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The enigma of internally displaced persons in Latin America and the Caribbean: An inquiry into natural disasters and climate-change-related displacements in The Bahamas, Honduras, Peru and Brazil

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Abstract: *This article seeks to approach internal displacement induced by climate-change-related disasters in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) through four local analyses. The general objective of the work is to cover how the four selected countries Honduras, The Bahamas, Peru and Brazil deal with this type of internal displacement legally and pragmatically, in order to understand whether or not it is a significant issue to local governments. Specifically, the article aims to expose how different groups of people experience internal displacement in each of the settings, and to show whether public policies consider those individualisations. Finally, this is qualitative research developed as a bibliographic study through descriptive and documental techniques.*

Keywords: *climate change; internal displacement; natural disasters*

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1. Introduction

When people think about forced migration they usually think of refugees, since refugee rights are internationally recognised and they face overlapping vulnerabilities. However, people displaced within their home countries — that is, internally displaced persons (IDPs) — receive much less attention, especially those forced to evade their homes due to floods, hurricanes, landslides, or to the construction of so-called development projects such as dams or highways. Though they face challenges similar to those confronting refugees, the public policies and programs designed to meet their needs are extremely scarce (Observatório de Migrações Forçadas, n.d.). In this article, displacement refers to the involuntary movement of people, which occurs when the ability to remain is physically removed. It diverges from migration for that exact reason: migrants relocate voluntarily, but IDPs do not have any degree of “choice” (Muggah 2015, 223).

In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), internal displacement (ID) has been an issue for many decades. Throughout its historical origins, domestic armed conflicts were determinant, mainly from the final years of the 1970s to the 1990s in countries such as Honduras and Peru. From the final years of the 1980s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, armed conflict was waged in Colombia between armed forces, *guerrillas* and paramilitary groups, and its consequences still endure for the millions of people who had to leave their land — as a result of that conflict, Colombia was in 1995 the first country to adopt a policy on ID. More recently, violence caused by gangs and drug cartels has been prevalent in other states such as Mexico, where guerrilla groups, criminals and paramilitary conglomerates have been a significant factor in expelling local populations (Sánchez-Mojica 2020).

Throughout the region some regular features of IDPs can be traced. Among them there is the fact that ID has predominately affected, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, indigenous people and members of ethnic minorities. Age, gender and disability factors also have a very important determining role in how ID affects each and every person differently. These factors must be analysed through an intersectional point of view, since there could be a lot of overlapping vulnerabilities within the same group of people.

In recent years, displacements resulting from sudden and slow-onset disasters triggered by natural hazards, including the adverse effects of climate change, have been added to the global and regional agenda with increasing relevance. The estimated total number of IDPs in the LAC region was 5.8 million in 2021, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC 2022).

Between 2008 and 2020, more than 26.2 million IDPs were reported in the context of more than 1,600 disasters related to slow-onset and sudden-onset risks and climate change in the region (IDMC 2021b). The most frequent were related to storms (10.4 million), floods (9.3 million) and earthquakes (6 million). Historically, storms, cyclones and hurricanes have affected Mexico, Central America (CA) and the Caribbean to a greater extent; storms and floods have done so in the Amazon region; and droughts have impacted more frequently the desert Andean zone shared by Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile (Kaenzig and Piguet 2014; Abeldaño Zuñiga and Fanta Garrido 2020).

The increase in the intensity and frequency of environmental disasters is one of the immediate and visible effects of climate change. In 2020 alone, more than 4.8 million people were reported displaced due to such causes (IDMC 2021b). Rigaud et al. (2018) point out that by 2050 the population affected by climate change and forced to leave their homes in LAC could reach a total of seventeen million people. This type of displacement has been characterised in recent years by occurring over short distances, towards urban centres (Cantor 2016; Kaenzig and Piguet 2014), and with a short average time (Yamamoto et al. 2017).

In relation to IDPs and natural disasters, the latest Organization of American States (OAS) General Assembly Resolution regarding IDPs, no. 2850, has explicitly stated that its aim is “to urge the member states to respond promptly and effectively to the needs of internally displaced persons in the event of natural disasters, including needs related to risk prevention, reduction, and mitigation, through domestic efforts, international cooperation, and, to the extent possible, dialogue with the internally displaced persons and the communities affected by ID” (OAS. AG/RES. 2850 2004, 189).

