

# LITERATURE REVIEW: CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN MOBILITY

Consultancy on Human Mobility  
and Climate Change for HIP and  
DANO

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September 30, 2022



Derecho a No Obedecer (DANO), a project of the Otraparte Corporation, and Hispanics in Philanthropy (HIP) have worked together to visualize and understand the intersection between climate justice and human mobility across the region. As a result, the partnership coordinated intergenerational dialogues, regional meetings between key partners, research, stakeholder mapping, and more. The status report presented in this document corresponds to a commissioned research project authored by consultants Juliana Velez Echeverri; Andres Aristizabal; Camila Bustos.



Hispanics in Philanthropy leverages philanthropic resources to mobilize and amplify the power of our communities. HIP has built, funded, and fueled Latine power for 40 years. HIP is a convener, creating spaces for organizations, the private sector, and philanthropy to connect and collaborate in order to dismantle the inequities that affect the well-being of Latines in the U.S. and our communities across the Americas.

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El Derecho a No Obedecer (The Right to Not Obey) is an advocacy platform of the Fernando González Corporation - Otraparte that creates, develops, and accompanies advocacy processes with the purpose of legitimizing the civic participation of young people to transform unjust realities through advocacy processes in public decisions and social imaginaries in five departments of Colombia (Antioquia, Bogotá D.C, Bolívar, Norte de Santander and Valle del Cauca), with projects and activities in Peru, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Mexico, focused on three themes: climate justice, mobilization and peaceful protest, and migration.

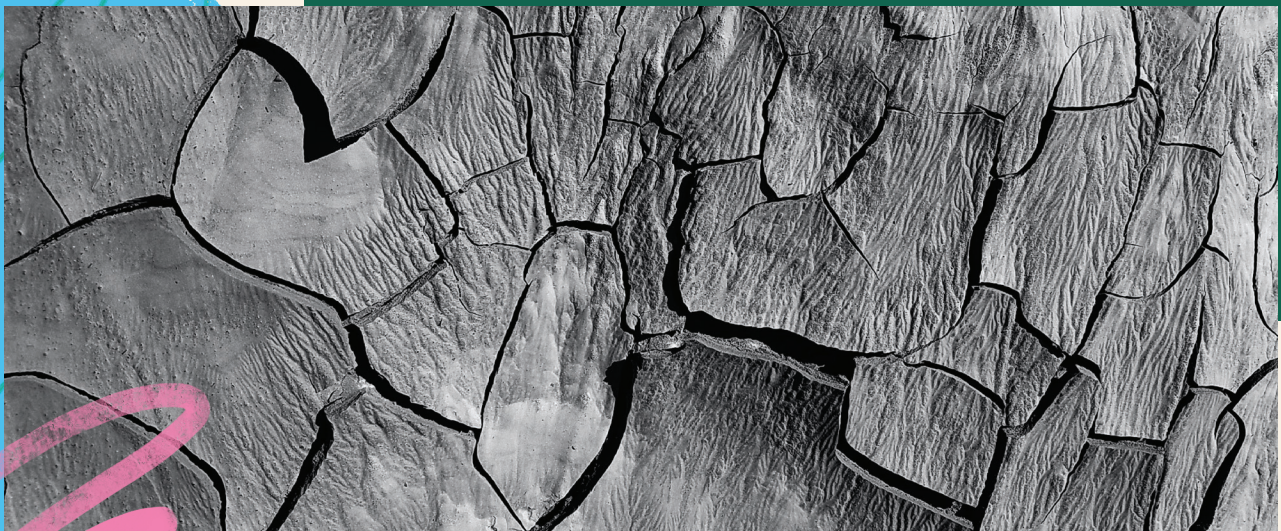
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# Introduction

There is broad consensus among relevant organizations that climate change has impacts on the dynamics of human mobility. However, we have an incomplete understanding of the way in which these mobilities occur and their impacts on the ways of life of affected communities. This literature review seeks to present what is known and has been experienced to date about the relationship between climate change and human mobility. Understanding this relationship is important for many reasons, but mainly because it can contribute to establishing action agendas with a focus on climate justice for the protection of those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Throughout this document the term 'mobility' is used to refer to the different types of human mobility that can occur in contexts of climate change (migration, displacement, and planned relocation, among others). This general concept allows for diverse forms to be addressed, but also allows us to consider their corollary: situations in which mobility does not occur and people end up trapped in disaster situations (flooding) or major environmental crises (droughts).



