

# The costs of the climate crisis



*K'elafo, Ethiopia, January 2023.*

*Ethiopia, along with Somalia and Kenya, has sustained its worst drought in the last four decades due to failed rainy seasons. The UN estimates that drought has led to 12 million Ethiopians experiencing acute food insecurity. Coupled with an ongoing conflict in the north, in Tigray, risks of exploitation have risen. Photo credit: Eduardo Soteras/AFP via Getty Images.*

**Compounding crises serve to heighten the risks of all forms of modern slavery. The COVID-19 pandemic, armed conflicts, and climate change have led to unprecedented disruption in employment and education, as well as increases in inequalities, distress migration, and reports of gender-based violence and forced marriage.<sup>1</sup>**

Climate change intersects with modern slavery in multiple ways. The impact of climate change hits hardest those who are already in precarious situations, such as women, children, indigenous people, and members of marginalised communities, increasing their vulnerability to modern slavery. Its effects may push people to migrate and magnify drivers of displacement such as loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, and a lack of access to water and other natural resources.<sup>2</sup> Migration in these contexts can be unplanned, with people lacking the resources they need to move safely. The greater precariousness that is generated out of these situations exposes populations to higher risks of modern slavery.<sup>3</sup>

Modern slavery is also linked to environmentally degrading industries with high climate change impacts. Forced labour is pervasive in key industries that are driving deforestation around the world.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, there is increasing evidence that renewable industries vital to our urgent transition to clean energy are also reliant on forced labour for the mining, processing, and manufacturing of critical minerals and inputs.<sup>5</sup>

Yet modern slavery is seldom mentioned in the intensifying debate over how to protect the world's most vulnerable people from climate change while accelerating the global transition to clean energy. As a global community, we must give more focus to these issues to ensure that we understand the different ways climate change is driving modern slavery and how at-risk and affected communities can be brought into the process of designing better solutions.

**Anti-Slavery International** is the world's oldest human rights campaign, founded in 1839. It exists to challenge contemporary forms of slavery wherever they exist by tackling slavery's root causes. Working in partnership with survivors, experts and its members, Anti-Slavery International manages projects in countries worldwide to help communities to understand and eliminate the causes and adverse effects of modern slavery, through legislative change, research and advocacy. Anti-Slavery International is a UK-registered charity (No. 1049160) and a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales (no. 3079904).

For more information  
visit <https://antislavery.org>.

## The intersection between modern slavery, climate change, and migration

In recent years, the negative effects of climate change have forced millions of people to leave their homes and move elsewhere. People on the move, a group already vulnerable to severe exploitation<sup>6</sup> are at particular risk when moving in the context of climate change. This is because they are likely migrating as their livelihood and survival opportunities at home are severely threatened or have ceased to exist. In these circumstances, migration takes place "in distress," meaning in a situation of severe need and precariousness. As a result, people become more vulnerable to forced labour as they are already lacking adequate livelihood options and may be more easily tricked into accepting risky opportunities for survival. Overall, research by Anti-Slavery International and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) demonstrates that "climate change acts as a stress multiplier to factors driving modern slavery."<sup>7</sup>

Governments are failing to respond to the challenges that migration in these circumstances poses to individuals. The latest summary report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),<sup>8</sup> the United Nations expert body providing scientific evidence on climate change, suggests that severe climate events are pushing people to migrate in most of the world's regions. People are moving across borders as well as within their country's national boundaries. In 2021, climate-related disasters led to the displacement of nearly 24 million people globally. Most were attributed to rapid-onset weather-related events such as storms, floods, wildfires, droughts, landslides, and extreme temperatures.<sup>9</sup> The World Bank highlights that unless urgent climate action is taken soon, then by 2050 more than 200 million people will have moved within their country's borders as a result of climate change.<sup>10</sup>



## How do climate change events push people to migrate?

While climate change is rarely the only reason people migrate, migration can be a response to either slow or rapid onset climate events, and sometimes both.

### Rapid onset events

Rapid onset events, such as floods or hurricanes, are events that destroy livelihood opportunities and households resources suddenly. In these instances, climate events push people into sudden or heightened situations of need to earn an income, thereby leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by human traffickers and other criminal organisations.

### Leaving to survive, fighting to return: the impact of climate change

In 2013, Super Typhoon Haiyan, known locally as Typhoon Yolanda, struck the Philippines, destroying millions of homes and livelihoods, killing more than 6,000 people, and leaving many more displaced. Luwalhati\*, who is 31 years old, and her family were among those who survived; however, the aftermath of the disaster left them in poverty and Luwalhati was forced to seek work abroad to support her ailing mother and two younger brothers in Tacloban City.

