



Climate Change, the Displacement of Puerto Ricans and the Problem of Representation

This paper highlights the particular challenges of Puerto Ricans facing displacement in the context of climate change. Unlike Small Island Developing States and other climate-vulnerable nations, the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico is not well-positioned to benefit from UNFCCC initiatives to build resilience and address climate-related challenges due its status as an unincorporated territory of the United States. It is therefore imperative that Puerto Rican authorities and civil society, the US government and international organizations collaborate to develop measures and mechanisms to safeguard the rights of Puerto Ricans displaced on the island of Puerto Rico and to the US mainland.

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Marielys Padua Soto

[Scientists predict](#) that in the upcoming decade, it is probable that the world will cross a dangerous temperature threshold. The planet is already experiencing unusual levels of warming, a scenario that may only be averted if nations rapidly shift away from relying on fossil fuels. There is consensus that limiting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius is still possible but [will require a 45 percent reduction in carbon emissions](#) by 2030. The urgency to transition to sustainable energy sources has never been more apparent, with experts stressing that immediate and concerted global efforts are necessary to curtail carbon emissions and prevent the planet from exceeding the critical temperature threshold in the next decade. Ironically, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) contribute little to global warming. On average, [they emit only 1.5 percent as much greenhouse gas as industrialized countries](#). However, they are [disproportionately affected by the consequences of climate change](#), with sea level rise and extreme weather events reshaping human mobility in many ways.

The Displacement of Puerto Ricans in the Context of Climate Change

Although Puerto Rico is not technically classified as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) due to its status as an unincorporated territory of the United States, it shares several geographical characteristics of SIDS and faces comparable challenges, including inadequate transportation infrastructure, relative isolation from major markets, insufficient access to some resources and heavy reliance on imports. Additionally, because Puerto Rico is situated in the Caribbean, it faces a heightened susceptibility to extreme weather events, including hurricanes and tropical storms, a characteristic commonly associated with SIDS. The devastation wrought by Hurricane María in 2017 highlighted the island's vulnerability, revealing deficiencies in its infrastructure and the fragility of its economy. Moreover, Puerto Rico's economic dependence on specific sectors, particularly tourism and agriculture, also resembles the economic structures of many SIDS. This dependence renders the island susceptible to loss in case of disasters or shifts in global markets, mirroring the economic fragility experienced by smaller island nations. Puerto Rico topped the [Global Climate Risk Index 2021](#) (CRI), which tracked human and economic losses and other adverse impacts of weather-related events such as storms, floods and heat waves, from 2000 to 2019. Myanmar and Haiti were ranked second and third on the CRI.

Puerto Rico's dependence on the U.S. and the absence of the SIDS designation limits its participation in important international frameworks and mechanisms intended to support climate-vulnerable regions. [Although Puerto Rico is part of the United States, it is distinct from it.](#) Puerto Ricans have US citizenship but lack full political representation and, relatedly, have developed their own brand of nationalism despite not being a sovereign state. Most people of Puerto Rican descent [don't live on the island](#), with 6 million residing on the mainland US and only 3.1 million residing in Puerto Rico. The island's population is expected to continue to decline due to outmigration to the mainland United States, low birth rates, an aging demographic, economic challenges including high unemployment and poverty, and the impacts of disasters triggered by hurricanes and sea level rise.

Given its population density of nearly [449 individuals per square kilometer and the fact that 56% of its inhabitants reside in coastal areas](#),

Puerto Rico faces significant vulnerability to climate related hazards, especially impacting those who are economically marginalized and living in socially inequitable conditions characterized by inadequate infrastructure and services. Rapid urban growth over recent decades has significantly [increased the presence of impervious surfaces](#) across Puerto Rico's watersheds, leading to situations where thousands of individuals now reside in regions susceptible to flooding. Additionally, intense storms [trigger numerous landslides annually in the island's mountainous regions](#), resulting in significant property damage and loss of life. Furthermore, rising sea levels are eroding the coasts and have consequently triggered [the displacement of many Puerto Ricans to the United States](#), a populational movement further exacerbated by [poverty, unemployment, and corruption](#).