## i. Multidimensional approaches to climate mobility

Although the adjective 'climate' increasingly appears in academic literature as well as international policy and regulations alongside the terms 'mobility', 'displacement' and 'migration', it is generally agreed that climate change is not the sole driving factor behind incidents of human mobility. Today, migration studies globally establish that:

### **Climate change-related mobility is multicausal.**

This means that there are political and socioeconomic factors that play a role in causing the migration, together with the impacts of climate change (Bladwin and Fornalé, 2017; Black, 2001; Black et al, 2010). Assessing these factors is essential, as they determine the way in which migration occurs. For example, a family living in poverty that has lost their home due to flooding will face greater difficulty migrating to another city or country than a middle-class family in the same situation. For the middle class family, migration is a safer and more predictable option as they may be unable to cover the costs of travel to a new location and may thus opt to seek refuge close to home.



**Climate change generally intensifies existing migration patterns, instead of creating new ones** (Barnett and Webber 2010; Foresight 2011). While this description might be more relevant in some contexts than in others, it is useful to underscore how climate change exacerbates or transforms the existing migrations in the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America, and what this means for human rights agendas. A 2021 study conducted by several U.S. universities found that Northern Triangle countries are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and that the risks are heavily influenced by local socioeconomic conditions, failed management of natural resources and environmental degradation. This means that the impacts of climate change exacerbate existing social and environmental problems, which contribute to increase in migration patterns linked to rural poverty, water scarcity, violence and food insecurity, among others (Bustos et al., 2021).



Although international migration exists, **migration related to climate change tends to be internal and temporary** (Castles, 2002; Hulme, 2008; Tacoli, 2009). This is explained largely by the complexities of the international migration possibilities and decisions. Crossing borders requires a certain financial capacity and oftentimes destinations are determined by the presence of family members or friends on the receiving end. Similarly, circumstances will define if the mobility is permanent or whether it is a temporary measure until people can return home. If people can return home after a temporary migration, in most cases, they will do so. This leads to the insight that international climate-induced migrations in Central America's Dry Corridor are only a limited proportion of the totality of climate change-related migration, since the majority of these occur *within* the borders of Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, and are temporary in nature.

### **Climate immobility exists.**

This refers to the fact that most people do not have the option to move to a safe location in case of climate events that threaten their lives and integrity (Foresight 2011) and that communities oftentimes resist leaving their land due to their attachment to it or the relationship between the territory and the survival of certain populations. Depending on the circumstances, the communities that stay and face the impacts of climate change and other conditions of social vulnerability may find themselves more vulnerable than those who were able to migrate. Notwithstanding the nuances and complexities of forced displacement, this reality evidences the need for protection mechanisms not only for those who migrate, but also for those who remain behind.



### **Types of human mobility linked to climate change and the associated narratives**

As was previously established, this literature review refers to climate mobility as a general concept that includes different types of mobility. In principle, it is not easy to define the boundaries between different types of mobility as it is difficult to delimit the forced or voluntary character of mobility, particularly in climate contexts. Initially, one could argue that migration is voluntary when, for example, a family decides 'freely' to move to another city or country because they are exposed to longer periods of drought than families in other places. However, while there is a conscious decision to migrate, the impacts of climate change effectively obligate that family to decide to leave their home. This example demonstrates that human mobility is complex and can occur in multiple ways, depending on the circumstances.

