

Climate-Induced Migration: Symptoms, Causes, and Examples of Innovative, Locally Led Solutions for Vulnerable Families in the Philippines

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Submitted by: Lara Hicks, MPA | Executive Assistant/Asst. UN Representative, UNANIMA International

Introduction

Families are the building blocks of society, and their well-being often reflects the strength and stability of our institutions.¹ Unfortunately, the compounded effects of global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recessions, conflict, and shrinking civic space have put the family unit under tremendous stress. While we do have frameworks (i.e., the Sustainable Development Goals) to guide and inform solutions to these challenges, they often neglect to consider the impacts on families and opt instead to categorize different groups by risk and relevance to meeting targets.²

Migration remains among the most influential forces impacting our global community – and by extension, our families. In fact, the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Risk Report ranked "large-scale involuntary migration induced by conflict, disasters, environmental or economic reasons" as one of the top ten global-shaping risks in the long term, alongside climate and environmental risks. However, migration is seldom examined with a family lens; it is commonly seen as an individual decision. This approach in academic and policymaking circles does not account for decision-making in the context of the family unit. In reality, the "choice" to migrate is determined by numerous factors, including the implications of what mobility means for familial relationships.

In recent years, climate change has been an increasingly urgent factor that drives families to migrate. As the severity of both short-term natural disasters and long-term environmental changes worsen, ⁶ families and their communities will be forced to adapt and respond. As such, this paper looks at climate-induced migration, its effects on families within the Filipino context, and locally led good practices that can help inform policymakers at all levels of governance to address this issue with families in mind.

Climate as a Driver of Migration

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there are an estimated 281 million international migrants and roughly 740 million internal migrants to date. In 2020 alone, 40.5 million internal displacements were new, and of those displacements, 30.7 million (76%) were triggered by weather-related disasters. Although data suggests that more families will migrate or be uprooted due to storms, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other immediate onset events, slower onset changes in climate, like droughts, actually increase the likelihood of migration to a larger degree than natural disasters. Some explanations offered in the literature assert that this is because migrants have more time to adapt and



plan their relocation, whereas the destruction caused by an event like a typhoon or flashfloods can be more difficult to prepare for and escape from.¹⁰

Recognizing the agency of families in the climate migration discussion is critical. The two most widely used categories in migration, "involuntary" (or forced) and "voluntary," fail to accurately capture the nuance and complexity of decision-making. The voluntary vs. involuntary dichotomy also limits us from considering multicausal explanations and is mutually exclusive; either you were *forced* to migrate, or you *chose* to. However, this oversimplifies migration and its drivers – including climate change. For example, in a UNANIMA International publication, Mary shared her testimony on climate-induced displacement and homelessness in Kenya. Born in an agro-pastoralist community depending on reliable weather cycles, Mary migrated with two of her brothers to the streets of Eldoret "in search of sustenance and some kind of life," since the rain patterns changed, and the soil yielded little food. ¹¹ Mary and her siblings chose to leave Kakuma for Eldoret, but their "choice" was significantly hampered by few options for survival.

This also highlights the importance of a community or a family's relationship to the land in migration decision-making; slow-onset changes in climate disproportionately affect Indigenous people, fishing communities, and farmers. When families depend on the land for their livelihoods, resources, and cultural preservation/identity, they are inclined to adapt and stay in place for as long as possible. As a result, many people continue to remain in high-risk climate areas or lack the capacity to migrate when an eventual natural disaster strikes. These individuals and families are especially prone to being left behind, with women, children/girls, and other marginalized groups comprising those most vulnerable. Akeyo, a single mother of five in an interview with UNANIMA International stated: We wanted to move, but couldn't afford it, I had no option but to live with the water in my house, waiting for the water to dry up... I have been living in the same place for 15 years now, and each year it is the case that it has flooded. Her lived experience speaks to the intersecting vulnerabilities of poverty, climate, and other structural failures affecting her family's ability to migrate.

Although Akeyo and her children were unable to leave their home, the same pressures confining them to stay could very well have prompted another family in similar circumstances to migrate. Her story also demonstrates how slow-onset climate triggers and compounding shocks can combine with socioeconomic factors to "generate critical thresholds for displacement." Framing migration as a continuous process and spectrum, ranging from voluntary to involuntary, allows us to: 1.) account for multiple factors simultaneously driving migration, 2.) better understand why some families migrate and others do not, and 3.) more accurately represent how climate change contributes to migration. Additionally, this continuum conceptual framework makes it easier to consider regional variation in migration and climate displacement within different geographic areas.

