

# LET'S RE-HOUSE CLIMATE DISPLACED FAMILIES EVERYWHERE: A CLIMATE DISPLACEMENT LEVY ON BILLIONAIRES COULD DO IT!

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Whether we like it or not, the truth is that the money needed to prevent and resolve climate displacement has not been forthcoming and is unlikely to be for a very long time, if ever. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that 1.6-3.8 trillion (1.6T-3.8T) will be needed each year to avoid warming of more than 1.5C.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, global GDP is just shy of 93T.<sup>3</sup> In 2009 the world's wealthy nations committed to channel USD 100 billion (100B) to less wealthy countries annually to tackle climate change, but to date have fallen far short of this target. Some have alleged that the estimates of the funds that have been raised thus far are wildly exaggerated, and that even if 100B were provided each year that this would come nowhere near solving the climate crisis.<sup>4</sup> While calculations vary widely from only slightly more than 10B in total to just short of 100B, the prevailing understanding is simply that "Trillions of dollars will be needed each year to meet the 2015 Paris agreement goal of restricting global warming to well-below 2C, if not 1.5C, above pre-industrial temperatures."<sup>5</sup> Of the funds allocated to this initiative, the vast majority are in the form of loans that need to be paid back by countries that face financial difficulties to do so.

To make matters worse, only the tiniest portions of funds have been dedicated to anything linked to solving climate displacement. The world's governments continue to spend minuscule proportions of their national budgets on climate displacement, if anything at all. When they do allocate funds all too often the most costly of all possible plans are selected, much to the joy of the well-connected contractors who will haul in most of that. The world's climate displaced persons are already suffering

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch>

<sup>3</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-by-gdp>

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Jocelyn Timperley, *The Broken \$100-billion promise of climate finance - and how to fix it: At Glasgow's COP26 summit, countries will argue for more money to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change in Nature*, 20 October 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Id.

and this is only going to get worse, much worse. Though many rightly look to the UN for climate displacement salvation, this has not and will not come. The vital role of the UN's IPCC and many other engagements in the climate change field are indispensable to our understanding and then tackling climate change, but in practical terms the UN has lagged far behind on concrete initiatives addressing climate displacement, and thus far done virtually nothing concrete to assist climate displaced persons. The total number of UNHCR staff, for instance, dedicated to this issue can probably be counted on one hand, with few of those with any field experience working with climate displaced communities. With some notable exceptions private donors have equally failed thus far to put their money into projects designed to assist what is by far the largest groups of displaced people across the world. Most international organisations ostensibly working on climate displacement issues have done little to nothing of real consequence to support actual climate displaced people, and tend to take highly academic approaches to these real world issues, holding meeting after meeting and issuing report after report with little actual impact for the people forced by climate to leave their homes forever.

So, given these circumstances, how are we going to pay for fixing the climate displacement crisis? Well, maybe we need to turn to a major cause of the climate displacement crisis - the billionaires - and see what it would take for them to address this massive crisis adequately.

The climate-ravaged planet on which we all depend has never seen climate risks like it is facing today, nor has it paradoxically ever before been home to more billionaires. In fact, we share this planet with nearly 3,000 billionaires, a group of individuals far more responsible for climate change on a per capita basis than any other, and by a very large measure! More than 70% of the world's emissions come from just 100 companies, most of which are owned and controlled by the world's wealthiest families.<sup>6</sup> These are allowed to write the *rules of the game* that ensure they continue to be able to operate. They are given support and almost total leeway by the States in which they operate, which of course include the current and historical worst CO2 emitters. In their daily lives on their mega-yachts, their private planes, and their multiple energy-inefficient homes, the world's billionaires are disproportionately responsible for the lion's share of climate change, releasing factors more CO2 per person than other groups in society. They need to do something to rectify and repair this damage. They need to become part of the solution and pay for the damage that has been done. At a global level, with even the poorest of billionaires - a billionaire with just one billion dollars - has a net worth that is a staggering and almost unfathomable *133,333 times higher* than a person located at the worldwide median net worth! There is nothing that can justify such brutal inequality.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jul/10/100-fossil-fuel-companies-investors-responsible-71-global-emissions-cdp-study-climate-change>

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If billionaires and the companies and governments that support them disproportionately caused climate change shouldn't they now pay to re-house every climate displaced person?

If even just one of these billionaires realised that they could begin to tackle climate displacement by contributing at least some of the money needed to provide new homes to the world's growing climate displaced populations, they might be surprised at how much human suffering they could assist in alleviating. The numbers are staggering, because if just a single billionaire decided to donate just one billion dollars of *his* fortune (and I intentionally use the pronoun *his* bearing in mind that around 90% of the world's billionaires are men), at the rate of around USD 9,100 per home (the real world cost of building works we carry out in Bangladesh supporting climate displaced families) he could build 110,000 homes for some of the world's most climate vulnerable families. Assuming the average household size of six in the countries most heavily affected, our friend the Earth-destroying billionaire could - at absolutely zero reduction to his own standard of living - build homes for a staggering 660,000 people, which equates to the entire population of a major world city such as Vancouver, Canada. Imagine what could happen if each of the world's billionaires were to do so?

