

Local struggles for housing rights in the context of climate change, urbanization and environmental degradation

Across the world, the right to adequate housing is under pressure from climate change, urbanization and environmental degradation. The urban population is growing, in part because more and more people are moving to the cities, including as a consequence of climate-related push factors.

Informal settlement dwellers and people living in poverty are particularly vulnerable to the increasing impacts of the climate crisis such as natural disasters, increasingly severe storms and sea level rise. Often poor communities are forced to settle on precarious land at the coast, on the banks of rivers or hillsides, or land that is subject to flooding. This increases their vulnerability to climate-induced disasters such as mudslides, flooding, extreme storms and sea level rise.

Although they are the most affected, more often than not poor communities and informal settlement dwellers, do not receive any support to protect themselves from climate change impacts and other crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or to address environmental degradation. This neglect is often a consequence of not being recognized as rights-holders by society or the state. Further, climate change and disaster risk reduction are increasingly being used as excuses for demolitions and evictions of informal settlements to make way for modernization and development projects, without adequate resettlement programs for displaced persons.

Adequate housing with access to water, sanitation and other necessary infrastructure and services, is a crucial element of crisis resilience, both in response to climate-induced disasters and to pandemics. States must urgently put in place mea-

asures to ensure those rights are respected, protected and fulfilled, including for the most disadvantaged in society. Participation of those affected is key. Therefore, States must start by engaging directly with poor communities to understand their needs and work with them to design sustainable solutions.

This publication is a joint initiative of the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, MISEREOR, and six civil society organizations who are working on the right to housing and related issues at the national and local levels:

- Fundacion Salvadorena de Desarrollo y Vivienda Minima (FUNDASAL), El Salvador
- Association pour l'Amour du Livre et le Développement Local (ASSOAL), Cameroon
- Pagtambayayong, the Philippines
- Community Organizers Multiversity (COM), the Philippines
- Centro de Investigación, Documentación y Asesoría Poblacional (CIDAP), Peru
- Spaces for Change, Nigeria.

It aims to show how the right to adequate housing and related rights (e.g.: water and sanitation) are threatened by climate change, increasing urbanization and environmental degradation, by highlighting ground-level experiences from Africa, Asia and Latin America. It aims to encourage an integrated approach to policy-making and to present examples of community-led advocacy and solutions from civil society groups from five countries: Cameroon, El Salvador, Nigeria, Peru and the Philippines. The report concludes with recommendations to national governments, local governments and the UN human rights mechanisms.



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Case Studies

CASE 1

EL SALVADOR

By Jacqueline Ivón Martínez and Alma Daysi Rivera (FUNDASAL)

This case study focuses on the qualitative housing deficit in informal settlements and how these conditions largely affect families in terms of the consequences of climate change and highlights a number of solutions that have emerged from communities themselves.

El Salvador's water crisis exacerbates the precarious situation of the poor population. In addition, the impacts of climate change are being increasingly felt, for example through the increased frequency of extreme natural events such as severe storms, heat waves and droughts. In 2020 storm Amanda and Cristóbal destroyed and damaged homes, affecting around 30,000 families.

The government has invested in protective works to limit the severity of stormwater flooding, but has no comprehensive strategy for reducing the impact of climate change on informal settlements.

Community-led solutions include the establishment of housing cooperatives which assist families to obtain legal security of tenure over their homes and access to basic services. Another example is the "Cradle of Peace" cooperative housing project, which involved the building of low-emissions housing using local materials, a rainwater harvesting system, a communal organic vegetable garden and local ecotourism sites to create livelihood opportunities.



Photo: Schwarzbach/MISEREOR

Civil society groups have managed to get the use of local materials (such as earth) included in El Salvador's official building regulations.

CASE 2

CAMEROON

By Jules Dumas Nguebou (ASSOAL)

In Cameroon, climate change is bringing more frequent floods and landslides which destroy vulnerable homes and pollute the water sources of the marginalized population. Poor governance, corruption and mismanagement of climate and urban policies leads to pressure on land resources, evictions, land grabbing and conflicts.

Successes have been achieved, including residents collectives which have advocated for new climate-sensitive social housing policies, piloted low cost, climate-responsive building and promoted participatory budgeting to ensure that local and national government resources and policies

are aligned with local needs and priorities.

