



DISPLACEMENT IN PARADISE

Hurricane Dorian slams the Bahamas

THEMATIC REPORT

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Author: John Marazita, Doctoral Student, University of Geneva, Department of Geography and Environment

Editor: Steven Ambrus

Design and layout: Rachel Natali

Cover photo: A home along the Grand Bahama Highway was hit by both the king tide and Hurricane Dorian. The inhabitants stayed in the home during the hurricane. As the water level rose, they moved to the attic although they were safe from the waters by only a few feet. After the storm, they then sought refuge with nearby relatives that were less impacted. Credit: John Marazita, 2019

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Caribbean region is a paradise of small islands dotting pristine turquoise waters. Honeymooners and retirees alike flock to the temperate waters seeking tranquillity and relaxation. That tranquillity was disturbed on 1 September 2019, however, when Hurricane Dorian made landfall on Elbow Cay, east of Grand Abaco in the Bahamas. For three days, the category 5 hurricane battered Abaco and Grand Bahama, causing catastrophic damage. As fierce winds blew, the sea churned, sending a wall of water up to seven meters high across the low-lying islands. The extensive damage led to widespread displacement of populations. Survivors seeking food and shelter were slowly evacuated by air and sea to New Providence, Eleuthera, Andros and other home islands. Given the proximity to the US and the extensive Bahamian diaspora in South Florida, evacuees with required documentation were allowed passage to the US. Hurricane Dorian caused an estimated 9,840 new displacements in the Bahamas.

Displacement following Hurricane Dorian was exceptional for the region, both in terms of numbers and patterns of movement. The study behind this report was based on a qualitative methodology with 41 semi-structured interviews as well as participant observation. Interviews were conducted with experts, host families and displaced people. The fieldwork was undertaken in New Providence, Grand Bahama and South Florida in October 2019, roughly five weeks after the hurricane made landfall. This report focuses on displacement geographically and by population groups, while examining the resulting obstacles to durable solutions on the hurricane-prone islands with the following four key findings:

| Displacement was compounded by a king tide

Hurricanes are historically common in this region. Local knowledge and building practices in the Bahamas have evolved with lessons learned from prior storms. Although hurricanes caused damage to infrastructure and private

property in the past, mass displacement was rare. The damage and widespread displacement associated with Hurricane Dorian was caused by the simultaneous occurrence of the hurricane with a king tide, which led to a wall of water measuring up to seven meters high sweeping across Grand Bahama and Abaco islands.

| Both internal and international networks facilitated evacuations

Shelters in the capital, Nassau, and in New Providence were the main destinations of immediate post-Dorian evacuation. As survivors gained access to communication, however, displacement was largely absorbed by extended personal networks, either in New Providence, other home islands or surrounding countries. For the displaced people still in collective shelters at the time of writing, a lack of networks has led to uncertain access to assistance.

| Durable solutions to displacement are still unclear

The road to recovery and rebuilding following Hurricane Dorian will be long. Most personal property and key infrastructure were damaged by a combination of the storm and the resulting storm surges. Even though the Bahamian government implements progressive economic measures in the affected areas, such as efforts to fund the rebuilding of homes and businesses, policy and economic response gaps remain. Firstly, the legal status of Haitian nationals unemployed as a result of the storm remains unclear.¹ Secondly, the implementation of government initiatives to increase employment on the disrupted islands is nascent. Lastly, the long-term process of rebuilding after \$2.5 billion in losses and damages will face a perpetual race against the occurrence of future hurricanes.² The accumulated destruction caused by recent hurricanes will continue to limit the ability of the Bahamian government to manage long-term disaster risk reduction.

| Hurricane Dorian was a catalyst for pre-existing internal tensions

As the Bahamian community began to struggle with the devastation caused by Hurricane Dorian, a narrative emerged critical of an already stigmatised Haitian community in Abaco and sexual and gender minorities in Grand Bahama. News outlets descended on informal settlements in Marsh Harbour, mainly populated by Haitians, and highlighted inequalities in displacement.³ These inequalities, however, had already been exemplified by an underlying legal battle waged by the Bahamian government to evict residents of informal settlements.⁴ While survivors of Haitian descent went into hiding because of the threat of deportations, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning and intersex (LGBTQA+) organisations pursued solutions to minimise the risk of violence in shelters. Assault against sexual and gender minorities in the Bahamas has pushed some outed members to seek asylum in Canada.⁵

TERMS

Cay: A small low-lying, sandy island.

Durable solutions: A scenario where displaced persons no longer require displacement assistance and meet the criteria set out in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons.

Informal settlements: Community either unplanned or existing outside of established legal frameworks.

