Two Years after Eta and Iota: Displaced and Forgotten in Guatemala

Kayly Ober and Rachel Schmidtke
Cover Photo Caption: Residents walk in a flooded area after Hurricane Eta in Guatemala on November 5, 2020. Photo by Johan Ordonez/AFP via Getty Images.
Table of Contents

Summary 4

Recommendations 5

Methodology 6

Recent Climate-Related Disasters Have Put Guatemalans at Risk 7

Two Years on in Chiquimula 8

Undercounted and Unaddressed Displacement 13

Gaps in the Humanitarian Development Interface 15

Conclusion 17
Summary

Climate hazards in Central America are becoming more frequent and more severe, while far outpacing investments in resilience and recovery. These events—combined with poverty, a lack of basic services, and wealth and gender inequalities—make Central America highly vulnerable to climate displacement.

This forecast is clear in Guatemala, where climate events such as hurricanes and tropical storms, as well as droughts and El Niño and La Niña weather pattern changes, are intensifying. The region of Chiquimula, Guatemala, provides a microcosm of the larger challenges many Guatemalans face amid these overlapping climate hazards. It can also illuminate a path forward on the policy shifts that would be required to better respond to and mitigate these hazards and related displacement.

Chiquimula is in what is called the region’s “Dry Corridor,” and faces frequent drought. Many of its communities also were hit hard by hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020 and tropical storm Celia in 2022. People in the area faced significant losses and are still struggling to recover. Crop failures affected their livelihood and triggered food insecurity. The storms destroyed people’s homes, forcing them to try to rebuild or relocate without the proper resources to do so. Matters are worse in rural, poor, and indigenous areas, where government support is traditionally lacking and where the absence of land titles makes it difficult for those who do not own their land to rebuild.

Two years on from Eta and Iota, people in the area still need significant support—and more must be done to prepare for future such climate hazards. While the Guatemalan government has made some efforts towards disaster recovery, most rural Guatemalans see very little impact from government interventions. Two years after Eta and Iota, half of the people Refugees International interviewed had been unable to return to their homes. These communities tend to rely on a patchwork mix of efforts—from municipalities, NGOs, community support, and remittances—to piece together some semblance of recovery. But affected communities are typically left with a series of untenable options: they can rebuild in hazard-prone areas; move to areas with higher rents than they can afford; or remain in a protracted state of displacement.

Research in Guatemala by Refugees International provides a case study of how these dynamics play out at a human level. However, comprehensive data regarding displacement from climate events is largely lacking in Guatemala, as the government does not recognize internal displacement—further complicating the response while depriving internally displaced Guatemalans of their rights.

Guatemala’s national government and municipal officials need to show greater leadership on these challenges, but also need more support from the international community—especially the United States. Without urgent action and progress, climate displacement will become entrenched and spur risks of increased out-migration.

The Biden administration has recently begun to explore how to better address climate displacement in Central America. The administration has stated its support for building resilience to climate change in Central America and recognizes this as a key tool to address “the root causes of migration.” The United States has also promised to surge humanitarian assistance and build up resilience in the region to address food security in its “Collaborative Migration Management Strategy.” As the Biden administration grapples with how to manage recurrent regional climate displacement, this report outlines steps the United States, Guatemala, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) can take to do so in Guatemala.
Recommendations

The government of Guatemala should::

- **Strengthen and expand the country’s early warning systems for natural disasters to reach the most at-risk.** In Guatemala, early warning systems are only as strong as the institutions that uphold them. In the past, early warning has had uneven reach due to the technical constraints of both the National Coordinator for Disaster Reduction (CONRED in Spanish) and local officials, leading to gaps in response for rural and indigenous areas. In general, CONRED needs more funding, personnel, and equipment. At the local level, all stakeholders should create, coordinate, and implement disaster plans that are rooted in local messaging—inclusive of the full range of indigenous languages and accessible to the community. The government of Guatemala must ensure that parts of the country not traditionally considered “at risk” have such plans and are monitored by relevant government entities to ensure that they are sufficiently covered by early warning systems.

- **Invest in resilient infrastructure in vulnerable communities across the country to reduce and mitigate disaster risk.** Much more can also be done to fortify and make local infrastructure resilient to climate change and natural disasters. In Chiquimula, Refugees International found that key disaster risk reduction interventions—such as retaining- and flood walls, check dams, and drainage systems—would go a long way toward mitigating the risk of flash floods. The government of Guatemala could proactively increase investment in these simple technical fixes to mitigate some of the worst risks.

