At a Climate Change Crossroads: How a Biden-Harris Administration Can Support and Protect Communities Displaced by Climate Change

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Two women seen standing on the remains of a house that was eroded in Bangladesh. Photo by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images.
Introduction

Within the first 30 days of taking office, the Biden-Harris administration has made clear that climate change, migration, and displacement issues will be a priority for its first term. On President Biden’s first day in office, he signed an executive order (EO) that recommitted the United States to the Paris Agreement. On January 27, 2020, he signed a comprehensive EO on “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad,” which makes clear that “climate considerations shall be an essential element of United States foreign policy and national security.” On February 4, 2020, he signed an EO on “Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration.” In Section 6 of that EO, President Biden requests that the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, in consultation with the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Director of National Intelligence, “prepare and submit to the President a report on climate change and its impact on migration, including forced migration, internal displacement, and planned relocation.”

This is a potentially ground-breaking development. Refugees International applauds President Biden’s efforts to establish the United States as a leader on such a critical issue. This issue brief seeks to inform this report and to provide guidance on how to enable action on key issues that the report will undoubtedly cover.

Refugees International has advocated for dedicated U.S. policy on climate, migration, and displacement issues for more than a decade, and we welcome the Biden-Harris administration’s interest in an issue that has profound national security and foreign policy implications. In fact, addressing this issue is more important than ever, as climate-related migration and displacement are already significantly affecting foreign policy and national security developments, including those relating to humanitarian assistance, international development, and peace and stabilization operations, among others. There are four main areas where progress will be essential.

First, the administration must strengthen the capacity of relevant U.S. agencies specifically on climate-related displacement and migration and encourage re-engagement and leadership on key multilateral agreements and processes in addition to the Paris Agreement. Second, President Biden must make dedicated and substantial commitments on climate finance for climate change adaptation and resilience measures in affected countries. Third, his administration must bolster and expand international and domestic legal protections and opportunities for refuge and resettlement for those who have been displaced by climate change. Fourth, it must lead the Americas in finding regional policy solutions, especially on climate-related migration and displacement.
Climate Displacement Can’t Wait

A series of factors make it essential that the Biden-Harris administration prioritize the climate displacement agenda.

**Time is running out.** The world has reached a crossroads in climate change. Climate scientists have long predicted that global warming will reach **1.5°C to 4.8°C by 2050** if carbon emissions continue to increase at their current rate. This scale of change means that disruptive and deadly events such as extreme heatwaves and precipitation will be more frequent and intense in the future. It also means devastating and irreversible impacts on the **ecosystems** on which we depend, including large-scale **ocean acidification** and declining fishery stock, **reduced quantity and reliability** of renewable surface and groundwater, and **mass extinction** of flora and fauna. Implications are dramatic for the future of food security and precarious agricultural livelihoods everywhere.

**Climate change is already affecting displacement trends around the world.** In 2019, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) calculated that weather-related disasters displaced almost **24 million people**—almost three times more than those displaced by conflict in the same year. This number is also underpinned by some of the first sudden-onset events to have tangible ties to climate change, including unprecedented double **Cyclones Idai and Kenneth** in Mozambique; longer-stalling **Hurricane Dorian** in the Bahamas; and wide-ranging **wildfires** in California.

**People displaced by climate-related disasters need real solutions now.** Over the course of the last decade, Refugees International has reported on post-disaster situations in dozens of countries. The trends are clear—sudden-onset disasters are becoming more frequent and intense; disasters are leading to protracted displacement; and people displaced by disaster are receiving inadequate support from their governments and the international humanitarian community on a range of issues, including durable shelter, planned relocation, and alternative livelihood support. For example, in 2017, **Refugees International visited Somalia** and spoke with internally displaced people (IDPs), where climate change was affecting livelihoods and forcing people to migrate. “The rains failed year after year. We sold our animals and now we have nothing,” an IDP from Qoryole told us. In **Ethiopia**, protracted drought has made it hard to grow crops and find jobs. As Abdullahi, a 40-year-old man who had been displaced, underscored when Refugees International visited the IDP camp of Faburo in 2019: “We have no food to eat. We need to be independent and stand alone.” In **Mozambique in 2019**, short-sighted post-disaster relocation led to unintended consequences for IDP livelihoods: “There is not enough food, and I don’t have any way to take care of my family, so how long can I stay here if I can’t make any money?,” asked Mandruzi, a fishermen resettled inland.
Policies around climate change, migration, and displacement can help circumvent future crises. Projections of future climate-related migration trends are striking. The World Bank predicts that unchecked carbon emissions and unequal development policies could lead to 143 million internal “climate migrants” by 2050 in Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the exact number of people displaced will be determined by policy decisions made today. The Bank predicts that if policies were enacted to cut carbon emissions and support a green transition—one with robust support for locally led climate change adaptation, stronger social safety nets, and more inclusive and equitable development policies—the total number of “climate migrants” would decrease by 50 to 80 percent, or 31 to 72 million people.

