



# Advocating for Those Displaced by Climate Change







Caring for plants in Cameroon for JRS livelihoods farming program.



Field of peanut plants grown by CAR refugee students as part of the livelihood farming program.

# Introduction

As 2024 draws to a close, it almost certainly will be remembered as the warmest year in recorded history. Yet heat is only part of the story. JRS serves people in 58 countries around the world, and every single one of these countries has already experienced climate change in ways that cannot be undone.

UNHCR estimated that at the end of 2023, almost three-quarters of forcibly displaced people were living in countries with high-to-extreme exposure to climate-related hazards such as intense droughts, flooding, typhoons, and declining biodiversity.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, nearly half of them remain threatened by war and conflict, compounding their distress. In these regions, where resources are scarce, climate-related hazards expose and intensify risks to the most vulnerable communities, amplifying poverty, disease, and social instability. Governments may move to isolate or persecute certain social, ethnic, or political groups. Gangs and cartels often take advantage of post-disaster situations, financially extorting vulnerable communities.

Southeast Asia, for instance, is experiencing increased coastal erosion and devastating cyclones.<sup>2</sup> By the end of this decade, 700 million people in Africa – nearly half of its population – will be displaced from their homes due to climate change. Africa faces record drought, fusing the existing threats of conflict and terrorism; a prime example is Somalia, where a five-year drought preceded the civil war, and the terrorist group al-Shabab prevented aid from getting to the Somali people, worsening the famine that caused families to flee.<sup>3</sup>

**There is no time to waste:  
we must take action *now* to  
minimize future impacts and  
assist those who are at risk.**



"The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are becoming increasingly serious and alarming," Pope Francis has stated, noting that the two are increasingly interconnected.

In the town of Cibitoke, which hosts a large refugee population, Gisoko primary and secondary schools lost two classrooms due to flood damage in early 2023.

# Climate Displacement Around the World

## Climate Change Implications for Migration

Millions of people are facing life-threatening conditions as a result of climate change – and many will leave their homes, desperate to find more bearable surroundings. They have become the embodiment of Climate Displacement, defined as the non-voluntary movement of people driven by climate or environmental conditions.

**Each year since 2008, an average of 21.5 million people have been forcibly displaced because of weather-related, and often sudden, climate disasters.<sup>4</sup> Most will remain within their own countries, becoming internally displaced, yet many will find themselves crossing borders into foreign territory. Alarming, they will not be afforded protection as refugees, since climate is not one of the qualifiers for refugee status as outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention.**

"As forcibly displaced, not covered by the refugee protection regime, they find themselves in a legal void," explains Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General and Former UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

In this void, climate refugees are even more exposed and imperiled. That's where JRS comes in, serving refugees regardless of whether they are fleeing persecution, war and conflict, or climate-related deprivation. We are indeed heeding Pope Francis' call to recognize the plight of those who have been displaced by the effects of climate and to show "warm pastoral care for those who have been displaced."





JRS and our partners working together to combat climate change in Indonesia.

## JRS and Climate

Building upon the Jesuit charism in giving people the opportunity to rebuild their lives, JRS accompanies people in the throes of climate displacement as they seek access to the basic necessities of suitable shelter, sufficient food, and available, clean water.

Longtime JRS/USA Board Member Dr. Susan Martin, who founded and led the Institute for the Study of International Migration in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, is emphatic about JRS' role in educating others about climate displacement. **"A lot of people are fearful of even talking about migration and displacement in the context of climate change.** They either think it's too political an issue or it's too daunting an issue," she says. With the right planning, however, "if we help the countries of origin prepare for internal movements and if we reduce the likelihood that people are going to be displaced, then we can manage these processes."

JRS/USA seeks to heighten awareness of climate change as a driver of migration and displacement. We have affirmed the United States' leadership role in the UN Framework Convention on Climate and the Paris Accords, and we aim to help communities create policies so they can plan for welcoming new populations of refugees fleeing famine, war, and uncertainty.

We continually develop, implement, and refine our programs serving people who are navigating climate displacement, while also promoting advocacy initiatives that directly advocate for greater resources for migrants and refugees suffering from climate change.

**Because of your support of JRS/USA, we can assist these families as they rebuild their lives.**



# Regional Stories

## JRS Asia Pacific

Nong Pedro and his wife Nay Josie have lived in Nocnocan – the only Philippines island community involved in the Research and Advocacy for Climate Policy and Action project (RACPA) Project implemented by JRS Asia Pacific with two partners: the Institute of Environmental Science for Social Change (Philippines) and the Institute for Social Research, Democracy and Social Justice (Indonesia).

Less than 10 acres in size, Nocnocan has experienced several climate related disasters, exacerbated by global warming climate change, in the last decade – including Typhoon Odette in 2021, which destroyed or damaged more than 75% of the homes and boats on the island.