Despite this, academic literature offers some distinctions that can help to clarify the types of mobility. The term ‘migration’ has been used to refer to mobility in general and to describe voluntary and adaptive mobility (Bates, 2022; Biermann & Boas, 2010; Brown, 2007; Leal-Arcas, 2012; Foresight, 2011). Nonetheless, when there are external factors that strip people of the power to control their decision about mobility and thus force them to migrate, this is known as displacement (Zetter, 2017; Jayawardhan, 2017; Ferris, 2017). Lastly, planned relocations and resettlements have been described as last resort adaptation measures (Bettini, 2017). The differences in these terms are relevant to understanding the concepts of climate migration, climate displacement and climate or environmental refugees.<sup>1</sup>

There are, however, differing positions on the scope of the aforementioned definitions. One example is the use of the term climate refugees. As explained in the following section, the term ‘climate refugee’ is not accepted by international law given that it does not fit the definition of ‘refugee’ contained in the 1951 Refugee Convention which considers that persecution is a determinative element. Furthermore, this definition is focused on cross-border migration and thus does not cover internal displacements associated with climate change.

The following section analyzes definitions of different types of mobility and the potential implications of certain associated narratives. It does not address the term climate migrants because all migrations related to the impacts of climate change are considered to be forced. In this way, climate displacement is considered the most adequate term.



# 1. Climate refugees

International policy as well as studies on the subject of protection for persons that have been forcibly displaced by events associated with climate change have been dominated by a focus on cross-border migrations (Mayer, 2013; Silja and Klepp, 2017). While this is a necessary and important focus, it is undeniable that a significant percentage of climate migration occurs within international borders, and that in specific cases, such as in the Northern Triangle, these dynamics can transcend borders.

<sup>1</sup> The literature also refers to environmental migrants or refugees. In general, this is used as a more general category that refers to people who migrate for environmental disasters, which can be related to the climate or with other environmental problems, such as contamination.



This difference is critical to assessing the perspectives and work of grassroots organizations that are facing the impacts of climate change on the ground and which often go beyond advocating against limitations on international migration by attempting to promote increased safety and security so that communities do not have to forcibly displace themselves from their homes or places of origin. In this way, understanding the social, political and economic dynamics of the Northern Triangle is necessary to see how they influence the impacts of climate change on migration patterns.

To a certain extent, this international focus can be explained by the origins of the debate on human mobility and climate change, and the instrumentalization of these main approaches for those who promote a political agenda in which migration is presented as a threat to global and national security. Environmental studies from the 1980s and 1990s, which for the first time referred to the concept of 'environmental refugees', drew attention to the supposed future tragedy of environmental refugees (Jacobson, 1988; Myers, 1993; Myers and Kent, 1995; O'Lear, 1997; Ramlogan, 1996), based on erroneous estimates of hundreds of millions of environmental refugees by 2010. Other studies have also suggested that the flows of environmental refugees may lead to violent conflicts in their places of destination (Reuveny, 2007; Stern, 2007; Smith, 2007). In general, it was academics from the Global North who for the first time put the issue on academic and public policy agendas, while also shaping the debate from a specific lens that, to a certain extent, continues to dominate the discourse.

These studies have been criticized by migration experts for methodological shortcomings (Black, 2001) and for fueling a discourse of migration as a threat from the countries of the global south towards those of the global north. This can, in turn, lead to an increase in marginalization and neglect of those forced to migrate for environmental or climate disasters (Hartman, 2010; Bettini, 2017). On this first element, the way in which the term climate refugee has been used seems to suggest that climate change is the only causal factor behind cross-border migration (Bettini, 2017). As previously explained, this is clearly false. This limited understanding of human mobility may result in ignoring the role of political, economic, and social factors in increasing vulnerability to climate change. In this way, these understandings depoliticize the causes of displacement. On the other hand, as was previously suggested, cross-border migrations are not the only consequences of climate change, considering that there may be internal migrations and displacements, trapped populations (Black 2001) and demands to increase safety, instead of or in addition to demanding safe migration pathways. The second aspect is even more problematic given that the discourse around 'climate refugees' has served political agendas interested in portraying migration as a threat, justifying the closure of borders in the global north and enactment of hostile policies against refugees (Boas, Farbotko, et al., 2019).

Another criticism of the concept of 'climate refugees' comes from those who consider that unless there is persecution as defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention, a person cannot be considered a refugee and is therefore ineligible for the protection mechanisms of the Convention (Berchin, Valduga, Garcia & Guerra, 2017; Jayawardhan, 2017; Zetter, 2017). While this position is highly debatable, it is important here to recognize its implications. It is true that including environmental refugees in existing protection mechanisms established by the Convention could overwhelm its limited capacity and foster greater levels of vulnerability for those who have already been recognized as refugees (Hartman, 2010; Zetter, 2017).

