

Environmental Migration in Honduras: A Challenge for Sustainable Human Development

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Migration is as old as the origin of humanity and each migratory phenomenon has unique characteristics. However, in the 21st century, in addition to the factors that have traditionally motivated migration (economic, political, geographic, demographic), we have the addition of environmental changes resulting from global warming, which are causing environmental migration. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) “World Migration Report 2022”, the intensification of ecologically damaging human activity leads to the depletion of resources and the collapse of biodiversity due to overconsumption, overproduction and unsustainable economic growth. It also points out that in 2020, among Latin America and the Caribbean countries, Honduras had the highest number of internal displacements due to disasters (937,000 people).¹

Many cases of environmental degradation are directly related to climate change (CC), which in turn causes environmental migration. IOM defines this term as “the movement of people or groups of people who, predominantly for sudden or progressive reasons in the environment that negatively affect their lives or living conditions, are forced to leave their places of habitual residence, or decide to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and move within or outside their country of origin or habitual residence.”²

This begs the question, is environmental migration an adequate strategy to confront CC or, should the State and local governments invest in infrastructure and community capacity development to reduce vulnerabilities, and increase local resilience instead?

This question arises from the observation that migration is often presented as a solution to the problem, without seriously considering what opportunities a population has available to reinvent itself—without having to migrate—in the face of the challenges that CC presents. Thus, the central thesis of this article is that by strengthening local capacities and social cohesion, it will be possible to increase resilience levels and implement preventive and early recovery actions

that avoid intra and international migration.

Environmental Migration in Honduras Because of CC

The last 50 years have witnessed the climatic vulnerability of Honduras, classified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as highly vulnerable due to its atmospheric dynamics, soil type and orography.³ These characteristics contribute to generating conditions of degradation that cause environmental migration and, from the perspective of “Sustainable Human Development”, have a negative impact on communities. Amartya Sen proposes that to overcome the economic vision of development centered on “having” (money and goods) we need a holistic vision centered on the “being and doing” of the human being (well-being and capabilities) in which the participation of institutions plays a determining role in development.⁴ A similar approach has been promoted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which defines development as a process through which people’s opportunities for a long and healthy life, better access to education and resources to enjoy a decent standard of living are expanded.

Environmental determinants of migration

According to the IOM, environmental factors are considered important variables to explain global migration flows, since people tend to migrate or move to survive natural disasters and adapt to changes in their environment.⁵ The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) have classified Honduras as a country vulnerable to different natural threats, for example, between 1970 and 2019, there were 82 disasters, 82% of which had hydrometeorological or climatic causes.⁶

Among the determinants related to environmental migration are:

- **Hurricanes and tropical storms.** The most dev-

astating hurricanes and tropical storms were Fifi (1974), Gilberto (1988), Mitch (1998), and Eta and Iota (2020). These caused damage to infrastructure, the economy, ecosystems, loss of human life, and the temporary or permanent displacement of much of the population.

- **Change in the rainfall pattern.** On one hand, there are intense rains with floods and soil erosion; on the other hand, prolonged drought affects the territories of the “Dry Corridor” with greater intensity.⁷ The immediate effect is the loss of crops, but there is also degradation of the soil that makes them unproductive.
- **Increase in sea level.** This phenomenon is observed repeatedly in coastal municipalities such as Marcovia-Choluteca, Puerto Cortés-Cortés, Tela-Atlántida where storm surges cause damage to infrastructure, loss of coastal beaches, and prevent fishermen from working, making their livelihoods precarious.⁸

Socioeconomic determinants

The civil wars and institutional breakdowns that took place in Central America between 1970 and 1980 caused instability in the region and had an economic impact. Even though Honduras was not the scene of civil wars during this period, it failed to generate the equitable economic growth and development that would allow the population to improve their quality of life and climate resilience.

