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DISPLACEMENT: Uncertain Journeys

DISPLACEMENT: Uncertain Journeys works in and around intergovernmental policy conferences, using artistic interventions to engage policymakers on the issue of people being displaced by disasters and climate change. They use exhibitions and installations, commissioned artwork, cultural dialogues, public events, publications and an online art gallery linked to social media to develop emotional engagement with the issues and promote effective action.

Visit project website (<https://www.displacementjourneys.org/>)

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These artists challenge us in a striking way. They remind us that it isn't just about meetings, speeches and documents.

Madeline Garlick, UN
Refugee agency

Keywords

Issues

Adaptation to Climate Change

Environmental Justice



creative carbon scotland
connecting arts and sustainability



Project Description

Background

Intergovernmental policy conferences are one of the key settings where major decisions and legally binding commitments are made on addressing climate change and related environmental issues. The most famous of these are the series of United Nations COPs (Conferences of the Parties) on Climate Change that have included COP15 in Copenhagen, COP21 in Paris, and COP26 in Glasgow. There are also United Nations COPs on biodiversity and many other issues, as well as different global forums, conferences and platforms. These are where negotiations take place, declarations are signed and major decisions are formalised but they are also spaces where governments seek to promote themselves and where non-governmental organisations, businesses and others exert strategic pressure to further their own goals.

Artists who aim to reach politicians or others working in policymaking may want to use these events as an opportunity to effectively target that audience. This requires markedly different methods from much climate change focused creative work, which is more frequently open and public rather than working in closed and private spaces. Many have commented on how the 'corporate' nature of the large conference centre venues that play host to these events can benefit from creative intervention and pointed to the ability of **art to offer alternative avenues for discussion that can evade the restrictions of more formal methods** (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/-/projects/softpowerenquiry>). However, finding a meaningful role for the arts in policy conferences can be difficult and there are unique barriers and complications that apply. This article uses the organisation *DISPLACEMENT: Uncertain Journeys* as a case study for how the arts can develop a role in these contexts.

Origins and Foundation

DISPLACEMENT: Uncertain Journeys (<https://www.displacementjourneys.org/>) is a project using artistic methods to improve international policy on supporting and protecting people displaced as a result of disasters and climate change, an issue often referred to as 'disaster displacement'.

DISPLACEMENT originated through the work of Hannah Entwisle Chapuisat, a lawyer by training with experience in operational and policy issues related to humanitarian affairs and displacement via the United Nations (UN). In 2009, she undertook a masters degree in fine art at the Geneva University of Art and Design (HEAD), looking at how contemporary art practice can be a method for researching international policy issues.

In 2013, Hannah was hired as a researcher for the Nansen Initiative, a group of states led by Switzerland and Norway working outside of formal UN processes to advance international action on the issue of cross-border displacement in the context of climate change and disasters. Although Hannah's role was not arts-focused, it created an opportunity to advocate for the inclusion of art in the intergovernmental consultative process.

In 2015, Hannah was able to work with Professor Walter Kälin, the Nansen Initiative's Envoy, and Professor Chris Wainwright, environmental artist, curator and Pro-Vice Chancellor at the University of the Arts London (UAL), to develop the idea. Establishing DISPLACEMENT as a UAL project, Chris led DISPLACEMENT's first exhibition about disaster displacement as part of the Nansen Initiative Global Consultation in Geneva in December 2015.

After Chris Wainwright unexpectedly and tragically died in 2017, UAL was no longer able to host the project. Subsequently, Hannah co-founded the Swiss-based arts association La Fruitière to host it and partnered with the Norwegian Refugee Council in Geneva, Switzerland. Although a doctoral candidate at UAL at this time, Hannah maintained her professional collaboration with the **Platform on Disaster Displacement** (<https://disasterdisplacement.org/>) (PDD), which replaced the Nansen Initiative in 2016, as an independent research consultant and member of its Advisory Committee. Her continued engagement and discussions with the PDD Secretariat resulted in the inclusion of DISPLACEMENT as a component of the PDD communication strategy.

DISPLACEMENT now operates primarily at international policy conferences and seeks to engage an audience of international policymakers, rather than a 'general public' audience. Initially, the project relied on 'in-between' moments, such as coffee breaks or relaxation spaces as delegates move between formal conference proceedings. Increasingly, they incorporate art within broader official sessions or have dedicated art events. DISPLACEMENT often uses immersive and interactive artworks that invite international conference participants to understand disaster displacement in innovative ways and focus more sharply on the emotional and human side of disaster displacement, which too easily feels abstract and distant in these contexts.



