Contribution for the OHCHR Report

**Internal displacement in the context of the slow-onset adverse effects of climate change**

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/IDPersons/Pages/CallforInputs_IDPs_climate_change.aspx>

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Slow-onset climate change and internal displacement in Latin America and the Caribbean

*A Contribution from UNEP Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean*

Slow-onset climate change events in Latin America and the Caribbean take various forms, including sea level rise, droughts, changes in rainfall, extreme temperatures, salinisation, desertification (notably Argentina, Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru), ocean acidification, melting of glaciers (especially in the Andes), land and forest degradation. These elements combine with political contexts, socio-economic and geographic vulnerabilities to impact peoples’ livelihoods and ability to enjoy human rights, pushing many to migrate –internally or internationally- as a coping strategy, while others are “trapped” without alternatives.

Climate change-induced migration has been attracting more and more interests in the past years, but there is a lack of comprehensive data collection and analysis on the subject. Existing data is mainly available for displacement caused by specific sudden-onset incidents and disasters in the region, such as hurricanes, tropical storms and floods. When it comes to slow-onset effects of climate change and migration in the region, data and research are sparse. Some studies have started to address the phenomenon, as an inter-agency study from 2017 demonstrated a correlation between prolonged droughts, food insecurity and migration from the Central American Dry Corridor to the United States.[[1]](#footnote-1) But data on the combination of *internal* migration and slow-onset factors are much more difficult to find.

Yet, a couple of tendencies and case studies can be identified from secondary research:

