

**PROTECTING MIGRANTS' RIGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND DISASTERS**

Climate change, environmental degradation, and disasters<sup>1</sup> adversely impact the well-being and rights of migrants and their communities of origin and destination. Often interacting with other negative factors such as conflict, economic crisis, poverty, and political fragility, they act as drivers of displacement, increase protection risks and degrade the capacity of communities and states to provide protection. Worse still, they may leave some people in vulnerable situations, who are unable to move due to physical disability, lack of resources or other social and political reasons, trapped/immobile in degraded areas, exposed to environmental shocks and further impoverishment.

Sudden and slow-onset events can prevent the effective enjoyment of basic human rights, including the rights to life, health, housing and livelihood, as these events may lead to food insecurity and water shortages, heightened physical and mental health issues, and loss of habitats, housing and livelihoods among others. The economic hardships that can result from climate impacts can push people to pursue risky livelihood strategies, including through irregular migration, making them vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation. Climate stressors and environmental degradation may contribute to conflict by exacerbating competition over land and scarce resources, which can undermine social cohesion and lead to further rights violations, including violations of housing, land and property (HLP) rights.

Climate change, environmental degradation and disasters are risk multipliers, which can exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities and weaken resilience. Those who are already marginalized, live in precarious conditions, have fewer resources, or have limited access to services and social protection are hit hardest. Communities that are disproportionately affected include displaced populations and migrants – particularly those in irregular situations, women, children, persons with disabilities, elderly people; persons with diverse SOGIESC<sup>2</sup>; indigenous people, minorities, and people in situations of poverty.

Migrants are more exposed to natural hazards due to a variety of factors. Language barriers, restrictions on mobility, irregular immigration status, confiscation/loss of identity or travel documents, limited social networks, isolation, attacks and discrimination are some of the factors that hinder the ability of migrants to access protection, move out of harm's way, or otherwise ensure their own safety and well-being. Similarly, women and girls commonly face higher risks and greater burdens from the



Bougainville, Papua New Guinea © IOM 2016/Muse Mohammed

impacts of climate change due to poverty and existing gender inequalities, leaving them vulnerable to gender-based violence, trafficking in persons and early/forced marriage. Globally close to one billion children live in 33 countries classified as at high risk of climate change impacts<sup>3</sup>. This exposure negatively affects children's well-being and healthy development; and hinders their access to key essential services, pushing the most vulnerable children deeper into poverty. Disaster displacement and potential family separation heighten risks of child abuse, violence, and human trafficking. The climate crisis also increases the risk of child labour and child marriage as negative coping mechanisms.

The communities most severely affected by these intertwined risks may become displaced internally or across borders, suddenly or due to slower drivers. Less acute impacts may still alter migration patterns if people decide to move, seeking better life opportunities. Others may decide to stay or may not have the resources to move and require support in resilience and adaptation. In any of these scenarios, States are required to provide effective mechanisms to prevent and redress human rights harms. It is important that measures taken to support and respond stem from informed and participatory decision-making by the affected communities – including migrants, regardless of status – and are accountable to those communities in their implementation.

1 Refer to natural hazard-induced disasters.  
2 Sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.  
3 UNICEF Report “[The climate crisis is a child rights crisis](#)”, 2021.

**FACTS & FIGURES**



Globally **1 in 2 of the world's children live in 33 countries** classified as at high risk of climate change impacts. Almost every child on Earth is exposed to at least one climate and environmental hazard, shock or stress. A record-breaking 850 million are exposed to four or more stresses (UNICEF, 2021).



Persons with disabilities face **2 to 4 times** higher mortality rates in disaster settings than that persons without disabilities (OCHA, CERF-UFE 2021).



When disasters strike, women are **14 times more** likely to die and less able to access relief and assistance (UNDP, 2022).



World Bank estimates suggest that **up to 132 million people** will be pushed into extreme poverty as a result of climate change by the end of 2030 (World Bank, 2020).