- **Legislate a law on internal displacement.** The government of Guatemala should follow in the footsteps of the other northern Central American countries by creating and passing a law on protection for internally displaced people (IDPs). Although the government of Guatemala has not shown initiative on this topic in the past, the building blocks for such a law have been set up by civil society and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). These can form the foundation of an IDP law that would promote the protection of people displaced by climate. Once the government passes an IDP law, they should begin collecting data on the number of displacements, including those by climate.

USAID should:

- **Bridge the gap between immediate disaster relief and resilient recovery.** Two years on from Eta and Iota, families in affected communities still need support to rebuild their homes and meet basic needs, including food aid. While USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) can mobilize resources immediately following a disaster to some areas of the country, they have not made significant investments in longer-term resilient recovery. Nor have USAID’s longer-term development programs, leaving a “missing middle” in post-disaster recovery that ultimately fails the most vulnerable. The Agency should also issue an updated policy on internal displacement to help clarify roles and whole-of-agency IDP responsibilities between BHA and other bureaus. USAID should also assign a clearly designated lead for post-disaster resilient recovery to ensure that a lack of follow-up resources does not force people back into the untenable choice of rebuilding in an insecure area or accepting permanent displacement. This should entail a significant increase in recovery and disaster risk reduction investments targeting marginalized populations.
• Support efforts in Guatemala to realize the “Early Warning for All,” initiative to ensure the global population is protected by early warning systems within five years. President Biden has already indicated support for the UN Secretary-General’s call to ensure “Early Warning for All” by 2027, with plans to mobilize it through the President’s Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (PREPARE). In Guatemala, early warning for all will only be assured if local communities and groups receive the appropriate training and develop their own anticipatory plans, with special focus on hard-to-reach communities and indigenous areas.

• Ensure that the U.S. government initiatives to combat food insecurity, including “Feed the Future,” focus on the most climate-vulnerable regions. U.S. government initiatives in Guatemala should be expanded to parts of the country most at-risk of severe climate hazards, including Chiquimula, Alta Verapaz, and Izabal. Feed the Future efforts have focused on assisting those with the greatest potential to increase agricultural yields, but not in areas hit hardest by climate-related crop failures. Food security initiatives should expand efforts to combine childhood malnutrition, such as school feeding programs and planting fortified, culturally appropriate crops for consumption.

• Support the development of an IDP law in Guatemala. Guatemala needs an IDP-specific law to ensure that the government collects the appropriate data, including on the specific needs of internally displaced people. USAID should support Guatemalan civil society to develop and promote such laws.

For the International Organization for Migration (IOM):

• Coordinate with the Guatemalan government to expand previous data collection efforts from Eta and Iota to track climate related displacement across the country. IOM can assist the government of Guatemala in tracking immediate displacements following disaster like tropical storm Celia, as well as continuing to follow up over the long term on displacements from disasters like Eta and Iota. Continuing to collect data is essential to understand the needs of affected Guatemalans and will be key in improving government policies and the effectiveness of international aid.

Methodology

To assess how climate change can exacerbate situations of displacement, Refugees International traveled to Guatemala in October 2022. Guatemala had experienced unprecedented double hurricanes, Eta and Iota, within a two-week time frame in November 2020. Initial reporting revealed deep and lasting impacts on food security, poverty, and displacement. Refugees International traveled to Chiquimula, a department that shares a border with Honduras at the heart of the Guatemalan “Dry Corridor,” to hear the testimonies of several families that continue to struggle two years after the hurricanes. Refugees International interviewed Guatemalans in both rural areas and small urban settlements to get a broad picture of the effects of climate change, as well as interviewing indigenous and non-indigenous Guatemalans.
Recent Climate-related Disasters Have Put Guatemalans at Risk

Guatemala is prone to sudden-onset climate events, including 12 hurricanes and tropical storms over the past 20 years. Hurricane Mitch (1998), Tropical Storm Stan (2005), and Tropical Storm Agatha (2010) alone cost Guatemala more than $2.4 billion in damages. But slow-onset events, particularly drought, have also been a challenge for the country.