Internal displacement: The forced movement of people within the country they live in.

King tide: Higher than normal high tides following a new or full moon or coinciding with perigean spring tides.

Cross-border displacement: The forced movement of people outside of the country they live in.

The Mudd at Marsh Harbour in Abaco, the Bahamas. The shanty town was totally demolished by Hurricane Dorian. Photo: John Engedal Nissen / IFRC, September 2019



INTRODUCTION

After passing through the West Indies, Hurricane Dorian intensified into a category 5 event as it approached the Bahamas. The hurricane made landfall on Elbow Cay near Abaco Island in the Bahamas on 1 September 2019. It struck the economic heart of Abaco at Marsh Harbor with wind speeds of 295 kilometres per hour before slowly moving west over eastern Grand Bahama.⁶ As the hurricane churned north, the eye stalled just north of Grand Bahama until 3 September. Meanwhile, a perfect alignment of the sun and moon led to an unseasonably high tide, colloquially known as a king tide.⁷ After three days of stalling over the Bahamas, Hurricane Dorian made landfall over South Florida before moving north.

The storm surge combined with the king tide caused a wall of water several meters high to sweep across Grand Bahama and Abaco. The devastation was unprecedented, with catastrophic damage to infrastructure and widespread displacement. Lacking food, potable water, and shelter, displaced people convened at airports and docks seeking evacuation to New Providence in Nassau, other Bahamian islands and international destinations.⁸

The Bahamas' National Emergency Management Association (NEMA), together with local organisations in Grand Bahama and New Providence, supported the creation of shelters to assist internally displaced people (IDPs). Most IDPs left the shelters following the immediate post-hurricane period for homes of friends and relatives, or returned to their place of origin at their own cost to begin reconstruction efforts. The transition for many displaced people was smooth, but societal tensions involving minorities quickly surfaced. Long a political pawn during election cycles, survivors of Haitian descent, for example, faced threats of deportation and subsequently abandoned the shelters. Police checkpoints at docks in New Providence for boats bound for Abaco prevented IDPs of Haitian descent from trying to return home. Lacking local networks and with nowhere to go, these IDPs went into hiding.

It is in this environment that qualitative fieldwork was undertaken on New Providence and Grand Bahama islands. A narrative of displacement from Hurricane Dorian was constructed using interviews with displaced people and host families, as well as knowledge of local disasters and social networks. The history of social

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD: GRAND BAHAMA HIGH ROCK, 21 OCTOBER 2019.

Not a single home survived unscathed along the normally picturesque Grand Bahama Highway between High Rock and Pelican Point. Where the eye of Hurricane Dorian made landfall, concrete walls had already collapsed, and homes had blown off their foundations. More than 50 days after the hurricane

passed, clean-up had only begun and building materials had yet to arrive.

Travelling east to East End, one could see blue tents lining the Grand Bahama Highway housing IDPs unwilling to leave their community. The IDPs subsisted on water from centralised water tanks and food that had been supplied by NGOs and churches. They worked to rebuild as they remembered family members and friends lost in the sea surge.



KEY FIGURES



**STORM SURGE:
UP TO
7 METRES**



**MORTALITY:
70 DEAD**



**9,840 PEOPLE
DISPLACED**

On 26 August 2019, Tropical Storm Dorian made landfall on Barbados. From Barbados, it crossed over Grenada, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines before intensifying into a hurricane near the Virgin Islands. As it moved northwest toward the Bahamas, it became a category 5 event with sustained wind speeds of 295 kilometres per hour, the strongest hurricane on record to hit the region. On 1 September, it made landfall on Elbow Cay before moving across Abaco. After making landfall on Grand Bahama, its path veered and stalled just north of Grand Bahama for more than 24 hours, affecting 20 per cent of the

population of the Bahamas. The hurricanes' winds then eased. It moved along the south-eastern US seaboard before largely dissipating over the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, east of Newfoundland, Canada on 7 September. Overall, the hurricane caused 465,000 new displacements in seven countries.¹⁰

The brunt of the damage was borne by the Bahamas where an estimated 9,840 people were displaced, at least 70 people died, and losses and damages reached an estimated \$2.5 billion.¹¹ This destruction was largely due to extraordinary high storm surges caused by the coinciding of Hurri-

cane Dorian with annual king tides. A wall of water measuring 5.5 meters to 7 meters in height swept across Abaco and Grand Bahama, causing mass displacement, both internal and cross-border, in its wake.¹² Meteorological statistics for Hurricane Dorian are precise, but mortality rates and the true impact of displacement may be underestimated because of a nine-year lapse since the last census. There are also barriers to quantifying such impacts in informal settlements and among undocumented foreigners severely affected on Abaco.

disparities in the Bahamas revealed significant tensions. Similarities arose between recent events in the informal Mudd Settlement in Abaco and past experiences at the informal Bwapen settlement in New Providence.⁹

The barriers faced by survivors of Haitian descent, however, are not the only story or even the general theme of this thematic series. Displacement caused by Hurricane Dorian revealed important network-based displacement characteristics and was one of the rare examples of not only local displacement, but also national and cross-border displacement. This report seeks to add an important component of data for the use of policymakers, stakeholders and academics and to capture this unique example of disaster displacement from a qualitative perspective.