Existing refugee and international protection regimes do not fully address climate-related displacement. The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, also known as the 1951 Refugee Convention, essentially defines refugees as those outside their country of origin and with a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a social group. While this definition has been critical to the protection of refugees and asylum seekers, it does not completely address the forced migration challenges of today, including those resulting from climate change. Unfortunately, this means that many people forced to flee their homes due to climate change events—such as repeated and more intense sudden-onset hazards, or prolonged drought and desertification—have not been able to obtain international protection.

The United States has a moral and practical responsibility to lead on issues of climate change, migration, and displacement. Climate change is the result of cumulative carbon emissions over many decades. While no one country is solely responsible for all carbon emissions, the United States is responsible for the largest share over time. According to the Global Carbon Project, by 2019 the United States had emitted 397 gigatons of carbon dioxide (GtCO2) since 1750. For context, China ranked second in all time carbon emissions with a total of 214 GtCO2. The United States also historically has committed to regular and substantial funding for international humanitarian and official development assistance efforts around the world. This continued support will be essential in a world that will be changed drastically by climate change.

Step One: Multilateral Reengagement and Strengthen U.S. Capacity

President Biden’s February 4 EO on climate change and migration directs senior officials to report on “opportunities to work collaboratively with other countries, international organizations and bodies, non-governmental organizations, and localities to respond to
migration resulting directly or indirectly from climate change.” Fortunately, there are many ongoing processes and frameworks that the United States should consider joining or to which the administration should increase support.

However, re-joining is just the first step. As Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry said, “It’s simple for the United States to rejoin, but it’s not so simple for the United States to regain its credibility.” Regaining credibility will also require implementing institutional changes within relevant agencies and offices that allow the United States to build capacity from within to lead on the world stage, and specifically as part of multilateral processes, on issues of climate change, migration, and displacement. This issue brief outlines the need and scope of building up capacity within relevant agencies below.

Re-engage and Demonstrate Leadership within International Processes and Issues

Endorse the Global Compact for Migration (GCM)
The GCM is the first international document of its kind to explicitly acknowledge climate change as a driver of migration and encourage progress on enhanced protection and migration pathways for people moving in such contexts. In 2020, during the very first Regional Review process of the GCM for North America and the EU, EU governments expressed a willingness to engage on issues of climate change and migration. The United States was absent from this conversation. Refugees International recommends that the United States formally endorse the GCM within the first 100 days of the Biden-Harris administration. We also recommend that the United States participate in the regional review expected to take place in April 2021 in the Americas, which will be coordinated by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), of which the United States is a Member State. The United States should also report on national progress made toward GCM objectives at the International Migration Review Forum that will take place in 2022.

Support UNHCR’s New Approach to Climate Change, including its Strategic Framework for Climate Action, Recent “Legal Considerations Paper,” and Regional Plans of Action
The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) will launch a Strategic Framework for Climate Action this year—the first of its kind. The Strategic Framework set outs a common approach for UNHCR to step up its ambition on three core pillars of action—law and policy, operations, and the “greening” of UNHCR. This is new territory for the agency and is much needed so that it can more effectively promote the rights and address the needs of displaced people and those at risk of displacement. As part of its efforts around law and policy, UNHCR released a legal considerations paper on protection for people displaced by climate change and disaster. While the paper does not seek changes in international law, it does make explicit use of the 1951 Refugee Convention, regional refugee definitions (under the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees and 1969 OAU Refugee Convention), and international human rights law to make the case for
expansive protection for those displaced by climate change and disaster. The paper marks a significant and progressive step forward.