In 2019 in the City of Bafoussam residents were hit by heavy rain that caused a landslide that swept away many houses and buried the occupants. Those without legal security of tenure were left homeless when their homes were destroyed. The Gouache disaster demonstrates why it is essential that the government takes into account the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation in housing policy-making and works with communities who are at risk from climate impacts, to protect their rights before and after disasters.



Photo: Ludwig Tröller

Informal settlements make up 90% of the urban area in Cameroon.

CASE 3

PHILIPPINES

By Francisco L. Fernandez
(Pagtambayayong)

Due to its geographic location, the Philippines ranks among the top three disaster-prone countries in the world. It is experiencing increasingly frequent and severe extreme climatic events. Urban poor communities are bearing the brunt of these disasters, as their homes are destroyed or flooded. Many of the climate adaptation programs adversely affect the poor when they relocate them to safer sites but far from their livelihoods.

Following advocacy by urban poor groups many gains have been achieved that protect housing rights. An example is the Urban Development and Housing Act or the Community Mortgage Program (CMP) that provides long term low interest loans to organized urban poor community associations to buy land, develop the site and build houses.

Further, urban poor communities have formed cooperative associations to jointly demand housing rights and climate justice. For instance, they make community Disaster Risk Reduction Plans and they prepare contingency plans for when disasters occur. Together, civil society groups are promoting the Urban Transformation Movement that advocates fighting the climate emergency while ensuring justice and social development for all.



Photo: Schwarzbach/MISEREOR

More than 30% of the urban population in the Philippines lives in slums that are very dense, unsanitary, and unsafe.

CASE 4

PHILIPPINES

By Luz B. Malibiran
(Community Organizers
Multiversity)

Flooding, severe storms and typhoons are becoming more frequent in Metro Manila because of climate change. Poor communities are particularly vulnerable to these disasters because they are forced to live on precarious land. The government in Metro Manila justifies evictions of these poor communities on the grounds of the safety and welfare of the urban poor. Frequently the government relocates the communities to distant sites far from livelihoods and support structures and without the accompanying supporting social services.

The communities formed the Alliance of People's Organizations Along Manggahan Floodway (APOAMF) and developed the "People's Plan" outlining a community alternative to forced evictions, to present to the government. It documented their recommendations for a fair relocation process and developed a climate-resilient, people-friendly and inclusive habitat concept. Negotiation processes with the government resulted in the construction of 15 low-rise buildings that have already accommodated 480 families, with 420 more to occupy their own housing units soon.



The members of the Alliance of People's Organizations Along Manggahan Floodway presented a "People's Plan" to the local and national governments.

Photo: COM

CASE 5

PERU

By Silvia de los Ríos (CIDAP)

More than 155,000 people in the metropolitan area of Lima live in poor quality housing in areas exposed to flooding.¹ This urban vulnerability is exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, such as increased rainfall, mud slides, heat waves and other natural disasters.

Neighbourhood community groups established a Community Alert System in two of Lima's poor neighbourhoods, involving community communication as a means of contributing to disaster prevention, mitigation and response. The public platform, Disaster Risk Management Information

1 CENEPRED (2019)

System, SIGRID alerts both the general public and the authorities to risks of disaster. The Cities for People Observatory is a community initiative which developed and hosts maps of settlements, which are not formally mapped and registered by the government. The maps are developed by the communities themselves in a participatory manner and provide information about living conditions, needs and risk which can be reported to the authorities. A community-managed solidarity fund uses community resources and local and national government contributions to reduce vulnerability to climate change and improve living conditions and quality of life through loans and credit for community works.

Settlements around the outskirts of Lima lie in high risk areas due to the weakness and/or morphology of the ground.