Consistent with Mary's testimony, of those who can and do migrate because of climate change, many relocate to cities and urban areas. People in rural settings can be more exposed to the elements, and changes in ecosystems can be the final push factor that leads vulnerable families to migrate to cities from their rural habitats. Dhaka, Bangladesh is a city that exemplifies this trend – approximately 300,000 to 400,000 migrants resettle there each year, and the cause is believed to be a combination of climate and poverty-related factors, with worsening natural disasters often being the trigger. Although data is limited on climate-induced rural-to-urban migration, there are regional studies and projections that predict population increases and movements to urban areas due to climate change, over time. One study finds that North Africa, in a "pessimistic reference scenario," will have 13 million people (6.1% of the region's population) migrate to urban areas because of climate change by 2050. These numbers are attributed to the worsening effects of severe water scarcity and sea-level rise in the Nile Delta region.



However, if significant reductions in global emissions and climate-friendly measures are implemented, this 13 million projection can be mitigated to 8.5 million climate migrants by 2050.²³ Another aspect to note about climate-induced rural-to-urban migration is the perception of climate change itself and public opinion. One study from Wodon et al. discovered an association between household survey responses asserting that climate change is worsening and higher probabilities of temporary and permanent migration among respondents.²⁴

Cities, at first glance, seem like a logical place for families to migrate to. Within countries, flows from rural to urban areas are linked to "economic modernization, improved education, service sector growth, and the concentration of economic activities in towns and cities." While urban centers are projected to become more popular destinations for all migrants (rural in origin, climate-induced, and otherwise) in the coming years, this is not without great risk and consequence. Many cities are in hazard-prone locations, including deltas, coastlines, and seismic zones. Unfortunately, this means that climate displacement risk can be largely concentrated in urban areas, too. Chawla (2017) finds that rural-urban migration increases pre-existing inequalities between the rich and the poor, as well as strains urban and social services. As a result, people escaping environmental and socioeconomic shocks in rural areas can end up in precarious, substandard housing and slums in urban climate hotspots. UNANIMA International's research on family homelessness strongly supports this observation by providing qualitative data and firsthand accounts from slum-dwellers in Kenya, the Philippines, India, and other countries. These accounts overwhelmingly point to the susceptibility of slum-dwelling families to trafficking, domestic violence, cyclical poverty, and other health and safety issues on top of their lack of decent housing.

As highlighted in this section, climate change is an important driver of migration but can be difficult to measure. Although movements that are primarily or partially induced by climate have significant cross-border implications, most migration is internal, highly localized, and increasingly projected to be rural-to-urban. Furthermore, climate change is only one part of an often complex and multicausal migration story among families. Migration decision-making accounts for climate perceptions and experiences, with "climate change" encompassing a combination of shorter and longer onset events, in addition to socioeconomic, familial, and cultural considerations. Even though 76% of new internal displacements were climate-induced, there are countless families that remain in their communities with varying abilities and desires to leave their homes; they should not be forgotten or excluded from the bigger picture. In the next section, some of the overarching trends discussed above are further unpacked with specific regard to effects on families in the Filipino context.

Effects of the Climate-Migration Nexus on Families in the Philippines

Although there is no "one-size-fits-all" way to untangle the climate-migration nexus at the family-unit level of analysis, country-specific examples of family experiences allow the international community to see how migration, climate change, urbanization, and socioeconomic trends can manifest within families.

The Philippines is a particularly compelling case for numerous reasons. First, it is highly susceptible to both long and short-onset climate events such as sea-level rise, typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, floods, volcanos, and declines in marine life/biodiversity. Second, there are frequent rates of outmigration and internal displacement in the Philippines. According to the latest available data, each year more than 1 million Filipinos leave to work abroad, and 5.7 million were internally displaced due to natural disasters in 2021 alone. Moreover, the remittances sent from family members overseas comprise nearly 10% of the Philippines' gross domestic product — a ratio that has remained consistent since the early 2000s. And, of those family members that do migrate for overseas work, 59.6% are



female.³⁴ Higher rates of female overseas migrants, taken together with historically engrained gender roles, can illustrate how migration and climate effects are gendered. The Philippines is also home to urban areas that are more highly prone to climate change and natural disasters – namely the Manila metro area. Slum-dwelling, urban poverty, and rural-urban migration are major issues in Manila, and they are only exacerbated by climate change.

