean islands including Barbuda, Saint Martin and Anguilla before making landfall in Florida. Two weeks later, Hurricane Maria – another near-record hurricane – tore through the Caribbean, bringing destruction to Dominica and Puerto Rico. In August 2017, extreme monsoonal floods affected more than 43 million people in Bangladesh, Nepal and India. More than 1,200 people were killed and millions displaced.³

The impacts of sea-level rise and other slower-onset changes such as desertification are felt incrementally over time, with assets and security being steadily eroded, and communities faced with a long and difficult decision making period. Those who make the decision to move under such circumstances are being forced to move involuntarily. Rising seas, combined with more intense storms, are increasing coastal erosion and inundation. By one estimate, in the long term, sea-level rise resulting from 2°C of warming could submerge land that is currently home to 280 million people.⁴ The loss of land to erosion and inundation not only damages livelihoods and security; it also threatens deep cultural ties to the land and sea. The world's atoll nations, including Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands, face a truly existential threat from sea-level rise.



Photo: Ula Majewski/Oxfam, August 2017

'My great hope for my country is that it remains, existing on the map.'

Claire Anterea, Kiribati Climate Action Network.

Climate change is also exacerbating drought in many parts of the world by changing rainfall patterns, and by higher temperatures increasing evaporation from the soil, adding to drier conditions. For example, in East Africa, increased temperatures caused by climate change are exacerbating the impacts of drought.⁵ Drought erodes food and livelihood security, particularly for households that rely on rain-fed agriculture. Individuals and families in arid regions often use short-term migration to cope during bad years. But increasingly severe and frequent droughts may force them to move permanently.



'In my lifetime I have never seen this. We used to have 700 sheep and goats. Now we have seven. This drought is affecting everyone.'

Ibado, Somali region, Ethiopia.

In Ethiopia's Somali region, severe drought has forced pastoralists, including Ibado (pictured) and her family, to move into temporary settlements.

Photo: Tracy Carty/Oxfam, March 2017

The majority of people displaced by extreme weather disasters and other impacts of climate change remain within their own countries, while some may be forced to cross borders.⁶ Some people remain permanently displaced, while others are eventually able to return home. There are also those who may wish or need to move, but lack the resources to do so and become 'trapped'.

More often than not, displacement is a result of multiple factors and it can be difficult to isolate one driver from another. Underlying poverty, the growing number of people living in exposed areas and a variety of other factors all contribute to the growing risk of displacement. The line between 'sudden' and 'slow' onset changes can also blur. For example, sea-level rise increases the risk from tropical cyclones, as storm surges are exacerbated by higher sea levels. When extreme weather disasters become more and more frequent, conditions may become increasingly hostile over time. Climate change may also exacerbate the conditions driving conflict and violence, as people are forced to compete for dwindling natural resources.

THE UNEQUAL IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISPLACEMENT

On average, 21.8 million people were reported newly internally displaced by sudden-onset extreme weather disasters each year between 2008 and 2016.⁷ Extreme weather disasters affect all countries, rich and poor. But while nowhere is immune, people in poorer countries are much more likely to be forced to move. Oxfam's analysis of the historical data reveals that on average people in low- and lower-middle-income countries are five times more likely to be displaced by sudden-onset extreme weather disasters than people in high-income countries.⁸ However, gaps in existing data are likely to mask the full extent of the impact in the world's poorest countries. Usually, reported displacement numbers only cover people displaced by sudden-onset extreme weather disasters and do not include people forced to move by drought and other slow-onset events, which also have a severe impact on the world's poorest countries. For example, Oxfam estimates that around 3.2 million people in low-income countries were internally displaced by extreme weather disasters over the first nine months of 2017 (January–September), of whom more than half were displaced by drought.⁹

Indigenous peoples are often the worst affected by climate change and at highest risk of displacement. In many cases, these new challenges come on top of a long history of discrimination, disadvantage and the legacy of colonization. The impacts of displacement may go far beyond the loss of security and livelihoods – profoundly affecting a community's deep cultural and ancestral connection to its land.