INITIAL RESPONSE

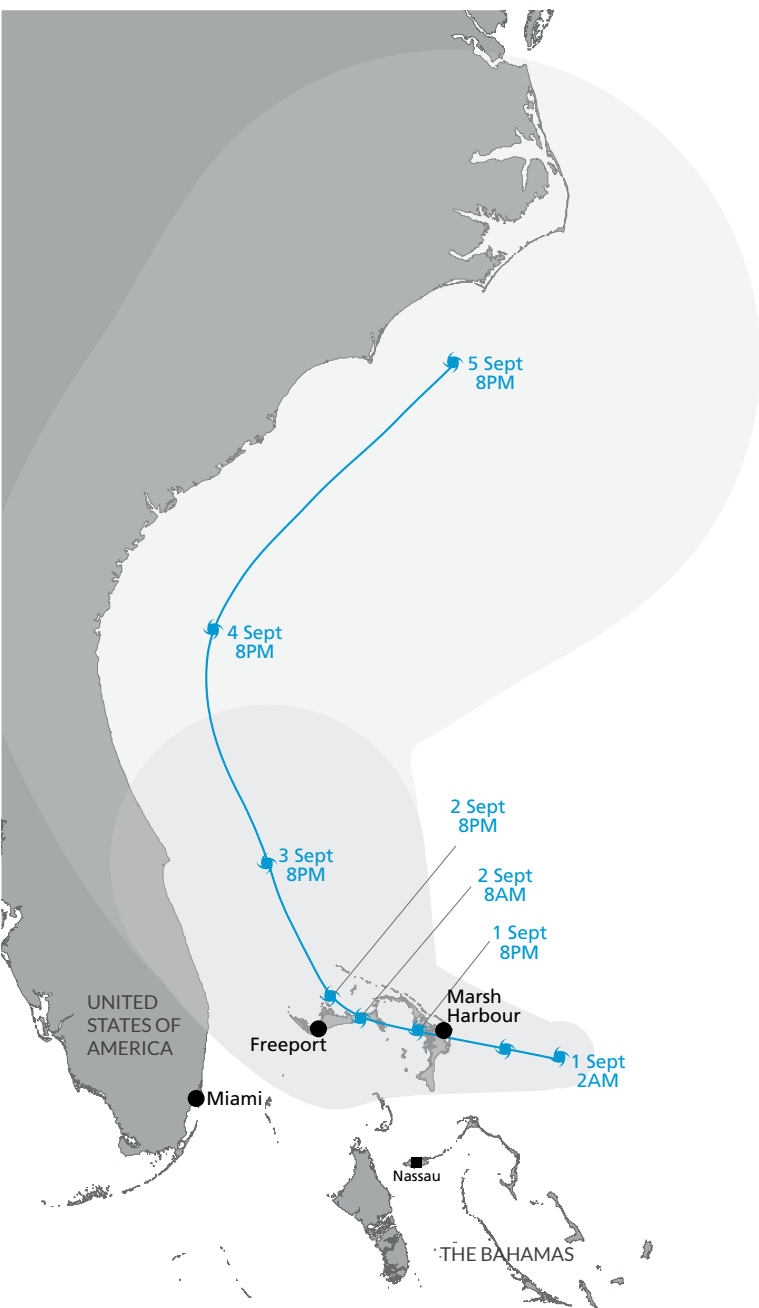
As Hurricane Dorian approached the Bahamas, the Bahamian authorities quickly and methodically issued warnings for Abaco and Grand Bahama, including through radio and television bulletins. Meanwhile, prominent members of the Haitian community alerted people in the informal

settlements on Abaco.¹³ Some households from cays east of Abaco heeded these warnings and evacuated. Having survived hurricanes Irma in 2017, Matthew in 2016 with its 5,000 displacements, Joaquin in 2015, Sandy in 2012 and Irene in 2011, most households remained in their homes as Hurricane Dorian approached.¹⁴ The warnings, however, did little to convey the severity of the hurricane striking in combination with a king tide. Such tides have been increasingly linked to coastal disasters across the globe, although they are rarely reported in disaster literature.¹⁵

As Hurricane Dorian stalled over Abaco and Grand Bahama, a fierce storm surge washed across the islands. Families living in mostly single-story homes scrambled for shelter in attics waiting for the calm of the storm's eye before seeking new shelters in anticipation of a second hurricane phase. Few households were prepared for the severe flooding and the intense winds, however, and many of those with elderly people and children were unable to cope. When the waters finally subsided, survivors on Abaco and Grand Bahama left home in search of potable water, food and housing.