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) must be mentioned when it comes to the ID regional agenda, since its decisions and its interpretation of international Human Rights (HR) treaties are considered a guideline as to how the member states themselves must apply them in their justice systems. Due to the conventionality control mechanism, all national judges of the states that have ratified the American Convention of Human Rights (ACHR) must follow the Court’s interpretations when applying the instrument, and, since the judges as had to address the issue of forced population displacement on countless occasions, those statements constitute agendas, similar to the resolutions of the General Assembly.¹

1 The IACHR has had to address the issue of forced population displacement on countless occasions: e.g., *Mapiripán Massacre v. Colombia* (2005); *Chitay Nech et al. v. Guatemala* (2010); *Massacres of El Mozote and nearby places v. El Salvador* (2012) and *Pacheco Tineo family v. Plurinational State of Bolivia* (2013).

1.1 The climate crisis and IDPs in LAC

In the LAC context, local countries have developed a robust normative framework for facilitating cross-border environmental mobility, but measures to ensure the protection of rights for people moving within national borders, however, remain less advanced (Francis 2021). On this point, it is important to mention that local regulations are related to international legal categories which have developed at different levels, but this process does not necessarily occur in a coherent and coordinated way (Van Velsen 2010). Hence, the first objective of this article is to start with four study cases — Honduras, Bahamas, Peru and Brazil — and describe how these categories have been introduced at the state level in the LAC context. In other words, the first objective of this article is to reconstruct and analyse what the main national laws and policies of these four countries were when circumscribing ID in the context of natural disasters and climate change, and what type of data have been collected for the development of responses.

Through the study of the four chosen countries and their specific cases, we will be able to see how the impact of natural disasters has been increasing in recent years, and how it affects each place differently. The Bahamas, Honduras, Peru and Brazil do not have similar geographical structures, but they have nevertheless faced somewhat comparable challenges with the advance of climate change as their situations have been worsening in recent years, leading to the cases presented later on. Hence, these critical episodes have put on our agenda the need to discuss the issue, as well as the need to have prevention and response plans for those types of emergencies, since they have been increasing over time.

This study does not claim to be comprehensive or comparative, but it does seek to show certain heterogeneous trends across LAC. For this reason, in the selection of cases, we considered the representation of diverse geographies, socio-economic contexts, affected populations, causes, and ways in which states have historically dealt with ID. The methodology used in this article is qualitative and will be based on analysis of judgments of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, reports of regional and national organisations, newspaper clippings, and regional research.

The description of the countries' processes will show conflicting tendencies in the legal and policy framework which provide evidence that ID triggered by climate change still has not been developed as a major issue for LAC in spite of being a recurring phenomenon throughout the continent. In a complementary way, the second objective of this article is to analyse, from the four study cases, the value of an intersectionality approach (Crenshaw 1991, 1242) for properly dealing with contexts of ID due to natural disasters and climate change. Finally, the study cases will enable us to describe the way that structural inequalities are experienced and how they affect IDPs in divergent ways.

2. Honduras

2.1 Honduras: Characteristics and protection framework

Honduras is a Central America country with coastlines on the Caribbean Sea to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the south. Over the years, it has with increasing frequency faced different natural disasters such as storms, hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, landslides and others. In fact, it is well known that the CA region is exposed to an environment with intense activity, but climate change has exacerbated the situation, causing more violent storms and hurricanes. In 2020, “1.5 million people were displaced in Central America as a consequence of disasters, including Hurricanes Eta and Iota” (IFCR 2021b).

The hurricanes and tropical storms cause flooding, land displacement, crop failures and considerable rises in sea and river levels, resulting in unfortunate loss of life as well as the destruction of homes, factories and businesses, destroying the livelihoods of many people.

Nevertheless, in analyses of the structural causes of internal migration in the region, emphasis is usually placed on the study of factors such as insecurity, corruption, inequality, etc., but very little mention is made of climate change (Lynch 2019). What are the reasons for this? It may lie in the fact that the historical drivers of internal population displacement were centred on the violence in the region, such as armed conflict and the presence of drug cartels and gangs.

It is important to review some frameworks for rights protection and cooperation project initiatives at the regional and domestic level. For example, the CA Integration System (SICA) gathers together seven countries in the region, such as Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. In the framework of SICA, the issue of climate change and risk management is on the agenda: this issue has been addressed by the creation of the Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in CA (CEPREDENAC), which manages climate disaster prevention and risk reduction projects in the region. Nevertheless, the development of work on IDPs in the context of climate crises is not as extensive as that on refugees and climate migrants.

In Honduras, there is a Permanent Contingency Commission under the Secretariat of State in the Offices of Risk Management and National Contingencies, with the important purposes of coordinating and elaborating prevention projects and developing emergency plans. Within the legal framework, it is important to mention the Law on National Contingencies (1993). In its first article, the law stipulates that it will regulate contingency situations in the territory which are caused by the alteration of natural phenomena and which are adjudged to be emergencies and disasters.