Hilda Mosby, Masig Island, Torres Strait Islands, Australia.
Photo: Brian Cassey/Oxfam, June 2017

'When we talk about relocation, it is very clear that this is an option of last resort. This is our home. No one is willing to leave, to lose their cultural ties, the loved ones they have laid to rest here. We want to try everything we can to keep our community here.'

Hilda Mosby, Torres Strait Islander.

Women are also disproportionately harmed by climate change and disasters and related displacement. Women typically bear greater responsibility for tasks that are made more difficult by climate change, including sourcing food and water.¹⁰ Displaced women are also disadvantaged in many humanitarian recovery efforts, and may face greater difficulty in accessing assistance.¹¹ Conditions of displacement are often conducive to gender-based violence.

Climate change also disproportionately impacts children and young people, who face heightened levels of vulnerability during disasters and situations of displacement.¹² Elderly and disabled people are often neglected in situations of displacement. Migrant workers, who typically move to areas that are highly exposed to climate impacts and live in poorly constructed housing are also particularly at risk. People already displaced by conflict, many of whom are located within the world's 'climate change hotspots'¹³ may face secondary or repeated displacement due to the impacts of climate change.

LEADERSHIP FROM THE FRONTLINES

While it is essential to recognize the disproportionate impacts of climate change and displacement, it is equally important to recognize the crucial role of those most affected in driving solutions to climate change. Many countries that are acutely vulnerable to climate change, including Pacific Island countries, are showing determined leadership in response to the climate crisis. This includes implementing ambitious renewable energy strategies and climate change adaptation plans, and working to catalyse stronger international action. Indigenous knowledge is critical to climate solutions and to building resilient communities, and indigenous peoples worldwide are at the forefront of action on climate change. In addition, enabling the greater participation of women and young people in decision making at all levels is essential to driving fair and effective responses to climate change.

Pacific Island countries are showing determined leadership in response to the climate crisis.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES

The growing threat of displacement in the context of climate change requires an integrated global agenda aimed at minimizing displacement, upholding the rights of people on the move, and supporting strategies to ensure safe and dignified movement for those who may be forced to move in the future.

Minimizing displacement

Minimizing the risk of future displacement demands rapidly accelerating action to end global climate pollution, in line with limiting warming to 1.5°C and thereby significantly reducing the risks and impacts of climate change. Developed countries in particular must commit to stronger emissions reductions and to increasing support to enable developing countries to implement their emissions reduction commitments. The Facilitative Dialogue 2018, mandated to take stock of collective efforts towards the Paris Agreement's long-term temperature goal, is a key opportunity to enhance collective ambition. Minimizing displacement also depends on supporting communities to build resilience to the impacts of climate change. This requires increasing the scale and accessibility of international finance for adaptation, as well as ensuring strong and inclusive adaptation strategies at the national and local levels.

Upholding rights for people on the move

It is necessary to guarantee rights, status and protection for people who are forced to move by the impacts of climate change – both those who are internally displaced and those who have to move across borders.

Supporting long-term strategies for safe and dignified migration

It is necessary to plan now to ensure that people facing the existential threat of climate change are able to migrate safely, with dignity, and on their own terms. This involves creating expanded channels for regular migration, including opportunities for education, family reunification, labour migration, and humanitarian visas. Long-term strategies to address the risk of displacement may also include greater opportunities for seasonal migration, including enhanced labour mobility schemes, which may allow communities to diversify their livelihoods and increase resources available for climate change adaptation.

Providing finance and resources for people forced to move

Lastly, the international community has a responsibility to provide adequate finance and resources to those forced to move – through immediate humanitarian support, climate risk insurance, and by mobilizing finance to address loss and damage from climate change impacts, including displacement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

International climate negotiations – the Paris Agreement

- COP23 must lay the ground for a robust Facilitative Dialogue 2018. This should be informed by the Special Report on 1.5°C of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and ensure a substantial strengthening of global action before 2020.
- Developed countries must significantly increase international finance for climate change adaptation, and prioritize simplified access to funding for climate-vulnerable communities.
- COP23 must reaffirm the necessity of finance for addressing loss and damage, above and beyond the US\$100bn already promised for adaptation and mitigation, and agree that a new loss and damage finance mechanism will be established within two years.