Both private and public infrastructure were severely affected. The storm levelled a direct hit on the economic hub of Abaco, and the local government was displaced, limiting its ability to begin the clean-up and rebuilding effort. On Grand Bahama, the storm surge destroyed the Grand Bahama International Airport and flooded police cars. Mass displacement resulted from widely damaged infrastructure on both islands. The affected areas were left without access to water, food, shelter, electricity and a means of communication to the outside world. The southernmost neighbourhoods of Freeport on Grand Bahama, however, were spared.

With the local and national government unable to cope in situ, evacuations from the stricken islands began using a mix of public and private transport.¹⁶ Evacuations were slow, with IDPs from Grand Bahama reporting wait times of up to three days. Ultimately, nearly 5,500 evacuees were registered in New Providence, with 1,957 IDPs in official, collective shelters.¹⁷



DISPLACEMENT

The hurricane and resulting storm surge triggered 9,840 new displacements in the Bahamas. This chapter follows the displacement of survivors locally, to New Providence, and to other countries.

As evacuees contacted extended networks and moved in with host families, the number of IDPs in official shelters fell rapidly. Additional threats of deportation and raids affecting IDPs of Haitian descent led to further declines in these numbers. An estimated 865 evacuees, meanwhile, relocated into rental properties.¹⁸

NEW PROVIDENCE

The destruction caused by Hurricane Dorian led to displacement and a dramatic exodus from Abaco and

Grand Bahama. An estimated 5,500 IDPs gathered around the airports and docks seeking transport to New Providence, the economic hub of the Bahamas and the home of the national capital, Nassau. The IDPs arriving in Nassau dispersed to a mix of host families, rental properties and official collective shelters. As shelters in Abaco closed in the days following the storm, 2,043 IDPs entered the New Providence shelters.¹⁹ Nearly half of them stayed on a short-term basis while seeking assistance from extended networks of family and friends. IDPs without such networks, however, remained in the shelters.

NGOs, international organisations, and church groups have provided continuous support in New Providence to displaced people. Local churches became the focal point for donations of consumable goods, especially from



Despite all having lost their homes, Barbara McIntosh (front right), Juliette Thomas (left) and Leona Laing volunteer in sorting out clothes for distribution at Bahamas Red Cross regional office in Freetown, Grand Bahama. Photo: Maria Santto / Finnish Red Cross, September 2019

the US.²⁰ IDPs visited local organisations on a regular basis for vital supplies in an effort to ease the burden on host families.

More than three months after Hurricane Dorian, dependency on collective shelters has revealed strong ethnic divides among displaced people. Bahamian survivors quickly integrated into local networks or returned to their place of origin. Displaced people of Haitian background, however, remained in shelters or in hiding because of the legal limbo created by deportation threats. As the end of the year approached and the government sought closure of the remaining shelters, 497 IDPs remained in two collective shelters on New Providence.²¹

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT ACROSS ISLANDS

At least a third of the displaced population in Abaco and Grand Bahama was evacuated to New Providence in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Dorian. Thousands of people, however, either stayed behind or quickly returned to their place of origin. Large numbers of IDPs waited in excruciating conditions for transport to Nassau. Some of them found shelter through extended families in less affected communities and in smaller shelters in Freeport, the urban centre of Grand Bahama, supported by local organisations and multinational companies. Cruise ship companies serving destinations in the Bahamas pledged thousands of meals daily to IDPs. Local organisations began supplying water, food, and healthcare to the most devastated communities. IDPs, most of them men, returned to their home areas, where they lived in tents, and began clean-up and reconstruction efforts.²² Within two months, 3,142 IDPs from Abaco had returned to their place of origin.²³

Collective shelters in New Providence remained open through the end of 2019. The two shelters in Freeport, however, were closed in October in preparation for the scholastic year, and the remaining IDPs in those shelters were relocated to rental properties and local hotels.²⁴ While cruise ships began visiting Freeport in October bringing passengers and economic activity to Grand Bahama, the long-term outlook for displacement on Abaco and Grand Bahamas remains unclear.

