

REPORT: CONSULTING ANALYSIS

Understanding
the phenomenon of
climate change-related
displacement
and the right
to remain

February 2023



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**



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.

<https://www.instagram.com/elderechoanoobedecer/>



CONSULTING ANALYSIS

The consultancy¹ team produced a stakeholder map, a table of common narratives, a literature review, and 11 interviews with experts from the region.² This document aims to summarize the most important findings of this work, analyze trends in the work of a small group of civil society organizations that address environmental and/or migration issues, and offers some recommendations to advance the climate change and displacement agenda in the Americas.

¹ Consultancy team: Andrés Vélez Echeverri, Andrés Aristizábal Isaza y María Camila Bustos

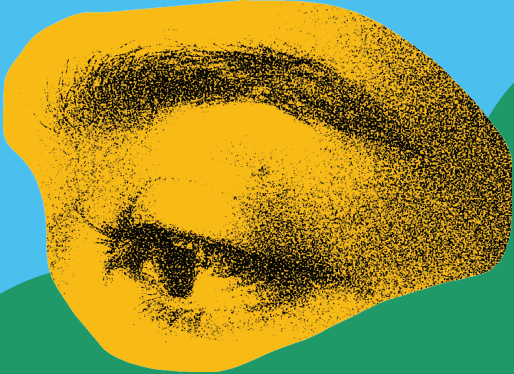
² There were limitations contacting and interviewing several grassroots organizations, mainly due to the fact that no field work was conducted, impeding face-to-face interviews. Additionally, there were limitations in terms of access by some communities to digital means, making it impossible to conduct online interviews. Another potential limitation, identified during an interview with an organization that has done field work, is that in contexts of violence such as those analyzed during this consultancy, organizations tend to be cautious when granting interviews. It is unclear whether this caution is why some organizations did not respond to the consultants. As a result of these factors, the conclusions drawn from the eleven interviews herein analyzed are limited to organizations that were interviewed online and which had been identified with the support of DANO for their potential work on matters related to climate mobility.

UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENON OF CLIMATE CHANGE-RELATED DISPLACEMENT AND THE RIGHT TO REMAIN

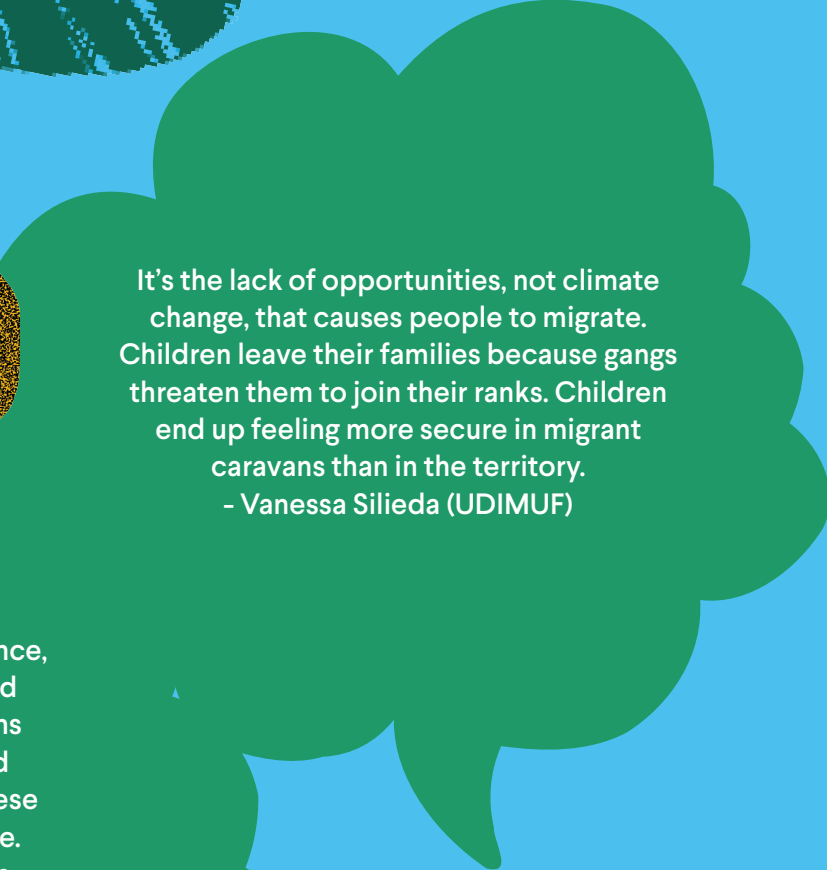
The organizations interviewed can be divided into three categories: (i) human rights organizations; (ii) organizations with multiple approaches to addressing migration; and (iii) organizations focused on environmental issues or climate change. One of the human rights organizations works specifically with women, while three of the migration-centered organizations are church-based.