Additionally, many Filipino families and Indigenous Filipinos inherently depend on the ocean and land for fishing and farming. As a result, they are both greatly connected to the land and are more vulnerable to environmental changes or natural disasters. Lastly, the Philippines maintains longstanding familial traditions and an emphasis on kinship. Ethnographic research on Filipino families demonstrates both the extremes and nuances of family life amid migration and climate change pressures.

Some of the most substantive literature available on the intersections of migration, climate change, household fragmentation, and familial relations has focused on *multi-local* Filipino families. Parreñas (2005) specifically explored how class and gender interact with long-distance relationships between Filipina overseas workers and their children.³⁵ She discovered that many Filipina migrant mothers still carry out the moral obligations and financial responsibilities of motherhood, even from a distance. Women in the Philippines traditionally manage household functioning, chores, and the budget, but must defer "major decisions of the family to fathers."³⁶ Interestingly in the case of Filipina mothers abroad, household responsibilities are delegated to other family members, but it is still assumed that mothers remain in charge of family affairs. Porio (2007) found that, rather than redistributing divisions of labor altogether, migrant women oversee expenses, parent their children by sending remittances, ensure a trusted female family member spends money appropriately, and nurture their children through these exchanges.³⁷ These examples display how migrant parents adapt care for their multi-local families through "global care chains."³⁸ They also show, for better or worse, how transnational communication can act as a mechanism to retain gender conventions from origin countries within the families of migrant women.³⁹

Separation causes Filipino multi-local families to reconfigure relationship dynamics, and while transnational communication can keep families connected, it can also foster resentment and exacerbate physical distance between family members. For example, some Filipino children with a parent abroad feel their relationship is "commodified," or reduced to material goods purchased by remittances. ⁴⁰ Many children of multi-local families also report feeling unloved when a parent abroad forgets birthdays or phone calls, and they feel pressured to grow up quickly to take care of their households. ⁴¹ Relationships can be strained between partners and spouses too: a respondent in a study on multi-local Filipino families shared that her friend was violently abused by her husband because he thought she was not spending enough of her temporary stay in the Philippines with him. ⁴²

Migration of one (or all) family members is a primary strategy for parents to cope with intersecting socioeconomic and environmental vulnerabilities, but other more harmful and desperate strategies include marrying off daughters, trafficking, and pulling children from school to work at home.⁴³ One of these harmful coping strategies, child trafficking, greatly increased after Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines in 2013. Child laborers from rural areas were trafficked in Manila for both sexual and labor exploitation.⁴⁴ Clearly, introducing the climate variable to the mix further complicates multi-local family relationships and decision-making. However, families in the Philippines realize that "the familial *is* environmental," and that they cannot thrive in an uninhabitable climate. Parents from Albay province in the Philippines shared with Ransan-Cooper (2016) their worries about their children's future, along with their hopes to prevent their children from struggling in the ways previous generations had.⁴⁵ These aspirations and concerns translate differently depending on each family's reality. For some, this means



migrating to Manila from the countryside is a more realistic option for their family rather than continuing to farm. ⁴⁶ Regardless, Filipino children are especially susceptible to climate change shocks, which disrupt their access to education, healthcare, and a stable family life – and parents are forced to cope.

These scenarios show how multiple stressors contribute to family relationships, displacement, and compounded traumas in the Philippines. It is evident that holistic support for children and multi-local families, particularly trauma-informed care and mental health services, needs to be prioritized. To quote four youth activists: "We must acknowledge where we stand, treat climate change like the crisis it is and act with the urgency required to ensure today's children inherit a liveable planet." 47