CROSS-BORDER DISPLACEMENTS

Bahamian citizens enjoy special access to Canada through an electronic travel authorisation (eTA) visa valid for up to 90 days and to the US through a conditional visa that allows free entry for up to 180 days.²⁵ Cruise ships and private and commercial aircrafts offered transport to South Florida as the exodus of displaced people to New Providence began. This was an appealing destination for some IDPs, given its proximity, as well as their family ties there, and a larger Bahamian diaspora of 49,940 people in the US.²⁶ Damage to the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) processing centre in the Grand Bahama International Airport, however, created bureaucratic hurdles that limited such travel. Without a functioning processing centre, evacuees were required to have pre-approved entry visas before being transported to the US.²⁷

The US was the main destination of cross-border displacement associated with the hurricane. This displacement was facilitated not only by extended family networks, but also local organisations in South Florida. There were, for example, high-profile cases of Bahamian students hosted by public and private schools in the US.²⁸ The US was also a destination for medical evacuations, a few Haitian nationals and at least one Cuban national residing in Abaco. Altogether, between 600 and 700 displaced people are thought to have gone to the US, not including US nationals residing in and visiting affected areas.²⁹ Canada was also a destination for displaced people. The number of cross-border displacements following Hurricane Dorian was small, but also significant given the rarity of this type of displacement from an island state.

DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

Displacement following Hurricane Dorian not only had a geographical dimension, but also a social one that revealed historic fissures in the Bahamian society. Displacement of the Haitian diaspora and sexual minorities exposed xenophobic, homophobic and transphobic tensions. This forced people to go into hiding due to threats of deportation, a dwindling group of formerly documented workers who are in legal limbo, and sexual minorities fleeing to Canada. This chapter further highlights the experience of displaced people by population groups including sexual and gender minorities, as well as Bahamians, Haitians and people of other nationalities.

BAHAMIANS

Displacement of Bahamians varied by island of origin. On Abaco, the hurricane made landfall near Marsh Harbour, the island's economic and administrative centre. With local authorities unable to provide assistance, IDPs had little choice but to leave the island. As the storm moved west, the second landfall fell on the rural communities of East Grand Bahama. Freeport in the western portion of the island, was saved from the eye, but storm surges flooded the international airport and damaged key infrastructure. This destruction, however, was not as widespread as in Marsh Harbour. Neighbourhoods in the southern portion of Freeport suffered little or no damage. Shelters and extended families in Freeport were thus able to accommodate some of the displaced people from affected parts of Grand Bahama. As the last shelter in Freeport closed in October, displaced people were relocated to hotels and private homes.

For many people, displacement began as the eye made landfall. Following the first wave of the hurricane, homes that during previous storms had provided adequate shelter were greatly compromised, forcing people to find shelter with relatives, in schools and in

fortified public buildings. For residents of affected areas who were able to remain in their homes for the second wave of the hurricane, high storm surges brought new and unforeseen challenges. As the waters receded, IDPs were guided to temporary shelters and eventually evacuated by air and sea to New Providence and other home islands, as well as to the US. A lack of food and potable water forced most IDPs to flee, but some of them remained behind to assist local communities and to begin clean-up and rebuilding efforts.

Personal networks were a key determinant of post-hurricane displacement for Bahamians. Many evacuated Bahamians initially entered government sponsored collective shelters. A lack of privacy and unsatisfying conditions at the shelters, however, led people to search for alternative solutions, whether with extended families in Nassau or in hotels and apartments. For evacuees without a strong support network that would lead them to a host family, housing was facilitated by the private sector and NGOs, including Samaritan's Purse and Global Empowerment Mission. Most displaced people went to New Providence, but significant numbers of IDPs headed to the less affected areas of Freeport and Andros, where they were hosted by relatives and friends. An estimated 500 people were displaced to Eleuthera and 600 people to the US.³⁰

| Students

Hurricane Dorian directly affected educational institutions on Abaco and Grand Bahama. Nineteen public schools, 15 in Abaco and four in Grand Bahama, as well as satellite campuses of the University of the Bahamas, were closed due to extensive damage.³¹ Following the evacuations, the Bahamian government focused on providing IDPs access to education through partnerships with non-governmental and private institutions. As the government sought to rebuild moderately



A church in Marsh Harbor, Abaco Island, sheltered 47 Haitians and held up to 320 people at most. Photo: UN/OCHA/Mark Garten, September 2019

damaged schools in Abaco and Grand Bahama, it tried to find institutions that could host displaced primary and secondary school students in New Providence. Private schools in the United States also facilitated enrolment of other displaced students.³²

The satellite campuses of the University of the Bahamas were heavily damaged by the hurricane. Programmes were thus implemented at the university's main campus in Nassau to help these students with new courses, housing and other needs. The students are largely expected to stay at the campus over the long term.³³