Overall, work on the phenomenon of climate change-related displacement is incipient across differing levels. Some organizations recognize the importance of the issue but not to the extent of incorporating it into their agenda of priorities. Others have started to include the issue in their overall approach, acknowledging the limitations posed by this complex and multicausal phenomenon to which local and national governments pay little attention. Still other organizations stated that local and national governments have not yet recognized that the effects of climate change contribute to human mobility dynamics in the Dry Corridor of Central America. This was explained, on the one hand, by a lack of understanding of climate change itself which could enable the identification that some of its effects are drivers of displacement. On the other hand, poverty, economic instability, violence, and the lack of opportunities were mentioned among the multiple causes that contribute to this phenomenon. The organizations interviewed confirmed that migration or displacement generally occur in connection with many other factors or variables that influence people's "decision" to leave their homes.

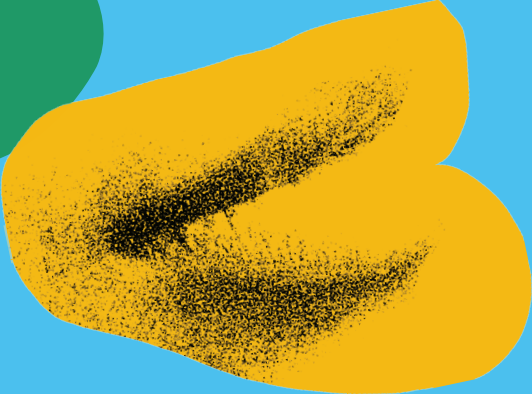




In Central America, we have to pay attention to the link that connects violence, climate change, and displacement, and which affects existing mobility patterns in the region. Migration flows mix, and communities and organizations face these dynamics alongside structural violence. It is always said that human mobility is multicausal, but this conceals some things, especially when it comes to climate change as a determining factor in the dynamics of human mobility. It is necessary to shed light on climate as a driver of human mobility. If it is not made visible, it won't exist on the agendas. - Erika Pires (RESAMA)



It's the lack of opportunities, not climate change, that causes people to migrate. Children leave their families because gangs threaten them to join their ranks. Children end up feeling more secure in migrant caravans than in the territory.
- Vanessa Silieda (UDIMUF)



In this way, extreme climate events are identified as adverse environmental factors that aggravate the situation of people or families in such a way that they decide to move, instead of being the defining factor behind that decision. This aligns with the findings of the literature review, which highlights the complexity of addressing the issue of human mobility in which climate change is one of the multiple causes producing mobility and serves as a factor that exacerbates existing vulnerabilities.

Additionally, climate phenomena are notably perceived as risk factors for people who cannot move freely within a territory due to a lack of financial means or the support networks necessary for such movement.

When we look at the community context, we see these phenomena: storm surges, flooding, long-lasting drought, saltwater intrusion. All this influences the decision to migrate. Those who can, leave. Those who cannot leave end up relocating to places that are just as vulnerable.

-Lili Mejía (Alianza Hondureña)

These testimonies create a backdrop marked by the concepts of “climate immobility” or “trapped populations.” This concept has been studied as a human response to the impacts of environmental changes and climate change that explores how people, though seeking to move, are unable to escape places that pose risks due to the specific circumstances they face.³

There are two important aspects when addressing climate change-related human mobility: i) the right to human immobility, the right to remain in or return to a territory where one can live in dignity; ii) working with those who decide not to leave, who are probably the most vulnerable.

-Adrián Martínez (Ruta del Clima)



Clearly, the concept of “trapped populations” has been subject to criticism since it may be used to disregard the agency of communities to make decisions as to how to respond to a disaster that impacts their place of residence. The concept is thus used herein to underscore that human mobility is also influenced by factors that can fuel or limit movement. For example, generating enough income to move and/or having relatives or friends that can receive individuals at a safe destination. Similarly, adopting an approach centered on community agency can favor the interpretation that some communities *are reluctant to move* and demand *the right to remain in their territories*. As stated by Ruta del Clima, Resama, and Alianza Américas, for communities whose territories have been gradually destroyed by climate change, it is important to demand that adaptation and reparative measures are taken to enable a return to safe conditions in these territories. In this sense, building narratives around human mobility in the context of climate change must consider not only migration but also the dynamics of the place and the attachments that contribute to immobility as a response based on demands for justice.