Climate change has made the hurricanes and droughts in Guatemala more intense. It has induced anomalously warm ocean and air temperatures, supercharging Atlantic hurricanes to become stronger, wetter, and prone to stalling over land longer. These changing conditions have also induced more “rapid intensification” of hurricanes, or an increase in rotational wind speeds of 35 mph or more within a 24-hour period. Eta and Iota both embodied these climate-charged features, with Eta intensifying at a particularly exceptional rate. In addition, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) scientists find El Niño and El Niña weather patterns have already been changing, and that droughts induced by the 2015–2016 El Niño were partially attributable to human influences.

From 2012 to 2016, Guatemala experienced one of the worst droughts in the country’s history. In 2012, drought affected more than 80 percent of the country. The drought ruined half of the maize and bean crops, causing an estimated loss of around $10 million. In 2014, another prolonged drought struck, which prompted the government of Guatemala to declare a state of emergency. The drought negatively impacted 70 to 80 percent of basic food crops. Some 236,000 families, or around 1.1 million people, were directly affected. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) reported that in late 2018, poor households in the “Dry Corridor” of the country “were still working to recover from indebtedness and lost assets” from the 2014 drought.

In November 2020, the one-two punch of Hurricanes Eta and Iota displaced hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans. The storms triggered massive landslides and flooding that wrought destruction and affected more than 2.4 million people in Guatemala. It is likely that the prolonged drought meant that soil was too dry to sufficiently absorb water that resulted in flash floods. More than 300,000 people were evacuated in the face of the storms, with more than 230,000 remaining displaced in the short-term. While the number of displaced people has dropped dramatically, homes are still badly damaged or destroyed.

Eta and Iota also took a toll on food security, damaging 130,000 cultivated hectares, including maize, bean, plantain, banana, tomatoes, onion, broccoli, cardamom, and coffee. According to the World Food Program (WFP), the hurricane damage exacerbated food insecurity for 1.8 million already-food-insecure Guatemalans. Eta and Iota also damaged homes, livestock, water systems, and infrastructure, such as schools and health centers, making recovery slow-going. In total, the Presidency’s Planning and Programming Secretariat (SEGEPLAN) estimates that the storms caused $777 million in losses and damages.
**Two Years on in Chiquimula**

Chiquimula was one of the departments most impacted by the storms. Almost 70 percent of the total population—**290,638 people**—were affected in some way. Infrastructure and agriculture were hit particularly hard. The number of people staying with family members or in other non-permanent housing situations remains undercounted, especially in rural areas.

Refugees International visited rural locations and small towns in Chiquimula to investigate the impact of the storms and the subsequent relief effort across the department’s communities. The Refugees International team spoke to affected families in La Palmilla Talquezal, a small, rural village built on the side of steep hills; and in the towns of Jocotán and San José La Arada. Every family the team spoke with continues to deal with the aftershocks of the hurricanes.

---

**Jose’s Story**

Jose* lives in the community of La Palmilla and works as a farmer, cultivating beans and corn on a small acre of land he owns. He makes between 30 and 40 Quetzales per day of labor (roughly U.S. $4–5) and works about three days a week, earning about U.S. $15 per week.

When tropical storm Celia hit, he tried his best to prepare the house for the storm, adding wooden planks to the roof and around the sides. The house did not collapse during the storm but was badly flooded, and all of Jose’s possessions were ruined. Jose tried to stay in his home following the storm, but several landslides made that impossible. He moved to another community for a short time to recover. He is fearful of rebuilding because of the precarity of his home.

Complicating matters further, Jose lost 100 percent of his corn yield and much of the beans. Jose, like many other people in the community, relies on the corn and bean harvest not only for his income, but for his daily food. Now that Jose cannot grow his own food, he must purchase rice and beans, which run about 2 Quetzales and 7 Quetzales respectively per bag. As food becomes his main expense, Jose struggles to meet other basic needs. He has considered moving to the nearby town of Jocotán, but his family does not want to leave their community.
The situation in Chiquimula revealed shocking deficiencies in the response to Eta and Iota. According to aid officials, the department is a popular site for “international” support. However, Refugees International witnessed very little residual effect from post-storm humanitarian assistance in the communities the team visited. According to one source, the $16 million provided for Eta and Iota recovery in Guatemala was too little. Because of this, USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) had to be judicious about where it focused its efforts. After the storms, partners on the ground provided shelter, food assistance, and hygiene kits mostly to communities in Alta Verapaz, Izabal, Quiché, and Huehuetenango. As one colleague told our team: “There was not enough money to do anything major.”
Carmen,* a woman Refugees International interviewed in the town of Jocotán, received some international support, but not enough to meaningfully change her circumstances following the storms. Carmen had to flee with her family and seek safety at a local shelter. Unfortunately, so many people were affected by the storms that there were not enough beds for her family. They were able to find temporary shelter and get by only with the help of two months of cash assistance from the World Food Program (WFP). The family now rents a house on the side of a nearby hill, and Carmen worries about landslides.