Locally Led Good Practices and Recommendations

The section above painted a more intricate picture of the forces shaping the "symptoms," paradoxes, and adaptability of multi-local families in the Filipino context. An important part of UNANIMA International's advocacy work is our research on families, which features stories from the grassroots that illustrate these difficult, and even traumatic, experiences with people in places of power. By centering the voices of women and children in our research and using a human rights-based approach, we are able to better understand how the global affects the local, and vice-versa. Consequently, we have learned that people with lived experiences and grassroots leaders are the true experts. Their wisdom and insights are critical in finding solutions to the global challenges that affect them, including migration/displacement, climate change, and poverty. This is supported by the literature: resilience theory suggests that community involvement and co-creation can be vital to disaster preparedness solutions, among others. 48

In UNANIMA International's publications, we also devote sections to sharing good practices at the local and national levels, as well as offer recommendations. Below are some examples of locally led good practices from the Philippines in addition to our overall recommendations on the intersections of migration, climate change, and families.

- The Homeless People Federation of the Philippines, Inc. (HPFPI) this NGO uses five community-driven approaches to alleviate local displacement: 1.) securing tenure, 2.) upgrading and housing, 3.) basic urban services, 4.) disaster risk reduction, and 5.) post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation. HPFPI commits to community development by hosting temporary and permanent housing initiatives, which is a crucial source of support for displaced Filipino families. 49
- The Manggahan Low Rise Building Project After Typhoon Ondoy (2009), 40,000 people living in the slums of the Mangghan Floodway were forced to leave behind their homes and livelihoods and relocate to places like Manila. In response, the Alliance of Peoples' Organizations Along Manggahan Floodway (APOAMF) formed and fought for the rights of their families to housing and land, along with the right to remain in Mangghan. The group utilized a community-based, participatory process (the People's Plan, 2010) to develop eviction alternatives. Residents collaborated with an architect and government officials to create more resilient structures. As of 2020, 480 families successfully moved into rent-to-own apartments.⁵⁰
- The Kapit-bisig Laban sa Kahirapan (Linking Arms against Poverty) Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services (KALAHI-CIDSS) KALAHI-CIDSS is a community-driven poverty alleviation project with the goals of empowering communities, improving local governance, and reducing poverty.⁵¹ This project uses a community participatory approach that aims to work with local communities so they can identify and implement the projects they



most need.⁵² Although Delfino (2017) finds some weaknesses with the project's implementation in the East Coastal Area of Lagonoy, he also reports that KALAHI-CIDSS received lots of positive feedback from beneficiaries. Since community members were actively included in the implementation of KALAHI-CIDSS in Lagonoy, many expressed that trust, mutual understanding, and cooperation were improved between locals and public officials. Moreover, KALAHI-CIDSS generated more job opportunities for impoverished families, and promoted gender equality, empowerment, transparency, and public safety (through the construction of seawalls).⁵³

Given the complexity of how climate change and migration impact families, UNANIMA International recommends that Member States:

- Routinely collect and share disaggregated data in collaboration with UN agencies, universities, and NGOs – to better document statistics on migration, climate-induced displacement, labor migration, and changes to the family unit over time.
- Strengthen disaster-risk reduction planning and urban planning by localizing national frameworks to better address the needs and vulnerabilities of communities.
- Expand access and allocate more funding to social safety nets, services, and floors especially in climate hotspot cities where rural-urban migration is expected to increase.
- Identify and promote more environmentally friendly approaches to fishing, farming, and extractive industries, while recognizing that consumption and production patterns from the Global North disproportionately affect the climate and economies of Global South countries.
- Boost internet connectivity rates and child-friendly digital access as a means of 1.) enabling families to maintain relationships with relatives abroad, and 2.) providing families with critical information and an alternative way to continue education amid natural disasters.
- Create and uplift community support systems/groups for vulnerable families, especially those
 that contribute resources and services to mental health, relationship-building, and traumainformed care.
- Reduce intergenerational cycles of inequality, poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination that
 predispose families to involuntary migration, homelessness, trafficking, domestic violence, and
 other unsafe situations.
- Ensure that all people have access to safe, affordable, and family-sized housing that can stand up to natural disasters and extreme climate events.
- Recognize that migration and climate change are highly gendered and offer gender-sensitive programs to support female migrants since migrant mothers and women face challenges that are uniquely exacerbated by gender roles, sociocultural norms, and familial expectations.
- Improve labor migration regulations and agreements, minimize exploitation of migrant workers abroad, recognize the rights of migrant workers, and endeavor to provide more opportunities for meaningful employment/decent work domestically.
- Include families in the design and implementation of policies that affect them, especially those related to climate & disaster risk reduction and other socioeconomic factors that drive migration.
- Integrate a family lens in the analysis, implementation, and follow-up of international frameworks like the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration; the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families; the Paris Agreement, and others.
- Support civil society and local leaders that are doing important work at the grassroots.