³<https://ehs.unu.edu/news/news/the-conceptual-birth-of-trapped-populations-and-the-danger-of-using-it-as-a-policy-tool.html>

On the other hand, it is important to highlight that organizations working on environmental issues or on climate change have adopted a climate justice approach to their work. This is essential as these organizations are addressing human mobility through the complexity of the political and economic system that places some communities in conditions of greater vulnerability. This is also consistent with the fact that both social and environmental factors are identified as a cause of human mobility related to the impacts of climate change.

Additionally, a number of organizations have integrated climate mobility into their work agendas because it has become a priority for the communities they have been working with for years. For example, FIAN Honduras and Honduran Alliance for Climate Change work with several communities impacted by climate in processes to relocate, given that their right to food has been impaired.

In other words, organizations approach this issue based on their areas of expertise and experience. There is a division between traditional environmental organizations and other organizations that provide support and services to communities on migration issues.



The link between organizations addressing human mobility and those addressing climate change is recent. Without a doubt, organizations are working in a fragmented way on their respective main issues: those working on Greenhouse Development Rights (GDRs) focus on these, just like those addressing ecological agriculture. It happens to many of us.
-Claudia Pineda (FIAN)

Organizations are considerably fragmented. There are those working on climate change, and others, on migration.
- Helena Olea
(Alianza Américas)

This division between organizations focusing on migration and organizations focusing on climate change, together with their differing approaches to the issue based on their main areas of work, demonstrates that mobility related to climate change is a concept in the making. Organizations are tackling the phenomenon and are in the process of giving it meaning and defining it as part of their work agendas. Indeed, this consultancy reflects the first attempt by organizations to address the issue and the existing limitations to define agendas for working on this issue. One decisive limitation is the lack of data on the matter, which hinders the development of common narratives. At the same time, there is a clear opportunity for organizations to start collecting data about an issue that they have already observed, allowing them to incorporate the issue into their work agendas and, eventually, convert it into on-the-ground work at both national and regional levels.

TERMINOLOGY: WHAT TERMS OR DEFINITIONS ARE USED IN THE REGION?

There is no apparent consensus on the best way to describe the phenomenon of displacement and climate change, or how to refer to affected people. National governments seem to use the term *damnificado* [“victim” or “disaster-stricken”], which tends to obfuscate the structural and public policy failures that cause an environmental disaster to lead to a community’s displacement.

“We have to drop the idea of natural disasters.” What we have are climate phenomena along with a negative relationship between humans and nature.

- Pedro Landa
(Plataforma Internacional)

The categories or definitions depend on the perspective. Maintaining the lifestyles of communities is not included in the concept of mobility. We don’t know how communities want to be named. It all depends! We need more data and stories from people.

-Erika Pires (RESAMA)

While different terms are used to refer to affected people, such as “migrant,” “victim,” or “displaced person,” each term has different legal implications. There are also different positions on the most appropriate term that captures state responsibility and affords people protection under humanitarian frameworks.

“The way we refer to victims of climate-induced displacement is important. While in our countries (Central and South America) the definition includes the lack of voluntariness or the level of force behind this mobility, it is easier to access protection measures in countries like Mexico or the U.S., as these countries receive more people. They prefer to call them climate refugees or climate displaced persons, not migrants.... This is the way in which States can be obliged to respond to these phenomena.

- Gabriela Oviedo (CEJIL)

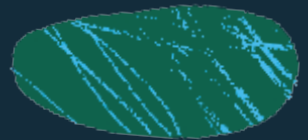
“We have to advocate for an expansion of the concept to include climate refugees.”

-Adrián Martínez (Ruta del Clima)



With regard to the name given to people who move as a consequence of climate change, there is no clarity, and the international community is not very interested in giving a specific status to those displaced for climate reasons. International agencies, except UNHCR, did not have a very clear agenda on this issue.



-Helena Olea (Alianza Américas)



This lack of consensus has multiple implications. First, it reflects the fact that climate mobility is heterogeneous and can occur in different ways, including even immobility. Second, a lack of consensus means that the terms adopted may be determined based on the organizations’ familiarity with certain concepts. For organizations that have worked with migrants or refugees, “migrants” or “climate refugees” may be valid terms to refer to climate mobility. Third, for governments, the use of a term is mainly determined by the obligations that would arise from using it. In several Latin American countries, the term damnificado can impose a humanitarian or first-responder obligation on the State that does not, however, translate into the adoption of structural measures to protect people who suffer the worst impacts of climate change. In that sense, human rights organizations prefer to use concepts such as “climate refugees” or “climate displaced persons” as these open up more legal and political enforceability of rights before the State. Fourth, it is necessary to collect data – both quantitative and qualitative – on the way in which mobility associated with climate change is occurring in the region, in order to cover the heterogeneity of this mobility and identify trends and the ways in which they occur. For this, the work of grassroots organizations is essential. The knowledge held by communities, their stories, and the way in which they respond to the impacts of climate change are necessary inputs to understand this mobility in the region and, based on that, establish joint work agendas.

