

Submission to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants on the impact of climate change and the protection of the human rights of migrants

March 22, 2022

Introduction

As an organization rooted in faith, [Church World Service \(CWS\)](#) believes that all people deserve to lead lives of dignity, wherever we find ourselves. In the context of climate change, we live out our mission by increasing access to information, skills, technology, and financial resources by climate-impacted families and communities to adapt to slow-onset change, manage disaster risks, and increase resilience.

While many people desire to remain safe, secure, and thriving in their home communities, migration has always been part of human history, and is a fact of life in many places where CWS supports climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction. In 2021, a CWS study documented perceptions of climate change, in-place adaptation, and migration in five countries – Cambodia, Georgia, Haiti, Indonesia and Kenya – where we support local climate adaptation. CWS [issued a report from the research](#) in August 2021.¹ This note highlights findings from our study in relation to questions posed by the Special Rapporteur for their forthcoming report.

Relationships between Climate Change and Human Mobility

The CWS study affirmed that climate change is very much felt in people’s lives, particularly by farmers, fishers, herders, and others who depend directly on natural resources for livelihoods. In communities where CWS works, climate change is perceived to negatively impact agricultural production, household income, health conditions, and access to education.

Slow-onset climate change impacts are contributing to or exacerbating human insecurity, and particularly food insecurity, in several study locations. In one of the most extreme examples, in Haiti, a respondent described this in terms of subjective fear: *“It hardly rains... there is a lot of impact, especially on the harvests, which means there is more hunger. The main reason I left is to search for life because misery wanted to kill me and my children. I consider the option of migration as a way to cope with change and weather. If I leave, I will find some relief.”*

Migration is relatively common in communities where CWS supports climate adaptation. Climate change impacts, particularly on agriculture, are one factor in migration, though not the only factor. In one island community in Haiti, the cumulative effects of climate change were described as a tipping point for displacement: *“A lot of people had no intention to leave. Now they don’t find anything to encourage them in the area.”*

¹ CWS teams conducted 211 one-on-one interviews and 26 focus group discussions in 30 communities; interviews with 43 key informants (primarily local government officials); and organized 12 community report-back workshops to share interpretations of the data and discuss potential recommendations.

In other locations, migration is not widely perceived as a viable way to cope with climate change, even if there is a high level of human mobility in general. This reflects high perceived costs of migration, and a sense of lacking the skills and assets needed to migrate in ways that would genuinely improve living conditions. One focus group in Kenya's Kitui county framed mobility as a non-option for themselves – asking rhetorically, “*Where would we migrate to?*” – even while noting that migration was relatively common among youth in the community.

Minimizing Adverse Drivers that Compel Migration

Our study reaffirmed that climate-impacted families and communities are already putting their limited resources toward adaptation and coping strategies. There is demand for external resources to complement these efforts, with a focus on longer-term investments that are needed to bring to life ‘the right to stay’ in increasingly challenging climate conditions. These include:

- **WATER.** Improving access to water, particularly for agriculture, is a prominent concern. This requires moving beyond customary irrigation and introducing new ways to harvest rainwater; improving access to technology; and mobilizing public investments to access groundwater sources, expand clean water distribution systems, and maintain community water infrastructure.
- **RESILIENT AGRICULTURE.** Agriculture remains a key source of food, income, and social and cultural identity. There is demand for expanding climate resilient agriculture, including conservation farming and use of drought-resistant crops and hardier livestock breeds.
- **COMMUNITY-BASED FINANCE.** Access to microfinance and working capital remains critical for expanding livelihoods beyond agriculture and other activities highly dependent on natural resources. It is particularly needed in places where climate-induced debt is a factor in migration, or where financial resources are needed to adopt or scale-up adaptation and disaster risk reduction technologies.
- **PARTICIPATORY DRR AND LONG-TERM RECOVERY.** For early warning systems to be effective, information on risks and disaster risk reduction needs to be communicated in ways that are accessible and understandable. Community participation in recovery from sudden-onset events can ensure that long-term needs are addressed.
- **CLIMATE ACTION.** While many respondents have some information about locally experienced climate change, there is little information available about national government plans or global climate action commitments. This can be addressed through national information campaigns and community information sessions, establishing municipal and regional climate resource desks, and decreasing the digital divide so that online information is more accessible.

More must be done to get resources for climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction to communities who already feel climate pressures acutely. This includes providing long-term, multi-year funding support; ensuring flexible funding that responds flexibly to locally defined needs and resource gaps; and prioritizing and incentivizing participatory approaches, such as participatory hazard mapping, climate vulnerability assessments, or mobility assessments.