HAITIANS

The 1950s brought changes to the region as the Bahamas prospered from tourism and Haiti experienced political turmoil.³⁴ The Bahamas became an attractive destination for Haitians in search of employment and interested in migrating to North America. As labour

needs grew, these Haitians filled low-skilled, low-paid and often temporary job vacancies. The Haitian population continued to grow, and tensions between Bahamian nationals and the Haitian diaspora festered. Today, an estimated 80,000 Haitians in the Bahamas have come to occupy an uneasy position in the greater Bahamian community.³⁵ Strict Bahamian citizenship laws, oriented around paternal succession rather than place of birth, have excluded many settled residents of Haitian background.³⁶ Tolerated as cheap migrant labour, while being the brunt of xenophobic attacks partly because of their perceived link to voodoo practices, Haitians, as well as the expansion of informal settlements, are often criticised by politicians during election campaigns.³⁷

Haitians have moved into informal settlements leased from private landholders. They have done so in search of solidarity and to reduce the burden associated with the high cost of living in the Bahamas. These informal settlements have thrived, including in New Providence and Abaco, and serve as dynamic spaces with their own

internal regulations and economies. The settlements' occupants pay rent, contribute to overall development and often co-exist peacefully with the greater Bahamian community. Tensions often arise with the authorities, however, when the inhabitants claim for more rights.³⁸ The destruction they suffered as a result of the hurricane brought them visibility in Marsh Harbour, but the hurricane was also a catalyst for a legal battle between them and the government that had been evolving for much of the year. As the government struggled in court to evict the residents, the mass displacement associated with the hurricane facilitated the seizure of the settlements by the government.³⁹

As Hurricane Dorian moved across Marsh Harbour, informal settlements, mainly populated by Haitians, were rendered uninhabitable in Mudd and Pigeon Pea. Homes there, often made of corrugated iron, were obliterated by the storm and resulting storm surge. The settlements devastated the Haitian community, which, having limited social networks, initially benefited from government assistance and was largely evacuated to collective shelters in New Providence. The status of displaced survivors of Haitian descent remaining in Abaco, however, is unknown. It is generally believed that, as government forces blockaded the settlements, survivors probably sought shelter in less affected ones in the north of Abaco. Meanwhile the settlements in Mudd and Pigeon Pea were effectively vacated and the land re-appropriated. They subsequently caught fire in October.

Displaced people of Haitian descent concentrated in the shelters of New Providence because they had no home to return to in Abaco and limited social contacts. On 10 October, 112 Haitians were deported.⁴⁰ Threats of deportation drove many of those who were undocumented into hiding in the informal settlements and bush around the island. In an effort to stop these undocumented survivors from returning to Abaco, authorities implemented document checks at some boat docks and at the entrance of informal settlements in Abaco. They also planned additional measures at Haitian churches.⁴¹ Groups of Haitian deportees are thought to include Haitians born in the Bahamas who never acquired Bahamian nationality and well-established migrants with little or no connection to Haiti. The deportations have been enforced even as Haiti continues to experience displacement caused by earthquakes in 2010 and 2018.⁴²

SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITIES

Accurate statistics on sexual and gender minorities in the Bahamas remain elusive because threats of violence often push the community into hiding. Homosexuality was decriminalised in 1991, but there is no protection against gender-based discrimination and violence against the LGBTQ community is widespread. A study by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada on sexual minorities in the Bahamas documents both physical attacks and murder, but most assaults tend to go unreported in the country, and cases of murder often result in lesser charges through self-defence pleas.⁴³ Sixteen Bahamians were granted asylum in Canada as sexual minorities between 2011 and 2014.⁴⁴

Recent pushes toward 2020 pride celebrations have faced stiff opposition from members of Parliament who have openly questioned the morality of pride supporters. For sexual minorities who have disclosed their sexual orientation, disaster displacement involved additional barriers and threats of violence. NGOs helped members of the LGBTQA+ community who were displaced and unwilling to stay in shelters for fear of violence in finding private accommodations. The storm also served as a catalyst for some displaced sexual minorities with sufficient resources to move to Canada.⁴⁵

OTHER NATIONALITIES

With an advanced economy close to the U.S., the Bahamas is an attractive destination for expatriates from around the region. In addition to more than 40,000 Haitian nationals, the Bahamas hosts more than 5,000 Jamaicans and 4,500 people from the US. It also hosts Canadians, Cubans and people of other nationalities.⁴⁶ Following Hurricane Dorian, displaced people of non-Bahamian and non-Haitian background largely relied on established networks and, when necessary, consular assistance to facilitate their evacuation.⁴⁷ Expatriates from the US and Canada were able to freely repatriate, while Jamaicans and Cubans, constituting a small group of at least 30 Jamaicans and three Cubans, were largely absorbed by extended networks in New Providence.⁴⁸ Following evacuation to Nassau, one Cuban survivor with dual Bahamian and Cuban citizenship joined family in Florida.⁴⁹

INITIAL CLEAN-UP AND RECONSTRUCTION

DOMED HOMES: TEMPORARY HOUSING



Sample Dome: NEMA Headquarters. Photo: John Marazita, October 2019.

