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**Analyzing State Responses to Climate-Induced Internal Displacement:  
The Case of Hurricanes Eta and Iota in Honduras**

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**Abstract**

Hurricanes Eta and Iota in November 2020 reformed Honduras. Almost 1 million people were displaced and agriculture severely impacted. The national legal framework in Honduras shows limitations in protecting those displaced by disasters. This paper discusses the state response to climate-related displacement in Honduras in terms of (mis)alignment with national policy and international protection standards, guided by the theoretical lens of the disaster-migration-policy nexus. Mitchell & Pizzi (2021) provide a foundation to argue that the institutional protection gaps necessitate reform towards adaptive governance together with human-rights-based legislation.

**Introduction**

Climate-related forced migration is one of the leading humanitarian and refugee crises of the 21st century. In 2021 alone, over 23 million people were displaced due to climate-related events, the majority of whom were internally displaced persons (Scopp, 2025). Climate change and human mobility also hold a direct correlation in the Latin America region. Despite Latin American countries being responsible for less than 0.1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, the region has experienced an increased frequency of stronger hurricanes, floods, droughts, and sea-level rise (Hernández Palma, 2024).

When Hurricanes Eta and Iota devastated Honduras in November 2020, just two weeks apart, the seriousness of this problem became abundantly clear. Almost a million people were displaced from their homes, and more than 3 million people were impacted. The enormity of the



suffering and disruption is devastating to consider. This tragic incident turned into a pivotal point in understanding how governments react when people are pushed to the limit by climate disasters. Using Mitchell and Pizzi's (2021) framework, I examine Honduras's response to these hurricanes in this paper to determine whether policy choices protected displaced communities or, regrettably, made their suffering worse. It serves as a sobering reminder of the serious consequences that arise when policy and crisis collide.

The paper's thesis is that the slow and insufficient reaction of Honduras to Hurricanes Eta and Iota highlighted the lack of both national and international legal protections for climate-displaced persons. Honduras passed legislation on internal displacement in 2023, but its poor initial response underlined the need for more timely and specific legal protections for those affected by climate displacement.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I chose to use the theoretical framework created by Mitchell and Pizzi (2021) for their investigation of conflict, forced migration, and natural disasters in this analysis. According to their framework, government responses to environmental disasters fall into four main categories: neglect, relocation and resettlement, reconstruction and disaster aid, and movement restrictions. They found that government policy responses are important intervening factors that influence whether environmental disasters result in stability or conflict.

According to Mitchell and Pizzi (2021), "we must analyze government policies related to relocation programs, restrictions on movement, and post-disaster reconstruction to identify trigger situations where disasters and migration are most likely to produce violence" (p. 580). Their framework highlights that the government's policy response determines whether displaced populations experience protection or increased vulnerability, rather than natural disasters alone dictating outcomes.

The framework is particularly relevant for understanding climate-induced displacement because it recognizes migration as “one response to environmental changes” while acknowledging that “the path through which migration leads to conflict—and the policy responses that either fuel conflict or promote stability—is not well understood” (Mitchell & Pizzi, 2021, p. 580). This theoretical approach makes it possible to systematically analyze how government actions can either increase the vulnerabilities of climate-displaced populations or lessen the risks they face.

This analysis also takes inspiration from Castles, de Haas, and Miller’s book *The Age of Migration* (2020), which warns us not to lump all “climate refugees” into one category or assume their movement is unavoidable. They explain that environmental changes don’t happen in isolation, but people usually get displaced when climate events mix with factors like poverty, political instability, and weak governance. When we treat displacement as an inevitable consequence of climate change alone, rather than the result of policy choices, alarmist stories predicting massive migration from the Global South to the North can actually hide the real causes and make the issue seem less political. From this viewpoint, who ends up displaced, for how long, and under what conditions depends a lot more on whether governments are prepared and able to protect people, not just on the environmental dangers themselves.

### **Honduras and Climate Vulnerability**

Honduras is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change in the world. In the 2018 Global Climate Risk Index, it ranked 45<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries for that year alone. But looking at the bigger picture, from 1993 to 2022, it was actually the third most affected country worldwide (Germanwatch, 2020). Its location makes it especially prone to hurricanes, tropical storms, floods, and droughts, and climate change is

making these extreme weather events happen more often and with greater intensity.

Honduras's vulnerability to climate change is made even worse by deep-rooted inequalities and widespread poverty. Rural communities, indigenous peoples, women, and children often bear the brunt of climate disasters more than others. As Hernández Palma (2024) points out, indigenous groups have unique social, cultural, economic, and political ties to their ancestral lands.

Before 2020, Honduras lacked solid legal frameworks to deal with people displaced within the country. Even though the government officially recognized forced displacement back in 2013, there were still no public policies in place to support the ongoing protection needs of those forced to leave their homes (UNHCR, 2023). This gap in policy left hundreds of thousands of Hondurans without proper legal protection when climate change forced them to move.

While it's clear that Honduras is vulnerable to hurricanes, environmental disasters don't automatically cause people to leave. As Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2020) explain, large-scale displacement usually happens when environmental problems combine with poverty, weak infrastructure, and poor governance. In Honduras, these deeper issues, along with the lack of strong protection laws, meant that hurricanes Eta and Iota forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee, even though many might have been able to stay if better support had been in place.

