



Justice or Charity? Climate Change in the UN High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement Report

The High-Level Panel report opens up the space for promoting a more nuanced understanding of displacement in the context of climate change, but stops short from framing it as an issue of climate justice.

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In 2050, a staggering 216 million people could be on the move within their own countries due to climate change, alerted the recent [Groundswell report](#) by the World Bank. At present, disasters and the adverse effects of climate change already account for the [majority of new internal displacements](#). It is therefore laudable that the recently launched [report of the UN Secretary General's High Level Panel on Internal Displacement](#) (HLP report) addresses climate change as one of the drivers of displacement. Importantly, the HLP report also talks about the need to 'prevent and mitigate risks of displacement' (p.41).

As scholars working on the issues of displacement in the context of disasters and climate change, we believe some critical remarks and a call for more drastic action is required to prevent further harm being done to people living in places most vulnerable to disasters and climate change. This is especially important when considering that most of these people are the least responsible for the current climate crisis. International actors are often reluctant to take a strong stance and to intervene in domestic affairs when conflict is driving internal displacement. In fact, that is why internal displacement has for long been an ignored issue on the global agenda.

This reluctance, however, is not warranted when it comes to displacement that is induced by disasters and the adverse effects of climate change, as this is a global issue for which assigning global responsibility is appropriate. We perceive this to be a matter of climate justice, understood as a restorative action rooted in the

recognition that '[climate change can have differing social, economic, public health and other adverse impacts on underprivileged populations](#)' in both the Global South and Global North. Climate justice can only begin with the acknowledgement of the reality of climate change, what is causing it, who is responsible for it, how it is impacting people around the globe, and what is really needed to prevent further worsening of the climate crisis.

This essay focuses on the way in which the HLP report addresses internal displacement in the context of disasters and climate change in particular. The analysis here not only reflects the recently published report summing up the HLP process and its recommendations, but also takes into account the submissions from Member States, NGOs, and other stakeholders that fed into the HLP process.

Without claiming to be an exhaustive analysis, it is aimed at highlighting the HLP report's strengths and weaknesses in its treatment of climate change as a driver of displacement. Of particular interest is the framing of responses as a matter of charity rather than justice, and how that then focuses more on disaster prevention than on addressing the root causes of climate change. In doing so, it also aims to advocate for improved protection for IDPs and to contribute to the academic [discourse of global justice](#), that goes [beyond normative arguments and pays attention to real-life consequences of climate change for people at the local level](#).

Strengths and weaknesses of stakeholder submissions

The HLP has been a highly participatory process actively [engaging a wide range of stakeholders](#) (UN Member States, NGOs, researchers, think tanks, academia, joint initiatives and platforms), as well as [consultations with IDPs themselves and members of displacement-affected communities](#). The analysis of the variety of inputs that has fed into this process reveals diverging perspectives among the key actors.

UN Member State submissions

What one notices in the UN Member State [submissions](#) is, first, the notable absence of submissions from many influential States: only 23 Member States submitted their views, and often submissions were limited to only a couple of

pages of broad summaries and vague discussions of charity. A reading of State submissions will find a litany of references to general accountability, responsibility, and the duties of States affected by internal displacement. However, there is not even the slightest hint of recognition that it is consumption and production patterns in the Global North that have driven, and continue to accelerate climate change.

Illustrating the broad summary approach, for example, [Mozambique](#) laments that ‘natural disasters driven by climate change’ are of increasing concern, and thereby implies that responsibility lies with nature rather than the Global North. Meanwhile the charitable approach is evident, for example, in [Japan](#)’s submission. Rather than recognising the potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate further adverse effects of climate change, Japan offers only that ‘in case of disaster and climate-change, further attention should be paid for preparedness, and international society should support the countries which have limited capacity to do so’.

Overall, concerns about conflict displacement figure more prominently in most submissions than concerns about displacement in the context of disasters and climate change, although some countries point out the intertwined nature of the drivers of displacement (such as [Afghanistan](#), [Denmark](#), the [UK](#), and [Ethiopia](#)). Focusing on conflict displacement makes it easier to emphasize the affected State’s responsibility to protect the rights of their displaced citizens, and hence frees non-affected countries of any blame and any moral obligation to act.

For example, the UK submission overwhelmingly focuses on conflict, and only makes a passing comment about climate change, not even noting it is a driver of displacement. This conveniently allows the UK to frame the issue as one for which responsibility lies primarily with the affected State. It should be noted, however, that instead of expanding on displacements and climate change in their submissions, some countries explicitly express their support for the submission by the [Platform for Disaster Displacement](#) (PDD) and engagement with the [Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction \(Sendai Framework\)](#) (such as [Denmark](#), [France](#), [Japan](#), [Norway](#), and [Switzerland](#)).

Further, there is a complete absence of any acknowledgement that internal displacement in the context of disasters and climate change also occurs in highly

developed States (with the exception of [Tonga](#), which highlights that its vulnerabilities are shared by other coastal communities in places like Venice, Italy and elsewhere around the world), despite demonstrable proof that it does. Displacements in the [US](#), [Japan](#), the [EU](#), [Australia](#), and elsewhere in the Global North are becoming increasingly common. Yet, none of the Member States making submissions to the HLP gave any indication that they were aware of that fact.