2.2 Hurricanes Eta and Iota

In this report we have selected the cases of the hurricanes Eta and Iota not only because of their devastating consequences, but also because they took place in the context of a pandemic, which aggravated the impact on the already battered population. First, it is necessary to provide a context for the situation. In November 2020, Hurricane Eta (Category 4) hit the east coasts of CA, affecting several countries in the region and causing strong tropical storms in Honduras which resulted in landslides and flooding of rivers. A few days later, another Category 4 hurricane called Iota hit Honduras, causing further damage on top of that already inflicted by Eta.²

The population affected by the hurricanes was already experiencing significant ID from non-climatic factors, one of them being violence. A report issued in 2019 by the Inter-Institutional Commission for the Protection of Persons Displaced by Violence, prior to the passage of Eta and Iota, reveals that “seventy-seven percent of displaced households (2004–2018) were victims of acts of violence, while one fifth of the households were displaced as a self-protection measure, in fear of a situation of generalised violence. In 45 percent of cases, the acts of violence were also accompanied by fear of elevated levels of violence in the community” (CIPPDV 2019, 38).

2.3 Main characteristics of displacement

The torrential rains and strong winds caused by the passage of Eta and Iota produced the same number of displaced persons (DPs) in one year as had been displaced in the previous twelve (ECLAC and BID 2021, 31). The added factors of structural poverty and the COVID-19 context have forced many people who have not been able to return home to join the so-called *caravanas de migrantes*, or migrant caravans. Another point to consider is that the destruction of crops has increased the food insecurity which already prevailed in the region (IFRC 2021b).

This combination of structural violence and the climate crisis affects women, children and elderly people particularly hard in their lives and social environments. Many women, girls and adolescents who were not able to return to their homes after the passage of the two storms went to shelters, where cases of sexual abuse were reported, especially while they were attending to their personal hygiene. This adds to the long list of rights violations suffered by internally displaced women in times of natural disaster. To calculate population distribution, report by the Economic

2 Many testimonies indicate that the storms are getting stronger due to climate change. “Nunca había visto una tormenta así” said one victim, which means “I have never seen a storm like this before” (Ernest 2021).

Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) addresses the impact of both hurricanes (ECLAC and BID 2021). The research shows that 51.3 percent of the Honduran population is female and 45 percent of the general population lives in rural areas (ECLAC and BID 2021, 40). Concerning the Indigenous population, the same report refers to the 2013 census: “In the last Honduran census, 717,618 people identified themselves as belonging to a native people; only 23 percent of those people lived in urban areas of Honduras” (ECLAC and BID 2021, 40).

3. The Bahamas

3.1. The Bahamas: Characteristics and protection framework

The Bahamas takes up 97 percent of the land area of the Lucayan Archipelago, which is situated in the Atlantic Ocean near to the Caribbean Sea and consists of more than 700 islands, cays and islets. In 2021, the population of The Bahamas was estimated at 377,000 (IFRC 2021a), or approximately 88 percent of the archipelago’s population. As an archipelagic nation of small, low-elevation islands, Bahamas is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to the impacts of climate change (McGranahan et al. 2007).

As one of the Caribbean countries, Bahamas faces a hurricane season every year from June to September. These natural hazards are common in the region, and there is accumulated learning from previous storms, local knowledge and a vast number of practices that have evolved over the years. Before 2019, however, those hurricanes mainly damaged infrastructure and private property, but it was not common for them to provoke large-scale displacements. Despite a long history of natural disasters including earthquakes and tsunamis as well as the tropical storms and hurricanes, the latter have been increasing in frequency and ferocity, becoming more dangerous (IFRC 2021a). This culminated in 2019, when The Bahamas had to face its most destructive natural disaster: Hurricane Dorian.

At a regional level, The Bahamas is a member state of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), which includes twenty countries in the region. Most of the countries are island states, with the exception of Belize, Guyana and Suriname. They are all developing countries, small-sized, which face challenges of natural disasters. The pillars of integration of CARICOM are economic integration, foreign policy coordination, human and social development, and security.³

3 In December 2017, eighteen Caribbean countries met in The Bahamas with the CARICOM Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), for the Caribbean Migration Consultation.

In order to respond to the natural disasters that occur in this area and generate severe damages at a material level and, particularly, in people's lives, The Bahamas has implemented a legal framework for repair of infrastructure after natural disasters, contained in the Disaster Management Regulations for the Electronic Communications Sector in The Bahamas (2020). The Public Utilities Regulation and Competition Authority (URCA) is responsible for the governance of this regulation. This initiative was driven by the destruction caused by Hurricane Dorian in 2019, which required many months of infrastructure reconstruction that impacted at an economic and social level.⁴ The aim of the Regulations is to make the networks sufficiently resistant, speed up the restoration of services and reduce the time without service in these events, since telecommunications play a fundamental role in this type of situation.