These cases point to a larger systemic issue at USAID and other aid donors: a significant drop-off between immediate emergency relief and subsequent recovery investments. USAID/BHA has a clear mandate and resources to provide immediate relief aid but the responsibility for resilient recovery after a disaster falls between the mandates of BHA, the USAID development mission in a country, and the national government. However, USAID development missions tend not to invest significantly in recovery because their funding is highly earmarked toward pre-existing priorities and cannot easily pivot after a disaster. And national governments frequently lack the resources (and sometimes the political will) to invest in resilient recovery, especially for marginalized populations. The result is that the population receives just enough aid to help them survive the immediate post-disaster period, but not enough to enable them to recover and rebuild in a more risk-resilient way.

Remittances and community support help to fill in some of the gaps. This was particularly true in more urban areas. For example, the metropolitan areas of Chiquimula fared better than the rural in some ways. Families Refugees International spoke to in Jocotán and San Jose La Arada had more access to community resources, reliable jobs and even, in some cases, remittances from family members working in the United States.

However, remittances and communal support are inconsistent and insufficient responses to recurring and frequent disasters. These resources helped some families Refugees International interviewed to recover. However, without the ability to relocate and rebuild their homes in less precarious areas, these communities will continue to be subject to losses. This was the case in the San Jose, where hurricanes Eta and Iota kicked off a chain reaction. The storms created severe riverbank erosion. This meant that when Tropical Storm Celia arrived in July 2022, the banks overflowed. For the first time in recent memory, river waters rushed into the town.

As a result of the flooding, one family Refugees International interviewed lost their house and all their possessions in the floods. The family’s patriarch, Oscar,* noted that they had only begun to recover with the generosity of their community, which rallied to donate food and basic household items to them. Oscar’s son in the United States was also able to send remittances. However, the family remains in a state of precarity—the house they have had to rent is still just meters away from the river.

Shelter

It was also clear that support from the central government of Guatemala was close to non-existent. The government of Guatemala had not provided any cash or food assistance. Nor had it helped to rebuild any houses in the communities Refugees International visited. In some cases, support to rebuild housing was denied because those affected did not own the land they lived on.

The families Refugees International spoke to in La Palmilla all had to evacuate to the local school to shelter from the storms. One woman, Marta,* had to physically carry both of her children who had mobility issues, ages eight and five, to the shelter. Her house, which was made of concrete
and built with the help of an NGO, fared the best in the face of the storms. It still stands today, with only minor damage. Meanwhile, Ana Maria,* another woman in the community, lost her home and all her possessions. She still lives in her daughter’s house—and does not have plans to rebuild in the immediate term.

There are some reports that the government of Guatemala has been rebuilding houses in different parts of the country—albeit very slowly. By May 2021, the government had supported the reconstruction of two houses of the estimated 2,696 homes destroyed. By June 2021, around 33 houses were in early stages of reconstruction. The government also announced in April 2022 the “Construcción de viviendas para familias afectadas por los ciclones tropicales Eta e Iota” (Construction of housing for families affected by tropical cyclones Eta and Iota) project, which pledged to reconstruct an additional 97 houses in Alta Verapaz, Zacapa, and Izabal by November 2022. Chiquimula is not on the list of prioritized departments. While a positive step forward, the scale of the work will not truly address the problem.

Carlos,* a local man, also lost his home but managed to rebuild a one-room structure out of bamboo within a month of the storms. His entire family of five, including his adult son and daughter-in-law, live together in the house. However, it sits on a very precarious piece of land on the side of a steep hill, which is prone to flash floods and mudslides. He knows it may only be a matter of time until the next storm washes his house away, but he feels he has no other acceptable option. The government offered to relocate his family to the nearby city of Jocotán, but he did not want to live far away from his community. The government also is not able to help him rebuild a home on his current plot of land because it is too at-risk. In fact, none of the families Refugees International spoke to were offered any help to rebuild their homes—and only those that owned their land were offered the opportunity to relocate.

