

Disaster-induced displacement in the Caribbean and the Pacific

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People in Small Island Developing States are particularly vulnerable to displacement by disaster. Governments in the Caribbean and the Pacific need urgently to do more risk management and planning, rather than focusing almost exclusively on response and relocation.

Relative to their population size, five of the 20 countries most affected by disaster displacement are Small Island Developing States (SIDS).¹ Today a person living in one of these States is three times more likely to be displaced by a disaster than a person living elsewhere.² However, little analysis has been done of displacement risk in SIDS, as the total number of people affected in a single case is often relatively small and therefore overshadowed by larger countries' more headline-grabbing events. The SIDS in the Caribbean and the Pacific belong to the most hazard-prone regions of the world – as demonstrated only too vividly by recent hurricanes in the Caribbean. According to the International Monetary Fund, SIDS lose approximately 2% of their annual GDP on average as a result of natural hazards, four times the global average.³ Yet there is a lack of literature on disaster displacement with a focus on SIDS, and especially with a regional focus on the Caribbean. There are no appropriate data collection methods to register situations of protracted displacement or the effects of displacement on livelihoods over time. Labels and categories such as homeless, evacuee and displaced are often used interchangeably and merged in statistics on disaster displacement, regardless of duration and distance of movement, or the influence of the movement on livelihoods.⁴ Many cases of displacement, including some of a protracted nature, remain unnoticed.

Displacement drivers

Our research set out to identify how disaster induced displacement is reflected in national and regional disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA) policy mechanisms in SIDS in the Caribbean and the Pacific.⁵ The results of the interviews conducted for the research project show that, overall, the drivers of displacement are similar in both regions. The informal nature of settlement development and the lack of safe land for settlements, poverty, lack of insurance schemes and social safety nets, environmental degradation and the erosion of traditionally strong social bonds all interact with political factors in a complex manner to shape displacement risk. Several respondents mentioned how land tenure systems lead to disputes over proving ownership of land after a disaster. According to several respondents, this was one of the factors delaying reconstruction and prolonging displacement after Hurricane Ivan hit Grenada in 2004: “So you lose documents on ownership, [...] and you are now recovering – [then] comes the quarrel or the struggle over who owns what.” Not only are informal settlements built in unsafe locations but they are built using unsafe and substandard materials and methods of construction and thus offer no protection from hazards. This is not limited to informal settlements. Formally built areas do not follow or apply building codes as these are either not adequately enforced or the general public do not have the means to apply them to their dwellings. One respondent describes how: “Some households cannot afford to obey the laws and regulations of Tonga’s building codes to build houses to be resilient up to a category 5 [...] they cannot afford to build houses up to these standards, and during a disaster they will be the first to move.”

Displacement drivers are not limited to sudden-onset hazards. Following the drought in 2013 a group of farmers in the Dominican Republic were forced to take out a bank loan, providing their land and houses as collateral guarantee.

In 2016, many of these farmers were displaced because they could not repay the loan on time and the banks seized the assets they had put up as security. Such indirect effects of slow-onset hazards are not registered as disaster-related displacement. This underlines the gap in the current data on displacement and the complexity of factors involved. During the interviews, it became evident that most governments avoid discussing displacement, especially when it is internal. One respondent from the Pacific commented: “An interesting point in our region to notice is that our countries are globally leading the debate and discussion on this issue. Regionally, it’s not getting a mention.” Governments tend to equate displacement with failure and thus it becomes politically sensitive and damaging to even broach the subject. As a result, displacement is rarely acknowledged. One respondent in the Caribbean stated: “Displacement is not accepted, because it implies that the government is not in control. So according to the governments, there are legal procedures, resettlements, and internal migration. So the reaction to talking about displacement is blunt, there is no consciousness about the issue. This is a reality which is not accepted by most governments.” This constrains any open discussion and stifles attempts to develop solutions. Displacement situations in SIDS across the Caribbean and the Pacific often go unnoticed by the international humanitarian community, as humanitarian actors tend to prioritise their actions based on the total number of people affected, rather than on the affected ratio of the population. One respondent stated: “As a humanitarian, we are supposed to go according to needs, the highest number of people affected. So that is why a lot of the humanitarian attention is on South Sudan [where] you have tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people displaced. Or Somalia. But then people in the Caribbean would argue: But it is 10% of our population [affected].” Interviewees stated that they could not provide any hard data on the overall displacement trends or current displacement figures in either region. Nevertheless, almost every interviewee was able to give at least one example of a displacement situation, many of which were currently ongoing and of a protracted nature.