She met a local recruiter who offered her a well-paid position in a factory overseas, promising all her expenses would be covered as well. Yet after arriving in Manila for training, Luwalhati was forced to work in a house there without pay. The man who later accompanied her to obtain her passport instructed her to apply with the name written in the papers she was holding if she wanted to go abroad, otherwise she should go back home at her own expense.

**“How can I go back to Tacloban? I do not have the money...My family is hoping that I will be able to help them cope from what the typhoon had left us.”**

Luwalhati left the Philippines for Thailand holding a tourist visa. From there, she travelled to Dubai. After working in Dubai for some time, she was sold as a domestic worker to an employer in Kuwait, a country she had never even heard of. Upon arrival, her passport was confiscated and she was left feeling confused, depressed, and isolated.

For example, modern slavery risks dramatically increased in the aftermath of Super Typhoon Rai, which hit the Philippines in December 2021 and displaced hundreds of thousands of people.<sup>11</sup> The typhoon caused widespread damage in the agricultural sector and decimated the livelihoods that depended on it, exacerbating vulnerabilities particularly for indigenous populations.<sup>12</sup> Risks of violence and exploitation were also identified among women and girls,<sup>13</sup> who are disproportionately vulnerable in the face of the climate crisis.<sup>14</sup> In Bangladesh, an increased risk of early marriage among girls from impoverished families has been attributed to extreme weather events. The practice is seen as a means of alleviating economic pressure and providing protection from the heightened risk of sexual violence during crises.<sup>15</sup>

She was forced to work for 12 to 15 hours a day and her salary was often withheld if she made a mistake. Her employers did not allow her to talk to anyone nor leave the house, and she was physically abused by them. All she could do was stay strong for her family and not give up.

Luwalhati was forced to work in Kuwait for five years. Every time she disposed of the waste outside, a young Kuwaiti woman next door smiled at her. One day, the neighbour told her to contact an NGO on social media to help her. Luwalhati contacted them secretly and they helped her escape.

**“I saw hope, for almost five years of not seeing my family. This was the chance for me to set myself free.”**

She was brought to the authorities, who helped her file a case and she was repatriated back to her country. At present, Luwalhati has set up a small store to support herself and family using the reintegration livelihood assistant program that the NGO helped her to acquire, while attending vocational education in Tacloban City.

*\*not her real name*

### Slow-onset climate events

Slow-onset events, such as droughts and rising sea-levels, result in lands becoming increasingly inhospitable. In these instances, loss of livelihood opportunities and extreme climate conditions can push individuals to move elsewhere for survival. Under these circumstances, their need to earn income can lead them to accept risky, exploitative employment solutions and incur debts to finance their migration journeys, in turn pushing them into situations of debt-bondage.

While rapid-onset severe weather events or climate shocks typically receive greater attention due to the visibility of their impacts,<sup>16</sup> the nexus between slow-onset climate events, migration, and modern slavery should not be ignored.

A 2022 study of two climate-affected locations in India found a higher prevalence of trafficking among migrants from a district suffering from slow-onset events compared to a district experiencing rapid-onset events.<sup>17</sup> In Palamu district, increasing drought and frost in recent decades have damaged the sustainability of agriculture and forest resources, leading to higher unemployment and pushing community members to migrate in search of work. Meanwhile, in Kendrapara district, communities have been affected by cyclones, floods, sea water intrusion, and salinity. The study showed that 42 per cent of migrant households from Palamu had experienced trafficking in comparison to 16 per cent in Kendrapara, which could be partly explained by the nature of the climate events. A lack of support and social protection for communities facing slow-onset events exacerbated the vulnerabilities they already faced.<sup>18</sup> In both locations, caste and class-based discrimination is driving disparity of access to resources, exploitation, and land grabs, which contributes to leaving some groups at greater risk than others.

In the Horn of Africa, increases in the rate of child marriages in drought-affected areas have been linked to the impacts of the climate crisis, particularly economic and food insecurity, displacement from homes, and interrupted education for girls.<sup>19</sup> In families unable to cope with climate-induced food insecurity, girls are at greater risk of being sold into sex work or early marriage to ease the financial strain on the household,<sup>20</sup> sometimes through payment of bride price.<sup>21</sup>