Carmen’s Story

Carmen* lives in the town of Jocotán with her children and husband. While she was educated to be a teacher, she has not been able to find work in her community. Her house is located right next to a river. Although her house made it through hurricanes Eta and Iota, Tropical Storm Celia caused irreparable damage. When the storm hit, the river began to rise rapidly. As the river grew, Carmen tried to save her belongings and waited until the last possible moment to leave the house. Once it became impossible to be in the house any longer, she and her family ran to a shelter set up by the municipality. Carmen stayed one month in the shelter, returning to her home, which was damaged but intact, to cook meals occasionally and try to recover items damaged by the storm.

The government will not support rebuilding her home due to its location in a hazard-prone zone. Carmen knows her home is not safe to live in anymore and wants to relocate. She could try to rebuild in another location further away from the river, but she does not own her own land, so the government cannot build another home for her. Left with no other option, Carmen and her family decided to rent a small home in the town until they determine what to do next. The cost of rent is high, further constraining the family, who gets by on her husband’s wages working in a nearby bakery. Carmen told her husband she is ready to leave Jocotán since she cannot find a job, and rent is expensive. She said she is willing to go anywhere, even the United States. “I just want to work,” she said. She knows others in the area have migrated to the United States and said if things got worse, they would consider leaving.
Guatemala has a relatively well-developed early warning system structure in place, but it is not effectively reaching all who must rely on it. In theory, the National Coordinator for the Reduction of Disasters (CONRED) coordinates the early warning system in conjunction with inputs from the National Institute for Seismology, Volcanology, Meteorology and Hydrology (INSIVUMEH). INSIVUMEH continuously monitors hydrological and geophysical conditions at local levels to gauge disaster risk. It reports back these conditions to CONRED so that they can indicate the level of alert and eventually coordinate evacuation orders. However, in practice, this early warning system is not comprehensive. In some cases, the gravity of the risk does not trigger the appropriate evacuation response, as happened in 2018 during a volcanic eruption.

In other cases, only the most disruptive disasters will even be monitored and lead to evacuation orders. For example, in San Jose, when Tropical Storm Celia induced flash flooding, there was no early warning. Gloria,* the oldest daughter of a family Refugees International spoke to, said she was awoken by rushing water and her family had to escape by climbing onto their roof. It took them three months to clean up the mud that covered their home. Even now, their home is not like it was before the storm. “Every time it rains, I’m scared,” she said.

Ensuring that evacuation orders are distributed to households and that shelter is made available highly depends on the quality and capacity of local leaders, such as the Consejos de Desarrollo Comunitario (Community Development Councils), or COCODE. While it is essential that local actors are the driving force behind early warning, the inconsistency could mean that systems are more advanced in some parts of the country than others. It will be important to fund these local governments and ensure training and standards are applied evenly. In La Palmilla, the COCODE was able to warn the community during Iota, and everyone was able to shelter in time to prevent serious injuries or deaths.

Photo Caption: Carmen’s house in the town of Jocotán. The house was flooded during Tropical Storm Celia and is unsafe to live in. Photo Credit: Rachel Schmidtke, Refugees International.

In other cases, only the most disruptive disasters will even be monitored and lead to evacuation orders. For example, in San Jose, when Tropical Storm Celia induced flash flooding, there was no early warning. Gloria,* the oldest daughter of a family Refugees International spoke to, said she was awoken by rushing water and her family had to escape by climbing onto their roof. It took them three months to clean up the mud that covered their home. Even now, their home is not like it was before the storm. “Every time it rains, I’m scared,” she said.

