CLIMATE MIGRATION IN HAITI
AN OVERVIEW

EAST BAY
SANCTUARY COVENANT
Fueled by poverty and political instability, Haitian migration trends have deep roots in colonization, slavery, and foreign interventionism by Western powers. This history has hampered Haiti’s ability to develop a stable economy, government, and infrastructure such as healthcare and education. Haitian society is caught in a vicious cycle of mutually-reinforcing economic vulnerability and climate vulnerability, rooted in colonialism and resulting in displacement on a large scale.¹⁻⁴

**ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE**

Haiti is at extreme risk of both slow and rapid onset climate-induced catastrophe. “The country is among the ten zones in the world considered most vulnerable to climate change,” and over 90% of the Haitian population is at risk of environmental disasters.⁵⁻⁶

- **Slow onset:** Haiti’s shorelines face the threat of rising sea levels and coastal erosion, while the specter of increased drought and desertification put Haiti’s forests and biodiversity at risk. Faced with the possibility of continuously rising temperatures and decreasing rainfall, Haiti’s ecosystems are particularly susceptible to the meteorological extremes of climate change.⁷⁻⁸

- **Sudden onset:** Hurricanes, floods, landslides, and earthquakes all represent highly visible ways in which sudden-occurring natural disasters have wreaked havoc on Haitian society in recent years.⁹⁻¹⁰

¹ Alcenat, 2017  
² Baraka Productions, 2005  
³ Alcenat, 2017  
⁴ Baraka Productions, 2005  
⁵ The World Bank, 2017  
⁶ The World Bank, 2021  
⁷ Ayazi and Elsheikh, 2019  
⁸ IOM  
⁹ The World Bank, 2017  
¹⁰ IOM
Beyond its direct impacts on Haitian society, climate change also exacerbates some of the country’s underlying political and economic vulnerabilities. The Haitian economy’s reliance on the agricultural sector, along with the scarcity of policies promoting sustainable farming practices, has forced many Haitians to migrate—either within Haiti or abroad—in an effort to provide for their families.12

The Haitian government has generally allocated little money toward improving infrastructure and environmental practices, placing the burden of climate change most heavily on everyday Haitians. However, Haiti’s sustainability and food-security-oriented National Agricultural Investment Plan13-14 lays the policy groundwork necessary to protect Haitians from climate change. The next step will be to consistently elect honest government officials without foreign interference to carry out these plans.

There is no shortage of international initiatives and NGOs whose main mission is to help Haiti, but it is essential to understand that these external organizations should only take supporting roles in Haiti’s strategies moving forward.

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11IOM
12Kurzban, 2021
13Dyoulgerov et al., 2011
14IOM
» How does climate change contribute to forced migration in Haiti?

» Read through “Climate Degradation and Human Displacement in Haiti,” by Nerine Ortiz Ponin and consider the following: What ways can we trace some of the issues people in Haiti face today to the history of colonialism and imperialism in the region? What are some of the colonial policies over the last 200+ years that have created conditions in Haiti that are causing people to flee?

» What can we do to support people forced to flee Haiti? Research five organizations that support Haitian refugees or work in Haiti to address the root causes of migration. Assess the potential impact of supporting each one.

» Read Fran’s story, excerpted from Lavil: Life, Love, and Death in Port-au-Prince, part of the Voice of Witness series of oral history, and try to imagine how his sense of home and belonging has changed throughout his life.

» Read Fran’s story and note any human rights abuses. Based on your interpretations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), analyze how Fran’s specific human rights have been abused.

» When considering Haiti within the global context of this exhibit, what similarities and differences do you see between this region and others?
FURTHER READING

» Haiti Action Committee Website


HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Haiti is a country with a rich culture and painful history. The original population, the Arawaken people, gave the island its name, meaning “mountainous land” in the Taino language.\textsuperscript{15} During multiple rounds of colonization, first by the Spanish, French, and finally the United States, much of the indigenous population was killed and then outnumbered by enslaved Africans, who were brought to work on some of the deadliest sugar plantations in history. In 1791, the new African enslaved population revolted and began the Haitian Revolution, eventually gaining independence in 1804, giving Haiti the title of the first black republic and second independent country in the Western hemisphere.

Unfortunately, Haiti has not had an easy journey since its liberation in the early 19th century. Years after Haitians gained their independence, France demanded Haiti repay an indemnity for taking its most valuable colony, asking for 150 million francs, which is equivalent to tens of billions of dollars today, when adjusted for inflation.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, Haiti has been indebted to France and the United States, who lent the Haitian government money to pay the indemnity in a timely manner. This exchange essentially allowed for American interventionism in Haiti. In addition, after the Haitian Revolution, the United States, France, and other allied colonial countries refused to acknowledge Haiti as a legitimate country, and thus Haiti was unable to effectively engage in the global market or build its internal economy.