In an effort to offer resilient temporary housing, InterShelter Inc. was enlisted to supply 250 dome homes. The temporary shelters, resistant to hurricane strength winds, earthquakes and insect invasions, have been ordered to house IDPs as they rebuild homes and businesses on the island of Abaco.

According to NEMA, the initial dome homes were installed in Spring City during the first week of December 2019. Although falling behind schedule, up to 110 domes were expected to be completed by the end of 2019. Each dome can house between four and six IDPs and can be connected to sewage lines, as well as water and electricity.

The government anticipates a budget of \$6.4 million, equal to roughly \$25,600 per dome, to build the structures.

Source: Report from Government of Bahamas. 10 Dec 2019.

The hurricane destroyed or damaged an estimated 13,000 homes in Abaco and Grand Bahama. This led to mass displacement of residents, including of civil servants.⁵⁰ With a lack of leadership on the ground, clean-up and reconstruction became a matter for the national government (NEMA), foreign aid partners, international organisations, churches, volunteers and IDPs. The national government recognised the need for local leadership in reconstruction and prioritised temporary housing to facilitate the repatriation of the local government to Abaco. This did not happen, however, until 2 November, two months after the storm made landfall, when Prime Minister Minnis announced government efforts to begin reconstruction.⁵¹ The government initiative initially called for the construction of 250 prefabricated, domed homes in Abaco able to withstand hurricane-strength winds.⁵² This complimented initial efforts by local organisations to facilitate home and roof repairs. National authorities have also proposed the use of recreation vehicles to house displaced civil servants.

The government has in addition limited value-added tax for the affected islands lasting until June 2020, introduced loans and grants of up to \$50,000 for affected businesses and grants of up to \$10,000 to cover construction costs for damaged homes under a proposed National Recovery and Reconstruction Trust Fund.⁵³

Abaco and Grand Bahama have unique governance structures within the Bahamian commonwealth. Freeport on Grand Bahama enjoys autonomy from the national government under an agreement with the Grand Bahama Port Authority. The Freeport free trade zone resulting from the Hawksbill Creek Agreement Act allows greater autonomy over land distribution and use.

Grand Bahama does not have the informal settlements that are characteristic of Abaco and New Providence. Damage to infrastructure in Freeport was mainly linked to the storm surge and affected the Grand Bahama

International Airport as well as the police department and hospitals. Neighbourhoods in the south and south-west areas of Freeport, meanwhile, were relatively damage free. On Grand Bahama structural damage was categorised as 54 per cent minimal, 19 per cent medium and 16 per cent major, while eight per cent of structures were completely destroyed.⁵⁴ This damage was concentrated on the eastern side of the island.

Reconstruction on Grand Bahama began at a grassroots level soon after the storm surge dissipated. Roads were cleared, and NGOs, church groups and aid donors moved in with essential items, including tents. By the end of October, settlements between High Rock and East Point resembled tent cities where survivors camped out while rebuilding. Settlements outside of Freeport, however, were still without electricity and with limited access to construction materials. The local and national governments focused on securing vital infrastructure to quickly rebuild the local economy. Although cruise ships began returning to Freeport on 13 October and international flights to both Grand Bahama and Abaco were restored in mid-December, full refurbishment of the heavily damaged Grand Bahama International Airport and the reconstruction of basic tourist facilities on Abaco will take many years.⁵⁵

A long-term solution to displacement in both Abaco

and Grand Bahama will involve many challenges, not only for displaced people of Haitian descent, but also for Bahamians. These include both economic factors and the threats of future hurricanes. Abaco and Grand Bahama faced economic difficulties even before the hurricane. Profits from the Grand Bahama Port Authority and from tourism had stagnated in recent years, and Grand Bahama was facing increased unemployment rates. On Abaco, rising real estate prices driven by the expatriate community and the demand for low-wage labour led to great inequality and the expansion of informal settlements. The need for a durable solution involving resettlement is thus complicated by different social and economic factors that are exacerbated by \$2.5 billion in losses and damages to primary sectors on the two islands.⁵⁶

Bahamian society has a long history of rebuilding after hurricanes. The government and private sector have invested in resilient homes and infrastructure, many of which survived Hurricane Dorian with minimal damage.⁵⁷ It is this prior experience of hurricanes that has created a resilient community. As the Bahamian government continues with the mammoth, years-long task of clean-up and rebuilding, damage from past hurricanes persists. Reconstruction and durable solutions thus become not only limited by funding and immigration policy, but a race against time before the next hurricane hits.