UNHCR has begun the process of translating its Strategic Framework into regional plans of action, in accordance with its push to decentralize and locally contextualize operations and policy. While this effort is underway, the Biden-Harris administration may wish to offer technical and financial support to help design the regional implementation process for the Americas and even volunteer to host the Americas’ regional plan of action process. Refugees International also recommends that the administration assess UNHCR’s legal considerations paper and its applicability to U.S. law and policy.

Join the “Group of Friends” of the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD)
In 2015, the Nansen Initiative, an influential state-led consultative process that explored protection solutions for people displaced across borders in the context of climate change and disasters, released a “Protection Agenda” endorsed by 109 states. The Initiative’s successor, the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD), aims to support the implementation of this “Protection Agenda.” The PDD has a “Group of Friends” that consists of states that are most interested in supporting PDD’s work. The United States was a “Friend” of the Nansen Initiative, and when the process ended in 2015, the United States did not become a “Friend” of the PDD. Refugees International recommends that the Biden-Harris administration re-engage in this marquee process and become an official “Friend” of the PDD in order to signal interest in leading on these issues and demonstrate the value it finds in these sorts of global processes.

Re-invigorate Interest in and Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction
The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030) was adopted in 2015 at the third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan. It was developed to continue work set out by the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005-2015) and sought to strengthen efforts to manage disaster risk. The Sendai Framework consists of seven targets that can be used to assess global progress. In 2018, the UN General Assembly officially shared 38 indicators by which states can measure progress towards these targets. Every year, states may volunteer to report on progress as part of the Framework’s Voluntary Commitments Initiative. To date, the United States has not submitted any commitments or volunteered to report progress. Refugees International recommends that the Biden-Harris administration initiate an in-depth assessment of U.S. progress and share lessons learned on how to prevent disaster-related displacement at the Seventh Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in 2021.

Build Up Capacity and Bolster Work on Climate-related Displacement within Relevant Agencies and Offices
Mainstream Climate, Migration, and Displacement Expertise within the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

President Biden’s EO on the climate crisis mandates in Section 103 that agencies engaged on international work develop “strategies and implementation plans for integrating climate change into their international work” within 90 days of the order. It makes explicit the need to include how climate impacts are relevant to the agency’s strategies in particular countries or regions of work, how the agency intends to manage impacts and mitigate risk, and how the agency’s international work can contribute to efforts to address the climate crisis. In addition, his EO on climate and migration specifically requests that a report on this issue cover “discussion of the international security implications of climate-related migration; options for protection and resettlement of individuals displaced directly or indirectly from climate change; mechanisms for identifying such individuals, including through referrals; [and] proposals for how these findings should affect use of United States foreign assistance to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change.” Two agencies in particular, the Department of State and USAID, will have critical responsibilities in these areas. Issues of deep concern to the Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM)’s are significantly impacted by climate change, including those relating to durable solutions, self-reliance and livelihoods, and protracted situations of displacement. USAID has acknowledged in the past that its mission to end extreme poverty could be compromised by climate change impacts. USAID must mainstream expertise on the critical intersection of these dynamic global trends.

Department of State

President Biden’s EO on the climate crisis, and in particular Sections 102 and 103, as well as his EO on climate and migration, make clear that the Department of State will have a key role on climate change and its implications. In both EOs, President Biden underscores that multilateral agreements and solutions will be necessary to meet the crisis head on. Within the climate crisis EO, Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of the Treasury Yellen have been tasked with leading the process to develop a climate finance plan. Such a plan must include a focus on disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and resilience measures.

The PRM Bureau in particular will need to center climate, migration, and displacement issues within its work. Refugees International recommends that PRM build up the capacity of staff on climate-related migration and displacement as well as mainstream the issue in decision-making, including the drafting of its functional bureau strategy.

Refugees International also recommends that PRM systematically assess and re-engage on past institutional progress that fell by the wayside over the last four years. For example, the 2019 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report—“Activities of Selected Agencies to Address Potential Impact on Global Migration” (GAO-19-166)—found that in 2016 PRM had been in discussion with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on developing a project to assist the governments of Small Island
Developing States (SIDS) to adapt their migration policies to account for climate change impacts. The GAO report also found that the Department of State had drafted an internal document to “help clarify its role in responding to the humanitarian aspects of sudden-onset and slow-onset climate events;” and this work stopped under the Trump administration.