From 1804 to the present day, each attempt by Haiti to stabilize and grow has been foiled by a foreign power. Recently, following the exaggerated controversy of the 2000 Haitian parliamentary elections, the international community established an embargo,

\textsuperscript{16}Westenley Alcenat, “The Case for Haitian Reparations,” Jacobin (January 14, 2017)
resulting in the withdrawal of all financial aid to Haiti by the United States, France, Canada, the United Nations, as well as the World Bank, IMF, and the Inter-American Development Bank.\textsuperscript{17} As a result of these continual “cold” attacks on Haiti’s economy and government, Haiti remains the poorest country in Latin America and the Caribbean region. This, along with unstable and corrupt regimes who pocket government funds, has led to the country making very little progress in the development of stronger infrastructure, healthcare, education, and addressing the effects of climate change.

\section*{ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION}

Haiti is at extreme risk of both slow and rapid onset climate-induced catastrophe. “The country is among the ten zones in the world considered most vulnerable to climate change,”\textsuperscript{18} and over 90% of the Haitian population is at risk of environmental disasters.\textsuperscript{19}

Among the “rapid” climate disasters, Haiti is susceptible to hurricanes and tropical storms,\textsuperscript{20-21} floods, landslides, and earthquakes.\textsuperscript{22} Among the “slow-onset” environmental changes, Haiti is susceptible to forest degradation, increasing temperature, decreasing biodiversity, drought, desertification (decreased average rainfall),\textsuperscript{23} coastal erosion, sea-level rise, and salinization.\textsuperscript{24}

Aside from slow and rapid onset climate changes and catastrophes, man-made problems impose secondary impacts that

\textsuperscript{17}Aristide and the Endless Revolution (Baraka Productions, 2005)
\textsuperscript{18}“Rapidly Assessing the Impact of Hurricane Matthew in Haiti,” The World Bank, October 20, 2017
\textsuperscript{19}“The World Bank in Haiti: Overview,” World Bank, April 26, 2021
\textsuperscript{20}“Rapidly Assessing the Impact of Hurricane Matthew in Haiti,” The World Bank, October 20, 2017
\textsuperscript{21}Hossein Ayazi and Elsadig Elsheikh, “Climate Refugees: The Climate Crisis and Rights Denied” (Berkeley, CA: Othering & Belonging Institute, 2019). Situated in the Hurricane Belt: hurricanes expected to intensify 5-10% by 2050.
\textsuperscript{22}“Haiti,” IOM: UN Migration: Environmental Migration Portal, n.d.
\textsuperscript{23}Hossein Ayazi and Elsadig Elsheikh, “Climate Refugees: The Climate Crisis and Rights Denied” (Berkeley, CA: Othering & Belonging Institute, 2019). Situated in the Hurricane Belt: hurricanes expected to intensify 5-10% by 2050. Potential decrease in rain by 43ml by 2050.
\textsuperscript{24}“Haiti,” IOM: UN Migration: Environmental Migration Portal, n.d.
compound with the former and threaten even more instability for Haitians. Among these are overfishing (leading to loss of biodiversity), lack of proper urban infrastructure, disease, interventionism and colonialism, and political instability.

For example, Haiti undergoes increasingly damaging tropical storms and hurricanes, and Haitians are frequently subjected to excessive flooding and flood water, which is contaminated with various diseases and debris. Cholera spread quickly in the days and weeks following the earthquake in 2010 due to the inadequacy of Haiti’s sanitation systems and drainage canals and irresponsibility on the part of UN workers coming from Nepal.²⁵

In recent history, the Haitian government has generally allocated little money towards improving infrastructure and environmental practices, multiplying the suffering and casualties from environmental catastrophes with its lack of preparedness and poor management. There are currently few policies in place that promote sustainable farming practices, and most of the work is left to be done by smaller, community-led organizations.

It is a common assumption that the majority of the Haitian diaspora migrated in response to natural catastrophes in the past decade. The 2010 decade alone contained the most devastating earthquake since 1946, as well as category 4 Hurricane Matthew. However, a large portion of Haitians living abroad migrated before the earthquake in 2010 to escape the Duvaliers’ regime in the 1970s and 80s or to escape poverty. So while climate destruction does play a role in some people’s journey elsewhere, economic and political instability are primary forces in pushing people to leave.