In Cambodia's Battambang province, families who feel climate change among livelihood pressures are developing new climate-smart agriculture techniques and marketing strategies,

through participation in CWS resilient livelihoods activities. Anecdotally we have heard that some livelihoods program participants who were considering migration to Thailand or Phnom Penh now intend to remain in their community in Battambang. One participant described how this has increased her family's income and has meant that her husband no longer needs to migrate for work: *"Now, we decided for my husband to stop working as a wage laborer – he does not need to leave to work away from home – and instead to help me to work on our vegetable garden, from which can earn much better income. We now can earn around US \$25 per day from selling vegetables, which is enough to support my family and repay debt. We will allocate some amount for saving to expand our vegetable business and to continue support our kids to continue schooling."*

Climate change resilience of great concern to women in Kenya's Kitui county, who feel its impacts most acutely, and typically bear responsibility for local coping strategies. During extreme drought in 2021, many working age men did leave the community, and leaving women with even more household responsibilities, including finding ways to cope with water scarcity. Women's leadership in mobilizing village savings and loans for resilience (VLSR) groups, has expanded income-generating opportunities, and have increased women's opportunities to make decisions on matters that directly affect them and their families during times of crisis.

Making Migration Safer and More Predictable

In places where migration is perceived as a climate coping strategy, the CWS study found demand for safer and more predictable migration. This often coexists with a desire to invest in resilience and locally led adaptation; or for better migration options that are closer to home, rather than over long distances or across borders. Policies should support in-place adaptation, improve internal migration options, and expand access to safe and regular international migration – in tandem, not in isolation.

Among our study locations, international migration was most prominent in Cambodia's Battambang province, along the border with Thailand. Climate impacts are one factor in cross-border migration for work opportunities. If successful, this helps to clear debts – some of which are incurred to cope with increasing water scarcity -- and to improve economic conditions. Unfortunately, the study found cases in which people returned in worse condition than before migrating (e.g., being arrested and serving prison sentence, falling seriously ill after migrating). Some respondents linked this to a lack of awareness of risks in migration or of basic labor rights; or noted that debt can increase the risk of exploitation by smugglers. Because of concerns about family separation, many prefer in-place adaptation over migration, or migration within Cambodia rather than across borders.

In locations where CWS found a high demand for more (and more accurate) information about migration, including both internal and cross-border migration, this did not reflect a demand for "messaging campaigns" about migration, nor for information solely about the risks posed by irregular migration. Respondents expressed a desire for accurate information to assist themselves and others in making difficult decisions that involve risk management and require thoughtful preparation.

Some people interviewed see migration as an expression of hope or opportunity; others describe migration in more reluctant terms. There is awareness of threats that exist in migration – interview respondents described fraud, workplace abuse, harassment, detention, limited access to health care in case of accidents or sickness, and even deaths in transit – particularly among people with lived experience of migration. Some perceive migration as a viable option,

even knowing about potential threats; while for others, awareness of threats is a deterrence to migration. More broadly, there is a sense that the returns on investment from migration can be uncertain, and that sound preparation is needed.

Specific recommendations that emerged include:

- **ACCESS TO INFORMATION**, through information centers or other activities that can make available accurate, reliably sourced information about migration, including requirements for safe, regular migration. These should also include information and training about personal safety and rights and responsibilities in migration, across communities of origin, transit locations, and places of destination.
- **MIGRATION SUPPORT SERVICES** such as skills training, financial planning, and other pre-departure planning; and provide information, incentives, and support services for the reinvestment of skills, savings, and remittances in climate adaptation.
- **EXPAND SAFE AND REGULAR PATHWAYS** and make these more accessible and affordable for poor households. This can include facilitating contact with consular services for international migration destinations; organizing border reception and assistance for safe transit; communicating with and monitoring employers to ensure that migrant workers' rights are respected; and assisting migrants to access essential services in places of migration.
- **MORE OPTIONS FOR INTERNAL MIGRATION**, in consultation with climate-impacted communities and local governments; and increase access to decent work, safe housing, and social protections for persons migrating internally.

Drawing on these findings and recommendations, CWS and our partner organizations have begun to incorporate information on safe migration alongside climate adaptation programs in Cambodia (cross-border migration to Thailand) and Georgia (internal relocation and international migration) and are exploring this possibility in other countries.

Engaging Climate-Impacted Communities

CWS organized our pilot research alongside support to local adaptation, rather than as stand-alone research. This intended to reflect accountability to directly impacted communities, by ensuring that CWS extends resources toward adaptation needs that partner communities had already identified. This also allowed our teams to leverage existing relationships with community-based organizations in preparing qualitative tools, conducting research, interpreting findings, and identifying next steps.

While there is value in continuing to increase the evidence base on climate and human mobility, such investments should encourage research that reflects accountability to climate-impacted communities. Ideally, this incorporates in-depth qualitative and participatory approaches, and expands opportunities for climate-impacted communities, as well as people on the move because of climate impacts, to lead or co-lead research agendas and knowledge production.

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