

## ADAPTATION STRATEGIES AND CARE PRACTICES AMONG CLIMATE-DISPLACED COMMUNITIES: COLOMBIAN CASE <sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** Climate displacement may be challenging to child development, since strategies adopted by families and communities, as well as those public initiatives and measures in order to ensure survival in this new order, are not always oriented to infants' full development. Care practices are affected by the dramatic changes faced by displaced families, resulting in a sudden rupture or transformation in everyday life. In this regard, the following project seeks to identify the challenges in terms of care after the 2010-2011 rainy season, taking as its point of reference the case of the communities affected in the South of the department of Atlántico in Colombia.

**Keywords:** Adaptation strategies, care practices, climate displacement.

## ESTRATEGIAS DE ADAPTACIÓN Y PRÁCTICAS DE CUIDADO EN COMUNIDADES DESPLAZADAS CLIMÁTICAS: CASO COLOMBIANO

**RESUMEN.** El desplazamiento climático puede constituir un desafío para el desarrollo infantil, dado que las estrategias adoptadas por las familias y la comunidad, así como aquellas iniciativas o medidas institucionales para garantizar la supervivencia en este nuevo orden, no siempre se orientan al desarrollo integral de los infantes. Las prácticas de cuidado se ven afectadas por los dramáticos cambios a los que se enfrentan las familias en situación de desplazamiento, traduciéndose en la ruptura o transformación repentina de la cotidianidad. En ese sentido, el proyecto que se presenta, buscó conocer los retos en materia de cuidado infantil tras la ola invernal de 2010-2011, tomando como caso de estudio, las comunidades afectadas en el sur del departamento del Atlántico en Colombia.

**Palabras clave:** Estrategias de adaptación, cuidado, desplazamiento climático.

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## **ESTRATÉGIAS DE ADAPTAÇÃO E PRÁTICAS DE CUIDADOS EM COMUNIDADES DESLOCADAS PELO CLIMA: CASO COLOMBIANO**

**RESUMO.** As mudanças climáticas podem constituir um agravamento para o desenvolvimento infantil, dado que as estratégias adotadas pelas famílias e comunidade, assim como as iniciativas e medidas institucionais para garantir a sobrevivência nesta nova ordem, nem sempre são adequadas ao desenvolvimento integral das crianças. As práticas de cuidados são afetadas pelas mudanças dramáticas enfrentadas pelas famílias em situações de deslocamento, resultando na quebra repentina ou transformação da vida cotidiana. Neste sentido, o projeto apresentado, procurou conhecer os desafios da assistência à infância após o inverno de 2010-2011, tomando como estudo de caso, as comunidades afetadas no sul do departamento do Atlântico na Colômbia.

**Palavras-chave:** Estratégias de adaptação; cuidado; mudanças climáticas.

### **Adaptation and care practices in climate displaced communities**

Migration has been considered as a powerful strategy for climate change adaptation (Jha, Gupta, Vhattopadhyay, & Sreeraman, 2018; Adger et al., 2015; Gemenne, 2015), as long as it results in long-lasting solutions for the people involved, so that they can have access to new opportunities in the new setting (McLeman & Hunter, 2010). In this article, adaptation is understood as a social dynamic process, partly determined by the ability of communities to act in a collective manner with the purpose to respond and overcome the risk or the impact of a climate variation (Adger, Huq, Brown, Conway, & Hulme, 2003; Adger et al., 2009). This capacity is based on the interaction of different factors, i.e. finance resources, access to information, social resources, human capital and institutional infrastructure to ensure security (Barnett & Webber, 2009).

Climate migration is understood as a demographic consequence of climate change, reflecting an ecological inflection between individuals and their physical, emotional and institutional environment due to the progressive or sudden degradation of environmental conditions (Amar-Amar et al., 2014; Gonzaga & Hernández, 2014). This type of migration is now seen as a multicausal phenomenon (Baldwin & Fornalé, 2017), mostly related to people's perception of change in their environmental conditions. However, it can also be associated with the unfavorable institutional, social and economic elements that put people's livelihoods at risk, increasing the pressure to migrate and involving resilient and maladaptive coexistent actions (Gemenne & Blocher, 2017). Thus, climate displacement acquires a dichotomic connotation: it can be a trigger for individual and social concerns, or an impetus for action in order to generate favorable conditions among migrant communities (Amar-Amar et al., 2014).