## IOM VISION AND PROGRAMMING

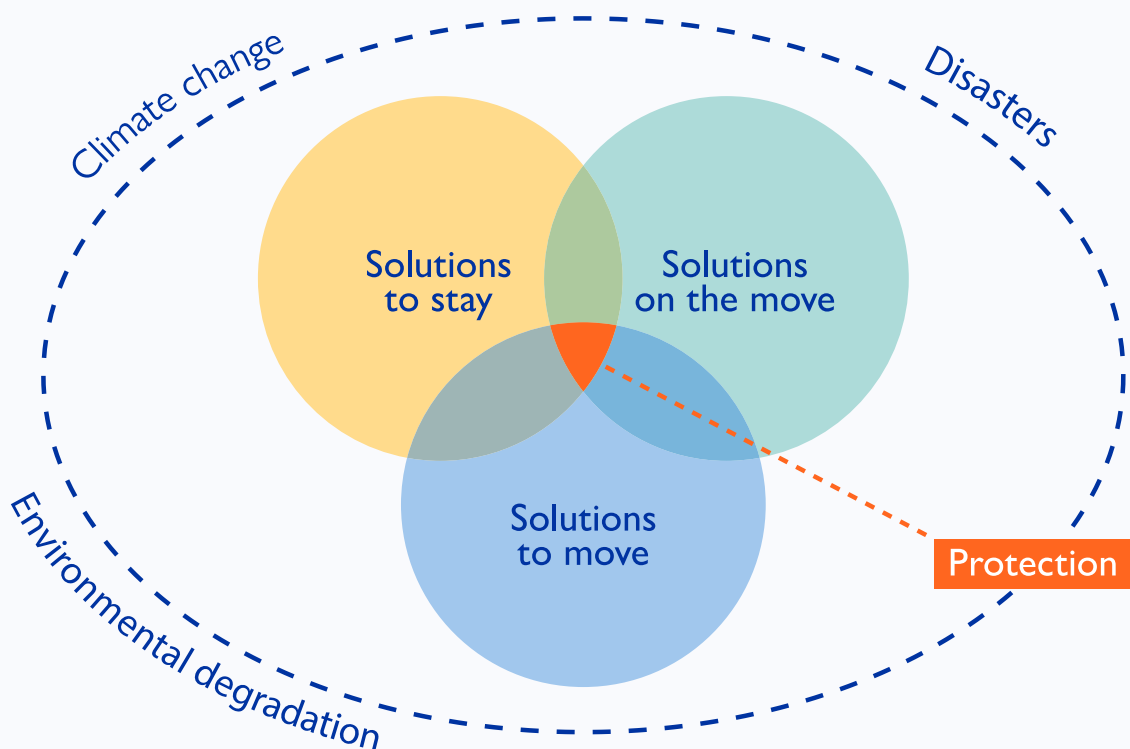
Building on [IOM's Institutional Strategy on Migration, Environment and Climate Change \(2021-2030\)](#) and [IOM's Approach to Protection](#), IOM is committed to ensuring the protection of the rights of migrants and affected communities in the context of climate change, environmental degradation and disasters. IOM's overarching goal on protection is to place the rights and well-being of migrants, including IDPs, at the center of its operations, regardless of their status. This means ensuring the protection of migrants across the full spectrum of migration management and governance. IOM promotes migration as a choice through interventions aimed at reducing the risks of violence, abuse and exploitation, and other rights violations, and fostering protective factors that lead to resilience at an individual, household, community, and structural level.

### IOM provides solutions:

- » **For people to make informed decisions to remain in place**, by focusing on prevention through anticipatory action, preparedness, and adaptation. Working on prevention is the most effective protection investment for the future, as it mitigates risk factors, mobilizes individual and community capacities, and creates alternatives to displacement. IOM works to develop capacities for disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation, supporting efforts to scale up forecasting, risk analysis, and early-warning capabilities for anticipating protection risks, identifying vulnerable communities, and taking preventive action.
- » **For people on the move**, by addressing the assistance and protection needs of migrants and displaced persons. IOM leverages its extensive field presence, data capacities, and co-lead role in the Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster for fast mobilization in disaster emergencies to deliver life-saving aid and specialized protection services. IOM promotes non-discriminatory and safe access to humanitarian assistance, prioritizing the most vulnerable groups. IOM works to deliver specialized protection services and establish functioning referral mechanisms for victims of violence, abuse and exploitation. IOM strives to advance early responses for solutions.
- » **For people to move** where safe, orderly and regular migration is an adaptation strategy to protect people, save lives, minimize suffering, and increase resilience. Establishing and expanding regular pathways for migration serves as a critical protection action, particularly for 'immobile/trapped populations' and 'populations without safe return options' that are highly exposed to protection risks. IOM also supports states in devising and implementing rights-based planned relocation as a measure of last resort to protect communities living in unsafe and uninhabitable areas.

IOM invests in collective action and partnerships to address protection risks in the context of climate change, environmental degradation and disasters. IOM believes that prevention, response and solution efforts should integrate all actors across humanitarian, development, peace and climate nexus. Climate action should be a collective endeavor based on the central role of the governments and involving international organizations, the private sector, civil society, academia and diaspora organizations, considering a whole-of-society approach.

## PROTECTION IS CENTRAL TO IOM'S CLIMATE ACTION



## IOM ENGAGEMENT

IOM supports states in carrying out their duties to respect, protect and fulfill rights and address protection needs in both humanitarian and non-humanitarian settings through direct assistance; training and capacity development; advocacy and communications; data, research and learning; convening and dialogue; and thematic guidance. In 2023, IOM delivered protection services to 2.6 million people affected by humanitarian crises globally, including through community-based protection and provision of assistance tailored to specific protection needs, and around 146,000 migrants in vulnerable situations as well as facilitated the safe and dignified return of nearly 72,000 returnees.

IOM is actively engaged in protection fora, including the Global Protection Cluster and its bodies, as well as the [Platform on Disaster Displacement](#). IOM's protection work aligns with the [Paris Agreement on Climate Change](#), [Global Compact for Migration](#), the [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2030 Agenda](#), and, [Migrants in Countries in Crisis \(MICIC\) Guidelines](#), among others.

