



*Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense*  
*Asociación Interamericana para la Defensa del Ambiente*

## **The Human Rights Impacts of Climate Change in the Americas**

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### **Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>**

Global climate change is a reality and will cause serious impacts for human populations throughout the Americas and all across the globe. Prompted by international concerns regarding climate change, the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 2008 requested that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) investigate the link between climate change and human rights. This report seeks to inform that effort by describing climate change's impacts in the hemisphere – both observed and predicted – and the ways in which these affect the enjoyment of human rights. It is vital that the IACHR recognize the negative implications of climate change for human rights and that it make recommendations to OAS Member States on how to fulfill their international obligations to protect and guarantee human rights.

This report shows that global climate change is already affecting the enjoyment of human rights in the Americas and that these impacts will likely intensify in the future. This is not an exhaustive list of all possible climate change consequences, but rather a summary of those that are currently best understood, most directly attributable to global climate change, and that have the potential to affect the greatest number of people and vulnerable communities.

One of the most troubling impacts that this report identifies is the dramatic reduction in freshwater availability for millions of people as glaciers melt, water-capturing ecosystems such as high-mountain *paramos* degrade, and weather patterns become more erratic. Climatic eccentricities are also increasing storm severity and flooding, thereby causing the destruction of thousands of homes, loss of crops and damage to infrastructure. The report further highlights the threat that global climate change poses to the oceans and the impacts that will occur as sea-levels rise and fish populations that feed thousands of communities are decimated. Further inland, increasing droughts and wildfires will bring disastrous consequences for access to food and housing. Finally, this report describes how the above impacts can also lead to increases in heat and vector borne illnesses.

These climate change impacts all have severe negative consequences for the enjoyment of human rights in the hemisphere. Principal among these will be the right to a healthy environment, as erratic weather deteriorates the ecosystems on which human communities all throughout the Americas depend. Because this right is closely connected to many other fundamental human rights, climate change effects will also severally hamper – for millions of people on the Americas – the rights to a dignified life, health, food, water, and adequate housing, among many others.

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<sup>1</sup> Advanced draft of the Executive Summary and Recommendations of AIDA's report, *The Human Rights Impact of Climate Change in the Americas*, presented during the 141<sup>st</sup> session of hearings of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, March 28, 2011.

Under international law and the American Convention on Human Rights, States have a positive obligation to protect and guarantee the human rights of persons under their jurisdiction. Additionally, States must use all the means at their disposal to avoid harmful activities, such as pollution, from causing significant damage to the environment in other nations. With respect to climate change, these obligations are particularly relevant for developed nations that are responsible for a disproportionately greater amount of historical and current contributions to human-generated climate change. For example, the United States of America has contributed 28.75% of historical, cumulative GHG emissions, while all Central and South American nations have only contributed a total of 1.38% and 2.30% respectively. Therefore, countries such as the United States and Canada have a greater obligation to prevent, mitigate and facilitate adaptation to climate change in the hemisphere.

This report also demonstrates that human rights impacts stemming from climate change will be most strongly felt in socially marginalized and traditional communities, which are also the least responsible for the human contribution to climate change. Communities in situations of vulnerability, including the poor, women, children, disadvantaged ethnic groups and the elderly, are often disproportionately affected in natural and climate-induced disasters. In addition, traditional and indigenous peoples and peasant farmers are more reliant on the natural systems disrupted by climate change for their subsistence and livelihoods. Moreover, the ability of these communities to enjoy their culture will be negatively affected by climate change impacts on lands and ecosystems of historical, cultural, and spiritual significance.

Finally, it is important that the IACHR note how climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies can also threaten the enjoyment of human rights. Market-based mechanisms for greenhouse gas mitigation present a host of equity concerns. For example, carbon trading programs can lead to the concentration of industries that emit other harmful pollutions along with carbon emissions that can seriously harm the health of nearby communities. Biofuel crops can compete for limited farmland with other crops causing food prices to rise and affecting the rights to food and a dignified life. Also, adaptation programs, which may foreseeably involve the massive relocation of many coastal communities, could result in forced displacements. When planning and implementing measures to limit harms from climate change, it is crucial that States respect the rights of all peoples to information and public participation to help avoid the above complications.

Below we briefly summarize key facts regarding the impact of climate change on the enjoyment of human rights in the hemisphere. We then conclude by presenting recommendations that States and other key actors in the hemisphere should consider in developing solutions to human-caused climate change.