Let's see what happens if we ratchet those numbers up a bit and take an average between the World Bank's figures of 216 million people<sup>7</sup> to be displaced due to the effects of climate change and those of Climate Central which uses the figure of 600 million.<sup>8</sup> That brings us to just short of 400 million people needing long-term solutions to their climate displacement predicaments or 5% of the human race. How much would it take, assuming the figure of USD 9,100/house (the real figure would be far less assuming economies of scale, of course), to build new homes on new land for the world's climate displaced population; all of whom are forced against their will to move because of the human-caused crisis of climate change? The answer: 3.6 trillion US dollars (3.6T). To the perpetually underfunded ears of us humanitarians, that might sound like a lot. But to billionaires, is it really all that much? 3.6T amounts to roughly four years of the military budget of just one country, the United States, the country that is historically more responsible for the effects of climate change than any other. 3.6T also represents just 25% of the more than 13 trillion dollars in collective assets owned by the world's 2,755 billionaires, a group of people which increases by one every 17 hours, even in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. And guess what? The 750 billionaires in the United States alone bolstered their pot of gold by 2.1T in 2020 during the middle of the pandemic in a country where more died than any other. Add in the other 2000 billionaires or so who are not from the US, and it has been pointed out that from March-December 2020, during the first and worst wave of COVID, the collected wealth of billionaires grew by 3.9T! Clearly, this is *not* about a lack of money.

25% of the treasure chest held in by the world's richest people in the form of a climate displacement levy could re-house every single one of those to be displaced by the effects of climate change!

I hope these figures of inequality shock readers to the core of your being and makes you want to do something about it, for they are a searing indictment of just how unjust our shared planet has become. And yet, if a 1% annual *climate displacement levy* was placed on the fortunes of the billionaire class

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<sup>7</sup> World Bank, Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.climatecentral.org/news/picturing-our-future>

for a period of 25 years, magically all the money we would need to solve a big portion of climate displacement problems would suddenly be available. This would amount to USD 10M a year or 250m over a period of 25 years. Just to put this in a perspective readers might more easily relate to, if you earn USD 50,000 per year and you were subject to a similar levy you would have to pay a total of USD 12,500 spread over a period of two and a half decades, or USD 500 a year, to play your part in solving the entire HLP crisis facing the world's climate displaced population. Imagine you could assist in providing well-built permanent homes for more than 400 million people without feeling it in your pocketbook or having to suffer any sort of decline in your overall standard of living, quality of life or anything else.

**IS THIS SOMETHING YOU MIGHT CONSIDER DOING? IF YOU ARE READING THIS ARTICLE YOU PROBABLY ANSWERED YES, BUT WILL THE WORLD'S BILLIONAIRES HEAR THE CALL?**

Elon Musk, as the world's wealthiest person now has a net worth of more than USD 300B, so he alone could come close to providing 33 million homes for climate displaced families. As of late 2021 news media outlets are predicting that he may become the world's first trillionaire! Put him, Zuckerberg, Bezos, Arnault, Bettencourt, Ambani, Ellison, Branson, Walton, Slim and a few others together in a consortium and we'd be able to solve the climate-induced HLP crisis many times over. Space can wait, but the world's climate displaced families should not have to.

And to those who say there isn't enough land available to house all these people, this is simply not true. Displacement Solutions has worked for years on the links between land availability and repairing climate displacement, and our experience shows clearly that land supply is not the issue that should concern us.<sup>9</sup> There is more than enough land to go around. Our detailed research, using highly conservative estimates of the number of people to be displaced and the amount of land that each household would require to re-establish itself reveal that far less than half of one percent of the world's land surface could easily re-house everyone displaced by climate change. Using a high-end estimate this would be roughly the size of Uganda, and using the lower end of the estimate scale, this would be the size of Costa Rica or the Australian state of Tasmania.

It has never been a question of land supply, but one of access. This is another reason behind our longstanding advocacy for climate land banks as a practical and viable policy tool to effectively tackle climate displacement.<sup>10</sup> With our local partners in numerous countries including Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Panama and elsewhere DS has identified specific land parcels that could become appropriate new land sites for communities displaced by climate change, the vast majority of which are currently state land thus requiring no costs in initially acquiring this land.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Scott Leckie (ed), *Land Solutions for Climate Displacement*, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, *The Urgent Need to Prepare for Climate Displacement in Myanmar: Establishing a Myanmar National Climate Land Bank*, Displacement Solutions, May 2018.