Nong Pedro is the island's carpenter. He looks after the local chapel while Nay Josie stands by his side. They feel a strong sense of home and belonging within their community, despite their personal tragedy: in 2013, Typhoon Haiyan struck while two of Nong Pedro and Nay Josie's children were working at a resort. One of their sons died, and his body has never been recovered. Their story shows “how complex the calculus could be for individuals, households and communities to move or stay in the face of climate change impacts,” says Cathy Torres, Project Manager of RACPA.

Cathy has met with families in two small Indonesian hamlets that, based on projections from the Climate Center, will be underwater by 2050.

Every year, tidal flooding inundates their streets and houses. Strong waves prevent the fishermen from going out to sea on their boats, further reducing their income. Soil salinization due to rising sea levels has forced these farming towns to shift to aquaculture. The hamlets planted a series of mangroves to prevent flooding, yet the sea water continues to rise quickly – so the villagers are skeptical that the mangroves will be a long-term solution to protect their community.



Burundi is in the throes of intense weather-related events induced by climate change including massive flooding.



## JRS Eastern Africa

Burundi, with its lush hillsides and agricultural heritage, is in the throes of intense weather-related events induced by climate change. Extensive flooding and intense periods of extreme heat and drought have combined to devastate the local families' food security and stability. An estimated 145,000 people have been displaced in Burundi due to climate change, and the number is expected to rise.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, heavy rainfalls have brought the dangers of catastrophic landslides. In one town, floods swept away two school primary and secondary school classrooms, leaving 200 young children without a place to learn.

JRS and local partners helped rebuild the destroyed classrooms, where the children have returned to their studies. JRS has also established environmental clubs for students and teachers to learn about climate change, the importance of caring for the environment, and strategies they can implement in their communities to mitigate negative impacts from climate change.

Africa's climate crises are widespread. Severe flooding in South Sudan has multiplied the despair of war. More than a half -million of those refugees have fled to South Sudan and now are dealing with possible secondary displacement as the floods forced families to find drier, higher land.<sup>6</sup>

One member of the JRS South Sudan team recalls how recent flood waters consumed their building, entering every workspace. "The most affected were the wash facilities: the borehole water pump was submerged in water and all the latrines were full and overflowing." Still, JRS carried out flood response in partnership with local churches and community leaders, providing mosquito nets and plastic sheets to refugees and the host community.

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# Policy Perspective

## Lack of Legal Protection for People Displaced by Climate Change

When the 1951 Refugee Convention created the legal definition of who is a refugee, climate change was not a known threat to humanity. For that reason, there is no internationally binding treaty or agreement that protects people displaced by climate change.

Some regional agreements allow for broader definitions of who is a refugee. For example, in Latin America, the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, a non-binding regional instrument for the protection of refugees, includes the phrase “or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order” in its definition of who is a refugee.<sup>7</sup> This phrase leaves room for interpretation of what disturbs public order, such as an extreme weather event, which some countries in the region have used to grant refugee status to people for reasons related to climate displacement.<sup>8</sup> Despite this room for interpretation, the Cartagena Declaration does not include an explicit mention of displacement due to climate change.

Currently, US law does not protect people displaced by climate change. ***To address this lack of protection, advocates have been calling for the passage of the Climate Displaced Persons Act.*** This bill was first introduced to Congress in November 2023 by Senator Ed Markey from Massachusetts and Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez from New York. If passed, this legislation would enact a national strategy that would provide a more equitable immigration pathway to the United States for people displaced by climate change and critical support for people affected by climate disasters internationally.<sup>9</sup> In particular, this legislation would create a U.S. resettlement pathway for climate-displaced persons.

Jesuit Refugee Service/USA worked to endorse this bill partnering with other non-governmental organizations. ***JRS/USA also advocated for the passage of the bill during its 2024 Advocacy Day event, which resulted in additional Members of Congress endorsing the bill thanks to the advocacy of JRS/USA supporters.*** While the bill is unlikely to pass this current Congress, Jesuit Refugee Service/USA will continue to advocate for its reintroduction in future sessions of Congress.

Thank you for your support of JRS/US and the refugees we serve around the world. Because of your generosity, we are able to advocate for the nearly 20 million people who are forced to flee their homes every year due to climate-fueled disasters.

**Take action!**







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**An estimated 560,000 of these refugees have fled to South Sudan and now are dealing with possible secondary displacement as the floods forced families to find drier, higher land.**





**Top Photo: JRS staff in Thailand repairing buildings.  
Bottom photos: JRS delivers food and hygiene kits  
for emergency response programs.**





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## 60 PERCENT

of refugees come from  
or are living in the most  
climate-vulnerable  
countries.



## UP TO 1.2 BILLION

people could be displaced  
due to climate change  
impacts by 2050.



Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organization serving refugees and other forcibly displaced people. JRS's mission is to accompany, serve, and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, that they may heal, learn, and determine their own future. Founded as a work of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1980, JRS today works in 58 countries worldwide to meet the educational, health, and social needs of more than one million refugees.