**USAID**

In 2019, USAID Acting Assistant Administrator Angelique Crumbley acknowledged in a formal response to the GAO report on “Climate Change as a Driver of Migration” (GAO-19-166) that USAID’s work helps “to build resilience and manage risk that, if left unaddressed, could lead to costly humanitarian disasters and related displacement or migration.” She listed four different ways USAID builds up capacity against such risk, including humanitarian assistance, development of early warning responses, resilience-specific projects, and risk analysis. These perspectives could help inform an agency-specific climate plan, as outlined by President Biden’s climate crisis EO.

The February 4 EO on climate and migration looks to USAID for understanding how climate-related migration and displacement may impact “foreign assistance to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change.” A number of USAID offices could have important contributions for such an analysis. The Global Climate Change Office works on mainstreaming climate change risk analysis and supports climate change adaptation and resilience work. The Office on Conflict Management and Mitigation integrates climate change into its conflict assessments. The Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance provides technical and operational support on the ground for those displaced by climate-related disasters. This is a good start. However, the scale of climate, migration, and displacement issues requires a broadly systemic approach. Refugees International recommends as a first order of business hiring a senior advisor to be assigned to the USAID Administrator’s office to help coordinate climate, migration, and displacement issues across the agency and to help identify those areas inside the agency where more expertise is required.

**Under the Leadership of Special Envoy Kerry’s Office, Form a Working Group on Climate Change, Migration, and Protection Solutions**

President Biden appointed Special Envoy Kerry to lead the U.S. effort to put into place a bold climate action plan. While there have been “climate czars” in the past, this marks the first time that one will sit on the National Security Council, ensuring that climate change is central in policy decisions. In an interview with ProPublica in December, Secretary Kerry already acknowledged that climate-related migration is a central question to his work. President Biden’s EO on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and on climate migration makes clear that Secretary Kerry and his office must consider this climate issue through a protection-based lens that includes solutions for those forced to migrate. Refugees International urges the creation of a Working Group on climate, migration, and displacement issues, with a special emphasis on such solutions
for those displaced by climate change. Ideally, this working group would include interagency participation and report through the NSC decision-making structure.

Such a working group should develop a strong line of communication with UNHCR’s Department of International Protection, IOM, and the PDD specifically on successful regional policies and frameworks, including the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, the OAU Convention, and the Intergovernmental Authority of Development’s Free Movement Protocol, among others. The Working Group would be well-placed to give appropriate guidance and promote strategy and policy within the Department of State and other key agencies on climate-related migration and protection issues. In particular, the Working Group would work closely with the White House Office of Domestic Climate Policy and the Department of Homeland Security, which will both be essential in policy decisions around resettlement and planned relocation in the United States.

**Establish a “Coordinator of Climate Change Resilience” to Support Future Protection Mechanisms**

Refugees International supports Senator Markey’s legislation on climate-displaced persons in 2019, which has yet to be enacted. However, some of the proposed building blocks of the bill could be put into action today within the Department of State. The Secretary of State should carefully consider the bill’s proposed “Coordinator of Climate Change Resilience” position. The Coordinator (who could also chair the aforementioned working group) would be in charge of collecting data and reporting on climate change impacts on migration and displacement. This would establish a strong basis for identifying communities in particular need of risk reduction, protection, and relocation measures. The Coordinator would ensure that information regarding climate change inform county condition reports, as the February 4 EO states, which “may be relied upon, where appropriate, to make specific factual and legal determinations necessary for the adjudication of refugee applications from individuals or from individuals within a designated group of applicants.”

This coordinator should also play a role in linking climate, migration, and displacement work across the whole-of-government. Refugees International recommends that this coordinator sit at PRM and be directed by the Assistant Secretary for PRM, report jointly to Special Envoy Kerry and Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, as well as chair an intra- or inter-agency working group.

**Step Two: Avert and Minimize Forced Migration and Displacement**

Disasters are not “natural,” and resulting displacement is not inevitable. In fact, displacement risk is often determined by complex interactions at the site of disaster, including the underlying vulnerability of people and communities, the magnitude and
frequency of the given climate-related hazard, and the ability to cope with such events. Displacement risk, then, can be limited through policy interventions, such as disaster risk reduction (DRR), early warning systems, and life-saving early action, such as pre-emptive evacuations, as well as by building up the capacity and resilience of frontline communities.

