

High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges: Protection and Resilience during Pandemics

Refugees International Written Statement for the session on Climate Action

Climate-related impacts are leading to displacement and forcing people to migrate today

We are in the midst of a climate crisis. The disruptive effects of climate change are being felt today. Nowhere is this more evident than in climate-related disaster displacement trends. For example, in 2019, weather-related events led to almost 24 million displaced people around the world, or more than three times the amount displaced by conflict the same year.¹ While not all of these events are necessarily climate-related, they do speak to a worrying trend; namely, that sudden-onset weather events, such as hurricanes or floods, are increasing in frequency and intensity due to climate change. The climate science is clear. For instance, in 2017, Hurricane Maria was 30 percent more powerful than any other storm ever recorded in Puerto Rico – an occurrence that climate change is making five times more likely.² The storm displaced 86,000 Puerto Ricans, with some 130,000 leaving the island for mainland United States in the aftermath.³ It also leveled much of the island Dominica and displaced 80 percent of its population.⁴ In 2019, Hurricane Dorian stalled over the Bahamas for more than 24 hours, supporting research that finds that hurricanes in the North Atlantic have been moving more slowly and stalling for longer periods due to climate change.⁵ Dorian was the strongest hurricane to ever hit the country, and it displaced 14,000 people.⁶

¹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). *Global Report on Internal Displacement*, 2020. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/>.

² John Keelings & Jose J. Hernandez Ayala. “Extreme Rainfall Associated With Hurricane Maria Over Puerto Rico and Its Connections to Climate Variability and Change,” *Geophysical Research Letters*, 46:5 (2019), 2964-2973. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2019GL082077>.

³ John D. Sutter. “130,000 left Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, Census Bureau says.” *CNN*, December 19, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/19/health/sutter-puerto-rico-census-update/index.html>.

⁴ IDMC. *Spotlight: The Atlantic Hurricane Season. Global Report on Internal Displacement*, 2018. https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2018-GRID-spotlight-atlantic-hurricane-season_0.pdf.

⁵ Timothy M. Hall & James P. Kossin. “Hurricane stalling along the North American coast and implications for rainfall,” *npj Climate and Atmospheric Science*, 2:17 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41612-019-0074-8>.

⁶ UNICEF. *Hurricane Dorian - Bahamas: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 3, 24 September 2019*, 2019. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/BHS-Dorian-UNICEF-SitRep%20N3%20CLEAR.pdf>.

Climate-related disasters do not affect all countries or people within their borders equally. In fact, displacement risk is often determined by complex interactions at the site of disaster, including the underlying vulnerability of people and communities, the magnitude and frequency of the given climate-related hazard, and the ability to cope with such events.⁷ In a real world context and using Maria and Dorian as examples, reporting shows that those most likely to be displaced and face long-term precarity are people and households that were already living in extreme poverty and/or who had tenuous employment status, such as undocumented Haitians in the Bahamas during Hurricane Dorian.⁸ This means that climate change most affects those that have the least to do with its driving force, carbon emissions.

Slow-onset impacts and their effects underscore the severity of the issue and the need to push the boundaries of existing policy paradigms. Slow-onset impacts include increasing temperatures; desertification; loss of biodiversity; land and forest degradation; glacial retreat; ocean acidification; sea level rise; and salinization.⁹ Due to the way in which they evolve, slow-onset events' effects are less tangible or immediately threatening in the short-term. Thus, households or communities may have more time to assess the changing situation and make a more deliberate decision about whether to move. However, as these impacts can make it untenable to earn a living in impacted areas, such decisions may be less than voluntary.

Slow-onset events are irreversible and migration related to them will likely not be temporary. In some cases, such as sea-level rise, the country from which people have fled may no longer exist. Sea-level rise is of increasing concern for low-lying island states, with recent predictions indicating that the rate of change is much higher than previously anticipated.¹⁰ In the case of slow-onset events, and especially sea-level rise, the international community has yet to develop protection mechanisms or frameworks to ensure the displaced can find sustainable solutions.

Managing the COVID-19 pandemic should not come at the expense of protection for those displaced due to climate-related disasters

Given the evolving nature of climate change and the closing window of opportunity to act, now is the time to get serious about the needs of those displaced by climate-related impacts. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this clearer than ever before. The way in which we as a global community interact with the environment has resounding implications and ripple effects on the safety and prosperity of everyone, but especially the most vulnerable. It will take a coordinated effort and global response to meet the challenge of both COVID-19 and climate change.

⁷ IDMC. *Global Estimates 2015: People Displaced by Disaster*, 2015. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/global-estimates-2015-people-displaced-by-disasters>.

⁸ VOA News. "Haitian Immigrants in Bahamas Struggle After Hurricane Dorian," *VOA News*, March 20, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/americas/haitian-immigrants-bahamas-struggle-after-hurricane-dorian>

⁹ UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Slow onset events*, n.d. <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/constituted-bodies/executive-committee-of-the-warsaw-international-mechanism-for-loss-and-damage-wim-excom/areas-of-work/slow-onset-events>.

¹⁰ Scott A. Kulp & Benjamin H. Strauss. "New elevation data triple estimates of global vulnerability to sea-level rise and coastal flooding," *Nature Communications*, 10:4844 (2019). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-019-12808-z>.

We welcome UNHCR’s continued engagement on climate change within the protection dialogue and as part of its Strategic Framework on Climate Action. However, we believe that multilateral organizations and governments must act more boldly.

We hope that UNHCR will help to lead the international discussion and international policy efforts to craft new and sustainable solutions for those displaced, both internally and externally, by disasters exacerbated by the effects of climate change. We welcome the new UNHCR paper on “Legal considerations regarding claims for international protection made in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters,”¹¹ which suggests important factors that should inform refugee protection decisions for those displaced by disasters exacerbated by climate change. UNHCR should advocate for national policies implementing the perspectives and guidance in the legal protection paper, and partner in such efforts with governments prepared to implement such guidance. This work should be done in close partnership with civil society organizations working on refugee issues on the ground, so that refugee status determination and practice evolve in this progressive way.

In addition, Refugees International strongly urges UNHCR to lend its support for complementary and alternative pathways, including novel resettlement and planned relocation schemes, for those who are forced to migrate as a result of climate displacement and who may not be eligible for other forms of international protection.

¹¹ UNHCR. *Legal considerations regarding claims for international protection made in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters*, 2020. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5f75f2734.html>.