Policy neglect of disaster displacement

The review of 30 key policy documents, both regional and national, showed a general neglect of any kind of human mobility consideration. Most Caribbean countries lack any form of DRR and CCA plans and policies, while the most often mentioned risk reduction activities in relation to human mobility in both regions are evacuations, relocation and resettlement. Yet preventive relocation of communities in high-risk zones can be problematic, as these affect the livelihoods of those affected and can increase the risk of impoverishment. The potentially negative effects of relocation are discussed in very few of the reviewed documents, and not in great detail. One of the respondents

stated with regards to Vanuatu: “What is mentioned now is one line about evacuation centres [...]. Other than this, there is no specific policy documents to protect the rights of those who are displaced.” Fiji is currently developing relocation guidelines, and Kiribati’s vision on ‘migration with dignity’ outlines a long-term relocation strategy not only within the country but also to neighbouring island states. With regards to the Caribbean, several respondents mentioned that relocation takes place on a regular basis but that there are no appropriate policies and plans in place. While Pacific policies address disaster related human mobility to a greater extent than those of the Caribbean, displacement management in both regions is reactive, and preventive measures are limited to relocation. The policies which do include displacement considerations do so only from a protection perspective. St Vincent and the Grenadines’ National Disaster Plan, for example, foresees allowances for friends and relatives who shelter displaced people and includes procedures for the identification of safe locations for displaced persons in case they cannot return to their old place of residence. Durable solutions for those displaced are not included in the policies we reviewed, nor are the effects of relocation. None of the reviewed documents seem to have been informed by the Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change (the Protection Agenda)⁶ or the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement⁷. On a relatively positive note, early signs in current developments in the legislative frameworks on disasters and climate change in both regions point to more attention being paid to risk management and adaptation approaches. Community involvement, early warning, awareness building and education, livelihood-based approaches and hazard-zone mapping are emphasised in the policies in both regions. Such activities can all help reduce displacement risk but the extent to which the policies will go is still unclear and untested. Current developments in the Pacific indicate an increasing awareness of displacement and a careful shift in attitude. In Vanuatu, a Displacement Policy Project is underway, aiming to build an overview of national internal displacement and forced migration patterns, while identifying challenges and gaps that need to be addressed in order to strengthen the country’s ability to manage displacement and to ensure sensitive and protective durable solutions.

Closing the gaps

Not only do national governments need to have a shift of mindset but the wider debate on climate change and SIDS needs to better reflect the nuances and complexity that exist. Our research findings point to a number of issues to be considered by policymakers, the international community and researchers: Governments need to accept disaster induced displacement as a real, complex phenomenon and develop appropriate actions and durable solutions. Addressing displacement will require governments to develop, firstly, risk reduction activities directly targeting displacement risk and, secondly, a human rights-based framework to protect people’s livelihoods and ‘rights of place’ – that is, their right to settle without the threat of eviction. Caribbean countries need to strengthen their overall DRR and CCA policies. These policies, in both the Caribbean and Pacific region, should include displacement considerations from a risk reduction and protection perspective, as recommended in the Protection Agenda. Current systems relating to land tenure rights need modernisation to avoid problems concerning property rights in the recovery phase and to reduce the risk of protracted

displacement. The implementation of the displacement policy currently developed by Vanuatu should be observed closely, identifying its successes and failures in order to be able to develop best practices for both regions. Regional approaches to displacement and human mobility issues should be developed to protect the rights of cross-border displaced people. The Pacific has already started negotiations on such an approach, from which the Caribbean could perhaps learn. And, finally, work needs to be done to develop new and improved displacement measures and systems for tracking people’s movements in order to determine the scope of the issue; such measures could helpfully include indicators on affected livelihoods and the perceptions of the affected populations themselves.

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1. IDMC (2015) *Global Estimates: People displaced by disasters* <http://bit.ly/IDMC-2015-GlobalEstimates>

2. Ginetti J (2015) *Disaster-related Displacement Risk: Measuring the Risk and Addressing its Drivers* <http://bit.ly/Ginetti-2015-risk-drivers>

3. International Monetary Fund (2016) *Small states’ resilience to natural disasters and climate change – Role for the IMF*

www.imf.org/external/np/pp/eng/2016/110416.pdf

4. Black R, Arnell N W, Adger W N, Thomas D and Geddes A (2013)

‘Migration, immobility and displacement outcomes following

extreme events’, *Environmental Science and Policy*, 27

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5. We interviewed humanitarian practitioners, government

representatives and researchers in the Caribbean and the Pacific,

and reviewed 30 DRR, CCA and development policies, both

regional and national.

6. <http://bit.ly/Nansen-ProtectionAgendaVoll>

7. <http://bit.ly/GuidingPrinciplesInternalDisplacement>