CHALLENGES IN CURRENT POLICY AND COORDINATION

As mentioned, one of the challenges is the difficulty of creating visibility around climate since there are other variables that contribute to displacement. This makes it difficult to recognize displacement derived from environmental or climate causes. Nevertheless, interviewees also identified that there are few incentives for climate migrants to identify climate change as a cause of displacement in their asylum applications. This is because refugee law offers very limited protection, since it only recognizes certain motives and does not include sudden climate events, such as hurricanes, or gradual ones, such as droughts. Likewise, the international community has not been able to arrive at a permanent solution.



Risk management systems are reactive and relocate people where they can, without adequate living conditions. That is why families return to their prior locations, where there are greater probabilities of risks materializing. When they cannot go back, people are not referred to as “displaced persons,” nor is there recognition of that condition. They are thus left without attention. When a community has to flee a place, they are sometimes called “disaster-stricken persons,” but there is no official term adopted or assistance for these types of difficulties.

-Adrián Martínez (Ruta del Clima)



The United Nations should address the issue systemically to have conceptual clarity regarding climate refugees. There is a trend to nationalize responsibilities and not to address the issue internationally. This is another way to avoid the responsibility of greenhouse gas-emitting countries within the damage and losses system. They pass the costs along to victim countries

- Adrian Martínez (Ruta del Clima)

At the national level, there has similarly been little progress in the protection of displaced persons, and many countries in the region still lack a protection framework for people displaced by violence or conflict. For example, the Law on Prevention, Assistance, and Protection of Internally Displaced Persons was only recently passed in Honduras (December 2022), in spite of the high levels of unrest that this country has experienced. This highlights the difficulty of making progress on this issue in national or local contexts, which suggests that regional-international scenarios are key when it comes to identifying roles and responsibilities and building agendas and public policies that recognize persons displaced by climate phenomena as subjects of special protection.

How human mobility crises are dealt with, how they are responded to, is explained by the interests of developed countries. They promote internal policies in other countries so that they address mobility as a national phenomenon of their own responsibility, detached from a climate change scenario.
-Adrián Martínez (Ruta del Clima)

While the issue of climate displacement is starting to be recognized, there is little funding to support its development. It is also difficult to talk about displacement, considering that the climate change agenda has worked based on a mitigation and adaptation approach, without connecting climate change with the possibility or threat of displacement.

Most interviewees discussed the challenges in the current context and, while they identified the need to protect affected communities, they don't know very clearly which policies or measures are needed to tackle this phenomenon. This demonstrates that, even if there is great interest and a need to advance the agenda, there is still a lack of capacity and resources to prioritize this issue and consider it as important as other more immediate issues.

The organizations or the State believe that with measures such as the humanitarian visa, they can solve the problem. This is just one step.
- Erika Pires (RESAMA)

Legally speaking, there is zero progress in terms of attention for climate displaced persons. For example, in Honduras, the first discussions are just now being held, but about violence-related displacement.
- Cristosal

Organizations that work on environmental matters respond to particular issues with private funding in a specific area and with specific communities. In El Salvador, in this region and with these communities on water. Some do work on the issue at the national level. They realize there is displacement, but there isn't anything that makes them work on it necessarily... "it's the boogeyman no one talks about." Communities don't want to talk about displacement, but rather about adaptation and mitigation.
-Helena Olea (Alianza Américas)

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. It is necessary to **create awareness around the climate factor as a cause of human mobility from a climate justice approach.** If there is no awareness, it won't exist on the agendas.

2. **Narratives have to be built and, for that, data is needed.** As of today, existing information on climate mobility does not necessarily reflect what is happening and hides a large number of migrations that can be related to climate change.

3. **There is an important opportunity through journalism.** There are several media outlets doing very good research and tracking to show what is happening. Promoting those partnerships is very important.

4. **Developing clear lines of funding** to support local and regional initiatives that advance the climate displacement agenda. Funding is a way to fuel the development of narratives as part of organizations' agendas.

5. **Promoting the issue of climate mobility in other organizations** that work on related topics but have not paid enough attention so far, such as youth organizations for climate action and LGBTQI+ organizations that may integrate a gender perspective to understanding climate migrations.



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