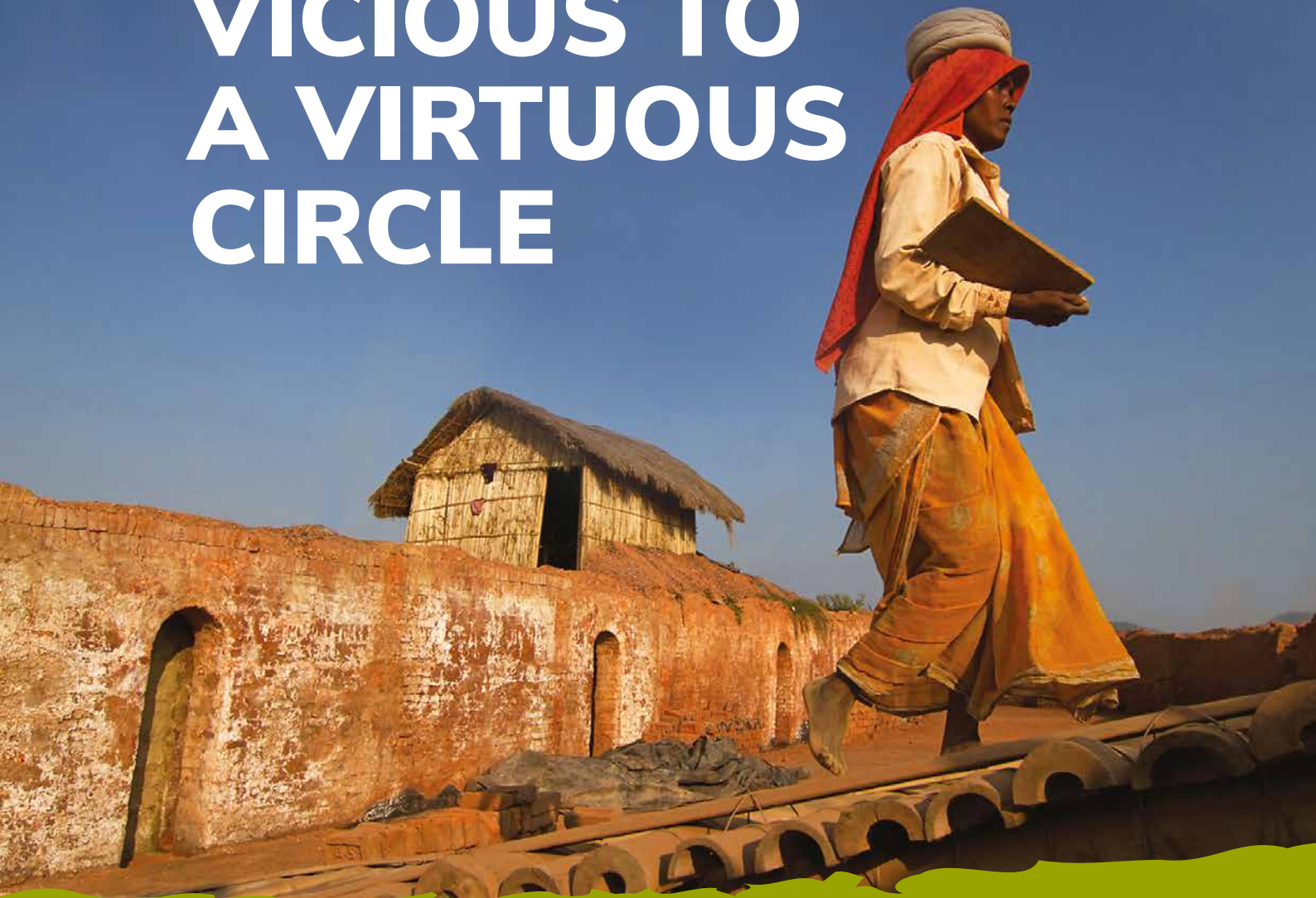


# FROM A VICIOUS TO A VIRTUOUS CIRCLE



Addressing climate change,  
environmental destruction  
and contemporary slavery

**Executive Summary**

# Executive summary

Right now, climate change is negatively affecting many of the most vulnerable people in the poorest countries in the world. A combination of sudden-onset disasters and slow-onset events are having a destabilising effect on urban and, in particular, rural communities. In many parts of the world the effects of climate change are exacerbated by economic activities that cause environmental degradation. Together these factors worsen pre-existing socio-economic vulnerabilities, deepen exclusion and marginalisation, drive displacement and migration, and heighten the risk of contemporary slavery for children and adults.

Covid-19's devastating impact is also deepening economic and social inequalities, driving millions of people into situations of vulnerability and exploitation, including human trafficking, forced labour and debt bondage.<sup>1</sup> These crises need to be tackled together to make sure that people who are made vulnerable to contemporary forms of slavery have the social protections and working conditions they need to lead their lives in dignity.

**“There is a very strong relationship: environment, mining and trafficking.”**

Specialist anti-trafficking prosecutor, Amazon region, Peru

Negative outcomes are not inevitable, however. Indeed, in the absence of sustained and comprehensive national and global action, many vulnerable communities are already proactively responding to these challenges. States and the scientific community have begun to pay increased attention to the potential of traditional, ancestral and indigenous knowledge and techniques as grassroots responses to the climate crisis. Isolated examples also exist of states adopting legal frameworks that promote resilience and adaptation.

