COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION ISSUES OEA/Ser.W

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CONCEPT NOTE

THEMATIC SESSION

"MIGRATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE"

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(Prepared with the Chair of the CAM with the support of the Technical Secretariat)

As early as 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimated that climate migrants would reach 200 million by 2050. However, the Ecological Threat Registry, conducted in 2020 by the Institute for Economics and Peace, projected that factors such as water stress, food insecurity and extreme weather events could displace 1,200 million people by 2050. [[1]](#footnote-1)After Asia, in the Americas, subregions such as Central America and the Caribbean are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, with significant increases in the frequency of severe weather events.

Although the above estimates are recent, there is a historical link between migration and climate that in recent decades has been reinforced by climate change. According to some studies, ongoing climate change will severely affect human settlement patterns. Indeed, historically, the environment has driven numerous migratory movements because people have continuously mobilized to survive natural disasters or as a result of complex environmental conditions that result in a significant decrease in opportunities. Climate change can also exacerbate sudden-onset disasters and gradual environmental degradation, two elements that lead to migration."[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this regard, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has stated that "the process of climate change – as well as the multiple natural disasters it will produce – will certainly increase the magnitude and complexity of mobility and human displacement." [[3]](#footnote-3) Likewise, the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) definition of climate migration also highlights the role played by climate change as a driver of the displacement of people: "Climate migrations include the transfer of a person or groups of people who, predominantly due to sudden or progressive changes in the environment because of the effects of climate change, are obliged to leave their place of habitual residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across an international border."

In addition, in this definition, IOM shows the classification of two types of changes in the environment that promote climate migrations: sudden weather events, such as hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, floods, drought, earthquakes, tornadoes, forest fires, landslides and storms; and long-lasting progressive processes, such as sea level rise and desertification.

For this reason, climatic migrations can be considered a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon, which "encompasses situations as different as those of communities that, in the face of a severe drought, see their crops endangered and send a family member to work in a nearby village, such as those of the inhabitants of small island States who witness the advance of the sea in their territories and its consequences".[[4]](#footnote-4)

In fact, this type of migration occurs in many geographical areas. According to the World Bank, if the most pessimistic forecasts are met, in 2050, Mexico and Central America could have 3.9 million internal migrants due to processes linked to climate change, including water scarcity, low crop productivity and sea level rise. In fact, many of the people who first move internally because of these phenomena to intermediate cities or communities then end up crossing borders when they find themselves in these new communities to which they have arrived with a shortage of resources, without access to opportunities and livelihoods. [[5]](#footnote-5)

The Dry Corridor area of Central America is also affected by processes of drought and desertification that affect food production and favor migratory processes. For example, in El Salvador, drought has led to food insecurity that could lead to population movements, both within the country's borders and abroad, and Guatemalans migrate after droughts and floods that affect the production of their crops, generating food shortages and poverty. Also illustrating[[6]](#footnote-6)[[7]](#footnote-7) this situation, just last year, storms Eta and Iota hit several regions of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua greatly impacting entire communities. These situations, coupled with pre-existing vulnerabilities, influence migration patterns.

On the other hand, in North America, the arrival of Hurricane Laura put more than 1.5 million people under evacuation orders in Texas and Louisiana. In the Caribbean, Hurricane Dorian caused 465,000 new displacements in seven countries, including the Bahamas, in which about 17% of all Bahamians were suddenly left homeless following the passage of this hurricane. In Brazil, floods and landslides displaced 295,000 people in 2019.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In recognition of the impact of natural disasters and progressive processes of environmental degradation, the countries of the region have taken action to protect migrants for environmental reasons, in addition to addressing the causes and consequences of climate migration. In the United States, for example, an Executive Order on refugees was issued that provides for consideration of options for the protection and resettlement of climate-displaced persons.

Some other countries are incorporating migration as a relevant element in their climate strategies. Such is the case of *Peru's Framework Law on Climate Change,* which calls for forced migration due to climate effects, and the National Climate Change *Strategy* of Honduras, which proposes to establish a legal and institutional framework for climate-based migration. In Guatemala, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has supported indigenous communities in the implementation of ancestral knowledge that allows them to strengthen their climate resilience and in Brazil, through the *Rural Sustentável* project, this organization has sought to promote changes in the behavior of farmers to align agricultural productivity with the conservation of natural resources. The above measures aim to address the causes and consequences of climate migration.

Despite the complexity of this phenomenon, there are legal loopholes that make it difficult to come up with effective short- and long-term solutions. For example, the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees offers protection to those fleeing conflict and facing persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, when their States are unable or unwilling to protect them, but the climate factor is not mentioned as a reason for protection. [[9]](#footnote-9)

As of mid-2019, there were nearly 20.4 million officially designated refugees under UNHCR's protection, yet there is an additional 21.5 million people fleeing their homes due to sudden weather hazards. [[10]](#footnote-10)In the context of climate change, there is a blurred line between voluntary and forced movements, which is why populations displaced by disasters are often in a situation of vulnerability and require protection mechanisms.

The relationship between migration and climate change is neither simple nor linear as social, economic, and cultural factors must be considered to explain the impact of climate change on migration flows. The current natural disasters, the advance of environmental degradation and the persistent inequalities in the region, further exposed today by the Covid-19 pandemic, make clear the need for public policies with an inclusive approach that simultaneously address the causes and effects of migration and climate change. [[11]](#footnote-11)

Examining the impact of climate change on migratory flows is of interest to the Committee on Migration Affairs. This session is expected to address this topic and open the space for interventions by Member states to share information on this topic.

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3. **UNHCR.** *Climate change, natural disasters and human displacement: UNHCR's perspective.* <https://www.unhcr.org/497891022.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://migracionesclimaticas.org/nuevo-blog-sobre-migraciones-climaticas-2/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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   <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29461/WBG_ClimateChange_Final.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. **OAS, IDB, IFAD, IOM, WFP.** *Food security and emigration.**WhyPeople are fleeing and the impact this has on families who remain in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.* <http://www.oas.org/documents/spa/press/Final_VersionCorta_ReporteMigracion_ESP_20170814.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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   <https://blogs.iadb.org/sostenibilidad/es/desarrollando-medios-de-vida-sostenibles-en-el-corredor-seco-de-guatemala/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. **IDB.** *Why is it key to address climate change and migration simultaneously?*

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9. **Tower**. *Climate change, forced displacement, peace and security: Actions of the administration of Biden that guarantee rights.* [*https://migracionesclimaticas.org/documento/cambio-climatico-desplazamiento-forzado-paz-y-seguridad-acciones-administracion-biden-que-garantizan-los-derechos/*](https://migracionesclimaticas.org/documento/cambio-climatico-desplazamiento-forzado-paz-y-seguridad-acciones-administracion-biden-que-garantizan-los-derechos/) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. **Podesta.** *The climate crisis, migration, and refugees.*<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. **IDB**. *Why is it key to address climate change and migration simultaneously?*

    <https://blogs.iadb.org/migracion/es/abordar-cambio-climatico-y-migracion-de-forma-simultanea/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)