Ensuring that evacuation orders are distributed to households and that shelter is made available highly depends on the quality and capacity of local leaders, such as the Consejos de Desarrollo Comunitario (Community Development Councils), or COCODE. While it is essential that local actors are the driving force behind early warning, the inconsistency could mean that systems are more advanced in some parts of the country than others. It will be important to fund these local governments and ensure training and standards are applied evenly. In La Palmilla, the COCODE was able to warn the community during Iota, and everyone was able to shelter in time to prevent serious injuries or deaths.
Food Security

In the aftermath of Eta and Iota, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) assessed that almost 3.3 million Guatemalans, or 20 percent of the population, were experiencing “crisis” levels of acute food insecurity. From March to May 2022, that total number of people across Guatemala in “crisis” increased by more than 600,000. This spike was driven by a number of factors, including the lingering effects of both hurricanes on household grain reserves, savings, income loss, and employment opportunities—especially for those working in the agricultural sector. In addition, food prices, especially basic grains, have risen to their highest level in 15 years, making it difficult to purchase food. U.S. aid that helped hungry, rural Guatemalan families impacted by the storms and flooding was halved in 2022—and almost none of it went to Chiquimula—despite the U.S. Ambassador’s renewal of a disaster declaration, projection of crisis levels of acute food insecurity, and rise in food prices.

In La Palmilla, the impacts of the hurricanes intermingled with issues of land access, poverty, and inflation to put families at risk of food insecurity and malnutrition. Families noted that they struggled with being able to grow enough for subsistence. Ana Maria* told Refugees International that Eta and Iota destroyed her entire harvest and rendered unusable the land where she would normally grow crops. Juan said they lost all their harvest that year, and Carlos noted that he lost his bean harvest and was able to grow only a little bit of corn. These losses also meant that there were no beans or corn stored for lean times the following year. The families RI met in Chiquimula ate only beans and tortillas, frequently only once a day, and lacked sufficient calcium and other nutrients.

Small scale but effective U.S. aid has begun to focus on the planting by rural families of a kind of maize that is both more nutritious and more climate resilient. Climate resilience related aid from other countries and private programs focus on empowering local organizations and indigenous communities and improving their agricultural practices—especially regarding water management and nutritious crops.

Undercounted and Unaddressed Displacement

Issues with Data Collection and Analysis

Limited humanitarian assistance and support to build back has meant that many people remain in situations of prolonged displacement and/or precarity. Two years after Eta and Iota, half of the people Refugees International interviewed had been unable to return to their homes. The rest needed support to ensure that they not be displaced in the future. Despite this, the Guatemalan government and aid agencies had failed to assess or meet the needs of internally displaced people or returnees who were once again at-risk of displacement. In the one case that the government intervened, it was to deny help in rebuilding a house because it was deemed to be in a high-risk location.

Part of the challenge is a lack of capacity and political will to collect data related to displacement. In the aftermath of disaster, CONRED mobilizes to count evacuees and number of houses damaged or destroyed, although it acknowledges that accounting for people displaced outside of official shelters remains difficult. In some cases, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) tracks displacement over the medium-term. IOM did this after Eta and Iota in March 2021 in the departments of Alta Verapaz and Huehuetenango, with the support of the Secretary of the Pres-
That survey found that two out of three people returned to homes that were destroyed or badly damaged. While underscoring Refugees International’s own findings, the IOM survey only covered 4,507 people across two departments—and has yet to be conducted again or elsewhere.

Without this data, the government, aid agencies, and donors cannot reach conclusions about the length or state of displacement after a disaster like Eta and Iota. Nor can they design and implement aid programs to help communities to adequately recover.

**IDP Law Key, but Still Missing**

Internally displaced people should have full access to all their human rights, and the protections and privileges that all other citizens enjoy. However, their displacement often means they struggle to access these rights in reality. Without an IDP law, the creation of policies and programs geared towards identification, support, and relocation for internally displaced people becomes deeply challenging. Indeed, the legal recognition of IDPs is but a first step in crafting durable solutions to internal displacement. International norms and principles, including the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, provide a starting point for Guatemala to enshrine IDP rights in its domestic law. This includes establishing in law and policy that IDPs must not be discriminated against because of their displacement, or because of their race, sex, language, religion, social origin or other factors.

While Honduras and El Salvador have made important advancements in the legal recognition of internally displaced people, Guatemala lags behind its neighbors. The Guatemalan government has not publicly released statements recognizing internal displacement as a phenomenon in the country since 1996, and there are no IDP laws in legislation. The government did some work on identifying cases of internal displacement in 2018 in a study done by the Human Rights Ombudsman and CRISTOSAL, which provided demographics and detailed information regarding 55 cases of internal displacement affecting 110 individuals. However, the study was relatively small in scope and did not examine the effects of displacement on those displaced by climate-related events.