At the “First International Conference on Risk Management and Resilience in Cities” held in Mexico City (2019), it was stated that resilience “not only implies the ability to respond and recover efficiently, but it also considers the ability to anticipate, adapt and absorb the impact of climate events.”⁹ In Honduras, the response to threats and risks related to climate change has been reactive. To move towards resilience, it is necessary to generate local capacities that allow the population to organize and prepare to manage different types of risk efficiently and to do so in advance. Among the socioeconomic determinants related to environmental migration the following stand out:

- **Poverty.** In 2023, 64% of Honduran households were poor, 22.6% were in relative poverty, and 41.5% were in extreme poverty.¹⁰ This condition, combined with environmental damage, creates greater vulnerability in the population and less capacity to face climate risks.
- **Underemployment.**¹¹ Although in 2023 an unemployment rate of 6.4% was recorded, the real problem is underemployment, which amounts to 56.7%.¹² Insufficient income leads to precarious housing and basic services.
- **Social inequality,** measured by the Gini index,

shows Honduras as one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the Central American region. In 2019, the World Bank calculated it at 48.2%, far from the zero value that shows perfect income equality.¹³

It is essential to consider environmental and socioeconomic determinants to respond to the problem posed by environmental migration. However, success depends on the collaboration of all sectors and change to the extractive economic model towards one that guarantees and promotes economic growth based on the principles of Sustainable Human Development.

Environmental Migration as a Survival Strategy

The oldest migratory movements were linked to the need for subsistence since the availability of food depended on climatic conditions. Over time, the motivations for migration have varied and can be multiple. Today, the challenges of CC this and is linked to multiple factors that often vary between location and context.

Two concepts relevant to a normative analysis of environmental migration are justice and responsibility.¹⁴ Regarding justice, the greatest costs of the climate crisis often fall unfairly on populations with great sociodemographic vulnerability and little resilience. Honduras is a prime example, especially in rural areas where the main livelihoods are in agricultural activities that directly depend on the stability of the rain cycle. Due to CC, this has become erratic and uncertain, especially in municipalities of the Dry Corridor. As agriculture and related livelihoods falter in the face of multiple losses, the possibility of migrating increases.

Bioethicists James Dwyer holds that responsibility is central to addressing unjust social structures, preventing environmental problems, and strengthening community resilience.¹⁵ Similarly, Marion Young raises the concept of collective responsibility and invites us to reflect on the damage we cause to others with our actions and inactions through structural injustices.¹⁶ Faced with the challenges that CC represents, adaptation and preparation in terms of infrastructure, organization and community empowerment can strengthen the capacity to respond and prevent risk. These are promising strategies for reducing environmental migration because community recognition of the realities can motivate them to inform and prepare to diagnose their risks and participate in designing locally appropriate responses. This enhances their capacity for resilience and adaptation and encourages transformative and systematic actions in the short, medium and long term.

In 2011, the National Climate Change Strategy was approved in Honduras,¹⁷ which incorporates measures aimed at reducing socio-environmental and economic vulnerability and improving the adaptive capacity of the sectors most exposed to climate threats.¹⁸ This strategy proposed the design of a national framework for short and long-term action

that would be locally appropriate, timely, and integrated into public policies to prevent climate-related migration. Despite this, migration constitutes the main adaptive response of the Honduran population, as demonstrated by the National Survey on Migration and Remittances (2023) which identified the impact of natural disasters (17%) and CC (4.5%) (17%) as causes of forced displacement in Honduras.¹⁹

Climate Change: An Opportunity to Reinvent Oneself

Social cohesion to strengthen communities

From the social cohesion approach, community characteristics at the level of social capital can increase or reduce vulnerabilities. On the one hand, communities with a lower degree of social cohesion where poverty, social inequality and individualism prevail have less opportunity to reduce potential damage or take advantage of opportunities to mitigate, adapt, or develop resilience to CC.²⁰ Social cohesion fosters trust in institutions, social capital, a sense of belonging, solidarity, acceptance of standards of coexistence and the willingness to participate in spaces for deliberation and collective projects.²¹ Among the actions that promote social cohesion, the promotion of environmental education stands out, with an emphasis on promoting practices that strengthen social resilience and community networks. Additionally, it is important to strengthen trust in institutions. This can be done through transparency, accountability, and by promoting spaces for dialogue that encourage local citizen participation.

Advancing local capacity

Training is central to developing capacity and there is a direct relationship between education and social cohesion. Hopenhayn and Ottone (2000) point out that education stimulates the ability to adapt to changes throughout life, to actively engage in dialogue in decision-making spaces, to exercise the right to participate, and to use strategic information to develop capacity.²²

Implementing systematic education from the first years of life is important. If new generations are empowered with evidence-based knowledge, ethical values and environmental awareness, there will be a positive change in attitudes and behaviors. This will contribute to building sustainable communities that have the capacity to adapt and that are resilient in the face of CC.