Communication and information technologies play an important role before, during and after these events in allowing people to access information. Before the event, they make it possible to detect alerts and provide directions to define the steps to be taken to keep the population safe. During the event, they are important for informing the population of what is happening. For example, if conditions worsen, the population can communicate with official agencies and be informed of new directions or provisions intended to keep them safe. After the event, the technologies are essential for any rescue that needs to be done and for organising help. Additionally, this regulation foreshadows the creation of a multi-stakeholder industry group to be called the Electronic Communications Sector Disaster Management Stakeholder Group, whose objective will be to assist the URCA in regulating the Critical Electronic Communications Infrastructure to reduce the emergency mortality, the number of people affected by disaster, the direct economic loss, and the damage to critical infrastructure that can lead to a disruption of basic services, and to increase the availability of early warning systems and the access to information (URCA 2020).

The Bahamas is vulnerable to climate change, and the risks are notorious. The frequency of hurricanes, rising sea levels and floods are some of the hazards (IFRC 2021a). Food and water insecurity, forced displacement and risks to human health can, among others, be some of the consequences that people face and which directly impact their livelihoods. At a social level, the physical injuries and mental health challenges that can appear after a traumatic event need to be addressed. These are examples of how challenging and variable the effects of climate change have been, and how much damage can be caused to populations which are not prepared for these types of situations.

4 The regulations came into effect in the first half of 2021.

3.2 Hurricane Dorian

In 2019 the number of IDPs reached a record 9,840 persons displaced, even more than the accumulated total from the previous four years.⁵ Hurricane Dorian was the strongest hurricane ever recorded to hit the north-western Bahamas, causing catastrophic damage from 1 to 3 September 2019. This Category 5 hurricane hit furiously and left devastation and destruction in its path. The main areas affected were the Abaco Islands and Grand Bahama (OCHA 2019).

Tropical Storm Dorian started on its path in late August 2019, then evolved into a Category 5 hurricane and made landfall on The Bahamas on 1 September. The devastation of the country was caused by a combination of factors: the hurricane, its strong winds, and a high storm surge that caused a “wall of water” up to seven meters high (IDMC 2020b).

A new writing project called “I Survived Dorian” was born in the aftermath of the hurricane. This aims to raise awareness of the challenges of climate change, and includes testimonies of the impact that the hurricane had on the population, and how horrifying it was.⁶

Most of the infrastructure and private property on Abaco Island and Grand Bahama were heavily damaged, and people did not have access to shelter, water, food, communication or electricity.

3.3 Main characteristics of displacement

The main characteristic of this ID event is that it occurred between islands. The climate disaster had a direct impact on Abaco and on Grand Bahama, where the international airport was destroyed. The local government was displaced, which limited its availability to start the clean-up and rebuilding effort. Both national and local governments were unable to confront the situation in the places that the hurricane happened, which meant that a combination of public and private transport was required for the evacuations and they were delayed for three days. Collective shelters recorded an influx of 1,957 IDPs.

5 According to the Global ID Database, in the weather-related hazard category, the total number of IDPs related to strong storms in Bahamas between 2015 and 2018 had been 8,137 (2015: 2842, 2016: 3500, 2017: 1565, 2018: 230); in 2020 the figure was 250 IDPs.

6 “I had both of my children in my arms and I cannot swim.” “I do not think there was ANYTHING that could have prepared us for Dorian. We felt like we were in a tsunami. It was like a horror film.” “It took almost a year for my son to talk and speak again after Hurricane Dorian.” “I would love to move back home, but there is a housing issue there right now. I guess the pandemic took precedent with building initiatives.” “My biggest fear up to this day is that if we have another catastrophe like this, our country is not ready!” (CCARR Centre 2021).

The first stage of ID was the movement of people from the two hardest-hit islands to the island of New Providence, where Nassau, the capital of The Bahamas, is located. At least 5,500 IDPs were seeking transport to go to New Providence. When IDPs arrived there, they mainly stayed in collective shelters, rental properties and with host families. Those of them who had better access to communication tried to find help through other networks such as families or friends. Those who did not have these possibilities stayed in the shelters.⁷

Although this situation generated great damage at a general level for IDPs, involving mobilisation in search of shelter, transportation, security, water and food, it is essential to explain that it had a different impact on different population groups. The hurricane made visible the conditions of inequality among the population in terms of economic difficulties, whether or not they had family or social networks, access to information and communication technologies, among others. One of the main differences in the impact of the hurricane was between those who had local networks and economic means, because they returned to their place of origin or integrated into networks more quickly, and they did not need public assistance (IDMC 2020b).

