



The Real Disaster May Only Just Be Beginning for Those Displaced by Hurricane Melissa

For many of those displaced by Hurricane Melissa, the real disaster is only just beginning. While close to a million people have been evacuated, undoubtedly saving lives, this will likely be the start of a much longer period of displacement for some individuals and communities. Viewed within the broader existing hazard-scape of violence, conflict, resource scarcity and funding challenges in the region, the dangers compound and grow.

This short piece, which discusses the long-term risks to people displaced by Melissa, also spotlights the chronic and worsening underinvestment in people and communities required to reduce the risk of disaster displacement and the devastating long-term effects on those affected. The blog underscores why parties negotiating the text of the forthcoming global treaty on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters must ensure that displacement, evacuation and planned relocations are reflected in the provisions and that commitments to international cooperation are backed by the financial resources necessary to make them real.

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Hurricane Melissa, the first recorded Category 5 storm to strike Jamaica, is wreaking havoc across the region, leading to extreme flooding, landslides, storm surges and displacement across Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti and the Bahamas.

With reports that [more than 735,000](#) people have been evacuated in Cuba alone, and whole towns [destroyed](#), it is inevitable that for many, the real disaster is only just beginning.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced from their homes, many fleeing to evacuation centres. But while evacuation is generally considered to be a temporary, life-saving measure, it is often the start of a much longer period of displacement.

On their own, the impacts of Hurricane Melissa are devastating. But when they intersect with existing violence, conflict, resource scarcity and funding challenges, the risks compound and grow. People are facing multiple protection risks and [ever-diminishing pathways](#) to relief.

For instance, prior to the hurricane, Haiti was already facing record levels of internal displacement, with more than [1.4 million](#) people dislocated from their homes. It's also sobering to realize that 15 years after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, tens of thousands of people [remain displaced](#) without a solution.

Similarly, in Cuba, the impacts of Hurricane Melissa will [exacerbate](#) challenges for people who are reeling from earlier extreme weather events. More than 250,000 homes were already structurally unsound and a further 600,000 had only lightweight roofing. This is why more than 735,000 people were evacuated in anticipation of Hurricane Melissa.

Under international law, States have clear obligations to protect the human rights of people displaced in the context of disasters. In 2027, States are expected to adopt the first-ever global treaty on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters – to address the need for a global regime to better protect people in disasters and to reinforce the importance of greater international cooperation on disaster risk reduction and response.

Negotiations on that treaty are informed by the International Law Commission's Draft Articles on the [Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters](#), which – curiously – only mention “displacement” in passing, as a potential defining characteristic of a disaster. The [absence of references](#) to displacement, evacuation or planned relocations in the substantive text run the risk that the treaty's purpose of facilitating adequate and effective responses to disasters, “so as to meet the essential needs of the

persons concerned, with full respect for their rights”, will not be met. The increasing frequency and severity of disasters, exacerbated by climate change, highlight the urgency of foregrounding displacement, evacuations and planned relocations across the disaster cycle – prevention, response and recovery.

Explicitly incorporating displacement considerations at all points of the disaster cycle is crucial – not only to address the rights, needs and agency of displaced people, but also to maximize the ability of international cooperation for that purpose. For example, well-planned evacuations and/or relocations can play a life-saving role as protective disaster risk reduction measures but may require cooperation with other States, whether material, financial or otherwise.

Yet, in Haiti and the Caribbean, funding cuts to the UN and the virtual [dismantling of USAID](#) means that assistance is even more scarce than before. UNHCR recently [cut](#) 42 per cent of its programmes in the Americas because only 20 per cent of the refugee agency’s financial needs had been met. Haiti remains “the least funded country in [UN] appeals for all underfunded countries in the world”, [said](#) a UN spokesperson, receiving less than 9 per cent of the funds it requires.

Funding cuts also hamper preparation, which is insufficient at the best of times. Preparation for hazards is key, yet globally, only three per cent of disaster funding goes towards preparedness; the other 97 per cent is on recovery. Previously, “USAID would have been working with governments and embassies in the region on preparing for hurricane season”, [according to](#) the former USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance Chief, Sarah Charles. This would have entailed preparatory exercises with relevant emergency management authorities, ensuring there was sufficient food, and coordinating with other federal agencies and civil society organizations. While the US State Department is involved, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio [announcing](#) that “rescue and response teams [are] heading to affected areas along with critical lifesaving supplies”, it has limited staff with relevant experience to draw on, and highly bureaucratic systems not built for emergency response.

One potential bright spot in this is the work that Jamaica has done to build in layers of financial protection for the country in the event of a disaster. For example, just last year, Jamaica issued a \$150 million US dollar “catastrophe bond” that could be triggered for payout depending on the severity of the hurricane. That [payout threshold](#) was almost certainly reached by Hurricane Melissa and much-needed funding could quickly flow to Jamaica.

Still, the overwhelming focus of funding in disasters is after the damage has been done. This is shortsighted and ineffective. Studies [show](#) that each dollar spent on disaster risk reduction brings an average return of \$15 on averted recovery costs. As the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [states](#): “This approach not only perpetuates vulnerabilities but also increases long-term costs for recovery and rebuilding”. Furthermore, funding often remains centralized, rather than invested directly in communities to support context-specific efforts grounded in community needs and expertise.

Hurricane Melissa lays bare the chronic underinvestment in people and communities needed to reduce the risk of disaster displacement and the devastating long-term effects this can have for people affected. To truly safeguard lives, people and communities must be at the centre of planning and funding, particularly where evacuation and longer-term displacement are possibilities. As States negotiate the forthcoming treaty on the Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters, they must ensure that displacement, evacuation and planned relocations are reflected in its provisions and, crucially, that commitments to international cooperation are backed by the financial resources necessary to make them real.

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