Lucy + Jorge Orta's Antarctic Village-No Borders and Antarctica World Passport Bureau, installed as part of the DISPLACEMENT exhibition at the Global Forum on Migration and Development in 2018, organised with the PDD and supported by NRC, UAL and others. Credit: DISPLACEMENT/Photo by Gorm Ashurst.

Past projects and ongoing work

For the 11th **Global Forum on Migration and Development** (<https://gfmdd.org/>) Summit in Marrakesh, Morocco as part of Migration Week 2018, **DISPLACEMENT** arranged for artists **Lucy and Jorge Orta** to set up their **Antarctica World Passport Bureau** (<https://www.displacementjourneys.org/2018/12/2018-global-forum-on-migration-and-development/>), built from reclaimed materials, where delegates were invited to become a 'world citizen' by receiving a stamped Antarctica World Passport, 'a universal passport for a continent without borders'. The work was visually striking and participatory but also invited crucial reflection on the arbitrary nature of national borders and the need for cross-border solidarity in responding to climate change. DISPLACEMENT also featured Søren Dahlgard's *Inflatable Island*, and presented contemporary artworks from Rhino Ariefiansyah, Lars Jan, Relocate Kivalina, Marie Velardi, and Chris Wainwright to highlight challenges and solutions related to disaster displacement.

This thread was continued at the **2019 Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction** (<https://www.unisdr.org/conference/2019/globalplatform/home/index.html>) in Geneva, Switzerland, where DISPLACEMENT was commissioned to curate an exhibition by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). The panel exhibition on the Lake Geneva border featured nine artists and collectives whose work spoke to different themes related to avoiding disaster displacement and living with future disaster risk. Contributing artists included Rhino Ariefiansyah, Amy Balkin, Søren Dahlgard, Mary Mattingly, Sidney Regis, Relocate Kivalina, Din Muhammad Shibly, Marie Velardi, Veejay Villafranca, and Chris Wainwright.

Through collaboration with the Norwegian Refugee Council and PDD, delegates were also invited to participate in performances that involved carrying Søren Dahlgaard's sculpture *The Inflatable Island* around the conference venue, bringing delegates together in a collective act of collaboration that also encouraged active and physical identification with the ideas embodied by the artwork, which represents disaster displaced persons from the Maldives and elsewhere, who will likely need to find a new home due to rising sea levels. **Hannah and Søren also presented the DISPLACEMENT project to the conference delegates from one of the conference stages.** (<https://www.unisdr.org/conference/2019/globalplatform/programme/ignite-stage/view%3fid=1001.html>)

For the **2019 UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP25)** (<https://unfccc.int/cop25>) in Madrid, Spain, DISPLACEMENT partnered with the Coalition for Art and Sustainable Development (COAL) (<http://www.projetcoal.org>) in Paris to present the winners of their annual art prize (<http://www.projetcoal.org/coal/en/2019/11/30/les-nomin%C3%A9s-du-prix-coal-2019/>), which that year was dedicated to the theme of 'Climate, Disasters and Displacement'. **PDD, COAL and DISPLACEMENT collaborated to present all ten of the COAL prize finalists' work to negotiators and policy experts inside the COP25 'Blue Zone'** (<https://www.displacementjourneys.org/2019/12/united-nations-climate-change-conference-cop25/>) – which is open only to negotiators and designated observers – during a side event hosted by the Warsaw International Mechanism Task Force on Displacement and during three dedicated sessions at the French Pavilion.

The Platform on Disaster Displacement invited the COAL Prize Laureates, Lena Dobrowolska and Teo Ormond-Skeaping, to receive the prize from the French Climate Ambassador at the French Pavilion for their project *You Never Know, One Day You Too May Become a Refugee*. Lena and Teo explained their project to the conference delegates and received feedback on which issues would be best for their planned film to tackle. **An interview with the artists was also featured on the Platform on Disaster Displacement Website** (<https://disasterdisplacement.org/staff-member/in-conversation-with-lena-dobrowolska-and-teo-ormond-skeaping.>).

For this project, Lena and Teo created a feature-length film set in a not-so-distant future that portrays the displacement and subsequent migration of a family from a fictional island state, off the coast of the UK, called the Isle of Grain. Throughout the film, the family's story is retold by "Mother", the head of a household, to a resettlement officer from an anonymous African country who has been tasked with deciding whether or not the family will be accepted onto a progressive re-settlement scheme offered by his state for those displaced by climate change.