The summary of this discussion is key to understanding the complexities of the narratives with respect to their consequences. Clearly, well-intentioned humanitarian organizations consider that the use of the term climate refugees is part of a narrative that may resonate with international humanitarian agendas. The fact that this concept is subject to criticism does not prevent cross-border migrations from being intensified by the effects of climate change. The case of the Dry Corridor is a clear example. Nonetheless, highlighting this discussion leads us to question how to use these narratives, while also mitigating the risks they pose of exacerbating the vulnerability of those forced to migrate because of climate change.





## 2. Climate displaced persons in immobility: a multicausal lens

The aforementioned critiques raised interest in a more contextualized understanding of mobility and how it is experienced by communities. Given that the debate on climate refugees said little about the probabilities and trends of migration, time periods, destinations, distances traveled, etc. (Foresight, 2011), climate change-related human mobility started to be analyzed from a multicausal lens. This framework leads to the identification of narratives that tend to classify migration as a form of adaptation to climate change, which would—it is implied—enable migrants to overcome the associated levels of vulnerability to climate change (Foresight, 2011, p. 181).

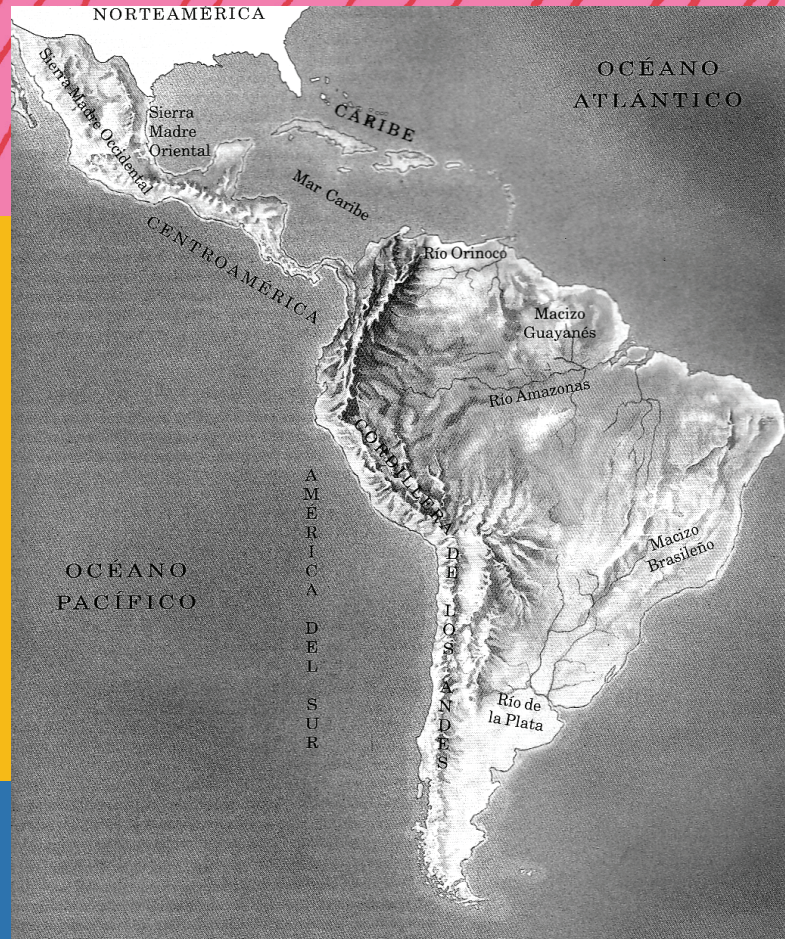
While this approach furthers the recognition of the multicausal nature of climate migration, it is centered on the individual responsibility of the migrant and can ignore the conditions of social vulnerability that lead a person to migrate in a certain way or to decide to remain without regard for the risks they are exposed to. Understanding migration as a form of adaptation may lead to justifying the mobility of populations, without considering the territorial dynamics that determine the wellbeing and survival of many communities (Klepp and Chaves-Rodriguez, 2018), as well as the socioeconomic conditions that expose some communities to greater levels of climate risk. This also can ignore the importance that grassroots communities may place on adapting their land, instead of having to search for a destination in another place.