Climate change adaptation and resilience building enables communities to avoid the worst climate impacts and seek out more sustainable or alternative livelihood strategies in the face of a changing climate. In many cases, this means investing in technological innovations, such as more drought- or flood-resistant crops or more efficient irrigation techniques. In some cases, these interventions will not be enough and proactive, planned relocation may be necessary to ensure that communities are not displaced by disaster over and over again.

However, communities affected by climate change have made it clear that they do not wish to move if they do not have to do so. And of course, the United States should seek to enable people to stay and thrive in the face of climate change where possible—and put people and communities first. To do this, the United States must provide financial and technical support where it is needed most to enable DRR, climate change adaptation, and resilience measures to avert or minimize the need to move. These forms of support should be context-specific and human rights-based. In all cases, affected communities should be consulted, actively engaged, and empowered to lead. The Biden-Harris administration should increase and strategically target investments for DRR, climate change adaptation, and resilience around the world. DRR and climate change adaptation measures clearly overlap in nature and scope of objective and outcome, and, in general, our use of the term adaptation in this paper is designed to incorporate the broad range of DRR measures relevant to climate.

**Increase Funding to Support DRR, Climate Change Adaptation, and Resilience**

The UN Environment Programme’s (UNEP) [2020 “Adaptation Gap Report”](https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/adaptation-gap-report) finds that the international community has failed to keep pace with necessary climate change adaptation investments. It notes that while about $30 billion is provided each year in development aid to help countries adapt to climate impacts, this amount constitutes less than half of the $70 billion needed. This is worrying because costs are set to increase further, to between $140 billion and $300 billion by the end of the decade.

The Biden-Harris administration can help to overcome this adaptation finance gap. First and foremost, it should adequately fund and support existing international climate funds, in particular the Green Climate Fund (GCF), and USAID, which already has been investing in climate adaptation-specific projects on the ground.

*Green Climate Fund*
The Green Climate Fund (GCF) is a UN financial mechanism that assists developing countries in funding adaptation and mitigation efforts. It was set up by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2010 and was meant to mobilize the largest commitment for climate finance to date, with initial targets set at $100 billion per year. In addition, the GCF established a “direct access” modality to allow national and sub-national organizations to apply for funding directly, rather than only through international intermediaries, such as the World Bank or UN Development Programme (UNDP). Former U.S. president Barack Obama was a proponent of the GCF and pledged to give $3 billion to the Fund in 2014. The United States made an initial payment of $500 million to the GCF, and just days before leaving office, President Obama transferred a second installment of $500 million—leaving $2 billion outstanding.

The United States must pay its “fair share” to the GCF to order to ensure that communities affected by climate change have the access to technical and financial inputs to adapt. President Biden has indicated a willingness to follow through on President Obama’s previous promises to finance the GCF. A Biden administration infusion of $2 billion would go a long way in re-establishing the U.S. intention to lead on climate change issues. This would also help to re-energize the anemic GCF, which was replenished by $9.8 billion in 2019 but is still far from its original goal of $100 billion per year. Refugees International recommends that the Biden-Harris administration also pledge to replenish GCF annually and put into place steps now to set a target that is in line with the need of vulnerable communities and the original aspirations of the GCF.

The GCF is also the site of progress around potential “loss and damage” financing mechanisms. “Loss and damage” is a term that acknowledges that there are limits to adaptation, that there will be irreversible losses due to climate change, and that those countries that have been the largest emitters of carbon have responsibilities to provide funds to address losses and damages. Least Developed Countries and SIDS constituencies have led the charge for loss and damage recognition and funding. However, wealthy states, such as the United States, Japan, and Saudi Arabia, among others, have resisted engaging on the issue. Nonetheless, last year at the Conference of the Parties 26 (COP26), Member States agreed that the GCF should be tasked with exploring how to enable financing “loss and damage” projects within the scope of its mandate.