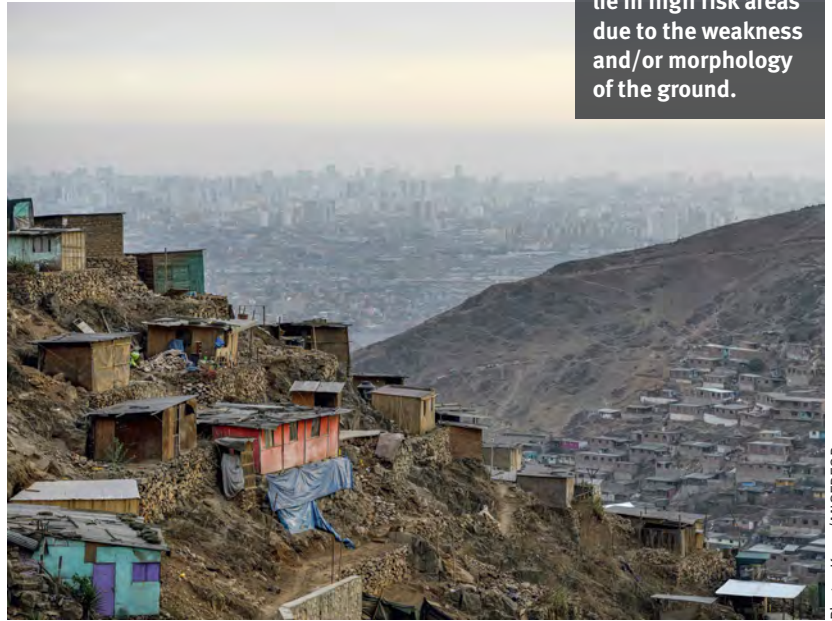


Photo: Kopp/MISEREOR

CASE 6

NIGERIA

By Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri and Aizighode Obinyan (*Spaces for Change*)

Lagos is prone to annual floods that displace people and destroy homes and livelihoods. Climate change is exacerbating the floods and causing coastal erosion, due to sea level rise and an increasing frequency of heavy rainstorms. These disasters are particularly destructive for informal settlements which are often located in low-lying, flood prone sites that lack drainage. The government responds by ordering the demolition of these informal settlements on safety grounds.

Informal settlements on the Lagos waterfront are under constant threat of forced eviction and demolition of their homes, despite the fact that many residents have lived there for decades. The law permits these evictions with only 7 days' notice and no payment of compensation. Therefore, the state can legally demolish the homes of waterfront communities without the payment of compensation, in the name of flood control and urban renewal.

Residents from 22 urban informal settlements came together to form the Communities Alliance Against Displacement (CAD) and to challenge the forced evictions and advocate for the rights of their communities. In one community, Isale-Akoka, there is no potable water and residents must pay high prices to purchase water from informal vendors or send their children on long walks to fetch water. Following advocacy by the CAD, the Lagos State Water Corporation selected two communities to be involved in a pilot project for immediate connection to the state's pipe-borne water network.



Photo: Rainer Wozny

Waterside settlements in Lagos, the state of Nigeria that is most affected by flooding.

Housing Rights in the Context of Climate Change, Urbanization and Environmental Degradation

- 1 Guarantee secure access to land and the right to housing for all.** This is a crucial means of protecting people from environmental and climate change impacts and from other crises, such as pandemics.
- 2 Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable as agreed in SDG 11.** All measures must be community-centered and based on human rights.
- 3 States must increase the ambition of their climate policies to limit global warming to 1.5°C** as the climate crisis is one of the biggest threats to human rights.
- 4 Recognize the role of urban areas and cities in creating a socially just and ecologically sustainable future.** Cities are key to improving the living conditions of poor communities, to achieving the SDGs and complying with the Paris Agreement.
- 5 Develop coherent, specific and integrated strategies to reduce the impacts of the climate crisis on human settlements.** They must be rights-respecting and include processes for the participation of civil society, particularly affected communities.
- 6 High-emissions States with an historical responsibility for climate change, donor organizations and the United Nations, must ensure access to (climate) finance** for protection measures against natural disasters and slow-onset climate impacts. Priority must be given to the marginalized and most affected populations.
- 7 Do not use climate risks as an excuse for evicting people from their homes!** States must support communities to stay where they live whenever possible.
- 8 Make public policies more inclusive, participatory and climate-sensitive.** For example, through shifting to a circular economy, enable the sustainable use and re-use of low-carbon and locally available building materials or participatory/citizens budgeting.
- 9 Support communities to self-organize** to deal with, and propose solutions to, the damaging impacts of climate change, pandemics and other disasters and risks. Experience shows that well-organized communities are more resilient in crises.
- 10 Enable monitoring and data collection on the housing situation of all rights holders.** States should also work with communities who are initiating their own monitoring, mapping and data collection projects, for example, through participatory mapping.

² These recommendations are deduced from the case studies presented in this report. They are directed towards State Governments while at the same time aiming at informing UN human rights mechanisms and institutions about necessary conditions that have to be achieved at the national and local levels. We give some selected examples with reference to the respective case studies. Each case study contains many more experiences and tools that cannot all be reflected in this section.

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