There were some sections of the Bahamian population, such as Haitians and the LGBTQIA+ community, who needed other solutions and for whom the recovery was more difficult. The Care International (CARE) 2019 report states that for the LGBTQIA+ community, the displacement caused by the event required help from NGOs, as this situation increased the vulnerability in which they found themselves. As an example, they did not want to stay in the shelters because of threats of violence. The report (CARE 2019) analyses another kind of vulnerability, shown in the dynamics of the Haitian population in The Bahamas. Migration from Haiti to The Bahamas began in 1950 and has historically been incorporated in a subordinated position in The Bahamas, but Hurricane Dorian increased the pre-existing inequalities.

Haitians began to migrate to The Bahamas due to the political situation in their country of origin and the attractiveness of The Bahamas for work in tourism, but their working conditions had the characteristics of low-skilled, low-paid and temporary work.

7 Not all groups of people, structures and communities are equally affected when a natural hazard such as Hurricane Dorian appears. "Pre-existing social and cultural norms and expectations placed on women and girls, including their roles and responsibilities in the home and in the community; their decision-making power in relation to men and boys; their engagement in paid work; level of education and other issues, can lead to women and girls being disproportionately impacted by disasters" (CARE 2019:1).

In 2020 the Haitian population in The Bahamas was 80,000 people. Many of them resided in informal settlements on New Providence and in the Marsh Harbour district on Abaco. Those settlements were destroyed by the storm, resulting in massive displacement. With no local networks, limited contacts, and nowhere to return to, the displaced Haitians spent more time than other IDPs in the shelters. Many of them went into hiding because of document controls, coupled with threats of deportation (CARE 2019).

4. Peru

4.1 Peru: Characteristics and protection framework

Peru is located in the western part of Latin America (LA). It has a total area of 1,285,000 km², making it one of the twenty largest countries in the world. Peru's economy is distributed between agricultural and export activities. The distribution between the two activities is quite uneven: 30 percent of the population works in agriculture, but this activity accounts for only 8 percent of Peru's GDP.

ID was for a long time a major problem in Peru due to the armed conflicts in the 1980s. However, the first regulations only appeared in 2004, with Law No. 28223 on ID. Although this law makes no special mention of displacement due to natural disasters, its Regulations (2005) specifically include this circumstance. Subsequently in 2011, Law No. 29664 created the National Disaster Risk Management System in order to provide an institutional structure for this topic. One year later, in 2012, the Law on Population Resettlement, for non-mitigable high-risk areas, was approved. This normative instrument aims to organise the relocation of populations residing in areas where there is a possibility that they or their livelihoods are at risk. It establishes a procedure initiated by municipal governments, with the intervention of technical agencies and the participation of affected communities.

Peru was the first country in the region to adopt domestic legislation on climate change: in April 2018, the Framework Law on Climate Change was approved, which includes the principles and international commitments assumed in the Paris Agreement, and establishes an institutional method for the design and implementation of policies aimed at meeting these objectives.

These normative instruments, combined with regulatory provisions on sustainable development, risk reduction, environmental impact mitigation and other issues, make Peru one of the countries with the most advanced legislation on climate change displacement. However, at present the elements of this legal framework are not sufficiently coordinated with one another, and its implementation and financing represent a permanent challenge for the Government (Bergman et al. 2021; IDMC 2017).

4.2 Main characteristics of displacement

ID in Peru has been a particularly worrying phenomenon in the recent past, due to the internal armed conflicts that ravaged the country in the 1980s and 1990s. That tragic episode in history resulted in the deaths of around 70,000 people and the forced displacement of 600,000 people, according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2003). This conjuncture constituted a painful process of uprooting and impoverishment, led to the concentration of the population in urban centres, and caused a delay in the possibilities of sustainable development that had a long-lasting impact. Indigenous peasant populations represented a disproportionate 70 percent of the displaced people. They were forced to relocate to very different contexts and suffered discrimination and economic issues. Those who returned had problems related to distribution of land and absence of governmental policies (OIM 2015, 58–64).

For many years, displacement studies were exclusively related to this tragic episode of Peru's history, but we must pay attention to other factors if we want to describe the phenomenon in its entirety. Massive ID has also occurred in Peru as a result of natural disasters of a geological or climatological nature, and currently this is the main and most alarming reason. According to the IDMC, the country saw approximately 656,000 disaster displacements between 2008 and 2019 out of a population of thirty-one million. Most of these were caused by climatic phenomena, especially floods. The years 2012 and 2017 in particular registered soaring incidences of climate disaster linked to the phenomena known as *El Niño* and *La Niña*, which produce alternating cycles of extreme drought and unusual rainfall.