Given this progress, Refugees International recommends that the Biden-Harris administration demonstrate leadership on “loss and damage” support and explicitly request that part of its $2 billion GCF replenishment be allocated towards enabling loss and damage-specific financing modalities within the Fund. The administration should also make a formal request to the GCF Secretariat that displacement and forced migration be a central part of future loss and damage assessments made by the Fund. This would signal that the United States takes climate-related displacement seriously and sees it as a core part of the loss and damage equation.
The Trump administration decreased funding for climate-related activities, and USAID was hit particularly hard. GAO findings indicate that USAID ended all new funding for climate change adaptation programming activities by fiscal year (FY) 2017 due to a shift in administration priorities. In 2019, the Trump White House partially decreased USAID spending on initiatives related to the environment. Refugees International recommends that these cuts be reversed—and that the Biden administration strongly support generous climate change adaptation and resilience funding.

Empower At-Risk Communities to Adapt

Ramping up support for international climate funds is important to ensure that climate change adaptation financing is on par with the need of vulnerable communities. However, consultations with communities indicate that they face barriers to accessing financing—especially any “official” climate financing through such institutions. Most recipient countries use funds from these institutions for public and centralized infrastructure developments and not for small-scale climate adaptation projects that protect rural or isolated communities. Studies show that less than 10 percent of all climate financing makes it to the local level. Climate financing also comes with a set of burdensome application and reporting requirements that are difficult for community groups to meet due to their limited capacity and fiscal capabilities. In addition, different funds come with pre-set funding priorities that are pushed onto communities and don’t necessarily meet communities’ key objectives for climate adaptation or relocation.

While there has been progress in facilitating more access to climate financing for national governments and entities, there has been less for local communities. This needs to be addressed as quickly as possible, as locally led adaptation can be more effective than top-down interventions for a variety of reasons. First, local communities and households understand their context better and they can often address their problems at lower cost and greater speed. Second, empowering local actors increases their awareness of and investment in adaptation, which leads to longer-term and ultimately more effective adaptation outcomes.

USAID should expand and strengthen existing applications of community-led climate change adaptation and resilience projects. At the same time, USAID should pilot direct cash assistance projects with reduced administrative burdens to ensure that smaller, more granular administrative units of governance—the community level and the household level—are able to directly access financing they desperately need.

Strengthen local-level climate change adaptation projects and systematize locally led adaptation principles

USAID has worked closely in the past with local stakeholders to enable climate change adaptation, including training farmers on climate-smart agriculture in the Philippines, supporting indigenous peoples to improve their leadership and governance of natural
resources in the Amazon, and developing local plans of action with communities near Mount Everest in Nepal, among others. However, projects like these were on the decline in the former administration. USAID will no doubt reinvigorate its programming in this direction. However, Refugees International recommends that when it does so, it follows the “eight principles for locally led adaptation” which were developed through a consultative process with the Institute of International Environment and Development, the World Resources Institute, and a variety of donors, funds, delivery partners, governments in the Global South, social movements, and non-profit organizations. These principles, importantly, include directives on giving local institutions and communities more direct access to financing and decision-making power over how adaptation actions are defined, prioritized, designed, and implemented; how progress is monitored; and how success is evaluated. The principles also are designed to ensure that processes of financing, designing, and delivering programs are more transparent and accountable downward to local stakeholders. There are hints of these principles in USAID’s current approach to climate adaptation projects, but Refugees International recommends that they be prioritized and formally systematized into all related USAID portfolios.

*Pilot cash assistance for climate change adaptation and resilience*

As mentioned, Refugees International also recommends that USAID pilot direct cash assistance, with eased administrative burden, for climate change adaptation and resilience for households. Direct cash assistance already has a proven track record of positive change in local development. Studies from around the world have shown that cash assistance effectively helps people living in poverty significantly improve many aspects of their lives, including through access to food, enrollment and attendance in schools, health outcomes, and investment in livestock and agricultural assets. These sorts of cash infusions may translate into positive developments for long-term climate change adaptation and resilience outcomes. More importantly, they enable households to exercise agency in making decisions related to their own well-being and enable them to use their own knowledge and expertise to adapt appropriately. While individuals and households may know that they need to adapt and how to do so, they often do not have the resources needed to undertake such measures.

In tandem with this pilot project, the USAID Administrator should request an assessment of the implications for long term resilience of existing humanitarian cash assistance programs. This would enable USAID to identify lessons learned and assess direct cash assistance strategies going forward—and to better understand the extent to which it should be a part of its climate change adaptation portfolio.