Looking ahead, the artists plan to organize interdisciplinary screenings and workshop events at major climate and migration conferences, universities, and art institutions to bring those working in culture, research, policy-making and human rights together in public forums to imagine ambitious future scenarios in which people being displaced because of climate change are adequately supported. **They have also since presented this project at the UN Office at Geneva's 2021 Peace Talks** (<https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1z/k1zi2vm57r>).



A still from the film *You Never Know, One Day You Too May Become a Refugee*, courtesy of the artists. Credit: Lena Dobrowolska and Teo Ormond-Skeaping.

Partners & Stakeholders

- **DISPLACEMENT: Uncertain Journeys** (<https://www.displacementjourneys.org/>) consists of a core curatorial team of three responsible for the overall design and implementation of the project: co-founder and curator Hannah Entwisle Chapisat, graphic designer and curator Gorm Ashurst, and creative advisor and artist liaison Kate Sedwell. It is housed in the Swiss art association **La Fruitière**.
- The state-led **Platform on Disaster Displacement** (<https://disasterdisplacement.org/>) (PDD) (formerly known as the Nansen Initiative) and the non-governmental organisation the **Norwegian Refugee Council** (NRC) are the project's main partners. Walter Kälin, Envoy of the Chair of PDD, Chirine El-Labbane, PDD Communication Officer, and Nina Birkeland, NRC's Senior Adviser on Disaster Displacement and Climate Change advise the project on intergovernmental policy and processes.
- DISPLACEMENT has also partnered with the **University of the Arts London** (UAL), the **Humanitarian Collaborative** at the University of Virginia's Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, **UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction**, the **Coalition for Art and Sustainable Development** (COAL) and others, who provide institutional and financial support.

We need to connect the impacts of climate change to people[...]We need to take climate change from this away-place such as the glaciers and cryosphere in the North and bring it to your home, to your kitchen table to understand it.

Teo Ormond-Skeaping and Lena Dobrowolska, artists

Sustainability Issues

- Disaster displacement is one of the biggest humanitarian challenges of the 21st century. Scientists warn that climate change is worsening displacement through increasing the likelihood of extreme weather events and other natural hazards such as drought and flooding, with coastal and island nations and poorer countries being significantly worse affected.
- Developing international policy on disaster displacement is thus of vital importance, but it can be a slow process and there is a risk that policy decisions made at international conferences are disconnected from the realities of disaster displacement.
- DISPLACEMENT uses artistic interventions to raise the profile of disaster displacement and influence positive changes in policy by helping policymakers understand issues in unconventional formats and promoting emotional identification with topics that can feel abstract in conference contexts.
- Furthermore, the project sees artistic practice as a way of researching issues in disaster displacement. As well as finding innovative ways to present the issues, artistic work can provide genuinely new forms of knowledge and understanding, helping policymakers find better solutions.
- The success of these interventions is usually measured anecdotally through responses from and conversations with delegates, the level of press attention, as well as quantitatively through tracking the number of people who attend or engage.

Lessons, Tips & Advice

- There can be barriers to communication and understanding when working between artists and policymakers. Policymakers may underestimate the costs of putting on arts events due to hidden costs like insurance and transportation, while artists need awareness of how the issue they want to address is framed in policy language. For example, the **UN refugee agency refers to 'disasters' not 'natural disasters'** (<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/594399824.pdf>), while **the term 'climate refugee' is not formally recognised by the UN** (<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/594399824.pdf>). Without knowledge of such nuances, artists risk their work being dismissed as not pertinent to the specific policy issues under debate.
- Artists should consider whether they want to work on the inside or outside of intergovernmental diplomacy or both, as this will determine which approaches and impacts are possible. For example, **the UN has specific rules for displaying artworks** (<https://ask.unog.ch/events/faq/178149>), given the political nature of the organisation, that might make exhibiting certain artworks or interventions unviable.
- DISPLACEMENT has limited staffing and works closely in collaboration with others. These partnerships are essential for gaining accreditation to access conference venues, establishing credibility and understanding of the policy context, and require devoted time to develop and maintain.

- DISPLACEMENT is currently included as a contribution to PDD's 'communication strategy'. This allows them to have an official role and access to some budget. Hannah is keen to change perceptions to show how art can also be a form of research that creates new knowledge, which could also sit under the 'research strategy'.
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As curator, an important task is to connect artists' work to relevant policy conversations on disaster displacement. While art is increasingly displayed in conference corridors and exterior spaces, my goal is to bring art practices to the centre of international policy debate by facilitating meaningful exchanges between artists and policy experts.