In some cases, slow-onset climate change threatens the existence of entire nations, such as among the Pacific Island countries and territories, where environmental factors have been forcing people from their homes. In 2014, the entire town of Vunidogoloa in Fiji was permanently relocated by the government as a result of the impact of climate change,<sup>22</sup> including encroaching sea water, regular flooding, and soil erosion. In atoll countries – a ring or chain of islands formed by coral – such as Kiribati and Niue, permanent relocation as a coping strategy for climate change has been on the political agenda for more than a decade.<sup>23</sup> Across the Pacific Island countries, risks created by environmental hazards increase as intensifying weather events and rising sea levels lead to greater food and water insecurity, crop loss, loss of arable land, overcrowding, poor health and sanitation, and increased competition for limited jobs.<sup>24</sup> These conditions create opportunities for traffickers to exploit vulnerable individuals,<sup>25</sup> particularly where avenues for regular migration are not readily available.<sup>26</sup> Women and girls with limited land rights are particularly vulnerable in these situations because they already face discrimination and become at greater risk of exploitation, particularly forced commercial sexual exploitation.<sup>27</sup>

### A vicious circle driven by extractive industries

Environmental degradation, often a side-effect of the economic activities of extractive industries such as mining and oil extraction, can similarly become a driver of migration that causes higher vulnerability to severe exploitation. In these cases, individuals can become trapped in a “vicious circle” where people flee their homelands due to environmental degradation caused by extractive practices, but end up working in these very same extractive industries, often experiencing exploitation. This is evidenced by Anti-Slavery International’s research in Peru and Bolivia.<sup>28</sup>

Extractive industries not only continue to destroy the environment and exacerbate the negative impacts of climate change, fuelling migration from affected communities, but also heavily rely on the severe exploitation of people. Often, people who have lost their livelihoods are then left with no option other than accepting exploitative conditions to earn some income to feed their families.

## Compounding vulnerabilities

### Who is most vulnerable to these impacts?

The impacts of climate change, particularly on decisions to migrate and on heightened risks of modern slavery, are not felt equally. They hit much harder on people who already experience limited access to resources, representation, and participation in society, both in terms of the immediate impacts from climate-induced weather events and ongoing risks associated with migration and exposure to severe exploitation.

Further research conducted by IIED in two states in India suggests that lower caste households, such as those of India's Dalits, who are significantly discriminated against, are three times more likely to migrate than higher caste households.<sup>29</sup> When inequalities, discrimination, and marginalisation exist, resilience to external shocks generated by the impact of climate change is low, precariousness increases, and so does vulnerability to modern slavery. Lack of inclusive access to support mechanisms often means that specific characteristics – such as a person's gender, age, or disability – creates further barriers to accessing support. This can increase vulnerability to severe exploitation.

When the negative impacts of climate change are combined with immobility, vulnerability to modern slavery can also be amplified as local resources and networks are eroded. Immobility can arise from lack of options to move elsewhere (such as due to lack of means) or from an unwillingness to migrate. Immobility is also found among already displaced people (who lack safe return options to their country of origin or access to resources) and in communities that hold a strong link with their ancestral lands.

### What other factors can play a role?

Separately, other structural factors, such as conflict, persecution, or political instability, can combine with climate change and other drivers to push people to migrate in situations of precariousness and make them more vulnerable to modern slavery.<sup>30</sup>

The negative impacts of climate change can also be among the factors fuelling tensions between local populations, as basic resources become scarce and the arrival of new groups puts pressure on existing infrastructure.<sup>31</sup> This can create competition over resources and in turn increase social tension and conflict, resulting in heightened modern slavery risks. In Somalia, extreme weather disrupts access to water and increases food insecurity.<sup>32</sup> Simultaneously, internally displaced people seek refuge from conflict and droughts by fleeing to Mogadishu, thereby increasing the strain on host communities.<sup>33</sup> These factors have contributed to escalating tensions between clans and are among those which can lead to the proliferation

of illegal armed groups, which in turn drive further displacement<sup>34</sup> and migration<sup>35</sup> while recruiting people affected by famine and food insecurity.<sup>36</sup> Extreme weather and climate-related resource scarcity are among the factors that have contributed to recruitment into non-state armed groups such as al-Shabaab,<sup>37</sup> Boko Haram,<sup>38</sup> and Islamic State,<sup>39</sup> which have been linked to modern slavery, including forced marriage<sup>40</sup> and the recruitment and use of children.<sup>41</sup>

Climate change can also exacerbate vulnerability in displaced settings. In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, flooding and landslides during monsoon season destroyed thousands of shelters occupied by Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar, further increasing humanitarian needs in the camps.<sup>42</sup> For a group already vulnerable to exploitation, the impact of climate events is significant, with further spikes in exploitation linked to increasing scarcity of resources and precarious living conditions.