**Step Three: Provide “Pathways” for Admission and Regularization**
Investments in DRR, climate change adaptation, and resilience will be the first step in ensuring that people at risk of climate-related displacement have the ability to adapt in place rather than be forcibly displaced. However, even coupled with deep and rapid carbon emissions cuts, climate-related displacement is already occurring—and will continue to occur into the future. Scenario-based models predict that, even with modest climate action, slow-onset impacts may impel close to 700,000 people in Mexico and Central America to move to the United States each year by 2025. This means that the Biden-Harris administration must take seriously the need to enact bold and novel ways for people displaced in the context of climate change to move with safety and dignity to the United States.

The United States already has a strong tradition of refugee resettlement, and President Biden has already committed to a worldwide U.S. Refugee Admissions annual ceiling of 125,000. The Biden-Harris administration will have the opportunity to push this promise further—and strengthen existing mechanisms as well as establish new pathways for admission and regularization for those already at risk. Below are a series of recommendations on how to do so.

**Explore Adjustments to Temporary Protected Status (TPS)**
Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is one of the only humanitarian designations in the world that explicitly offers protected status to people already in the United States who are affected by “environmental disasters” in their countries of origin. The United States currently has designated the citizens of ten countries as eligible for TPS, including Haiti, El Salvador, Syria, Nepal, Honduras, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, Nicaragua, and South Sudan—all of which are highly vulnerable to climate change. Given the evolving nature of climate-related impacts, especially slow-onset disasters, safely returning TPS holders to the countries of origin may become more challenging.

Refugees International recommends that the Biden-Harris administration request that the Department of State develop a mechanism and guidelines around assessing country risk to slow-onset disasters in order to assess viability of return for TPS holders. The recommended “Coordinator of Climate Change Resilience” would be best placed to do this. However, if the Coordinator has yet to be established, the Assistant Secretary of PRM, with guidance from the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate’s office, should put into place a plan to enable the mechanism and guidelines.

Refugees International believes that no TPS-holder should be in temporary status indefinitely—and certainly not for over a decade or more, as has been the case with some populations—whether return is continuously prevented due to climate-induced disaster or other factors. Thus, the administration should work with Congress to develop means to guarantee against this outcome. One option would be to give the administration the authority, after a TPS-designated population has had that status for five years (the time period that UNHCR has associated with a protracted refugee situation), to establish for members of that population a possible pathway to permanent
residence and citizenship. The legislation could direct the administration to take account of several factors before making the group designation (such as the prospect of changed conditions in the country of origin, which might permit return shortly after the five-year period). The goal, of course, is to ensure that temporary protected status not have the ironic result of being so prolonged as to create an unfair and even inhumane burden on the individual.

Refugees International also recommends that the Biden-Harris administration work with Congress to eliminate the need for a foreign country to request a TPS designation based on “environmental disaster.” Of the three categories for which the Attorney General (AG) can grant TPS, only in the case of environmental disasters is a nation required to proactively request designation. While there are some potential benefits to this requirement, it adds an arbitrary limitation to the AG’s ability to offer assistance directly to those in need. In order to enable a proactive, U.S.-led designation, Refugees International recommends that the Department of State establish a mechanism to review impacts on the ground, to be made in consultation and coordination with institutional experts who monitor evolving situations in real time, such as USAID country teams and UN humanitarian country teams.

**Explore Specific Resettlement Designations for People Displaced by Climate Change**

There are clear limits to “temporary” protected status, especially when it comes to slow-onset events, which are dramatic and irreversible in nature. Some legislation proposed in the prior Congress, including [Global Climate Change Resilience Strategy bill (S.2565)](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/2565) and [The Climate Displaced Persons’ Act (H.R.4732)](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/4732) (introduced by Senator Ed Markey and Representative Nydia Velazquez in the 116th Congress), which aim to provide permanent relocation opportunities in the United States for those displaced by climate, explicitly acknowledge this reality.

The Biden-Harris administration should support legislative measures that create relocation/resettlement options for those impacted by climate change.