* **Internal migration in the Central American Dry Corridor due to droughts and food insecurity:** If the aforementioned study addresses cross-boundary migration rather than internal migration, the phenomenon studied has also affected internal patterns of displacement in the Dry Corridor, especially in Northern Triangle countries.[[2]](#footnote-2) Unprecedented droughts worsened by the El Niño phenomenon in 2014-2016 have affected crop production, and consequently the livelihood of small-scale farmers and food security in these regions, impacting the populations’ rights to live free from hunger, and their rights to water and health.[[3]](#footnote-3) [[4]](#footnote-4) It has been calculated that droughts reduced crop production by up to 80% between 2014 and 2015, leaving around 248,000 families severely food insecure in 2016.[[5]](#footnote-5) A considerable portion of rural communities impacted by this phenomenon are indigenous peoples. The lack of food and employment have prompted many to migrate internally towards cities, and internationally to the United States. These trends can only be reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, as lockdowns and border closures have impacted livelihoods and led to a sharp increase in hunger and food insecurity in the region, especially countries like Guatemala and El Salvador.[[6]](#footnote-6) [[7]](#footnote-7) The border closures would prevent international migration, increasing the number of internally displaced.
* A number of studies exists regarding **droughts, rainfall patterns, land degradation and internal migration in Mexico**. Analysis based on census, population flows and meteorological data have shown both droughts and abundant rainfall to be push factors for internal migration in the country, especially in regions most dependent on agriculture revenues.[[8]](#footnote-8) [[9]](#footnote-9) [[10]](#footnote-10) A study specifically found that each additional drought month increased the odds of rural-urban migration by 3.6%.[[11]](#footnote-11) Such patterns of climate change-induced urbanisation can lead to inadequate living conditions for internal migrants and impact their right to an adequate standard of living.[[12]](#footnote-12) In addition, studies demonstrated a positive correlation between land degradation, soil erosion and migration, especially in the poorer states of Mexico.[[13]](#footnote-13) [[14]](#footnote-14)
* **Sea-level rise and its impact on migration and relocation in the region have been documented**. For example, the Gunayala indigenous peoples living in the San Blas archipelago of Panama have been impacted by sea-level rise and extreme weather events, which will force an estimate of 40,000 people to relocate to the mainland, affecting their cultural rights and right to self-determination.[[15]](#footnote-15) [[16]](#footnote-16) The Gulf of Mexico is another at-risk region from sea-level rise, which could have important implications for the livelihood and access to employment of many of its inhabitants as the Gulf possesses eight major fishing ports and two industrial ports. The Yucatán Peninsula and other coastal zones such as Veracruz, Ixtapa and Cozumel are also at risk from rising sea levels in Mexico.[[17]](#footnote-17)
* **Land degradation and armed conflict as combined drivers of internal displacement:** in the case of Colombia, drought and land degradation are combined with the persistence of internal armed conflicts between the government, FARC dissidents and other armed groups like the ELN, which have been triggering environmental degradation, leading to massive internal displacements, confinement and human rights violations.[[18]](#footnote-18) [[19]](#footnote-19) [[20]](#footnote-20) In 2019, more than 25,000 people have been subjected to mass displacement, while approximately 27,600 remained in confinement, due to the presence of anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance.[[21]](#footnote-21) According to the ICRC annual report for 2020, the highest confinement and mass displacement has been recorded in the departments of Arauca, Antioquia and Norte de Santander.[[22]](#footnote-22) The use of these munitions denies access to natural resources and land, vital for the development of communities whose livelihood is based on agriculture or farming. As a consequence, entire communities are internally displaced or forcibly confined.[[23]](#footnote-23) This can be seen in Putumayo department, where mobility restrictions prevented the access of the community to public services.[[24]](#footnote-24) Therefore, their right to adequate food, water and health is threatened and denied. On the other hand, the chemical contamination by landmines poses a risk the health of entire communities due to their toxicity, affecting populations’ right to health, access to water and food security.[[25]](#footnote-25)
* **Forest degradation and displacement:** Although fires have an ecological role in forest ecosystems by ensuring future generation of trees from the accumulation of humus through soil microorganisms, higher temperatures and unpredictable weather patterns induced by climate change increase the severity of forest fires, pest infestations and diseases. At the same time, fire-sensitive ecosystems may lack the ability to recover quickly after a burn: in the long-term, the increasingly frequent and severe fires in the Amazon ecosystem promote the establishment of vegetation vulnerable to fire. A study from WWF shows how the combination of a reduced tree population and large amount of dry organic matter on the forest floor increased the forest’s vulnerability to fire, leading to high damage to economy and social life.[[26]](#footnote-26) The alteration of fire regimes, influenced by climate change and vegetation type, is the main natural cause of loss of global biodiversity and forest degradation. In addition, a series of droughts due to El Niño took place in Amazon since 1998, affecting the Brazilian state of Roraima. In these circumstances, populations living in and relying on the Amazon rainforest and its resources for their survival, especially indigenous peoples including uncontacted tribes, are at risk. Moreover, these risks are heightened as they combine with the surge in illegal logging, deforestation, mining and resulting contamination, resource scarcity and the activities of armed groups on their territories, all factors increasingly pushing indigenous peoples to migrate.[[27]](#footnote-27) Around 350 indigenous groups live in rainforest territories across Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela and Paraguay, 70 of them being uncontacted. Fires, deforestation, mining and agro-industrial developments are forcing many to adopt migration as a coping strategy, seeking refuge in regions that do not correspond to their ancestral territories.[[28]](#footnote-28) This jeopardise their cultural rights, right to self-determination, to land, and to live in an environment free of contamination, as well as an array of rights specific to uncontacted tribes including the right to live in voluntary isolation.[[29]](#footnote-29) These rights are all the more under threat with the surge of COVID-19 in Amazon territories and among indigenous peoples, which has also permitted a sharp increase in deforestation and mining, as prices of gold have gone up and indigenous peoples are patrolling their territories less due to the self-isolation measures taken to fight the spread of the virus.[[30]](#footnote-30) [[31]](#footnote-31) [[32]](#footnote-32) This has led to multiple mass displacements episodes for indigenous peoples in Colombia and Venezuela during the pandemic, including the nearly 5,000 Venezuelan indigenous displaced in the Brazilian Amazon Basin and the undocumented bi-national communities Wayuu, Bari, Yukpa, Inga, Sikwani and Amorúa, located along the border between Colombia and Venezuela, threatened by armed groups who are seeking to take control over their lands.[[33]](#footnote-33) [[34]](#footnote-34)
* Lastly, it is important to mention that changing climate and weather patterns are also increasing the **occurrences of vector-borne diseases and viruses**, such as dengue, yellow fever and malaria. A dengue epidemic has been impacting the region, Honduras being one of the hardest hit countries.[[35]](#footnote-35) Such occurrences, together with other climate-induced and socio-economic factors, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, can combine to drive further internal migration.

There are still no international frameworks that address migration stemming from climate change, including slow-onset events, to protect affected people. In the Latin American and Caribbean region, although some countries, such as El Salvador in January 2020, have passed new law on internal displacement, such laws often fail to address and include any references to the climate-change drivers of displacement.[[36]](#footnote-36) Many Latin American and Caribbean countries have also developed Natural Disaster Preparedness Plans and Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Plans, sometimes with the guidance of international actors such as UNEP, but there is a need for an increased social focus in such plans and a more explicit recognition of migration induced by climate change and disasters, to address subsequent protection needs. In some cases, as in Panama or Mexico, localised relocation plans have been implemented with varying levels of success.[[37]](#footnote-37) [[38]](#footnote-38) Policies to reduce climate induced rural-urban migration need to focus on rural adaptation initiatives while helping rural migrants in their resettlements and search for employment in urban areas. Countries also need to effectively reaffirm their commitments to protect the rights of indigenous peoples in the region, including uncontacted tribes, who are disproportionately affected by climate change and environmental degradation-induced migration.

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