This silence is remarkable, given that the worsening climate crisis is already affecting countries across the world. What about [desertification in southern Europe](#) and in [California](#)? What about rising sea levels and [the recent river floods in lowland countries in northern Europe](#) which are [likely to become more frequent as climate change's impact intensifies](#)? In fact, countries such as Spain, Portugal, Greece and the US did not even bother to respond to the HLP's invitation to submit their inputs. Instead, what one finds in the submissions from the industrialised countries is a tone of pedantry that the Global North will guide and contribute funding to the Global South's efforts to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change.

In other words, the furthest Member States go is to offer financial support and technical know-how to address disasters and to reduce disaster risks, for instance by setting up early warning systems (see for example France, Norway, and Denmark submission). Prevention then, mostly revolves around the prevention of disasters, but not around prevention of climate change itself, even though this is at [the actual root of many disasters that trigger new displacements](#) every year. This implies, incorrectly, that climate change is somehow inevitable, and at the same time perpetuates the image of the Global North as donor and benefactor to the Global South's recipient. In effect, this reveals that the Global North intends to continue to observe this issue from the higher grounds of its traditional donor role, and to engage in climate charity when what is needed is climate justice.

Submissions from NGOs and other stakeholders

Turning to the submissions from the NGOs, joint initiatives, and other stakeholders, one notices more references to displacement in the context of disasters and climate change, although these references are made alongside a [diverse range of other points for which these submissions advocate](#).

The [PDD](#) submission stands out as being particularly comprehensive. It discusses the different aspects of displacement in the context of disasters and climate change, and calls for a set of different measures to address prevention and preparedness, reduce vulnerability, ensure that disaster responses are protection-sensitive and start searching for solutions early in the process. This comprehensive focus is, in fact, what led PDD's submission to be widely endorsed by many other stakeholders. Yet, being a State-led initiative with most of its funding coming from States in the Global North, it is not surprising that the PDD does not make climate justice a central issue.

Towards this end, not being bound by political considerations to the same extent, the submissions from NGOs and civil society organisations go further in calling for climate action than the PDD's statement. Nonetheless, even there, the emphasis on climate justice is not always as well articulated as one would expect it to be. The notable exception is the input by the [Climate, Migration, and Displacement Platform](#), representing over 30 civil organisations working in these areas, which stresses the need to address displacement in the context of climate change 'as part of the wider effort to promote climate justice for all' and points that industrialised countries have the responsibility 'to reduce their emissions significantly.' Albeit not referring to climate justice in particular, [Oxfam's submission](#) also calls for the need 'to push countries to achieve deeper and more urgent emissions reductions' and 'a swift and just transition away from fossil fuels'.

Yet, even in the context of these outspoken submissions, greater emphasis tends to be placed on the role that the developed countries have to play in scaling up climate finance and easing access to such funding for climate-vulnerable communities. The importance of working in solidarity with the international community and supporting disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation initiatives in developing countries should not be underestimated. That said, it should not overshadow the equally urgent need for the industrialised States to fully acknowledge their contributions to the climate crisis and take immediate action to avoid further destabilising the environment.

Displacement in the context of disasters and climate change in the HLP report

The HLP description of their goals asserts they hope [‘to prompt action to prevent, respond and solve the world's internal displacement crises’](#), but the final report (p.41) asserts that it focuses on solutions and, thus, offers only limited discussion of prevention. This may be a compromise between the Member States’ submissions that ignored the responsibility of the Global North in causing climate change and the NGO submissions that rightly assigned blame. Generally, the HLP report goes further than the Member States’ submissions, and takes on board many of the points advocated by other stakeholders. At the same time, it provides an explanation for its limitations instead of fully exploring the need for climate justice. However, its recognition of the significance of climate change as a direct driver of displacement, as a contributing factor to dynamic interactions between conflict and disaster situations, and as an impediment to responses does not go unnoticed.

It is also worth mentioning that the inclusion of both disasters and climate change as a part of the report’s standardised list of causes of displacement, is appropriate. While the distinction between such terms may have little relevance to those who are actually displaced, it rightly reflects the understanding among policy experts, who recognise the [differences and similarities between climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction](#). In most media reports, however, the erroneous practice of using these terms almost interchangeably prevails. On three counts, this should be corrected. First, the understanding that not all disasters are caused by climate change warrants separate terms. Second, misnomers like ‘natural’ disasters, which [continue to feature in both popular and policy discourses](#), ignore [the reality that the challenges posed by both disasters and climate change often have little to do with nature](#).

Finally, in recognising that displacement is often triggered by a combination of forces, it is important that one does not neglect the slow-onset effects of climate change, like droughts and sea-level rise. These effects often interact with other factors to force displacement without being immediately identified as ‘disasters’ in the way sudden-onset events are. Again, one would expect this distinction from the HLP, given that its work has also been guided by [a group of leading experts](#), but it is worth highlighting the reasoning for this terminology for the benefit of wider audiences. To that end, the report rightly stays away from the language of [‘natural and manmade disasters’](#), in favour of the more specific description of ‘conflicts, violence, disasters and climate change’ (p. 2).