### CASE STUDY 1

#### [Climate Resilience Against Trafficking and Exploitation](#)

Climate change puts a strain on livelihoods, worsening pre-existing socio-economic vulnerabilities, and can lead to an increase in high-risk migration as a coping strategy among affected populations. This may include resorting to migrant smugglers and other agents, which in turn increases vulnerability to trafficking in persons and associated forms of exploitation and abuse, particularly when knowledge about these risks is limited. The impact of climate change, however, is rarely considered as a potential contributor to human trafficking and the nexus remains relatively unexplored. Evidence and understanding of the different impacts of slow and sudden onset hazards at the community level, as well as appropriate and effective responses, is limited. This project is piloting an initiative to explore this nexus in more detail. Coordinated by IOM United Kingdom, the pilot is being implemented at the community level in key hotspot locations in Ethiopia and the Philippines. The project seeks to reduce the risks of trafficking by supporting the communities to be more climate-resilient and trafficking-aware. The project is innovative as it draws on the theoretical and practical knowledge that has emerged from climate change adaptation initiatives, particularly resilient livelihoods, disaster risk reduction and ecosystem management, and applies these to a trafficking context. The project will also contribute to enhancing the evidence base on how climate change can impact

migration and vulnerability to trafficking and generate learning about potential responses. Ethiopia and the Philippines have been chosen as target countries as they are both significantly impacted by the nexus of climate change and trafficking in persons.



San Juan, the Philippines © IOM 2023/Andrea Empamano

### CASE STUDY 2

#### [The Impact of Environmental Drivers and Climate Change on Migration Trends and Protection Needs in Ethiopia](#)

Ethiopia is increasingly affected by environmental changes, such as recurrent droughts, desertification, and land degradation which, in conjunction with social, economic, and political factors, causes complex migration flows. More than 70 per cent of the Ethiopian population is employed in the agricultural sector, characterized by low-input, low-output, and subsistence production. Meanwhile, drought was the leading cause of mortality in Ethiopia in 2019. Since 2020, Ethiopia continues to face one of the most severe droughts in the last 40 years and over one million people in the Somali region are experiencing acute water shortages, increasing food insecurity and significant livestock losses. In tandem with droughts, more than 270,200 people in the Oromia region were affected by floods in September 2023, causing considerable damage to homes. As environmental degradation and disasters increase, people engage in various forms of migration as a coping mechanism, leaving them exposed to violence, exploitation, and abuse.

IOM Ethiopia, under the Cooperation on Migration and Partnerships for Sustainable Solutions (COMPASS) project, is finalizing broad research to assess the nexus of protection, migration, and climate change. The results are stark: when household participants were asked, 'in the last year, have all household members had sufficient access to food?' 99 percent of respondents answered "no." 81 percent reported

that their household does not have regular access to drinking water and 64 percent reported that the worst disaster they had ever experienced occurred in the last five years. The report gives a comprehensive overview of the affected populations' needs and recommendations for how to provide support amidst this multiform crisis.



Oromia Region, Ethiopia © IOM 2022/Kaye Viray



**Migrant Women Protection in Central America and the Dominican Republic: Resilience and Gender-Based Violence Prevention**

Central America and the Caribbean are exposed to the recurring impacts of natural hazards, such as drought, floods and hurricanes. The gendered impact of disasters exacerbates situations of inequality, entails a rise in gender-based violence and creates differentiated vulnerabilities and protection needs. One of the objectives of this regional project is to ensure that the needs of women and girls on the move and in vulnerable communities are addressed in a more systematic way through a protection lens.

The project aims to apply a comprehensive, intersectional and multistakeholder approach for positioning migrant women issues into regional programmatic and protection agendas and public policies. As the programme reaches its second phase, it will focus on advocacy, knowledge and capacity building, data-based evidence, awareness raising, and innovative actions for rural women. As part of the advocacy work, the project achieved the following results: i. Mitch+25 High-Level Forum Declaration included reference to the protection needs of women and girls on the move as well as the inclusion of migrants into disaster emergency responses; ii. Decision No. 6 about gender and environmental management was adopted in the XXIII Environmental Ministers Forum; iii. Heads of Legislatures initiated and approved a

Regional Framework Law that includes a reference to rights-based migration management in the context of environmental and climate-related work.



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**KEY MESSAGES**



Disasters heighten the risk of violence, abuse, human trafficking, and exploitation. Climate action protects people in vulnerable situations.



Prevention through anticipatory action, preparedness and adaptation is central to climate action. Working on prevention now is the most effective protection investment for the future.



Regular migration can be an adaptation strategy to climate change. Expanding regular pathways for migration serves as a critical protection action for climate-affected communities.



Climate action and climate justice require adequate, predictable and sustainable resources. Climate-vulnerable populations are protected when equity and inclusion in financing climate action are ensured.