Civil society has shown leadership on the issue of developing IDP legislation. The University of San Carlos in Guatemala has been central in the development of past disaster legislation. Similarly, the Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial, with support from USAID, drafted public policy blueprints for IDPs in 2020 but will need support to continue its work and add disasters and climate change to its analysis. Such institutions will be essential partners in pushing the Guatemalan government to adopt a meaningful IDP agenda.

Examples from El Salvador provide a roadmap to what adopting an IDP law could look like. El Salvador’s IDP law was approved in 2018. Since then, the Government of El Salvador and the UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) documented 71,500 IDPs and are undertaking new studies to obtain quantitative and qualitative information for evidence-based decision-making and public policies. The country also outlined a National Response Plan under the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS in Spanish) with 49 commitments in protection, health, education, and livelihoods to assist IDPs, refugees, and asylum seekers. While far from perfect, the law does provide a baseline to build more comprehensive support for internally displaced people.

Guatemala has a long road ahead to achieving any kind of meaningful IDP response. As a first step, it must pass an IDP law that specifically provides for protections for those displaced by climate-related events.
Limited Understanding and Strategies to Address IDPs

While responsibility for addressing situations of internal displacement lies principally with the government of Guatemala, there has been a general push by the United States government, particularly the U.S. Department of State and USAID, to support in a variety of ways. USAID/BHA in particular has acknowledged that severe weather events have exacerbated humanitarian needs of IDPs. In a recent brief, the bureau notes that from mid-2021 to mid-2022, 69 percent of IDPs in Guatemala have reported income loss; 26 percent reported relying significantly on aid to cope with decreasing access to livelihood opportunities; and 18 percent experienced moderate to severe hunger. USAID/BHA also supported the work of IOM to collect data on displaced people after Eta and Iota.

According to USAID’s 2004 “Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons Policy,” as well as the 2014 and 2015 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) and QDDR 2, USAID is the “U.S. Government’s lead coordinator on internal displacement to ensure a coherent response from the U.S. Government and the international community,” and articulates a broad vision for how to address IDP situations.

In addition, the situation in Guatemala also makes clear that USAID may need to update its IDP policies, strategies, and programming to reflect evolving IDP realities, including the increasing threats from climate change. Such steps will ensure that USAID/BHA is equipped to address IDP situations to the best of their ability—and without confused divisions of labor.

Gaps in the Humanitarian-Development Interface

Disaster Risk Reduction

The Guatemalan government and donors like USAID recognize that the country is in desperate need of disaster risk reduction and preparedness measures. For example, the 1996 Law on the National Coordinator for the Reduction of Natural or Man-Made Disasters supports the creation of a dedicated “National Fund for Disaster Reduction” and a coordination system. However, the law does not address key processes of disaster risk management, such as risk identification and risk reduction. In an attempt to facilitate this over the past decade, the government of Guatemala has centered disaster risk management in its national development plan and has passed two laws to include disaster risk reduction in development planning: the Social Development Law (Decree 42-2001) and the Law of Housing and Human Settlements (Decree 120-96). In 2019, the Guatemalan Congress also submitted a bill to strengthen the legal disaster risk management framework. Guatemala also has a National Plan for Disaster Risk Management for 2018–2022.

Despite immense interest, capacity and money are still lacking. In the case of Guatemala, there are a number of disaster-specific funds: the “Emerging Fund,” the “Emergency and Public Calamity Fund,” and the “Permanent National Fund for Disaster Reduction.” In 2017, the Budget Law would administer $24 million to transfer resources from the “Emerging Fund.” The “Permanent National Fund for Disaster Reduction” is financed annually through a dedicated budget line. In practice, resources should be transferred before the declaration of an emergency. However, the fund’s budget is pursuant to the availability of state resources, and in 2017 this meant that $1 million was assigned to it for CONRED’s use. CONRED’s overall budget this same year was $76 million.
In addition, foreign assistance to Guatemala for disaster risk reduction continues to be inadequate. For example, in 2020, disaster preparedness accounted for only 4 percent, or $4.5 million, of the total U.S. foreign assistance budget. That is far too low in light of the country’s struggles with frequent and worsening climate hazards. There is a business case to do so: each dollar invested in resilient infrastructure in low- and middle-income countries generates four dollars in benefits.