• In the spirit of SDG 17, facilitate strong multilateral and regional partnerships on climate-induced migration, labor migration, transnational/multi-local family policies, and other relevant issues driving displacement of families.

These recommendations and good practices are a helpful place for governments to start. However, in addition to implementing these recommendations, it is also important to shift our shared understanding of migration and climate change's roles in family decision-making. Framing migration as a *voluntary-involuntary continuum* allows for better explanations, multicausality, and the consideration of contradicting forces that both improve and constrict a family's agency. Policymakers will stand to benefit more families within all the levels of climate vulnerability and migration likelihood if they can make sense of complicated socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental factors that exert pressure on the family unit.

Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge the recent changes in the makeup of families and what our societies now consider a family to be. We need to use definitions or descriptions that are more inclusive of different kinds of families and forms of migration, especially those that are climate induced. What does the modern-day family look like? And how do climate change and migration contribute to the changes in the maintenance, recreation, and perception of familial ties? These questions are critical for public officials, service providers, and economists to grapple with since our understanding of how families interact with shifting environments often lags behind rapidly evolving social, political, and economic processes.⁵⁴ As discussed earlier, families are increasingly becoming multi-local, with relatives working abroad and sending remittances to those back home. Families are also more transnational, and the barriers of physical distance are minimized by technology that can keep family members in contact with one another. Recognizing that families, gender roles, and relationships evolve against this backdrop of globalization and the changing world of work will also be important for our leaders to consider.

The state of migration today is no longer largely dominated by individual labor migrants. In fact, family migration is increasingly becoming the norm: family migration accounted for 38% of documented migration flows to OECD countries (compared to labor migration, which comprised 11% of OECD migration in 2015). The examples from the Philippines demonstrate how intimacy and household management can be shared with relatives. These kinship networks are a remarkable case of familial resilience. However, they are also a byproduct of the very personal and economic pressures that compel families to migrate in the first place. Families are highly adaptable, but better social safety nets, greater jobs, and more robust support for those families most susceptible to climate change are needed to ensure their rights and dignity can be fully realized.

When our families are strong, our societies are too. Many of the trends in this paper are still difficult to predict, define, and collect data on. Additionally, migration pathways and the long-term implications of communities at extreme risk for climate displacement (i.e., Small Island Developing States) remain unclear. However, it is overwhelmingly clear that migrant families are moving into systems "which frequently struggle with inclusion of extant groups." Social exclusion is only further exacerbated by risk multipliers – and migration drivers – like COVID-19, conflict, and climate change. Social cohesion cannot exist amid rampant social exclusion, where our planet's most vulnerable people continue to lack access to necessary services and opportunities for formal employment.

The urgency of this moment cannot be understated. At UNANIMA International, we stick to the mantra "don't talk about us, without us." The way forward needs to include the voices of families. It also needs to address harmful climate practices, historical injustices, and policies that inhibit the integration of migrants and their families. Families reach a combination of social and environmental tipping points before deciding (or being forced) to leave their homes; let this be the tipping point for the global community to commit to more family-strengthening, climate-centric, and just migration policies.



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About UNANIMA International

UNANIMA International is a non-governmental organization (NGO) advocating on behalf of women and children (particularly those in poverty), migrants and refugees, homeless and displaced, and the environment. Our work takes place primarily at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, where we and other members of civil society aim to educate and influence policymakers at the global level. In solidarity, we work for systemic change to achieve a more just world.

Our Vision

A future where Women and Children who live in extreme poverty in our society will be empowered to achieve a better quality of life.

Check out all our publications on Family Homelessness at https://unanima-international.org/





UNANIMA International 777 United Nations Plaza, Suite 6-F New York, NY 10017, USA

+1 (646) 410-2612 <u>info@unanima-international.org</u>







WE CALL FOR: global action to address, reduce, and end Family Homelessness; and for a global paradigm shift where Family Homelessness is viewed as the human rights issue it is.