

Pacific needs disaster displacement included in treaty

by Thomas Mulder and Jane McAdam

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Families relocated to Maewo Island following the 2018 volcano on Ambae Island in Vanuatu

Photo Credit: [Vanuatu Red Cross](#)

When disasters strike, so does displacement. Each year across the Pacific, cyclones, flooding, coastal erosion and storm surges prompt people to leave their homes. Often this movement is temporary, as people seek shelter in evacuation centres or on higher ground, returning home after the immediate danger has passed. But sometimes it becomes prolonged or even permanent. For many Pacific communities, displacement is not an exceptional outcome of disasters; it is a recurring and defining feature of how they are experienced.

Although Pacific countries are on the frontline of the climate crisis, they are also at the [forefront of solutions](#). The [Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility](#), endorsed by Pacific Leaders in 2023, is a world-leading document that seeks to ensure that the region is resilient and “future-ready” by anticipating, preparing for and responding to the adverse impacts of climate change and disasters, including through mobility.

The region has a new opportunity to show global leadership in this area. Between now and early 2027, states are negotiating what is likely to become the first-ever global treaty on the [Protection of Persons in the Event of Disasters](#) (PPED treaty). This presents a significant opening for Pacific states to ensure that displacement is reflected in the treaty text. Despite how central displacement is to the [lived reality of disasters](#), it remains only marginally reflected in the current draft treaty text.

The proposed treaty aims to fill a [longstanding gap](#) in international law by establishing a comprehensive legal framework to strengthen the protection of people affected by disasters, including through greater international cooperation and disaster risk reduction (DRR).

The [negotiation process](#) is now entering a critical stage. States were [invited to submit](#) written proposals [for amendments](#) to the [draft text](#) by the end of 2025. These proposals were discussed during a session of a dedicated [UN Working Group](#) in early April 2026. These discussions will inform a consolidated draft expected by

September 2026, with a view to adoption at a [diplomatic conference](#) scheduled for early 2027 in the Philippines.

And yet, within this process, one issue stands out for its relative absence: disaster-related displacement.

This omission of displacement is striking given its scale and significance globally. Disasters displace two people every second. In 2024 alone, an estimated 65.8 million internal displacements [were recorded](#), with almost 70% triggered by disasters rather than conflict.

Although the current definition of “disaster” (in [draft article 3](#)) mentions “mass displacement” as a possible defining characteristic of a disaster, it is otherwise missing from the treaty — and [some proposals](#) would remove even this reference.

The silence on [displacement in the PPED treaty](#) is not merely a technical oversight. It risks sidelining one of the most common and significant consequences of disasters at precisely the moment when states are crafting the legal framework intended to address them. If left unaddressed, the treaty may fall short of capturing how disasters are actually experienced by millions of people worldwide.

For the Pacific, this gap is particularly consequential.

Disaster-related displacement is a defining feature of the [region’s security](#). Pacific Island countries are [among the most exposed in the world](#) to cyclones, flooding, droughts and sea-level rise. In some cases, entire communities face the prospect of displacement, which is why [a number](#) of Pacific states have developed [national policies](#) addressing [internal displacement](#), as well as [planned relocation guidelines](#) and [operating procedures](#). Meanwhile, the [Falepili Union](#) between Tuvalu and Australia creates a special human mobility pathway which enables up to 280 Tuvaluans annually to migrate to Australia.

This leadership would be welcome in the PPED negotiations. Pacific states have not yet made any [formal proposals](#) on the treaty text, and representation from the region in the [Working Group discussions](#) has also been limited. This is not unusual given the capacity constraints many Pacific delegations face, but it does raise important questions about whose experiences and priorities are shaping the treaty.

There is still time to change this. The negotiations are ongoing and further amendments can still be proposed [by 15 May 2026](#), moving toward the consolidated draft. The window for shaping the treaty is open — but narrowing.

In a 2025 [policy brief](#), we set out a series of targeted amendments that would better

recognise displacement within the existing structure of the PPED treaty. These proposals are not about expanding the treaty's scope. Rather, they aim to clarify and strengthen its provisions in line with established state practice.

They include incorporating references to displacement in the preamble, recognising evacuations and planned relocations as forms of disaster risk reduction, and clarifying that international cooperation may encompass human mobility, such as evacuation assistance and access to humanitarian visas. These measures reflect what states are already doing, from organising evacuations in anticipation of hazards to relocating communities exposed to recurrent risks.

Taken together, these relatively modest adjustments could have meaningful impacts.

Explicitly **recognising displacement** in the PPED treaty could support more coherent legal and policy frameworks at the regional and national level, including in areas such as evacuation planning, shelter management and long-term recovery. It could also enhance coordination in international responses and help direct funding toward more inclusive DRR strategies that take mobility into account.

More fundamentally, **recognising displacement** would reinforce the treaty's central objective: the protection of persons in the event of disasters. Displacement is not a peripheral or secondary effect. For many, it is one of the primary ways in which disasters are experienced. A treaty that seeks to protect people from the impacts of disasters cannot afford to overlook this reality.

For the Pacific, the stakes are clear. The region has both the experience and the policy frameworks to contribute meaningfully to the development of the PPED treaty.

As negotiations progress, there is a critical opportunity for Pacific states to help shape the outcome. This could take many forms: submitting written proposals of amendments, participating in Working Group discussions, coordinating positions with stakeholders, or engaging in diplomatic outreach to build support among other states.

The PPED treaty is not just another international instrument. It has the potential to define how the international community understands and responds to disasters for decades to come, affecting us, our children and future generations.

Ensuring that displacement is recognised within it is therefore not simply a matter of drafting legal texts. It is about aligning the treaty with the realities on the ground — and with the lived experiences of communities across the Pacific.

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