Other studies have established that climate change-associated mobility is assumed to be forced (Ferris, 2012; Castro-Butrago & Velez, 2018; Valencia et al, 2014), and thus recommend the use of the term forced displacement. This concept covers situations in which conditions of vulnerability lead to an involuntary migration that can imply serious violations of human rights (Gonzaga et al, 2015).





In this sense, it has been necessary to create protection mechanisms similar to existing mechanisms for persons displaced by internal armed conflicts.



These studies recognize the multicausal nature of human mobilities associated with climate change, but put the focus on the aspect of justice - climate justice at the global level which considers that those who are more exposed and are more vulnerable are less responsible for the problem, while also considering the power dynamics in the places where these displacements occur. In this way, climate change is considered a factor that exacerbates already existent social problems, and as a result, the measures to address it must be crosscutting and comprehensive with regard to other public policies and norms. This approach also considers the existence of immobility associated with climate change, which recognizes that certain conditions of vulnerability prevent certain people from moving in response to changed conditions.

This analysis is important to bring a justice lens to climate change adaptations and recognize that climate displacement may entail human rights violations. For this same reason, it is important to see human mobility as a measure that can be either positive or negative, depending on the circumstances. Adaptation to climate change can occur in many ways – by way of managing risks on the ground, facilitating safe and dignified migrations for those who consider it an option, etc. In any case, the best adaptation mechanism and context-specific protection measure requires an understanding of specific circumstances and of how the communities give meaning to their experiences through narratives.





### 3. Planned relocation: *In situ* relocation and resettlement

Planned relocation refers to processes planned by states or communities aimed at moving a community from one place to another. Generally, relocation occurs when the community is relocated to a place nearby its original location and resettlement refers to a community being redirected to a new settlement in a process that produces significant changes in living conditions. With respect to the impacts of climate change, resettlement and relocation have been used to prevent the forced displacement of populations before and after a disaster strikes, and in this way, have been categorized as measures to adapt to climate change.

While the planned relocations are initially aimed at protecting the life and integrity of community members, studies on resettlement agree on the negative effects of these processes. In many cases, resettlements generate a loss of employment, exclusion, food insecurity, loss of community ties, among other situations that can aggravate the existing conditions of vulnerability (Cernea, 1995). Additionally, some authors have questioned whether it is an effective means of adaptation and protection of rights (Barnet & Webber, 2010; Zetter, 2017; Ferris, 2012; McAdam, 2010).

To be clear, planned relocations are not per se negative, but they have to follow certain procedures with the participation of the affected community to mitigate the potentially negative effects. Resettlement in a new location does not only involve accessing safe housing, but should also include the construction of social fabric in which communities carry out their daily lives (Chardon, 2010). In the same way, there are more than a handful of examples of resettlements implemented with violence that end in forced evictions. Some studies on the issue have established that planned relocation should be considered a measure of last resort, once the in situ mitigation has been attempted and rejected (UCL, 2021; Cernea, 1997; Barnett & O’Niel, 2012). This is fundamental because it highlights the problems of using resettlement as a priority adaptation measure for communities located in risk areas. First of all, it ignores the important relationship between the place in which communities live and their existence. To live in a risk-plagued area does not impede people from developing attachments to place, community and social relations and in some cases, forging conditions that make it easier to survive in increasingly gentrified cities. Second, this can prevent resettlement from being used to dispossess individuals of their land and aggravating social exclusion that is seen in many parts of Latin America. This paints climate-induced risk as a political phenomenon that has a social dimension and should be considered alongside the technical dimension of the problem.

