IDRC Research Chair
West Africa

CENTRE FOR
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IDRC RESEARCH CHAIR ON FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN ANGLOPHONE WEST AFRICA

POLICY BRIEF IV

Recurrent Urban Flooding as a Driver of Cyclical Internal Displacement in Monrovia, Liberia.

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Strengthening Knowledge, Evidence Use, and Leadership in the Global South on Forced Displacement

Emerging from extensive field research under the IDRC Chair's systematic field investigations conducted in Monrovia's flood-prone settlements, including Bernard Farm, Doe Estates, FDA Junction, Mt. Barclay, and Dour Town, this brief highlights how recurring floods disrupt housing, livelihoods, and access to essential services. It documents the structural drivers and socio-economic consequences of cyclical internal displacement, serving as an evidence-based resource for policymakers and practitioners seeking to implement preventive and resilience-building interventions.

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Summary

Recurrent urban flooding is the perpetuator of cyclical internal displacement in low-lying settlements in Monrovia, including Bernard Farm, Doe Estates, FDA Junction, Mt. Barclay, and Dour Town. .

Findings from the field shows that households are repeatedly forced to temporarily relocate during heavy rainfall, mostly seeking shelter in churches and schools before returning to dilapidated homes once floodwaters recede and dry off.

This pattern of “displacement in situ” reflects structural urban risk rather than isolated disaster events. Blocked drainage systems, unregulated settlement in flood-prone zones, weak waste management and deteriorating infrastructure amplify the impact of heavy rainfall. Without targeted flood prevention, drainage rehabilitation and risk-sensitive urban planning, internal displacement in Monrovia will remain cyclical, protracted and intergenerational.

This brief calls for urgent and medium-term policy actions to reduce flood-induced internal displacement.

Introduction

Urban areas across West Africa are vibrant hubs of economic activity, social interaction and cultural exchange, providing opportunities for livelihoods and community development.

However, these same urban settlements are increasingly vulnerable to recurrent flooding, particularly in low-lying and densely populated areas. Poorly maintained infrastructure, blocked drainage channels, unplanned construction, and inadequate waste management exacerbate the impacts of heavy rainfall, forcing households to temporarily relocate and disrupting livelihoods, education, health and social networks.

Understanding the patterns and consequences of flood-induced displacement is essential for designing proactive, risk-informed urban planning, disaster preparedness, and social protection strategies that protect the rights, dignity and well-being of affected populations.

What causes this problem?

1. **The Problem: Flooding as Structural Urban Risk**

Findings from the five flood-prone areas visited in Monrovia reveal that displacement in the region is primarily triggered by heavy rainfall and inadequate drainage infrastructure. Key features include:

- *Settlements located in low-lying and poorly drained areas*
- *Blocked, shallow or no drainage channels*
- *Open waste dumping that obstructs water flow*
- Weak housing structures are unable to withstand floodwaters

During intense rainfall, floodwater enters homes, damages personal belongings, collapses latrines and renders dwellings temporarily uninhabitable and to some extent permanently. During situations as that residents move to churches, schools or relatives' homes and return when waters recede only to repeat the cycle during the next major rainfall event. Therefore, flooding in these communities is not a one-time event or episodic but rather a recurring and predictable event due to the infrastructural deficiencies in the various locations.

2. **Impacts of Flood-Induced Displacement**

a. Housing Destruction and Asset Loss

Floodwaters weaken foundations, damage zinc roofing, destroy bedding and household goods and increase indebtedness as families attempt repeated repairs using salvaged materials. The homes of these IDPs are mostly snatched away from them, not just by nature but by the structural deficiencies they find themselves in.

Already having lost their belongings and having little to no finances to feed on, not to mention using that money for rebuilding. IDPs in Monrovia find themselves in a cyclical nature of internal displacement ripping them of their human dignity.

b. Public Health Risks

Flooding carries waste into compounds, contaminates water sources and accelerates outbreaks of malaria, diarrhoeal diseases and skin infections. Stagnant water becomes a breeding ground for mosquitoes, while overflow from pit latrines compromises sanitation systems.

There are situations where overflow from the pit latrines flows into the boreholes, which are the only source of water for most of the communities visited and therefore, residents are mostly affected by this, with most of them falling sick from diarrhoea, typhoid and skin infections.

c. Interrupted Education

Schools are sometimes used as temporary shelters, disrupting children's education. Flood-related economic hardship further limits school attendance.