On the other hand, climate displacement involves the temporary or permanent abandonment of the place of residence, as well as the resettlement in a new and different location that can be at a relatively close distance from the point of departure or beyond national borders (Yamamoto, Serraglio & Cavedon-Capdeville, 2018). In many cases, this generates a household reorganization, consisting of redistributing and redefining chores and

roles of its members, creating changes in the productive activities, habits and practices (Amar-Amar et al., 2016; Amar-Amar et al., 2014). At the community level, these displacements are characterized by the reconstruction of the social fabric and the emergence of new scenarios of social linkages marked by the dichotomy between solidarity and the competition for access to resources (Amar-Amar et al., 2014).

At the institutional level, climate displacement translates to the absence of a socio-administrative system capable of minimizing social cost of this human mobility. This could lead to the improvised management of humanitarian assistance due to the lack of policies that address the specific concerns related to migration dynamics and their impacts on territories (Amar-Amar et al., 2014; Yamamoto et al., 2018). These impacts are related to a low and gradual incorporation of policy formulation for climate change. For instance, in Latin America, even though the opposition to the climate agenda is not strong, decisions are made under circumstances of events with high national effect or according to conditions of economic opportunities (Ryan, 2017).

In the context of climate displacement, adaptation processes require a transformation of people's habits to ensure subsistence. Here, special attention should be given to the concept of care, including practices at the individual and collective level, directed to people who require special attention and assistance. Care is understood as the set of practices that ensure the development of human potential, e.g. eating, hygiene, sleep and leisure habits, affectivity, filiation, security, sexuality, as well as moral education and accepting rules (Amar-Amar et al., 2016). These practices primarily take place at the household level; the family being a critical agent of emotional connections, early learning and financial support (Amar-Amar et al., 2016).

Care practices are built upon customs (Evans & Myers, 1995; Rodríguez, Santos Talani & Tovar, 2015). They are a cultural process and product, shaping a large part of individual and community identities. But what happens when the strategies traditionally used by groups require an abrupt adjustment to guarantee survival in the face of a climate event? Sudden transformation of certain habits at the household level triggers a process of consolidation until new habits become sustainable actions, evolving into new characteristics of normality and everyday life of communities involved. In this regard, a point of convergence between the concepts of care practices and adaptation lies in the implementation of actions towards ensuring subsistence and the improvement of people's living conditions.

## **Climate displacement in Colombia**

Colombia is a country particularly vulnerable to climate variability phenomena (Milanés Batista, Galbán Rodríguez & Olaya Coronado, 2017; Ramírez-Villegas, Salazar, Jarvis, & Navarro-Racines, 2012). Its geographic characteristics, along with high levels of poverty, inequality and institutional weakness contribute to the settlement of thousands of people in hazard-prone areas (González-Velandia, 2014). In this respect, corruption, weak legislation and insufficient strategies of results monitoring play an important role; although the disaster management law should provide tools to face environmental adversities, many communities are ill-prepared from participating in the planning process (Ávila-Toscano, Vivas, Herrera, & Jiménez, 2016; Sedano-Cruz, Carvajal-Escobar, & Díaz, 2013; Solano & Polo, 2015).

An example of this is the riverine communities of the Magdalena River -Colombia's major river- who have historically experienced seasonal flooding (Fals Borda, 1984). At the

end of 2010, the heavy rains associated with El Niño phenomenon increased the river flow to levels never registered before (Sánchez, 2011). This generated a dam rupture from the Dique Canal, allowing the ingress of 2,200 millions of m<sup>3</sup> of water in the lowlands of the south Atlantico Department, and causing massive flooding in various municipalities (Amar-Amar et al., 2014). Within this area, approximately 43,000 families were affected through the loss of houses, livelihoods and infrastructure damage, which in turn caused the displacement of thousands of people (Alta Consejería para las Regiones y la Participación Ciudadana, 2012). The large impact triggered by the natural event made these communities some of the most representative of the challenges presented by ever increasing climate events and adaptation to climate change in the country (Amar-Amar et al., 2014; Cardozo, Martinez, Colmenares, Oviedo, & Rocha, 2012).