Local residents of Marsh Harbor on Abaco Island cover a roof affected by the hurricane with tarp. Photo: UN/OCHA/Mark Garten, September 2019

DURABLE SOLUTIONS AND ADAPTIVE MEASURES

Following previous hurricanes, the Bahamian government took significant steps to ensure that communities were rebuilt to higher standards of disaster preparedness. The scale of destruction to both private and public infrastructure in Abaco and Grand Bahama following Hurricane Dorian, however, has led to a greater focus on displacement and repatriation than on durable solutions and adaptation. The IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons sets eight benchmarks for durable solutions, mainly: safety and security; adequate standard of living; access to livelihoods; restoration of housing, land and property; access to documentation; family reunification; participation in public affairs; and access to effective remedies and justice.⁵⁸

The government has focused on displacement and repatriation, but the achievement of durable solutions remains fragmented. Survivors with networks and economic means have quickly integrated into host communities in New Providence and other home islands such that they no longer need public assistance. Durable solutions on a broad scale, however, remain elusive. The lack of adequate housing and cases of lost documentation remain barriers to applying for jobs. Participation in decision-making and policy debates by displaced people, especially those from the LGBTQA+ and Haitian communities, is lacking and continues to be driven by the central government in Nassau. As the return of evacuees to Abaco and Grand Bahama increases, uncertainty exists for those who do not own land and for residents of informal settlements where land has been repurposed.



High Rock, Grand Bahama. Photo: John Marazita, October 2019.

A recent study from Stanford University highlights the unique vulnerability of Abaco and Grand Bahama to hurricanes. This includes problems related to the occupation of marginal lands.⁵⁹ Intense competition for land among expatriates in Abaco has contributed to the ballooning of informal settlements in Marsh Harbour. These were later flattened by Hurricane Dorian. In the absence of an adequate resettlement strategy, construction of informal settlements on marginal lands will continue, and these vulnerabilities will persist. The northern coast of Grand Bahama, with the exception of the airport, is undeveloped because of the Grand Bahama Port Authority's poor management. This has created a barrier to local communities limiting damage from hurricanes in the past. More developed areas of Freeport, however, are low lying. As a result, flooding from the combination of the king tide and storm surge associated with Hurricane Dorian caused widespread damage. Abaco and Grand Bahama, which are both low-lying islands, will remain vulnerable to the combined effects of hurricanes and king tides.

CONCLUSION

As Hurricane Dorian intensified into a category 5 storm and landfall on Elbow Cay became imminent, the government followed protocols established through experience. Even with early warnings and pre-emptive evacuations, however, the damage exceeded expectations and triggered mass displacement in Abaco and Grand Bahama. These severe impacts were related to the combined effects of intense storms and a king tide, a colloquial term borrowed from the Pacific Islands to describe extraordinarily high tides. King tides, which are easily calculated, have remained understudied, but as climate change leads to sea level rise, awareness of the phenomenon has spread among coastal communities. Monitoring them in connection with rapid-onset hazards has become vital, as have comparisons of similar experiences in other small island states.

Hurricane Dorian was one of the most devastating storms to hit the region. Owing to the quick response of the government, civil society and the private sector, evacuations and other elements of disaster response were carried out smoothly. Displacement, however, has been overshadowed by festering social issues of xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia predating the storm. Eight months after the devastating hurricane, displaced people of Haitian descent still have no clear pathway to durable solutions and in many cases are uncertain about their legal status. As deportations continue to Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haïtien, displaced people are being sent back to a country they may never have known, with few contacts and little aid. For the deportees, displacement may become the new norm because they are ending up in places currently experiencing their own internal displacement.

As 2019 came to a close, durable solutions remained elusive for many people displaced by Hurricane Dorian. The return of cruise ships to Freeport began shortly after the disaster, but long-term employment prospects, even with funding from the Bahamian government, remain in doubt. Key infrastructure has been destroyed and civil servants displaced. Recovery has become a long-term process with long-term objectives as the Bahamas seek to rebuild local economies already facing economic hardship. As the Bahamas turns its sights towards long-term durable solutions, the likely occurrence of another hurricane could further exacerbate displacement.

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The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
3 rue de Varembé, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland
+41 22 552 3600 | info@idmc.ch

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