Across Peru's arid coast, glaciated highlands and tropical rainforest, people are exposed and vulnerable to a variety of sudden- and slow-onset hazards, which threaten livelihoods and drive displacement (Blocher et al. 2021). Currently, half of the national territory is exposed to recurrent hazards, and a third of the population lives in exposed areas.

Its complex geography and extreme climates have led the inhabitants to develop adaptation strategies to cope with this context, but it is necessary to address these phenomena in order to anticipate and minimise possible negative impacts. When adaptive capacity is exceeded, displacement occurs, and there is a risk of large-scale displacement if the necessary precautions are not taken. This is of great concern because it would represent a serious setback in the human development indicators that Peru has managed to improve in recent years.

At this point, it is difficult to determine when human movement constitutes forced displacement and when it is a voluntary migratory movement, which is why the numbers are not so clear. Nonetheless,

according to the IDMC, displacement due to armed conflict has now been surpassed by displacement due to natural disasters. There is a Register of IDPs in Peru that was funded in 2005 under the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations, but to date there is not a single person registered in it as a result of natural disasters, which in practice means that these people are invisible to the system created to guarantee their rights.

4.3 *El Niño*

In 2017, the north coast of Peru was affected by an exceptionally severe episode of *El Niño*, the climatic event which is related to the persistent presence of abnormally warm waters during various months in the Pacific Ocean region. Over a three-month period, *El Niño* brought particular damage to the departments of Piura, Lambayeque and La Libertad. Its effects were so harmful that, even years later, the region had not completely recovered. In summary, landslides and floods affected over 1.5 million people, caused 162 deaths and damaged hundreds of thousands of homes. Due to the floods, there were 20,000 displaced persons in Piura's capital alone. The previous appearances of *El Niño* took place in 1982 and 1997. Despite being more aggressive, those two events produced less dramatic effects. The 2017 floods were largely a human-caused disaster, and the infrastructural damages were greater in some sectors during the 2017 event — not because of greater flooding, but because of rapid urbanisation in recent years (Venkateswaran et al. 2017).

The disaster exposed a series of vulnerabilities among the rural communities of the region. In the Piura and La Libertad departments, 25 percent of the people live in extreme poverty (WFP 2017), and women make up the majority of this population. At least 30 percent of them do not have a personal income. Hence the disaster did not operate in a vacuum. Rather, *El Niño* acted on the extreme social inequalities that mainly affect rural women, such as low access to education and healthcare, and lack of control over household resources, among other disadvantages.

Consequences of *El Niño* were visible at different levels. One year after the event, 11,000 people were still living in temporary shelters and lacked access to basic services, such as communal areas, spaces with clear functional division, and precautionary measures to mitigate risks of gender violence. Nearly 3,000 were women, whose particular needs were often left unattended.

One of the most sensitive impacts of the event is related to the lack of a gendered approach to the affected population. In Piura, an estimated 100,000 women aged 15–49 and 134,000 children aged 17 and under have been left in highly vulnerable situations due to the floods (OCHA 2017). Numerous family men who lost their livelihoods were displaced to big urban centres in search of economic resources. Women became the heads of their households, so the burdens of post-flood health challenges and loss of housing have landed on the women's shoulders (Flores Fernández 2019).

5. Brazil

5.1 Brazil: Characteristics and protection framework

Brazil is the fifth largest country in the world and also the fifth most populous one, accounting for roughly one-third of all LA's population. Human mobility within and outside the country greatly affects the region's overall numbers. Nevertheless, the majority of Brazil's population is concentrated along the eastern seaboard, with the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (RJ) being the most populous ones. Likewise, Brazil has been close to the centre of the world's economy for many years as it has a variety of wealth resources (Burns et al. 2022).

Yet acute social inequality remains a protagonist in Brazil's reality since around 50 percent of the poorest inhabitants actually possess negative wealth, according to Statista (Romero, 2021). Also at the centre of Brazilian society are periodic financial crises, political deadlocks and environmental deterioration. Even so, very little is known about the scale and dynamics of ID in Brazil. The term "IDPs" is not in official usage in the country, since the concept is only expressed through the word *deslocados*; this translates as *displaced people*, but it is only applied to people who are forced to leave their homes due to major catastrophes or substantial development projects, especially hydro-electric dams (Muggah 2015, 224).

Despite this issue of inadequate acknowledgment, migration within Brazil has continued to be driven by limited land ownership, low incomes — especially in rural areas — and volatile climatic conditions.