This raised the concern to understand how families and communities faced adversity and reshaped their social and community relations, particularly in a situation that places children at a high-risk condition for their development.

### **The experience of a 'climate displaced' community**

In the context of climate displacement, different projects were implemented to discover the challenges of adaptation after the 2010-2011 rainy season and their consequences on child care practices. Likewise, they aimed to promote actions for child development even in the most complex conditions of families in the affected areas.

Projects consisted of an interdisciplinary team and were based on a methodological design composed by three stages: diagnosis, intervention, and evaluation of effects on participant population. The diagnosis phase included a literature review about adaptation, climate displacement and care practices; in-situ observations during 18 months, both of families in shelters and those that returned to their homes; in-depth interviews and focus groups. During the implementation phase, workshops promoting resilience, care and child development were carried out to support families after the flood. Finally, evaluations were conducted on the perception of families about changes in their care practices and community interactions, and on the evidenced changes in child development indicators of children between 0 and 5 years old.

Some of the findings generated at the different moments of the project will be presented in this section, as well as some reflections for practitioners and public policy makers about key issues with regard to climate displaced people that require attention.

The 2010 flooding marked a turning point in the life of southern inhabitants of the Atlantico Department. Community displacement was the result of a combination of factors, such as the lack of community preparedness to face a disaster, as well as the fragility of risk management policies implemented in an area historically affected by flooding. The sudden nature of the event resulted in confusion and led to general chaos during the moment of evacuation. Only people and families with financial resources and strong social networks were able to save some assets, while the poorest were forced to leave their belongings and livelihood.

Displaced people initially faced a situation characterized by competition for space and the distribution of available resources with host populations, equally considered as poor. In addition to official shelters, where many people lived for almost 4 years, part of the population chose to resettle with relatives and friends in close municipalities or in the periphery of the capital city of the Department. Others settled in makeshift dwellings along

the roads. Sparseness of the population constrained the efficient and equitable delivery of emergency assistance. Those who could not be registered in the official lists turned to alternative assistance systems within the community, depending on the possibilities of the others to receive aid or to mobilize resources.

Thus, displaced people undertook a long migration journey characterized by the temporariness between departure and receiving territories, which in turn was determined by the limited possibilities to satisfy family needs, cohabitation and integration conditions, and by the absence of cultural and social ties in the arrival places. Displacement caused an economic breakdown due to the loss of livelihood, which many were unable to regain in the receiving territories.

Families affected by displacement lived in overcrowded conditions and confinement in small and unfamiliar spaces. These inadequate housing conditions characterized by lack of privacy exacerbated the breakdown of family functioning and daily routine, intensifying the feeling of uprooting and unfamiliarity with receiving places. These living conditions ultimately led to family and social fabric fragmentation. In many cases, contact with the city produced a destabilizing effect due to insufficient economic opportunities offered by receiving places, consequently, reinforcing marginalization and exclusion.

Accumulated effects of these displacement conditions prompted the return of the displaced population to the disaster area. This decision was determined by the absence of significant official assistance able to organize and engage in material and social reconstruction. A strong momentum emerged among the community to develop strategies in order to recover individual spaces and assets, partially possible through a system of 'getting by' and mutual assistance. Nevertheless, the apparent opportunity to 'rebuild better' was hampered very early by the lack of resources in a collapsing economy, characterized by the lack of employment opportunities and the impossibility to restore productive assets destroyed by the flood.

In the months that followed the return, this economy of survival did not allow people to restore and improve prior living conditions. Furthermore, the process of return highlighted the social dislocation and the need to rebuild emotional and social ties within the community. Projects and programs supported by local government hardly considered this dimension, focusing instead on material reconstruction in the affected zone.