Though this reflects a commonly understood terminology, [some scholars question the relevance of qualifying climate change migrants as somehow distinct](#) from those displaced by other drivers (pp. 9-10). However, climate change is distinct in that it is primarily [driven by the Global North](#) while its consequences are suffered globally, and disproportionately by those in more vulnerable situations in the Global South. Failing to recognise this allows the worst contributors to climate change to express sympathies and offer charity without accepting any responsibility and providing justice. By referring to displacement both in the context of disasters and climate change, the HLP has rightly acknowledged the existence of disasters both linked to and independent of climate change while ensuring that the role of climate change in forcing displacement does not go unnoticed.

Importantly, the HLP report clearly acknowledges that internal displacement – particularly in the context of disasters and climate change – is a global crisis, where ‘no nation is spared from the risk of displacement’ (p.2). It also warns that climate change specifically will ‘extend the risk of displacement to new places’ (p.2), including countries in the Global North which have hitherto perceived themselves to be immune to displacement crises.

In this sense, the report makes a long-awaited step forward in countering the [dominant narrative that primarily associates internal displacement with situations of conflicts and violence in fragile States](#). As noted above, displacements driven by disasters and climate change are already widespread in the Global North, even if many States fail to acknowledge this reality. That is why this discussion in the HLP report is so significant. This perception has been for long preventing internal displacement from featuring more prominently on the global agenda, and precluding more attention to be channelled to displacement in the context of disasters and climate change.

With regard to climate change, the HLP report further recognises that although its impacts will be extensive, they will also be highly unequal, depending on the level of vulnerability and exposure experienced by different people in different places. Importantly, it acknowledges the cruelty of the situation in which ‘many of the countries most at risk from the impacts of climate change are among the least responsible for the emissions driving it’ (p.42). Hereunder, it specifically mentions

that in some cases the impacts of climate change ‘pose not only a displacement risk but an existential threat’ (p.2). In so doing, the HLP process opens up the space for promoting a more nuanced understanding of displacement in the context of climate change as an issue that is inextricably linked to questions of equality and justice.

However, the HLP report falls short of making full use of this more nuanced perspective in stating what action is required to address this issue. Towards this end, the HLP report acknowledges that business as usual is not an option by saying that ‘states must take responsibility for the global impacts of their emissions, including recognizing the role their emissions and climate change play in driving displacement’ (p.43). Yet, this clear call for action is immediately blurred by the next sentence which says that states ‘must also work in solidarity with poorer nations to assist them in preparing for the impacts of climate change’ (p.43). Unfortunately, this refocuses the attention on charity just as key arguments were being made for justice.

Shining a true light for the future of IDPs in the context of climate change calls for more drastic climate action

Whereas responsibility is an essential concept for claiming justice, solidarity is too often understood as [a matter of goodwill and charitable intentions](#). Thus, in order to clearly frame displacement in the context of disasters and climate change as an issue of justice and equality, much greater emphasis has to be placed on responsibility-sharing rather than on the solidarity aspect that often gets confused with charity. Towards this end, the language in the HLP report stops one step short of actually promoting that much-needed framing. Instead, it leaves an impression that the HLP is reluctant to point out that the actual locus of responsibility for climate change lies with the Global North and that addressing the root causes for displacement in the context of many disasters and climate change first and foremost actually requires the resourceful countries to step out of their comfort zones by seriously reconsidering their patterns of production and consumption.

Moreover, although we understand and fully support the HLP’s strong focus on solutions, we are concerned that with respect to preventing displacement in the context of disasters and climate change the recommendations it offers are too

focused on the provision of funding and technical assistance. There is no doubt that more funding and meaningful technical assistance are needed. However, utmost attention should be paid that the emphasis on these aspects does not reinforce traditional power hierarchies between the resource-rich and technologically advanced Global North, and the Global South dependent on the generosity of the industrialised countries to mitigate disaster risks and adapt to the impacts of the global climate crisis. Such power imbalances only reduce the ability of the States in the Global South to be firm in demanding drastic action and holding countries in the Global North accountable for addressing the adverse effects of climate change.

Following the release of the IPCC report “[Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis](#)”, the UN Secretary General stated that the only way to prevent the already serious climate crisis from worsening is by ‘[urgently stepping up our efforts, and pursuing the most ambitious path](#)’. Following such a path calls for much stronger actions from the Global North: not as a matter of charity, or a nice gesture of solidarity for which the Global South should show its gratitude, but as a matter of global climate justice for which there is global responsibility to act. For all people already displaced and those facing a real risk of displacement in the context of disasters and the adverse effects of climate change, we truly hope that this message will be taken forward in the upcoming [COP26 in Glasgow](#) and beyond. Every second counts in the race against the worsening climate crisis!

The authors are listed alphabetically and wish to acknowledge that they all contributed to the project in equal shares from conception to completion.

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