
MIGRANTS IN DISASTER SITUATIONS
(Document presented by the Chair)

▪ Natural Hazards in the Americas

The Americas is highly prone to natural hazards. In South America, the Pacific Coast is dramatically exposed to seismic and volcanic activity. Major Andean cities and important population concentrations are settled in the very active and fertile volcanic cones. Some countries are frequently affected by hurricanes or heavy rains in their tropical regions. In the plains of the Atlantic, episodes of flooding and droughts are common. The desert zones of South America experience extreme temperatures and flash floods that frequently affect the population.

Central America's major cities tend to lie in high-risk areas prone to natural hazards. All Central American countries are vulnerable to hurricanes, floods, and mudslides, and some have strong volcanic and seismic activity.

The Caribbean region, highly vulnerable to extreme weather, is commonly hard-hit by hurricanes, which have wrought exceptional destruction in the past few years. These islands also lie in an active seismic zone and endure volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.¹ North America experiences earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, wildfires, blizzards, and avalanches.

The *La Niña* and *el Niño* phenomena – that is, cooler and warmer than normal sea surface temperatures, respectively – have impacts not just in the Americas but on the global climate, contributing to conditions that create hurricanes, floods, and droughts. The impacts of climate change on the frequency and severity of weather events further complicate this picture.

▪ Relationship between Disasters and Migration

The relationship between disasters and migration is multi-faceted. Perhaps most obviously, disasters influence the movement of people into and out of an affected area. Following the Indian Ocean Tsunami, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) identified people who: sought to leave the affected area; chose to remain, aided by an inflow of humanitarian assistance; and moved to the area to support to those affected.² Diaspora populations figured prominently in the latter.

¹ [Americas 2009-2010 Plan](#), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

² International Organization for Migration, MRS N°30 - Migration, Development and Natural Disasters: Insights from the Indian Ocean Tsunami, 2007.

When disasters strike, they not only affect vulnerable migrants more gravely, but increase the subsequent vulnerability of those groups. This Committee is fully aware of the day-to-day challenges of many migrants. Their special vulnerabilities in disasters are described below.

- Special Vulnerabilities of Migrants in Disasters

A disaster occurs when a population is vulnerable to the impacts of a natural hazard. Not surprisingly, poverty – which affects many migrants in the Americas – creates conditions that leave people more vulnerable to natural hazards, such as unplanned urban expansion, deforestation, and soil-erosion. Poor migrants are increasingly likely to live in hazard-prone locations, such as in makeshift houses on unstable hillsides or flood plains. They are also less likely to have the resources to prepare for a disaster, and aid agencies have a more difficult time reaching migrants with preparedness messages.

Once a disaster strikes, migrants may have a more difficult time recovering. Newcomers to a society lack social networks through which they can receive material assistance and psychological support. They may also lack places to take refuge, such as with relatives. It is more difficult for migrants to reassure their families of their safety a disaster.

Undocumented migrants find themselves in an even more precarious situation. Government aid is often reserved for individuals with the appropriate documentation. Humanitarian aid organizations may step in to fill the void, but undocumented migrants do not always trust that they will not cross paths with the authorities when seeking assistance.

- Legal Framework for Migrants in Disaster Situations

The responsibilities of governments vis-à-vis migrants in disasters are grounded in national as well as international law. International Human Rights Law defines standards that include migrants of all categories. In addition, there are specific legal regimes that may apply: International Refugee Law sets out the rights of refugees and the standards for their treatment. International Humanitarian Law protects migrants in situations of armed conflict, as they are civilians and, in certain instances, aliens in the territory of a party to a conflict.

One of the most important legal questions regarding migrants in disaster is the extent to which undocumented migrants can receive disaster services. In some countries, it is unlawful for any individual or organization to provide humanitarian assistance to an undocumented person. However, guarantees for basic humanitarian assistance extend to every human being, including migrants, and irrespective of their legal status.

Finally, International Disaster Response Law, Rules, and Principles, which facilitates the provision of international disaster assistance, may also help governments and other actors to meet the needs of migrants.