## DS doesn't just stand for Displacement Solutions, it also stands for Do Something!

Sadly, few if any of those reading this article will find themselves in that group of 2,755 billionaires, however, a huge proportion of those scanning this article now are found within the world's top 10% richest people. It might not feel like it to the hard-working, underpaid NGO staff that so many of those interested in the work of DS may be, but if you make more than USD 40,000 a year, you, yes *you*, are in the global 1% of income earners. For every one of you, thus, there are 99 who are poorer. If your overall net worth - all of your assets minus your liabilities - surpasses USD 129,000 you are in the global top ten percent. Even if you don't feel rich as such, with life remaining hard, bills always needing to be paid and that feeling that there's never enough money left at the end of the month, viewed in global terms you are doing pretty well, and clearly much better off than our displaced friends who are moving in ever growing numbers to escape the tragedy of their homes and lands no longer being viable.

As much as I wish the billionaires would jump in and help to solve this problem that they have helped to cause in so many ways, I am not holding my breath. Most billionaires became billionaires by thinking largely about themselves, and even those few who have devoted large sums to philanthropy often do so far more out of self-interest in perpetuating the very system that allowed them to become so rich than anything else. If you don't believe me, just read Anand Giridharadas' *Winner's Take All* to get the full story.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps world leaders will finally accept that something has to be done and issue a 25% climate displacement levy, spread across a period of years on all global billionaires to ensure that these new hundreds of millions of newly displaced people have somewhere else to go besides the slum.

In the meantime, before the billionaires swoop by Geneva in their Gulfstreams on their way back home from next year's Davos meetings and start handing out that 3.6T we need to house people displaced due to global warming, or prior to the proposed levy being issued and enforced, *you* can lend a hand, you can personally show your conviction and help to build new, permanent homes for at least some of the world's most vulnerable people. If we don't do it, I fear no one will.

## OHOF Does Something

In our own small way, we are trying to do something. Our *One House, One Family* at a time project (OHOF) provides a way to fund the construction of new homes for coastal dwellers in Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, Panama, India and Sri Lanka. Since 2018, OHOF-Bangladesh has built nine houses near Chittagong, Bangladesh providing free, lifelong homes for around 50 people. We are now in Phase 3 of this project and hope to build a further 11 homes in 2022, thus providing a total of 20 homes under OHOF, giving new starts to more than 120 people. Each home costs USD 9,100, which includes a land plot, a brand new two-bedroom house, kitchen, living room, tube well, drainage and all the other attributes of a good quality home in a safe area. Phase 3 has a budget of USD 100,100. To support the Carteret Islanders in Papua New Guinea, we are working with our long-time partners Tulele Peisa as part of OHOF-PNG to build 31 new homes on the safer island of Bougainville at an even lower per house cost

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<sup>11</sup> Anand Giridharadas, *Winner's Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, Deckle Edge, 2018.

of USD 7,140 each, with an overall target of USD 221,340. We are in the process of initiating OHOF-India where two new restaurants in Varanasi and Jaipur will act as funding nodes to support the construction of new homes for climate displaced families in what is soon to be the world's biggest population. In Panama, we will work with our longtime partners the Guna Assembly to raise funds for OHOF-Panama to assist the relocating Guna islanders to build homes that are consistent with their cultural practices and traditions. And, finally, OHOF-Sri Lanka will do the same.

These homes are all made possible by individual contributions by people like you who are tired of hearing promises go unmet, watching helplessly as CO2 levels increase year on year, and who no longer want to sit idly by and see climate displacement get worse and worse. OHOF is a project for people who want to do something practical, concrete and visible to assist the totally innocent people who have to find new homes because of the impacts of climate change. To date scores of people have generously donated 500 dollars here and 1000 dollars there towards OHOF and its objectives. Some of OHOF's more generous contributors have given enough to build an entire house. A core element of the project is our commitment that 100% of any funds you or your friends or families are able to contribute will be sent directly to our local partners in both countries. Displacement Solutions manages OHOF but accepts no funds for this *pro bono* initiative and hope this will inspire readers to lend a hand.

We're still hoping the billionaires will come and join the party soon, and that courageous governments will come together to institute a worldwide climate displacement levy, but in the meantime it's up to us, and if we all come together we can begin to help solve climate displacement one house, one family at a time. Haven't we all had enough meetings, enough pontificating, enough Zoom calls and enough reports? Isn't it time for all of us to put our money down and become a concrete part of the solution? We can all afford it; all of us. I'm personally more than willing to give up flights, holidays, fancy meals and a lot of other things to make these homes a reality and I hope you will be too!

If you would like to help, please contribute directly via our website or write to [ohof@displacementsolutions.org](mailto:ohof@displacementsolutions.org) and we would be delighted to work with you.