

Mini Simulation

Hurricane in the Caribbean

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Overview

Climate change is presenting major policy challenges, especially as extreme weather events become increasingly damaging and frequent. Many small island developing states in the Caribbean are disproportionately impacted by these weather disasters. How should the United States support climate [refugees](#) and provide financial assistance that strengthens climate resilience in the region?

Students will understand that climate change is causing some natural disasters to become more frequent and severe, placing vulnerable countries at increased risk of devastation.

Students will understand that the United States faces varying long-term and short-term challenges when responding to disasters abroad.

The Situation

As climate change continues, some countries are exposed to greater risk from its effects than others. Small island developing states (SIDS) in the Caribbean are especially vulnerable to sea level rise and extreme weather such as hurricanes. Experts predict that hurricanes [will become more frequent and severe](#) as a result of climate change, which will pose significant challenges to populations and economies. As of 2024, [more than three hundred disasters](#) have struck Caribbean countries since 1950. They have caused more than 250,000 deaths. They have also affected more than twenty-four million people through injury or loss of livelihood. Compounding the destruction of extreme weather events, many SIDS lack the resources to quickly recover from disasters. Some disasters can incur costs higher than the annual output of countries' entire economies. Hurricane Maria, for instance, cost Dominica an estimated [225 percent of its gross domestic product \(GDP\)](#).

Climate change poses challenges not only to those vulnerable countries, but also to the rest of the world. Disasters can drive increased migration. In 2020, for instance, the Caribbean had [one of the highest rates of emigration in the world](#), in part due to the frequency of natural disasters. Climate-related migration can lead to [brain drain](#) in the affected countries. It can also worsen political tensions and economic challenges in countries receiving [migrants](#). Complicating matters, in contrast to those fleeing war or persecution, U.S. and [international law](#) do not currently recognize people fleeing natural disasters as entitled to special status. Thus, such migrants receive protections only on a case-by-case basis. In some situations, disasters can also worsen political instability. [In Haiti](#), for instance, a series of severe disasters over the past decade has compounded ongoing political turmoil and humanitarian suffering. Many analysts characterize climate change as a [threat multiplier](#). It can exacerbate preexisting tensions and instability around the world.

Governments both in SIDS and other countries increasingly face the question of how to assist those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Island countries vulnerable to climate disasters have [highlighted the need for internationally funded adaptation projects](#) [PDF] that can lessen risks. Those include coastal flood protections such as storm surge barriers and wetland preservation. They can also consist of more resilient infrastructure that can resist storm events. Improvements to early warning systems that can help governments prepare for disasters are also a type of climate [adaptation](#). However, adaptation efforts require significant resources and political will to succeed. According to [one report](#) [PDF], Jamaica will need to spend \$462 million per year to

protect against sea level rise. That will amount to 19 percent of the country's GDP. Adaptation projects also take time, often spanning multiple elections. To succeed, countries need to maintain political will for years.

The United States has sought to provide both short- and long-term assistance to Caribbean states. It frequently administers immediate disaster relief resources to affected islands. It has, in the past, granted [temporary protected status](#) (TPS) to communities affected by disasters. TPS allows those who have fled conflict or disasters to legally live and work in the United States. In 1988, for instance, migrants from Honduras and Nicaragua [received TPS](#) after a hurricane battered the two countries.

The United States has also assisted Caribbean states in their long-term adaptation efforts. In June 2022, the Joe Biden administration established the [U.S.-Caribbean Partnership to Address the Climate Crisis 2030](#). That initiative aims to help Caribbean states fund projects focused on strengthening energy security, critical infrastructure, and local economies. The Biden administration has also devoted more than [\\$100 million in funding](#) to Caribbean nations to address climate, energy, food, security, and humanitarian needs. Still, those efforts amount to only a fraction of the region's needs. U.S. climate envoy [John Kerry has said](#) that Caribbean states will ultimately need trillions of dollars in international financing.

In the meantime, disasters will likely take a worsening toll on Caribbean states. As the humanitarian and economic challenges of climate-related disasters grow, the United States will face pressure in the region to address both the immediate effects of natural disasters and the broader needs of building a more secure future.

Decision Point

A category 5 hurricane has struck Saint Clement, a small Caribbean Island country with a population of just under two hundred thousand. The storm caused catastrophic damage to the island's infrastructure and population. Initial reports indicate the death toll could be in the thousands, with tens of thousands more left without shelter, food, water, and electricity. Many experts estimate the island will not fully recover for years, if not decades. In the meantime, Saint Clement is increasingly vulnerable to additional storms as climate change makes extreme weather events more common. Many Saint Clementians have decided to leave the island and make for the United States. The government has asked Washington to assist in the island's recovery. The United States has a history of being the major source of foreign aid in the Caribbean. It has seen the nearby region as a key part of its [sphere of influence](#) for over two centuries. The president has convened the National Security Council (NSC) to discuss how the United States should respond. NSC members should bear in mind that, although the disaster in Saint Clement is an isolated incident, the growing frequency of natural disasters means the president could soon face many more decisions like this one.

NSC members should consider the following policy options, either alone or in combination:

- *Provide support for [migrants fleeing the island](#).* The United States could use TPS to allow Saint Clementian [immigrants](#) to legally live and work in the United States. Providing TPS could simplify the process of determining immigration status for the thousands of Saint Clementians who have already left the island. However, it could also encourage more Saint Clementians to migrate. It could further set a precedent that the United States will welcome other populations displaced by future climate disasters.
- *Support climate [adaptation efforts](#).* This option would entail a considerable U.S. foreign aid investment in developing climate resiliency. Such support could be done individually or in cooperation with other governments and regional organizations. In its least ambitious form, this option could target investment solely toward Saint Clement to help the island rebuild with more resilient infrastructure. A more expansive alternative could extend to other vulnerable areas as well—which could significantly increase those areas' ability to endure disasters in the future. However, that would require a massive investment and take years to produce results.
- *Offer short-term disaster relief assistance.* This option would provide immediate support to Saint Clement in the form of food, medical supplies, mobile generators. It would also include infrastructure assistance to clear debris and repair transportation links. Such action is in line with many previous U.S. disaster relief effort and could provide the much-needed aid to put Saint Clement back on its feet without demanding a massive U.S. investment. However, without larger-scale resiliency projects or migrant support, it would only partially address the full scale of the disaster. That would leave Saint Clement exposed to an increasingly likely repeat hurricane.

Photo: Palm trees sway in the wind as Hurricane Irma moves toward Caibarien, Cuba on September 8, 2017.

Source: Alexandre Meneghini/Reuters

[How the Caribbean Is Building Climate Resilience](#) Council on Foreign Relations

[A Caribbean Island's Quest to Become the World's First Climate-Resilient Nation](#) The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

[The Crisis of the Century: How the United States Can Protect Climate Migrants](#) Council on Foreign Relations