### **Hurricanes Eta and Iota**

In November 2020, Honduras was struck by two Category 4 hurricanes within 15 days. Hurricane Eta made landfall on November 3, followed by Hurricane Iota on November 17. These back-to-back storms created what experts described as an "unprecedented situation" in Central America (Climate Refugees, 2020).

The impacts were devastating. More than 3 million people were affected by Hurricane Eta alone, with an additional 600,000 affected by Hurricane Iota (ChildFund Alliance, 2020). The hurricanes damaged and destroyed over 90,000 homes and over 71,000 individuals, including 11,700 children, were displaced to collective emergency shelters established in 93 schools, churches, and other buildings (Shelter Projects, 2021).

The storms caused severe infrastructure damage, with over 400 health facilities in Honduras reporting damage and at least 120 rendered inoperative (Humanitarian Action, 2021). Agricultural losses were severe too, with the destruction of over 700,000 hectares of crops that served as critical sources of livelihood and food security for many families (IFRC, 2021).

### **Government Response Analysis**

Using Mitchell and Pizzi's (2021) framework, the Honduran government's response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota mostly falls under "neglect", with some signs of poorly handled "reconstruction and disaster aid". This conclusion is backed up by several clear examples of the government's inadequate response.

As Hernández Palma (2024) puts it plainly, the government has failed to protect vulnerable communities or properly tackle the impacts of climate change. Disaster response systems are insufficient, weakened by corruption, and lack capacity for recovery. For people forced to move, safety isn't guaranteed. On top of environmental dangers, they face threats from mining and other extractive industries, as well as ongoing violence, making it "extremely difficult, if not impossible" to resettle within the country.

### **Inadequate Shelter and Protection**

The government's response in setting up shelters fell far short. Even though they opened 440 shelters for displaced people, many of these places didn't meet basic standards for safe and decent living. According



to Shelter Projects (2021), there simply wasn't enough space in the evacuation centers to accommodate everyone properly. The overcrowding was particularly risky during the COVID-19 pandemic, putting displaced people at even greater risk of health problems.

Women and children were especially vulnerable in the government-run shelters. After the hurricanes, these shelters didn't provide enough protection for women, leading to heartbreaking reports of rape, physical and sexual assaults, and other attacks (Hernández Palma, 2024). The absence of gender-sensitive disaster response measures clearly showed how the government failed to meet the specific safety needs of the most vulnerable people, and I believe this constitutes one of the most unsettling facts.

### **Legal Framework Gaps**

The Honduran government's weak response revealed major gaps in legal protections for people displaced by climate change, both within the country and internationally. Nationally, Honduras didn't have comprehensive laws to deal with internal displacement until 2023.

International laws also fall short when it comes to climate displacement. The 1951 Refugee Convention, for example, doesn't recognize environmental reasons as a basis for refugee protection. This leaves people displaced by climate change in a legal grey area when they cross borders (McAdam, 2012). Even inside countries, existing human rights laws offer only limited protections specifically for those forced to move because of climate-related issues.

This legal vacuum meant that climate-displaced persons in Honduras faced what scholars call "falling through the protection gaps" (McDonnell, 2024). Without official legal recognition or clear protection systems, these communities were left relying mostly on limited humanitarian aid and informal support from friends, family, or local groups.

## **Consequences of Inadequate Response**

According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), those two storms displaced as many people in just one year as had been displaced over the previous twelve years combined (Fernández Bravo et al., 2022, p. 142). This massive displacement happened on top of already existing challenges because more than 3 million people in Honduras were struggling with food insecurity even before the hurricanes hit (IFRC, 2021).

## **Post-Hurricanes Legal Development**

The government's inadequate response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota helped push forward important legal changes. In December 2022, Honduras's National Congress passed the Law for the Prevention, Care, and Protection of Internally Displaced Persons, which officially came into effect in March 2023. This law is significant because it's the first time Honduras has adopted a comprehensive legal framework to address internal displacement, especially related to widespread violence and organized crime (UNHCR, 2023).

The new law sets out a range of important measures, like early warning systems, prevention and emergency plans, humanitarian aid, and protections for rights such as education, housing, and property. One key feature is the creation of the National Forced Displacement Response System (SINARDEF), which is meant to coordinate how the government responds to displacement. However, because the law mainly focuses on displacement caused by violence, it doesn't fully cover the specific challenges faced by people displaced due to climate change.

## **Conclusions**

The Honduran government's response to Hurricanes Eta and Iota shows how weak policies can make life even harder for people displaced by climate disasters. Because of this failure, hundreds of thousands were



pushed into dangerous migration and left without enough shelter or support, making their situation even more vulnerable.

Although Honduras passed a law on internal displacement in 2023, it still doesn't fully address the unique needs of people displaced by climate change. This situation highlights the urgent need for legal reforms, not just in Honduras, but globally, that clearly recognize and protect those forced to move because of climate impacts.

This study supports the idea that current laws aren't enough to protect climate-displaced populations, showing why comprehensive reform is so important. As climate change worsens, building strong legal protections for climate displacement will be key to preventing even bigger humanitarian crises.

Looking ahead, future research should focus on evaluating how well Honduras's new displacement law works in practice and compare climate displacement policies across Latin America. This could help guide better regional approaches to managing climate-related migration.

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