Challenges to human development led the UN General Assembly to adopt the 2030 Agenda in 2015. Its Sustainable Development Goal 13 (SDG 13) focuses on “climate action” and calls for strengthening climate resilience and adaptation capacity (Goal 13.1), promoting planning (Goal 13.b), and improving education, awareness-raising and human capacity (Goal 13.3).

The goals of SDG 13 are aligned with the central thesis of this article, which proposes strengthening local capacities

and social cohesion, in order to increase resilience and reduce internal and international migration. Such responses to CC should be a focus of policies, strategies, and action plans. To achieve this, education, awareness-raising, and the involvement of all social sectors are important.

Adaptation, mitigation and local resilience

The relationship between climate events and migration is evident and may render life unsustainable in some locations. However, history shows that human beings often reinvent themselves in the face of adversity. This potential for adaptation and resilience should motivate us to collectively face the challenges of CC. Commitments have been made internationally including the Paris Agreement, 2015 (in force since 2021). It focuses on preventive actions that strengthen resilience like, for example, establishing alert and preparedness systems for emergencies, comprehensive assessment and management of risk, protection of ecosystems and communities, increasing adaptive capacity, strengthening climate resilience, and reducing vulnerability in ways that contribute to sustainable development (Article 7).

Internationally, the World Bank has also proposed that planning for a green economy, resilient and inclusive development, and investing in research to understand climate-related factors that drive internal migration will contribute to the effective development and CC policies.²³ Scientific evidence and vision for the future will make it possible to develop and implement strategies to increase community resilience.

Strengthening local capacity in Honduras

CC and its impacts are becoming more frequent, intense and devastating. No part of the planet is exempt from their consequences, and we do not have a new planet to migrate to.

CC and environmental migration should make us think about whether humanity will face it responsibly and systematically. Doing so requires fulfilling the commitments made related to reduce greenhouse gases (GHG) and promoting what some call a sustainability revolution through collaboration and alliances that aim to achieve progressive transformation and environmental regeneration. Núñez and Carvajal (2021) describe a need to implement environmental regeneration that rebuilds the broken fabric of nature as a mechanism to mitigate and compensate for anthropogenic damage and the lack of environmental awareness.²⁴ To do this, the active participation of communities is vital. By knowing the vulnerabilities of their countries and regions to CC, they can propose innovative, creative and sustainable solutions that protect and elevate the resilience of their ecosystems.

Strengthening local resilience through social cohesion is essential. Since 2000, Honduras has initiated some such

efforts with support from the World Bank to strengthen disaster risk management and adaptation to climate change. Greater commitment is required from all social and institutional sectors and investing in local capacity is key. Citizens must be made aware of CC and local vulnerability and capacity and invited to participate in dialog and action that aim to strengthen their resilience, adaptation, and capacity. Educational institutions are important as education on environmental issues can contribute to change in behavior and attitudes. It can be a starting point for proposing a development agenda that understands CC as a cross-cutting variable. Additionally, the Honduran government is responsible for governance and the effective execution of the National Climate Change Strategy.

Conclusion

CC and environmental degradation have contributed to the migratory displacement of many Honduran communities leading to loss of social capital and opportunities to strengthen resilience, and reduced ability to anticipate, prepare and recover.

Migration should not be the main response to the threats posed by climatic events. Communities have the potential to reinvent themselves and become stronger in the face of CC and other disasters through knowledge and commitment. Strengthening social cohesion and promoting collective empowerment are viable solutions to structural injustices that intensify the harms and damages of CC. These can promote unity and promote opportunities for adaptation.

Attaining climate justice in Honduras demands dealing with the structural problems that limit Sustainable Human Development. In fact, perhaps the biggest obstacle is not the lack of public policies linked to CC, but the lack of political will to comply with the laws, coupled with acts of corruption that threaten ecosystems and the possibility of regenerating them systematically.

It is key to adopt a comprehensive approach where climate justice and community resilience are fundamental pillars from which to prioritize actions that promote the well-being of those most exposed and with the fewest resources and least capacity. Strengthening resilience in this way will increase community capacity for responding to CC, and offers better options for Sustainable Human Development, particularly for the most vulnerable.

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