More widely, where conflict has weakened institutions or aggravated drivers such as economic and food insecurity, communities and governments may also find themselves struggling to cope with the adverse effects of climate change and unable to adequately support individuals at greater risk of modern slavery.<sup>43</sup>

**“From South Sudan, to the Sahel, to the Dry Corridor in Central America, refugees, internally displaced and stateless people are often among the first to be affected by the climate emergency.”**

*Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021<sup>44</sup>*

### Exploitation's circular economy

In a separate, but related, issue to climate-induced migration, it is well-known that modern slavery is pervasive in some of the world's most environmentally- and climate-damaging industries. The charcoal, cattle, and palm oil industries are associated with forced labour, where workers in debt bondage are forced to clear forests; the illegality of this deforestation means that workers are unable to report such exploitative practices.<sup>45</sup> Moves to replace fossil fuels with biofuels, such as palm oil, have had unintended environmental and social impacts.<sup>46</sup> In Indonesia and Malaysia — the world's leading producers of palm oil — increased production has led to deforestation and loss of biodiversity<sup>47</sup> and has been linked to forced labour.<sup>48</sup>

Conversely, those industries most necessary for our urgent transition to clean energy are also sadly currently reliant on exploitation and forced labour. For example, risks have been identified throughout the solar energy value chain, from evidence of forced and child labour in cobalt artisanal mines

in the Democratic Republic of the Congo<sup>49</sup> to the production of polysilicon in the Uyghur region of China,<sup>50</sup> which evidence shows is reliant on systemic state-imposed forced labour of the Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim-majority groups.<sup>51</sup> The need to include just transition measures, such as ensuring decent work for all in the transition to a low-carbon economy, has been enshrined in international treaties on climate change such as the Paris Agreement<sup>52</sup> but has yet to be fully realised. With global temperatures almost inevitably set to continue rising,<sup>53</sup> government and business action to address both climate change and modern slavery — and its intersections with conflict, displacement, gender, and industry supply chains — are critical.

### What are the solutions we need?

There are still significant gaps in our understanding of how climate change and modern slavery interact with one another in different contexts and what solutions we need to eradicate the risks. In fact, the exact manifestations of vulnerability to severe exploitation emerging from climate change impacts, including climate-induced migration, are highly context specific. For example, they change depending on the type of climate emergency and the existing structural and individual factors that can amplify the impacts of climate events, as well as on the degree of precariousness and need that individuals experience. While the problem is global, solutions need to be local and driven by those affected.

This also means that we need to better understand who is most affected and vulnerable in the context of climate-change, including climate-induced migration. To do so, practitioners and policymakers need to direct their focus to listening and understanding the experiences of those who are traditionally not represented in societies and who often are excluded in blanket approaches to climate responses. This includes groups that are highly dependent on natural resources, such as indigenous people and rural communities, but also communities that face multiple forms of discrimination.

As we learn more about the intersection of climate change and modern slavery, we need to define specific solutions to reduce vulnerabilities. Anti-Slavery International is investigating these elements and collating evidence that can inform the design of solutions that are effective and speak to the needs of the most vulnerable. Meanwhile, the global community should move forward swiftly on actions that can be taken now. Policymakers have a key a role to play in reducing the risk of modern slavery in the context of climate change. Responses must be people-focused, rights-centred and integrated. If we act quickly in response to the linked challenges posed by climate change and modern slavery, we can make real progress toward a more just and equal society that is free of exploitation.

## Recommendations for governments

- 1** Take decisive climate action to put a halt to the worsening of climate change and the negative effects it has on communities across the world. This includes making the necessary, science-based reductions in carbon emissions in accordance with internationally recognised timelines.
- 2** Design climate solutions with an intersectional and inclusive approach that takes into account human rights violations, including vulnerability to modern slavery.
- 3** Develop safer and more legal routes for migration, to increase protection from vulnerability to severe exploitation. This should include removing barriers that prevent migrants from seeking refuge<sup>54</sup> from the impacts of climate change. National policies should address the vulnerabilities to modern slavery of internal migrants, including by improving accessibility to social protection mechanisms.
- 4** Support local communities to become more resilient to climate events, through introducing risk management strategies, livelihood protection support, collective bargaining support, and social protection initiatives to ease pressure on households to adopt risky coping strategies amid climate-related displacement.<sup>55</sup>
- 5** Ensure that the transition to a carbon-free global economy provides decent work for all by addressing and preventing forced labour risks in the value chains of sustainable energy products.
- 6** Ensure that climate finance through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is allocated to addressing climate-induced vulnerability to modern slavery.<sup>56</sup>