5.2 Main characteristics of displacement

Predominantly, three general scenarios that can lead to ID can be identified in Brazil: political and criminal violence, development and resource-related interventions, and natural disasters. In fact, a combination of these factors is very common in some of Brazil's megacities, but also in large and medium urban areas throughout the country (Muggah 2015, 226).

When it comes specifically to forced displacements, most of those between 2000 and 2017 occurred in the Northeast (27 percent), and in the South and Southeast, with 26 percent each. The North region of the country supplied 19 percent and the Central-West added a low 2 percent (Observatório de Migrações Forçadas, n.d.). However, according to Muggah (2015, 222) the literature on voluntary and forced cross-border migration is sparse, but when it comes to IDPs even less is known. Nonetheless, the key authority when it comes to the issue, IDMC, started monitoring Brazil in 2017, which allows us to have a better grasp on the real extent of the issue.

As at 31 December 2020, the total number of new displacements in Brazil according to the IDMC hit 358,000; by comparison, the total of new displacements in 2016 was estimated to be 14,000. Furthermore, future displacement in the country is expected to hit 202,976 per year for sudden-onset hazards such as earthquakes, tsunamis and floods, the latter being by far the main cause with an estimated total of 201,712 (IDMC, 2021a.).

Meanwhile, attempts to build standards for the protection of IDPs were only for those whose displacement had been caused by development projects. Back in 2013, Brazil's Ministry of Cities approved policies intending to safeguard the rights of residents who are involuntarily removed from their homes. They were proposed on the basis of constitutional provisions about housing and guarantees of dignity for human beings, with the statement that assessments should be undertaken before big development interventions in order to establish alternatives to the displacements, limit the number of displacements, protect environmental conservation areas and ensure adequate housing alternatives; the policies also required a draft resettlement plan for the affected families, including suitable compensation quotas (Muggah 2015, 232). Regardless of that initiative, IDPs remain invisible to the Brazilian Government even in times of extreme disasters.

5.3 Record rainfall

In late 2021, weeks of heavy rain produced serious flooding in the northeastern state of Bahia. The floods led to collapses and landslides, leading the state's governor to declare it "the worst disaster that has ever occurred in the history of Bahia" (Reuters 2021). According to the experts, rainfall in December 2021 in the state capital, Salvador, was six times greater than average (Al Jazeera 2021). This mass of disasters led to countless displacements and deaths; the scale of it was so huge and frightening that even Argentina, a neighbouring country, offered aid to Bahia.

In general, situations such as these expose the federal lack of interest in issues related to natural disasters, despite Brazil being integrally affected. However, this study will here focus on one specific state, that of Rio de Janeiro, in order to have a deeper grasp of the issue, as it would not be plausible to cover the entire country in any detail. Accordingly, Rio de Janeiro's situation has been selected for further analysis due to its characteristics in relation to the intersections of IDPs, and to the impact and relevant currency of climate change. Rio is home to the largest *favela* in LA, Rocinha, as well as to several others.⁸

8 Favelas are alternative housing conglomerates, originally built by the poorest members of the population. In Rio de Janeiro, they are usually located on hills and are also referred to as *morros* (which literally means hills).

When there is a concentration of a large number of people — an estimated 6,775,561 in the city of Rio and 17,463,349 in the state as of 2021 (IBGE 2021) — events that trigger displacement tend to have considerable repercussions. In February and March of 2022 abnormal rains struck Petrópolis, which is known as Rio's "Imperial City", leaving hundreds of people dead. More than two hundred landslides were reported within twenty-four hours in nineteen different points of the city, warnings were issued due to the severe weather, and local authorities provided around twenty-three emergency accommodation centres. On 21 March, the local Secretary of Social Assistance declared that it was working to ensure that the 839 people who had arrived at those emergency points were taken care of, as well as maintaining support for another 289 people being observed due to the February rains (Agência Brasil 2022; Davies 2022). Even during the search and clean-up efforts, repeated downpours restricted the work of emergency teams and volunteers, who had to dig through thick mud with shovels and other hand tools looking for their loved ones in unstable areas. In one single day, the February rainfall exceeded the average for the whole month, triggering landslides and floods (BBC News 2021).

Historically, Rio has been a city divided between those who hold the money, power and family names, and those who offer only their labour capacities. While it was the nation's capital between 1822 and 1960, many urban resettlements were proposed and made by the likes of the Portuguese Royal family, which remained in power even after the nation's independence, and the nobility. That is, the rich constantly set forced resettlements in motion and that is a pattern repeated into the present day through the concept of gentrification; moreover, the racial element also plays a huge part in it, since the ones firstly displaced were recently freed slaves. Thus, the "forced resettlement of squatters and landless groups into planned housing schemes is itself often followed by migration to *favelas* and lower-income areas, since these same people are simply unable to meet the rising costs of living near urban centers" (Muggah 2015, 229).