What is needed is that those communities and countries most affected by climate change and environmental damage are provided with a suite of supports and options that protect fundamental human rights and enable them to build resilience to survive this crisis with dignity. The voices of those affected by this multi-faceted emergency – among them land and environmental rights defenders, those at risk of exploitation, and survivors of trafficking and slavery – must be heeded rather than dismissed.

In the words of indigenous leader Nemonte Nenquimo:

**“We are fighting to protect what we love – our way of life, our rivers, the animals, our forests, life on Earth – and it's time that you listened to us.”<sup>2</sup>**

Taking this path will involve radical change in mainstream approaches to these issues. For too long, states, corporations and multilateral bodies have treated climate change as a disembodied external threat, rather than as the consequence of a global economic system predicated on endless growth and the exploitation of nature and labour. In turn, the global response has prioritised a mix of externally imposed technocratic fixes and market-based mechanisms that are insufficient to resolve these issues and often incompatible with a human rights approach. Instead, what is needed is a fundamental shift in the allocation of power and resources, failing which we risk a scenario of deepening inequality, exclusion and vulnerability that former UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Forms of Poverty, Philip Alston, has likened to a 'climate apartheid'.<sup>3</sup>

If the stated aims of international commitments such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and the many other international human rights agreements are to be achieved, this fundamental shift is urgently required. States have made commitments to reduce emissions, fund climate adaptation, support migrants, prevent abuse and exploitation, involve affected and at-risk groups, and penalise those that profit from the abuse of the planet and its inhabitants – human and animal. The time has come for them to make good on those promises.

Right now, many people in the poorest and most climate vulnerable countries remain locked into a global economic system that commodifies nature and human beings, incentivising environmental destruction and exploitation. Right now, many governments and multilateral institutions are encouraging and even subsidising activities that actually increase emissions through pollution, land use change and deforestation. Right now, labour and environmental standards are under attack by global businesses that put profit before people and planet, while governments ignore abuses. Right now, many of those who resist are threatened, criminalised and murdered. Right now, we have an opportunity to design a global recovery that has human rights and climate justice at its heart.

This paper presents the findings of research into the relationship between climate change, environmental destruction and contemporary slavery to provide policy recommendations for national and international action. The research highlights the importance of a rights-based approach to tackling these intertwined and complex issues.



## What we are seeing

### **Climate change and environmental destruction are driving vulnerability to contemporary slavery**

- The impacts of climate change are destabilising communities and driving internal and cross-border migration.
- The world's poorest people are especially vulnerable to climate variability and environmental degradation due to their reliance on forests and natural resources.
- Without adequate tools and supports for the vulnerable, those pushed into migration are at risk of being exploited and abused.
- In many parts of the world, development models based on resource extraction and export-oriented agribusiness are worsening vulnerability to exploitation by monopolising land and resources, polluting the soil, air and water, destroying ecosystems, and driving displacement.
- Climate, environmental and human rights issues are often siloed within the state apparatus, hampering efforts to address them.
- Confusion over key concepts of contemporary slavery and an over-emphasis on criminal justice approaches can pull attention and resources away from the positive obligations of states to prevent foreseeable harms and protect victims, and of businesses to eradicate abuse from their supply chains.
- Many of the most affected communities and those from the most vulnerable sectors, including survivors of trafficking and slavery, are not meaningfully included in conversations about future policies or initiatives.

## What we want to see

### **An integrated social, economic and environmental response to build resilience**

- Adopt an integrated rights-based approach to tackling the climate, biodiversity and environmental crises.
- Act urgently to reduce emissions in wealthier countries via a just transition away from fossil fuels in favour of renewable alternatives that are environmentally sustainable and respect human rights.
- Prioritise and properly resource climate adaptation interventions and actions to build resilience in the most affected countries and amongst the most vulnerable populations, in line with international commitments.
- Enable and support safe migration both internally and across borders.
- Enforce existing laws on slavery, forced labour, human trafficking and debt bondage.
- Adopt a victim-centred approach to tackling contemporary slavery and take seriously states' positive obligations to prevent harm.
- Vigorously regulate business sectors associated with environmental destruction and slavery at the national level.
- Introduce mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence laws with strong liability provisions at national and regional levels, and a legally binding international treaty to cover global trade and supply chains.
- Address the root causes of the overlapping vulnerabilities to climate change and exploitation through anti-discrimination policies, comprehensive social protections and provision of key services such as health and, in particular, education.
- Adopt participatory and inclusive decision-making processes at all levels to ensure the meaningful participation of workers, affected groups and vulnerable communities.

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To read the full report – including case studies  
visit [antislavery.org/climate-change-modern-slavery](https://antislavery.org/climate-change-modern-slavery)

## Endnotes

- 1 Anti-Slavery International, 2020: Covid-19 and Slavery: the five big impacts.
- 2 Nenquimo, N. 2020. 'This is my message to the western world – your civilisation is killing life on Earth'. The Guardian, 12 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/12/western-worldyour-civilisation-killing-life-on-earth-indigenous-amazon-planet>.
- 3 Alston, P. 2019. Climate change and poverty. Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. June A/HRC/41/39. Geneva, United Human Rights Commission.



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