

Policy Brief

Addressing Climate Change Displacement

Climate change has become a major driver of displacement of millions of people across the world. This policy brief, based on a 2023 Caritas report *Displaced by a changing climate - Caritas Voices: protecting and supporting people on the move*, provides policy recommendations to mitigate the needless human suffering, human rights violations and unchecked losses and damages resulting from a destabilised climate.

The growing reality of climate change displacement

People displaced by climate change are left to bear the weight of multiple violations of their human rights - economic, social and cultural, as well as civil and political - and associated losses and damages. While leaving is in itself traumatic, displaced people face situations of high precariousness, disintegration of their households, discrimination, abuse, exploitation, trafficking, conflict, violence and successive moves. Adding to their hardships, they are often forcibly returned to the place they initially had to flee and are left with no other option but to move again. Existing efforts to protect, promote and integrate persons displaced due to climate change are simply not meeting the magnitude of the situation.

States pledged to leave no one behind when they endorsed the Sustainable Development Goals, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change recognises the need to address displacement due to climate change. Yet evidence from a 2023 Caritas report, *Displaced by a Changing Climate - Caritas Voices: protecting and supporting people on the move*, shows that people displaced by climate change are mostly left without legal and policy frameworks to protect and support them.

Great investments are therefore required in countries which do not have the means to deal with displacement due to climate change, a problem they did not cause. Most movements take place in lower and middle income countries, many of which are highly indebted and have difficulty servicing their debt. Donors have consistently been falling short of their climate finance commitments, most of which is in the form of loans. Adaptation finance is vastly insufficient, and rarely addresses migration. Funds are also urgently needed to address losses and damages inflicted by migration due to climate change.

Displaced by a changing climate - Caritas Voices: protecting and supporting people on the move

Based on the experiences of Caritas member organisations across the world, this report takes stock of the hardships faced by persons displaced within and across country borders due to climate change. It outlines the risks of inaction on displacement, and points to possible solutions to mitigate needless human suffering, human rights violations and unchecked losses and damages resulting from a destabilised climate.

The recommendations of the report are as follows:

The causes and scale of climate change displacement

Extreme weather events, fuelled by climate change, are a highly visible cause of displacement. Droughts, tropical storms and hurricanes, heavy rains and floods are the most common causes. In the last decade, over 20 million people have been displaced within the borders of their countries every year due to extreme weather events alone. This is over twice the average number of people who have been internally displaced every year due to conflict.

Displacement due to slow onset events Climate change is also progressively degrading environments in which people live, with approximately 3.3 billion people living in countries with high human vulnerability to climate change. With the Earth's temperature rise unchecked and population in at-risk areas increasing, particularly in lower income countries, migration due to climate change is likely to continue growing. A World Bank report concluded that, in six regions alone, by 2050, without ambitious climate action, well over 200 million people may need to move within the borders of their countries, to cope with the impacts of slow-onset climate events.

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Recommendations to address climate change displacement:

To address present human rights violations and plan ahead, States should:

- adapt and increase social and physical infrastructure capacity to holistically address present and future needs generated by displacement due to climate change.
- actively involve communities on the move and those hosting in planning and implementing durable solutions. States must address the needs of both parties to avoid conflict, and value traditional approaches.
- improve data collection and analysis on displacement due to climate change.
- make full use of existing planning instruments which are presently underutilised – Nationally Determined Contributions, National Action Plans and Disaster Risk Reduction strategies - and address displacement due to climate change in all national and local planning processes, with a whole-of-government approach, so as to enable positive development outcomes.

To scale up funding to ensure migration with dignity, donors should:

- increase the level of funding in the form of grants - not of loans - dedicated to climate change adaptation, including migration as an adaptation response.
- urgently work on making the Loss and Damage fund operational. Ensure its scope is broad enough to cover all losses and damages associated with migration due to climate change and that the human rights concept is central to its design and implementation.
- until the Loss and Damage fund is operational, drastically increase funding through existing channels and consider debt relief and debt swaps to address losses and damages associated with migration due to climate change.
- ensure civil society - including indigenous peoples and local communities - has a say in deciding how funds are to be used and are given the possibility to access funds directly, as well as to monitor whether they are spent according to plan.

To leave no one behind: develop and apply policy and legal frameworks:

On internal displacement:

- **States** should incorporate and enforce the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in all relevant national legislation and policy frameworks.
- **The international community** should remind States of their primary duty to protect the human rights of all persons in their jurisdiction, including persons displaced due to climate change, and, when necessary, enhance the capacity of States to protect.

On cross-border displacement:

States should:

- apply the 1951 Geneva Convention to situations where climate change and conflict coexist.
- fully adopt the recommendations in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in their legal and policy frameworks.
- grant asylum to persons displaced by the impacts of climate change where regional agreements give a broad enough definition to the concept of refugee status.
- adapt, improve and make full use of existing complementary pathways for admission to lessen the protection gap for people on the move due to climate change, where no better options are presently available.

The international community should:

- encourage more regions to adopt refugee definitions which encompass climate change impacts as valid reasons for seeking asylum.
- encourage States to meet their commitments to international law as regards people on the move due to climate change, including by applying the principle of non-refoulement.

The Caritas report *Displaced by a changing climate - Caritas Voices: protecting and supporting people on the move*, can be found at <http://www.caritas.org.au/publications/reports>