Sea level rise and extreme weather events also pose significant threats to the coastal communities of Puerto Rico. During 2017, Puerto Rico experienced one of the worst hurricanes in its history, category 5 Hurricane María. According to a [Harvard study released in 2018](#), at least 4,645 people died as a result of Hurricane María and the devastation it left on Puerto Rican soil. It is estimated that after María, more than [470,000 people left the island by 2019](#). The aftermath of the hurricane also led to significant job losses across various sectors, exacerbating the island's existing economic challenges. Rebuilding efforts in the wake of the disaster provided some employment opportunities but didn't fully offset the long-term impacts on Puerto Rico's workforce and economy. For this reason, many Puerto Ricans left the island in search of better opportunities. The families that remain and who have inhabited the coastline areas for generations now find themselves facing an unimaginable dilemma – to stay and risk their safety due to probable future catastrophic events or abandon their homes in search of safer areas.

Adverse demographic impacts

According to a 2019 analysis, [younger people are more likely to leave Puerto Rico](#), with a median age of 31 for migrants versus an overall median age of 44 on the island. The report mentioned that migration was already increasing significantly due to Puerto Rico's depressed economy but that the impact of the hurricanes made the situation much worse, leading more people to move because of the disaster situation

that unfolded in the months after hazardous weather events. Due to migration and other factors, Puerto Rico now [ranks seventh in the world](#) for highest percentage of people aged 65 or over, according to a report from the United Nations Department of Economy and Social Affairs. Driven by the dire circumstances caused by poverty, rising sea levels, and the increasing frequency and intensity of hurricanes, [many young Puerto Ricans have decided to internally relocate to the United States](#). The decision to relocate is driven by a complex interplay of variables, including socioeconomic constraints, environmental repercussions, and anticipation of future adverse conditions, with internal displacement and migration often occurring in the aftermath of environmental calamities, as previously mentioned. This migratory trend, in turn, has ignited a whirlwind of economic, cultural, and social challenges in Puerto Rico. A lack of youthful individuals has led to [a shrinking workforce, a decline in economic productivity](#), and an aging population that has become more dependent on limited healthcare and social services.

Addressing overlapping challenges: Climate vulnerability, displacement and political representation

Displacement experiences such as these reverberate on a global scale, contributing to the broader discourse on climate induced migration. As vulnerable regions worldwide struggle with the impacts of environmental shifts, we have a collective responsibility to address the root causes and consequences of climate change. Its adverse effects are not only confined to rising temperatures and melting glaciers; they extend deep into the fabric of societies, challenging the ability of communities to adapt and survive. Puerto Rico's case is only a small example of the larger global problem of climate change.

There is an urgent need for comprehensive strategies, policies, and international cooperation to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change. However, because of Puerto Rico's unique status, it has not fully participated in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change ([UNFCCC](#)) and related intergovernmental processes aimed at addressing vulnerability and building resilience. For example, Puerto Rico and the needs of its people are not mentioned in the [US's Nationally Determined Contributions \(NDC\)](#) report to the UNFCCC, which has chosen to focus solely on emissions reductions and green energy transitions, not climate adaptation and mobility challenges. Additionally, Puerto Rico is not part

of the [National Adaptation Planning](#) process and does not develop or submit a National Adaptation Plan (NAP) as this process is intended for developing nation parties to the UNFCCC. Thus, Puerto Rico is not well-positioned to benefit from UNFCCC [adaption funding](#), [loss and damage funding](#), and [technical support](#).

The journey from Puerto Rico to the United States represents a profound cultural and emotional shift for young Puerto Ricans. Displaced youth often find themselves struggling with cultural dissonance as they attempt to assimilate into a new society, grappling with the tension between preserving their Puerto Rican heritage and embracing their new American reality. The social fabric that once provided support and belonging becomes threatened, leaving these individuals to navigate a complex and unfamiliar setting on their own. The experiences of displaced Puerto Ricans in the United States demonstrate the urgent need for comprehensive strategies and policies to address climate-induced displacement.

As climate change continues to accelerate, it is imperative that Puerto Rican authorities and civil society, the US government and international organizations collaborate to develop proactive measures to safeguard the rights and well-being of Puerto Ricans displaced both on the island of Puerto Rico and to the US mainland. This calls for a multi-faceted approach that addresses economic empowerment, cultural preservation, and social integration. Sustainable adaptation, including rights-supporting mobility strategies, are crucial in the wake of climate-related displacement.

Marielys Padua Soto is an MA student of the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies at The American University in Cairo. She is a multilingual lawyer and humanitarian professional with a strong passion for addressing the challenges faced by migrants, refugees, and indigenous peoples.

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