Hannah Entwisle Chapuisat, Co-founder and Curator, DISPLACEMENT

Funding

- The majority of financial support has come through the Platform on Disaster Displacement and the Norwegian Refugee Council, including support from the German Federal Foreign Office for the exhibitions in Marrakesh, Geneva, and Madrid, and PDD's Communication work more generally.
- The Humanitarian Collaborative at the University of Virginia donated money to help set up the website, alongside seed funding from the Norwegian Refugee Council.
- The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction commissioned the panel exhibition at the 2019 Global Platform on Disaster Risk Reduction.
- University of the Arts London contributed in-kind support towards artists' costs such as travel and accommodation expenses in Marrakesh, 2018.
- Funding has been received through government funds to support the exhibition of national artists abroad. For their work at the summit in Marrakesh, DISPLACEMENT were able to raise some funds from the Swiss fund ProHelvetia in Cairo and the Danish Embassy in Rabat, Morocco, on the grounds that they would be promoting Danish citizen Dahlgaard's work abroad.
- Individual donors have also provided financial support, with project staff also contributing their time.

Fundraising is a major challenge. Government actors with limited financial resources may not recognize the value of spending public funds from humanitarian budgets on art exhibitions. At the same time, art funders may not support exhibitions at restricted intergovernmental conferences because they are not open to the general public. The limited advance time for planning exhibitions, given the late planning horizon for intergovernmental conferences, also poses significant difficulties when applying for grants.

To date, DISPLACEMENT has raised sufficient funding to pay artists a modest fee for exhibiting their work, but, like many projects, is dependent on some voluntary time from staff.

Quotations

Disaster displacement is a complex issue that touches on humanitarian action, migration law and policy, disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation, and sustainable development. When appealing to busy diplomats, government officials and representatives of international organisations, visual art can convey emotional messages that cut through such political silos and create spaces for spontaneous interactions which help build consensus at international conferences.

Walter Kälin, Envoy of the Chair of the Platform on Disaster Displacement

Relevant Links

DISPLACEMENT: Uncertain Journeys website (<https://www.displacementjourneys.org/>)

DISPLACEMENT: Uncertain Journeys events listings (<https://www.displacementjourneys.org/engage/events/>)

DISPLACEMENT: Uncertain Journeys COP25 activity (<https://www.displacementjourneys.org/2019/12/united-nations-climate-change-conference-cop25/>)

DISPLACEMENT: Uncertain Journeys 2018 Global Forum on Migration and Development activity (<https://www.displacementjourneys.org/2018/12/2018-global-forum-on-migration-and-development/>)

Platform on Disaster Displacement website (<https://disasterdisplacement.org/>)

Hannah Entwisle Chapuisat interview on Platform on Disaster Displacement website (<https://disasterdisplacement.org/staff-member/in-conversation-with-hannah-entwisle-chapuisat>)

Lena Dobrowolska and Teo Ormond-Skeaping interview on Platform on Disaster Displacement website (<https://disasterdisplacement.org/staff-member/in-conversation-with-lena-dobrowolska-and-teo-ormond-skeaping>)

2019 COAL Prize (<http://www.projetcoal.org/coal/2019/11/30/les-nomin%C3%A9s-du-prix-coal-2019/>)

Hannah Entwisle Chapuisat speaking on a panel about climate justice (<https://www.onassis.org/whats-on/climate-culture/climate-justice-as-the-foundation-of-a-sustainable-future-panel-2>)

Lena Dobrowolska's website (<https://www.lenadobrowolska.com>)

Teo Ormond Skeaping website (<http://teormondskeaping.com>)

King's College London research on the role of arts and culture in UN offices (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/-/projects/softpowerenquiry>)

Images courtesy of DISPLACEMENT: Uncertain Journeys and Platform on Disaster Displacement

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Image of Lena Dobrowolska and Teo Ormond-Skeaping speaking at COP25 credited to Platform on Disaster Displacement (<https://disasterdisplacement.org/staff-member/in-conversation-with-lena-dobrowolska-and-teo-ormond-skeaping>)

Still from You Never Know, One Day You Too May Become a Refugee, credited to Lena Dobrowolska and Teo Ormond-Skeaping (<https://disasterdisplacement.org/coal-prize-winners>)

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