## **Discussion: Implications of climate displacement on care practices**

Observations on the impacts of climate displacement on the daily lives of families, in particular, care practices and strategies adopted by families to guarantee survival guided the following reflections.

As indicated previously, climate displacement, relocation or the return of population to the disaster area, generated deep changes within communities and had a severe impact on care practices. It is pivotal to point out that care practices are created within the framework of private and public life. These practices interact in function of four types of relationships: those concerning the distribution of responsibilities inside and outside the home; relationships that exist between people requiring care and those providing it; relationships established between actors and institutions that regulate and ensure access to care; and finally, working relationships between caregivers and their respective care centers (Amar-Amar et al., 2016).

Although the distribution of responsibilities at home has received minor attention, it remains a critical issue linked to climate migration in its various forms (displacement, resettlement and return). It is frequent to see teenagers, as elder brothers and sisters or cousins, assuming the role of caregivers of the youngest (Pedone, 2006), while adults migrate to more distant places to seek resources, sometimes, beyond borders (Amar-Amar et al., 2012); similar scenarios have been found in other cases of climate migration (Yamamoto et al., 2018). Hence, young caregivers may stay the entire day with children – a situation that prevents youth and infants from going to school. In many cases, they are forced to drop out of school to supplement household incomes, pushing them into the world of informal economy. These life conditions affect the coverage of fundamental needs for children that are essential for their healthy development, such as leisure activities and rest (Amar-Amar et al., 2016; Cardozo et al., 2012). This may also lead to emotional, social and health disorders (Skeels & Sandvik-Nylund, 2012).

With regard to the relations between caregivers and those receiving care, critical changes occur especially as a consequence of family dispersion to different places, due to the generation of new burdens for those who receive them. Host families may assume the role of caregivers of children, elderly, ill and disabled people (Amar-Amar et al., 2012). This leads to tension and cohabitation problems due to changes in daily routines, increase of chores, lack of privacy, poor sanitation services and lack of sufficient food (Amar-Amar et al., 2016).

Finally, regarding the institutions that regulate and offer care services, the 2010-2011 rainy season evidenced the institutional incapacity to minimize social costs of climate displacement (Amar-Amar et al., 2014; Ávila-Toscano et al., 2016). Beyond the humanitarian emergency assistance, the lack of a comprehensive migration policy creates disturbance in living conditions of reception locations. In this way, care practices in the public domain are also affected. Schools, early childhood attention centers and health centers are transformed into temporary shelters; reconstruction in the disaster area can take months, obstructing full access to essential needs and rights (Amar-Amar et al., 2014; Amar-Amar et al., 2012; Cardozo et al., 2012).

In addition, the overcrowding for long periods, the absence of programs for their economic re-establishment, the strong dependency on governmental aid, and the competition for resources in the recipient communities, all undermine the possibilities for development both in reception and departure locations once the emergency has ceased. This has also been the case in other types of migration, for instance, forced displacement as a result of violence (Clavijo & Valencia, 2016). In the long term, this represents another risk for communities which hinders access to future opportunities, and to goods and services needed for specific and complete potential development, especially of the youngest child.

## **Final considerations**

After five years accompanying displaced, resettled, and returned populations affected by an extreme climate event, we aimed to present some considerations from our field experience. We emphasize government responsibility to generate conditions that guarantee the rights of the most vulnerable in these contexts. When there are thousands of people in this situation, the political solution cannot punish parents or take children to foster homes. This represents a complex dynamic which requires recognizing the changing roles of adults

and children in the new conditions. It is also critical to explore different forms of support during the process of adaptation that include the necessary tools for caregivers, so that they can provide the best conditions of care to children and ensure their own development opportunities.

Likewise, with the purpose to keep caregivers close to their children, institutions should propose occupational and work alternatives in the reception and return locations. This has to be combined with solutions for decent accommodation, access to good quality services, particularly hygiene and sanitation, health and education. Moreover, institutions must assure the circulation of information that contributes to facilitate coexistence during displacement, resettlement and return, e.g. rules of coexistence, promotion and prevention campaigns, and information that aim at the protection of child and caregivers' rights.

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