In most instances, because of heavy rainfall causing flooding, most students are unable to walk to school, as data from the field also shows that most of them walk to school.

d. Gendered and Vulnerable Impacts

Workshop discussions confirm that women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities face heightened risks during flood events. Women bear the brunt of the impact of flooding as most of the time they move with children, burdening them with what they are to eat and where to sleep.

Their incomes are destroyed if they are to farm or head to the market to sell. Limited mobility, caregiving burdens and insecure temporary shelter arrangements increase vulnerability.

3. **Policy Gaps**

Despite repeated flooding, responses remain largely reactive and not proactive. Key gaps include:

- Limited investment in drainage rehabilitation
- Weak enforcement of risk-sensitive land-use planning
- Inadequate urban waste management systems & WASH services

Current responses focus on temporary relief rather than structural flood risk reduction.

Policy Recommendations

i. Prioritise Drainage Rehabilitation in High-Risk Settlements

Targeted investment in drainage infrastructure is essential to reducing flood intensity and repeated displacement in high-risk urban areas.

- Conduct rapid drainage mapping in Bernard Farm, Doe Estates, FDA Junction, Mt. Barclay, and Dour Town to identify critical bottlenecks and flood pathways.
- Create, clear, and deepen blocked drainage channels ahead of each rainy season to improve water flow and reduce household flooding.
- Establish routine drainage maintenance schedules, with dedicated municipal funding to ensure sustainability beyond emergency interventions.

ii. Strengthen Urban Waste Management

Poor waste management significantly contributes to blocked drainage systems and flood severity.

- Introduce structured and regular waste collection systems in informal settlements to reduce indiscriminate dumping.
- Support community-based waste management initiatives that promote local ownership of sanitation and drainage protection.
- Enforce penalties for indiscriminate dumping of refuse, following the provision of accessible and designated waste disposal sites.
- Reducing waste obstruction directly lowers flood intensity and associated displacement risks.

iii. Implement Risk-Sensitive Urban Planning

Long-term reduction of flood-induced displacement requires integrating flood risk into urban development decisions.

- Identify and map high-risk flood zones across Monrovia to inform planning and infrastructure investment.
- Prevent further settlement expansion in extreme-risk areas through strengthened land-use regulation and enforcement.
- Develop safer relocation, upgrading, or in-situ improvement schemes for households experiencing chronic and repeated flooding.

iv. Integrate Flood Risk Reduction into National IDP Governance

Flood-induced displacement should be formally recognised within national displacement and disaster governance frameworks.

- Recognise recurrent urban flooding as a structural driver of internal displacement in policy and planning instruments.
- Align flood prevention and urban resilience strategies with internal displacement management systems.
- Strengthen coordination between disaster management agencies, municipal authorities and displacement-related institutions to ensure coherent responses.

v. Establish Early Warning and Community Preparedness Systems

Preparedness measures can significantly reduce emergency displacement and loss during peak rainfall periods.

- Expand localised flood early-warning communication systems tailored to community contexts.
- Train community volunteers in flood preparedness, evacuation coordination, and first-response actions.
- Pre-position emergency supplies and support mechanisms ahead of peak rainfall seasons.
- Effective preparedness reduces forced emergency relocation and enhances community resilience.

Conclusion

Recurrent urban flooding is the central structural driver of cyclical internal displacement in Monrovia's informal settlements. The displacement observed in Bernard Farm, Doe Estates, FDA Junction, Mt. Barclay and Dour Town is not accidental, but a predictable and recurring outcome of inadequate drainage systems, unmanaged solid waste, fragile housing structures and limited enforcement of risk-sensitive urban planning.

These conditions transform seasonal rainfall into repeated humanitarian disruption, forcing households into temporary displacement and reinforcing long-term vulnerability. A shift from reactive flood response toward preventive urban risk governance is therefore urgently required.

Strategic investment in drainage infrastructure, improved waste management, and inclusive, risk-aware planning will not only reduce flood impacts but also interrupt the recurring cycle of internal displacement, strengthening urban resilience and safeguarding the dignity and livelihoods of Liberia's most vulnerable urban residents.

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