#### ***A. Principal climate change impacts for human rights in the Americas:***

##### ***Loss of freshwater resources and droughts***

- Tropical Andean glaciers have shrunk dramatically since the 1970s in a trend that is directly related to rising temperatures. Climate scientists predict that up to 50 million people will be affected by the loss of dry-season water for drinking, irrigation, sanitation, and hydropower.
- Most of the region has experienced a substantial increase in drought severity since the 1970s, except for the Southern Cone region which has gotten substantially wetter. Scientists estimate

that by 2025, as many as 77 million additional people in Latin America will experience water stress because of climate change.

- About 90% of agriculture in Latin America is not irrigated and is thus very vulnerable to changes in precipitation or increased soil erosion.

#### Extreme storms and flooding

- Heavy rains have become more frequent even in places where annual precipitation has decreased, and Latin America has recently experienced unusually extreme flooding. For example, in 2008 over 300,000 people were left homeless when two widespread floods hit Brazil in a single, six-month period. In 2010 Colombia suffered its most devastating floods in forty years, adversely affecting over 2.2 million people and costing the country over USD \$300 million for emergency relief.
- The strongest hurricanes in the North Atlantic region have gained intensity since the 1970s in a pattern associated with warmer sea surface temperatures. Millions of people live in the path of increasingly fierce hurricanes in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, where, since 1970, an average of 1,300 people have been killed and 70,000 left homeless every year by storms, mudslides, or floods.

#### Rising sea-levels and marine ecosystem destruction

- Since the 1960s, climate change has caused sea levels to rise at an ever-increasing pace, consistently exceeding scientific projections (current estimates range from 0.6 to 1.9 meters by 2100). The impacts are already being felt by coastal communities such as the indigenous Kuna of Panama's San Blas Islands. A 1.5 m sea level rise – within scientific projections in the absence of serious near-term mitigation efforts – could displace millions of people in the region, including 90% of the population of Guyana.
- Warming ocean temperatures are the likely cause of a precipitous decline in the marine algae that are the foundation of ocean ecosystems. Factors associated with climate change, including increases in storm surges, warming water temperatures, and ocean acidification, have likely contributed to the destruction of over 80% of Caribbean coral reefs that provide important breeding grounds for fish. Wild fish make up 84% of the fisheries of Latin America, and significant loss of fish populations would impact food security, nutrition, and livelihoods.

#### Increased wildfires

- Droughts associated with climate change have led to more frequent, intense and deadly wildfires since the 1980s. During the 1990s, fires raged in forests that had never been subject to widespread burning before, including the Brazilian rainforests and Mexican cloud forests. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) scientists fear climate change will lead to a catastrophic die-back of the Amazon forests that would fundamentally alter local precipitation patterns and biodiversity, and negatively affect traditional livelihoods and cultures.

#### Heat and vector-borne illness

- Climate change causes human health impacts through multiple pathways. Increased flooding and warmer temperatures help spread diarrhea and vector-borne illnesses. One study estimates

that by 2030, Latin America may experience up to a 28% growth in risk of malaria due to climate change.

- Hot days, hot nights, and heat waves are on the rise and cause heat-related deaths and warmer air temperatures also exacerbate ground-level ozone and smog pollution, contributing to respiratory illnesses. This can be especially worrisome in many mega-cities, such as Mexico City, that are also located in air basins subject to thermal inversions that trap toxic air pollutants.

***B. Recommendations for protecting human rights in the face of climate change:***

- States should cooperate to create binding, effective and equitable international commitments to prevent further contributions to global climate change, particularly through the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations;
- All States should work to the greatest extent possible to reduce the human-caused contributions to global climate change. Efforts should not only address vehicular and industrial sources, but also take a comprehensive view by addressing other causes such as large dams and deforestation;
- States that have historically contributed and are presently contributing most to global climate change should heed their responsibility to aid other States in adapting to and mitigating climate change impacts that affect human rights. This cooperation should also follow principles of equity and “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities;”
- States that undertake adaptation or mitigation measures should ensure, from the very earliest stages of planning, that all interested parties and affected persons have prior access to information and are allowed to participate in decision-making processes;
- States should take measures to improve access to information regarding adverse climate change impacts and possible human rights implications of these, in particular for communities in situations of vulnerability. States should also provide information on the possible climate change impacts of new development or investment projects, for example, by requiring environmental and human rights impact assessments to consider climate change impacts;
- Intergovernmental bodies such as the OAS should create spaces for Member States to negotiate binding obligations to mitigate climate change. They should also encourage international cooperation between States so that developed States can fulfill their obligations to help lesser developed States adapt to climate change impacts that affect human rights;
- International Financial Institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank should incorporate a human rights perspective in their financing policies for the energy sector, and should refrain from funding projects that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.

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