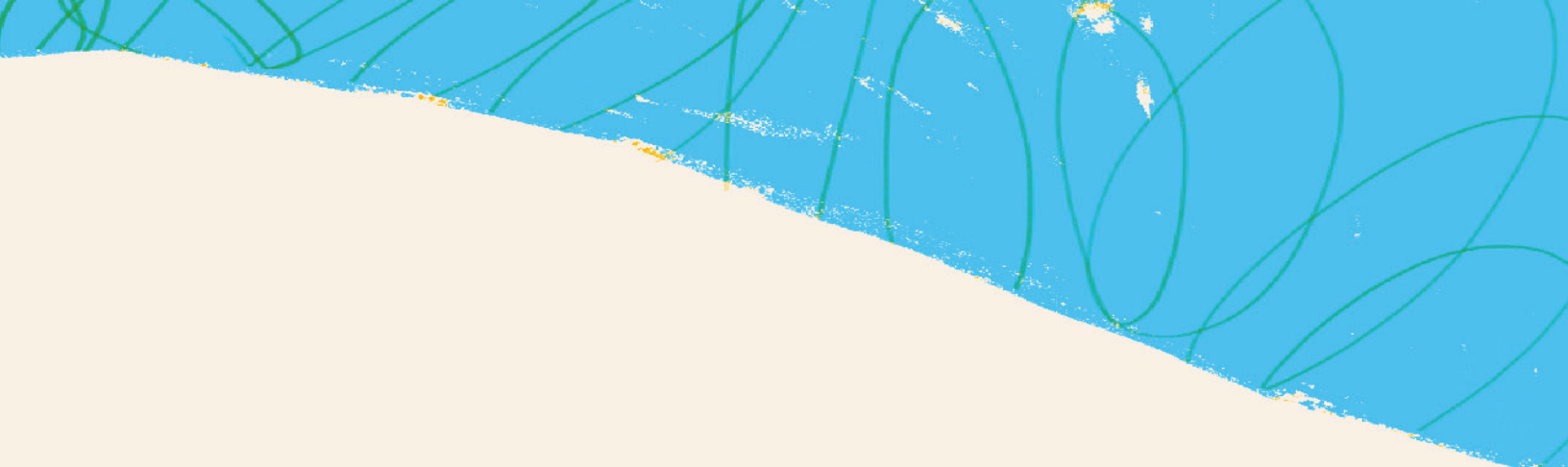
## Other approaches based on territory

The ways in which different types of mobility have been addressed along with their associated narratives highlights the dilemmas between the characteristics of the places where communities most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and migration live. Understanding the experience of people who migrate due to climate change, among other reasons, starts with understanding the place where they live or where they come from and the socioeconomic and political circumstances that led to this migration. Focusing on the place of origin is equally as important as considering the migration destination. Ignoring the former could lead to obfuscating the efforts of organizations fighting for a safer territory adapted to climate change so that it is possible to remain there, without having to migrate as a desperate measure. Similarly, promoting deliberate and safe migrations in which the act of migrating does not constitute a situation of vulnerability for anyone is critically important. Climate change compels us to reconsider the places that we live in and the ways in which we have allowed or disallowed migration. To help us better grasp this relationship, it is important to understand the narratives of those who most seriously suffer the effects of climate change.

Lastly, understanding this relationship from a perspective of climate justice implies asking ourselves why certain populations (in certain countries) are more socially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, when they have least contributed to the global problem. This allows us to see the injustices derived from a global system dedicated to the exploitation of the planet and of its population. Living in areas highly vulnerable to climate change is not the result of a deliberate decision by individuals, but of an economic and social system that leads these people to live in these locations. This is based on the understanding that the risk of being impacted by climate change is a social construction. On the one hand, climate change has accelerated and intensified as a product of human activity of certain countries and companies more than others. On the other hand, there are places that, thanks to exclusionary forms of development, have weak adaptation processes that increase the probabilities of disaster and human losses.







These differences in vulnerability are also reflected in different population groups in a given location: women and LGBTIQ+, Indigenous, and Black communities, among others. It is important to keep this in mind as global and local dynamics of places and the way in which communities give meaning to their experiences define the narratives related to climate change-associated mobility.

This document, which centers mainly on the terminology around mobility associated with climate change, aims to present the different ways in which this social phenomenon is described. However, it is important to highlight that this is a foundation from which to understand how organizations give meaning to this reality and whether this coincides with mainstream narratives and those used by organizations. Additionally, it insists that terms can be used to prioritize or subordinate certain narratives according to particular political and legislative agendas that define the actions of government and civil society with regard to this issue.



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