The 2018 Global Compact on Migration should:

- Reaffirm the international responsibility to minimize displacement through addressing the root causes of climate change and factors in vulnerability;
- Support short- and long-term strategies to ensure safe and dignified movement for those who may be forced to move due to climate change, while recognizing that relocation is an option of last resort;
- Progressively develop new norms for addressing displacement in the context of climate change and gaps in legal protection, specifically: a two-year process to identify a protection and reception strategy that includes legal recognition and status for people forced to cross borders due to disasters, including extreme weather events; and a longer term process to address migration and displacement across borders when related to slow-onset impacts of climate change.

Regional and national responses should:

- Encourage the establishment and strengthening of regional mobility schemes and agreements, ensuring these are designed to support the needs of communities and safeguard against the exploitation of migrants.
- Expand opportunities for safe and regular migration for those who may be forced to move permanently, including through bilateral and multi-country agreements, special visa categories and open-access arrangements between developed countries and countries facing a high risk of displacement.
- National Adaptation Plans should include: early identification of communities at risk of displacement due to climate change; consultation with and full participation of affected communities; and strategies to support successful relocation, when appropriate, based on upholding human rights and protecting livelihoods and culture.

An expanded set of recommendations is provided in the briefing paper:

<https://oxf.am/2zzGJvs>

NOTES

All URLs were accessed in October 2017.

- 1 See note on methodology in Annex 1.
- 2 Government of Fiji (May 2016). Fiji Post-Disaster Needs Assessment: Tropical Cyclone Winston. <http://reliefweb.int/report/fiji/fiji-post-disaster-needs-assessment-may-2016-tropical-cyclone-winston-february-20-2016>
- 3 Oxfam (31 August 2017). 43 million hit by South Asia Floods: Oxfam is Responding. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2017-08-31/43-million-hit-south-asia-floods-oxfam-responding>
- 4 Benjamin Strauss, Scott Kulp, Anders Levermann (2015). Mapping Choices: Carbon, Climate and Rising Seas – Our Global Legacy. Climate Central <http://sealevel.climatecentral.org/uploads/research/Global-Mapping-Choices-Report.pdf>
- 5 T. Carty (2017). A Climate in Crisis: How climate change is making drought and humanitarian disaster worse in East Africa. Oxfam. <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/mb-climate-crisis-east-africa-drought-270417-en.pdf>
- 6 UNHCR (2015). UNHCR, The Environment and Climate Change. UNHCR. <http://www.unhcr.org/540854f49.pdf>
- 7 Based on the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre's full dataset for Disaster-Related New Displacements <http://www.internal-displacement.org/database/>
- 8 See note on methodology in Annex 1.
- 9 See note on methodology in Annex 1.
- 10 Christine Haigh, Bernadette Vallely (2010). Gender and the Climate Change Agenda. Women's Environmental Network. <https://www.gdnonline.org/resources/Gender%20and%20the%20climate%20change%20agenda%2021.pdf>
- 11 Hannah Entwisle (2013). The World Turned Upside Down: A Review of Protection Risks and UNHCR's Role in Natural Disasters. UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service. <http://www.alnap.org/resource/12148>
- 12 UNICEF (2017). No Place to Call Home: Protecting Children's Rights when the Changing Climate Forces them to Flee. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/No-Place-To-Call-Home.pdf>
- 13 UNHCR (2015). UNHCR, The Environment and Climate Change. Op. cit.

Cover photo: Vald Sokhin/Panos/OxfamAUS. Tiiria, 11, balances on a fallen coconut tree near her family home in Teoraereke village, South Tarawa, Kiribati

© Oxfam International November 2017

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

