

How aid cuts could make vulnerable communities even less resilient to climate change

May 19 2025, by Kalle Hirvonen and Olli-Pekka Kuusela

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As global temperatures rise and climate-related disasters [become more frequent](#), the need to adapt is rapidly increasing. That need for adaptation—from adjusting farming practices to diversifying livelihoods and strengthening infrastructure—is most acute in vulnerable low- and middle-income countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Haiti and Vietnam.

Despite contributing a negligible share of [historical global greenhouse gas emissions](#), these countries are facing the brunt of climate change. Yet as the demand for long-term resilience grows, international aid priorities are shifting in the opposite direction.

Over the past three years, several major rich countries have substantially cut their development aid budgets. Remaining funds have been [redirected](#) toward [emergency relief](#).

This shift could [undermine the climate finance commitments](#) made by wealthy countries to mobilize US\$300 billion (£228 billion) a year for climate action in the most vulnerable low- and [middle-income countries](#) by 2035.

Emergency aid, while vital for saving lives during crises such as droughts and floods, is reactive by nature. It arrives only after disaster has struck, often with a [substantial delay](#).

By contrast, [climate adaptation](#) is proactive. It focuses on anticipating future risks and helping communities prepare for changing environments.

A key part of this is supporting transitions away from sectors like crop agriculture that are particularly vulnerable to climate-related shocks. In some cases, adapting to a changing climate may also require helping families move safely—turning relocation into a choice rather than a last

resort.

In Ethiopia, one of the world's [most drought-prone countries](#), a US government-funded [food security program](#) aimed to strengthen resilience by offering livelihood training, organizing savings groups and providing a US\$200 lump sum to poor rural households. Research shows that this program improved food security and protected assets [during periods of drought](#).

[In Nicaragua](#), families who received cash transfers alongside vocational training or investment grants were better protected against drought shocks than those relying on cash alone. These households could supplement farming with other income sources. This made them less vulnerable to drought-related losses and helped stabilize their earnings throughout the year.

These schemes are known as "cash-plus programs." They help create the conditions for households to [adapt](#) and [thrive](#). But when climate and environmental shocks overwhelm the resilience of local communities, relocation may still become the only viable option.

That's why proactive adaptation efforts need to be scaled up and broadened—not only to meet immediate needs but to support longer-term transitions. This includes investing in sustainable livelihoods through diversified income sources, skills training and, when necessary, enabling safe and voluntary relocation.

Some pilot interventions that supported seasonal rural-to-urban migration have shown what's possible. [In Bangladesh](#), a small migration subsidy of just US\$8.50 helped the participating poor farm households affected by seasonal famine cover travel costs.

Migration for temporary work increased by 22%, and families back

home experienced improvements in food security. With even modest support, people were able to access job opportunities in cities and strengthen their resilience.

Programs that make it easier for people to choose to move from rural areas to cities could help families move with dignity rather than in desperation. However, scaling up such initiatives successfully [remains a challenge](#), requiring strong political commitment and effective governance.

Climate relocation

Without proactive planning and support, migration often happens out of necessity rather than choice. This kind of displacement typically occurs [within national borders](#) rather than across continents—contrary to [popular narratives](#).

In fact, 59% of the world's forcibly displaced population live [within their own country](#). By the end of 2023, [a record 75.9 million people](#) across 116 countries were internally displaced—a 51% increase over the previous five years, driven in part by climate change.

History provides sobering lessons about relocation triggered by environmental collapse. In the 1930s, a severe drought and [dust storms](#) struck the Great Plains in the US, creating the ["dust bowl."](#) This devastated farmland and forced millions of people to leave their homes, as economic hardship became widespread and the land so degraded that crops wouldn't grow.

Today, similar patterns loom as droughts, floods and rising seas threaten livelihoods around the world. Small island states such as [Tuvalu](#) face existential threats from rising sea levels, with entire communities at risk of being displaced.

These mounting threats underscore a hard truth: the window for effective climate adaptation is rapidly closing. As [climate disruptions intensify](#), the case for long-term investment in resilience has never been clearer. Without proactive adaptation, the cycle of crisis and response will only deepen.

Societies can adapt, but doing so takes foresight, investment and courage. In the face of escalating climate risks, bold, forward-looking policies are not a luxury—they are a necessity. By supporting longer-term strategies, rich-country governments and aid charities can enable [vulnerable communities](#) to withstand, adapt and, when necessary, move with dignity.

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