In October 2021, the Biden administration pledged $3 billion towards climate change adaptation financing. This marked “the largest U.S. commitment ever made to reduce climate impacts on those most vulnerable to climate change worldwide.” In addition, the newly released “President’s Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience (PREPARE)” acknowledged the need to mobilize more climate change adaptation financing in accordance with the UN Secretary-General’s call to ensure “Early Warning for All” by 2027. However, climate financing specific to Latin America remains unclear.

In the communities Refugees International visited, these shortfalls had very real implications. Even before Eta and Iota struck, houses continued to sit precariously on the river’s edge or the side of a hill according to locals. There had been no effort to fortify infrastructure in surrounding communities and no incentive for families to move to mitigate risk. In the case of San Jose La Arada, Eta and Iota eroded the riverbanks, but there was no attempt to build flood walls, dikes, levees, check dams, or channels to alleviate the pressures of the next deluge, which in turn led to flash flooding later. In La Palmilla, there had been no attempt to build retaining walls, create drainage systems, or prevent deforestation to mitigate landslides. However, in this same community, the Guatemalan Army Corps of Engineers had built a schoolhouse. In the end, while the school served as shelter temporarily during the storm, people’s homes washed away. Even after the memorable lessons of Eta and Iota, one colleague told us: “Nothing has been done to prepare for the next hurricane.”

This trend looks set to continue. In June 2022, USAID Administrator Samantha Power announced approximately $198 million in humanitarian assistance for Latin America and the Caribbean, including nearly $92 million in USAID/BHA programming in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, of which more than $87.5 million will go to emergency funding and only $4.3 million to early recovery, risk reduction, and resilience programs.

**Addressing Food Insecurity: Feed the Future**

USAID’s Country Development Cooperation Strategy for Guatemala (2020–2025) also acknowledges the need to bolster the “Feed the Future Initiative”—a U.S. government initiative that works with partner countries to develop their agriculture sectors and break the cycle of poverty and hunger. This is the United States’ flagship global food and hunger initiative started by the Obama administration. Many of Feed the Future’s projects in the country have focused on higher yield and sustainable agricultural practices, value chain development, decreasing the spread of coffee rust, integrating health and nutrition interventions, and improving local governance. Between FY2012 and 2016, Guatemala received $13 million per year, on average, for Feed the Future projects.

According to USAID assessments, Feed the Future increased sales of coffee by 24 percent and sales of horticulture by 150 percent from FY2015 to FY2016. In the areas where Feed the Future was implemented, poverty decreased by an estimated 29 percent between 2013 and 2015. In 2020, the Trump administration slashed funding for the overall global Feed the Future portfolio by roughly 50 percent, to $506 million. This year, USAID Administrator Samantha Power has
already sought to re-establish a healthy budget for Feed the Future, committing $5 billion over five years. This is a welcome goal. However, Feed the Future’s focus is often on areas that are likely to produce high yield, which is not always in the areas where there is most need. It will be important for Feed the Future to expand its focus to include areas like Chiquimula that are highly impacted by climate, and to support interventions that address household-level food security and nutrition more explicitly.

It is important to note that increasing crop yield will not eradicate malnutrition. While increasing crop yield will provide access to more income, access to nutritious foods is still a barrier for many rural Guatemalans. Therefore, food security programming in Guatemala should be expanded to areas like Chiquimula, to not only focus on improving crop production, but also planting climate resilient crops that are nutritious such as bio-fortified maize. These must be combined with expanded efforts to combat childhood malnutrition like school feeding programs and adult education on nutrition.

Conclusion

Two years after Eta and Iota, Guatemalans continue to deal with the aftershocks. Families in Chiquimula are still struggling with issues of shelter, poverty, and food insecurity. Many of them remain in a state of displacement or are at risk of displacement. The government of Guatemala has not stepped up to meet their needs, and the international community has not either. While there is much room for the government of Guatemala to ensure Guatemalans rebuild their homes and lives today, there is an opportunity for Biden administration to have an enormous impact in the lives of Guatemalans over the long-term and in line with its root causes strategy.

*Refugees International used pseudonyms to protect the identity and security of people interviewed for this report.*
About the Author

Kayly Ober is the former climate displacement program manager, at Refugees International. Follow her on Twitter at @KaylyOber.

Rachel Schmidtke is the senior advocate for Latin America at Refugees International. Follow her on Twitter at @r_schmidtke.

About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.