**Incorporate Consideration of Climate Factors into Refugee Eligibility Determination**

Eligibility for refugee status is determined on a case-by-case basis by specially trained officers in the Refugees, Asylum, and International Affairs Operations Directorate (RAIO) of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The Biden administration should direct USCIS RAIO to draft a new lesson plan for officers that incorporates the most up-to-date UNHCR guidance regarding “claims for international protection made in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters.” This guidance does not change existing law, but knowledge of it will help officers to better assess whether refugee status should be granted to marginalized or vulnerable people who flee adverse climate events or effects that their governments refused to protect them from.
Step Four: Explore Regional Solutions and Protection for those Displaced by Climate Change

The Biden administration has pledged to convene a regional meeting of leaders from neighboring countries, including El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Canada to “address factors driving migration and propose a regional resettlement solution.” One of the factors driving migration in the region, according to the Central America Plan outlined by then-candidate Biden during the presidential campaign, is climate change. According to this Plan, part of the regional solution to avert and minimize climate change’s impacts on communities will require addressing food insecurity, providing technical assistance through USAID, and promoting climate change adaptation and resilience measures.

Engaging with North and Central American regions for partnership is a logical step. In fact, Latin American and Caribbean countries have explored adoption (if not implementation) of some of the most progressive climate-related policy and legal policies in the world. Notably, 19 different countries of the region have adopted within their domestic legislation the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, which expands the definition of refugee to those who flee from “generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive human rights violations, and other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order.” The UNHCR also considers this regional refugee definition to have scope to extend to those displaced by climate change and disaster.

A Biden-Harris administration can jumpstart progress on regional protection for people displaced by climate change in at least two ways:

First, it can advocate for climate-specific contributions to the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework / Marco Integral Regional para la Protección y Soluciones (MIRPS). MIRPS is a State-led initiative supported by the Organization of American States (OAS), UNHCR and the wider UN system, and the Central American Integration System (SICA). Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama are implementing countries of the MIRPS. They have pledged to strengthen regional cooperation and shared responsibility associated with countries of origin, transit, and destination; and have committed to adopting and implementing national action plans on protection.

The United States is a part of the support platform of the MIRPS, which can provide technical and financial assistance, host convenings, and share best practices. The next MIRPS Support Platform High-Level meeting will take place in summer 2021. The Biden-Harris administration should request that climate change be explicitly added to the agenda. At this meeting, the administration should request the formation of a working
group on climate change and migration and increase financial support for implementing States to explore ways in which climate change can and should be integrated into their national action plans.

Second, it can support progress on domestic policies in the region related to internally displaced people (IDPs). A 2020 Refugees International issue brief highlighted that a lack of legislation for IDPs in the region translated to inadequate services and support for relocation and humanitarian assistance. The United States should provide technical support to countries that have yet to draft IDP legislation. The United States should allocate funding for organizations that assist IDPs and that collect data to assess how best to support the displaced. The data collected by these organizations should include an assessment of drivers of IDP displacement to understand to what degree climate change is playing a role. In a region that will continue to be battered by climate change impacts, and where initial movements will likely be internal, this is more important than ever.

All of the above recommendations function best if they complement and bolster one another. And without preventative and proactive measures to address climate displacement and support our southern neighbors, protection and resettlement options may become more salient.

Conclusion

We are at a climate change crossroads. The world is set on a carbon emissions trajectory that may completely upend traditional livelihoods and the ability of millions of people to live with dignity. In 2019, weather-related disasters internally displaced more than 23 million people around the world. By 2050, without proper policy measures, slow-onset climate impacts may increase that number five-fold in just three regions of the world. In the Americas, some studies predict that climate impacts may impel almost 700,000 people in Central America to migrate to the United States by 2025. However, these numbers mean little without an appreciation of the role policies play in determining ultimate outcomes. We recognize that the Biden-Harris administration has demonstrated bold leadership on climate and migration issues through recent executive orders. There is now a unique opportunity to translate these expressions of intent into reasonable and targeted actions that ensure at-risk communities have the tools to adapt in place, migrate safely and with dignity, or seek the legal protection they may desperately need. The United States must once again engage at the global and regional stage on this issue.

Climate change does not have to lead to a migration and displacement “crisis.”
The United States can put into place bold, human-centered, “fair share” policies today to promote the objectives President Biden has articulated, and to demonstrate to the world a commitment to build back better.

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