One might conversely imagine that, in relation to climate change or disaster-triggered displacement, economic class would not change how they affect people, since they are phenomena caused by nature. However, as previously stated, pre-existing factors are key to the comprehension of ID in Brazil. As a matter of fact, the areas that suffer the most from heavy rains are precisely the *favelas* themselves, due to their lack of construction analyses; this is particularly so in the hills, places which are often subject to landslides. Most wealthy people take comfort in their modern buildings, watching floods come and go. In Rio, that extreme reality shift can be seen between different locations along single streets. A concept that illustrates the dynamics seen in the state really well is environmental racism, which refers to the institutional rules, regulations, policies or decisions that deliberately target certain communities, resulting in them being disproportionately exposed to certain dangers based upon race (Green Action, n.d.).

The same logic is true when applied to ID, because communities of colour and or low-income are disproportionately impacted by it when it comes to the number of persons displaced and also the way displacement affects them. For this reason, it would be expected that at least the local authorities would have public policies (PPs) aimed at that population, but that is not a reality. Even for floods in general, which are the main cause of displacement in Rio and which happen regularly, not much preparation has been done.

In summary, the Operations Center (OC) initiative is very valuable when it comes to emergencies and dealing with the day-to-day issues of a metropolis. However, Rio has even developed partnerships abroad to share its knowledge, but was incapable of doing so for its own neighbours or higher authorities. For instance, if Petrópolis had an OC like Rio's, the extent of deaths and displaced persons would certainly have been smaller than the colossal numbers which transpired because the city's alerts did not work properly to warn its inhabitants of what was coming. IDPs remain invisible in PPs not only in Rio but throughout the country, but they do undoubtedly exist and they deserve to be acknowledged in order to have their human rights guarded.

6. Final considerations

Overall, LAC have a wide variety of factors that influence the forced displacement of populations: civil wars, crimes against humanity, drug trafficking, structural poverty, marginalisation and racism, amongst others. It is difficult to approach LAC without thinking about the historical and political context, factors that generally aggravate any critical crisis that the populations must face.

However, displacement for climatic reasons has yet to be given the relevance that it deserves due to the current crises that are related to it, which will worsen over the years. Although abundant regional and internal legislation related to climate issues has been found, as demonstrated above, the reality in practice is quite different. This is especially because displacement triggered by climatic reasons has not been given a role in that legislation, and this point has been echoed in the testimonies of the people in the focused analysis conducted throughout the present paper.

Furthermore, LAC is diverse in political contexts, social situations and even geographic particularities. Therefore, the treatment of ID and climate change challenges has also been heterogeneous and conflicted. In a similar way, the pre-existing inequalities have been exacerbated. There is however a common denominator: there are groups that face more risk than others; that is, not all IDPs have the same resources or need the same solutions. There is a difference in impact, which reveals the lack of policies that contemplate the particularities of different social groups in each scenario.

Moreover, as stated before, there is a link between climate change and the increase in the ferocity of the most recent hurricanes, floods and landslides as well as of the destruction and devastation they leave behind. The massive displacements which have resulted make it clear that it is necessary to address this issue with a strategy that includes all three phases of climate emergencies: prevention, the *modus operandi* of when it is happening, and how to deal with it once it is over.

These situations must involve mobilisation for shelter, security, water and food, and access to information: they are all fundamental in order to know what to do, what is going on, where to go and the availability of resources. Not only that, but particular groups also need specific solutions for their care and recovery: in the case of Honduras, for example, women and children; in The Bahamas, Haitian migrants and the LGBTQIA+ population; in Peru, women from rural settings; and, in Brazil, racialised and low-income communities. To sum up, public policies in all four cases are insufficient, each in their own way, for supplying all the needs of all different groups of IDPs.

Truly, the issue does not receive the amount of governmental attention it should in LAC, based on its extent and gravity in the region. In conclusion, the climate emergency is faster than the adaptation of legislation in LAC. Contingency plans are rarely sufficient to meet the assistance needs of people in countries with other structural problems such as poverty, corruption, gangs and state violence.

A possible solution is to listen to indigenous communities, experts and youth when legislating to protect nature, but that angle is tainted by the high levels of corruption in many countries in the region. In other words, to protect and assist IDPs in LAC, the *modus operandi* of politics itself and of public management must change to include a human rights-based approach at their core.

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