²⁵“10 Years On, UN Officials Reflect on Haiti Cholera Epidemic Caused by Peacekeeping Mission,” The World (GBH, PRX, October 27, 2020). A cholera epidemic broke out in the UN camps after the 2010 earthquake due to lack of access to clean water.

²⁶“Massive Earthquake Strikes Haiti,” History.com (A&E Television Networks, January 11, 2021)

²⁷Kira Olsen-Medina and Jeanne Batalova, “Haitian Immigrants in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, August 12, 2020
CURRENT CLIMATE OF MIGRATION

Migration, whether it be internal or external, is currently one of the main forms of survival in Haiti. The percentage of the Haitian population that has migrated to Port-a-Prince and other major cities continues to grow due to the vast poverty that afflicts the rural population. With slow onset climate change making agriculture a less reliable source of income generation, rural Haitians have no choice but to move to the city in hopes of finding work to support their family. External migration is also often seen as the saving grace for struggling families. Most Haitian migrants send back a large portion of their income to family members in Haiti; remittances make up at least one third of the country’s total GDP.

A majority of the time, the final destination for Haitian migrants is the United States. If they are unable to find a direct path into the U.S., many migrants will first travel to Brazil, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, or Chile. Historically, many Haitians migrated either to Florida or New York, with an entire neighborhood in Miami entitled “Little Haiti.” In recent years, more Haitians are attempting to enter the United States through Mexico at the Southern Border, a trend that is connected to former President Donald Trump’s aggressive immigration stances that made former entry points much more difficult to navigate.

Unjustly, Haitians face racism and violence within these stepping-stone countries while waiting for legal entry into the United States, often in the form of asylum and Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Under the U.S. government’s Title 42 policy, many Haitians have been expelled or forced to reside in “temporary” migrant camps along the border since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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28 Ira Kurzban, phone call interview with attorney, August 15, 2021
29 Kira Olsen-Medina and Jeanne Batalova, “Haitian Immigrants in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, August 12, 2020
30 Kyilah Terry, “New Haitian Migration Patterns End in Displacement,” UCLA Latin American Institute, April 17, 2019
31 Ibid
32 Title 42 is a particularly malicious policy that prevents any granting of asylum in the case of a public health concern, i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic
There they are vulnerable to violence, sexual assault, and are shunned by other Central American migrants who have an easier time blending in with the Mexican population.  

### POLICY RESPONSES

Several programs in Haiti have targeted climate change and outlined potential response strategies, including the National Agricultural Investment plan,” a large-scale project ($772 million) to reconstruct and develop the agricultural sector. It focuses on supporting small-scale farmers, sustainable natural resource management, and improving food security.” Additionally, Haitian analysts have conducted research on the link between migration and environmental conditions, such as the First National Communication (FNC) and the National Plan for Disaster Risk Management. Later reports, such as the National Action Plan for Adaptation (NAPA, 2006), the Second National Communication (SNC, 2011), and the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC, 2015) outlined Haiti’s contribution within the Paris Agreement towards a sustainable planet. Migration due to environmental causes was identified both as a problem and, ironically, as one of the only present solutions available to Haitians in response to environmental change. The groundwork to improve Haiti’s precarious circumstances has already been laid out; now the country will need to fairly elect honest government officials to carry out these plans, without foreign interference.

On an international scale, there is no shortage of initiatives and NGOs whose main mission is to help Haiti. Some of these include the Caribbean Climate Justice Initiative of the NYU School of Law, the Environmental Justice Initiative for Haiti, Oxfam International, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to name a few. It is essential to understand that these external organizations should only take supporting roles in Haiti’s strategies moving forward. As international allies to Haitians, we must remember that advocating for a larger international aid budget within our own countries is not doing the work we

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33Milen Dyoulgerov et al., “Vulnerability, Risk Reduction, and Adaptation to Climate Change: Haiti” (The World Bank Group, April 2011)
previously thought it did. Immigration rights attorney Ira Kurzban emphasizes that money allocated as foreign aid rarely makes its way to the ground in Haiti. Initiatives and NGOs are not a replacement for a well functioning self-reliant government, and unfortunately the United States government foreign aid budget is nothing more than a concealed path to funnel money back to U.S.-based corporations.

To properly address climate disasters and climate migration we must take a holistic approach in finding solutions, as none of these issues occurs in a vacuum. Focusing on migration means looking at the economic and political instability that forces people to either relocate from the rural countryside to big cities or leave Haiti altogether. Real solutions would consider the role that the United States, France, and Canada have played in continuing the state of destitution that forces Haiti to be reliant on these countries for resources and aid in exchange for control over the government and Haiti’s natural resources. We would do best by looking to Haitians in Haiti for leadership and supporting community-led organizations if we are to make sustained progress.