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Nexus Dynamics: The Overlapping Causes of Forced Displacement in the Haiti Disaster Context

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Abstract	Throughout the 20th century, the world underwent transformations which led to structural changes on how drivers to refugee flows take shape. Two aspects that have been notably affected by these shifts are key variables to understanding contemporary refugee phenomena: violence and environmental factors. Today, many refugee contexts are strongly influenced by those aspects; those that arise particularly from the interaction between both stressors are referred to as *nexus dynamics* (ND). The article aims to explore the evolving nature of the refugee concept, shaped by structural changes that encompass emerging forms of violence and environment imbalance. The study, then, examines how ND manifests through a case in which a natural disaster exacerbated a pre-existing condition of State fragility caused by long-term violence, as seen in the 2010 Haitian catastrophe.
Keywords	climate change; forced displacement; Haiti; nexus dynamics; violence
Acronyms And Abbreviations	UDHR: Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNGA: United Nations General Assembly, IPCC: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, UN: United Nations

Introduction

Among all the humanitarian crises predicted for this century, the refugee crisis increasingly appears to be structurally intertwined with various forms of social and environmental degradation, reflecting particular structures of inequality on a global scale. Worldwide, people have been forcibly displaced due to various and complex reasons related to human vulnerability, concerning contexts such as armed conflict, poverty, food insecurity, persecution, terrorism, human rights violation, adverse impacts of climate change and disasters (United Nations General Assembly, 2016, as cited in Weerasinghe, 2018). It has been noted that many of those factors, especially climate change, have been intensified as drivers of forced displacement.

The international system uses a legal definition of the term 'refugee' established in 1951 by the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, one of the key documents reinforcing the international protection of displaced people. The 1951 Convention recognizes that the person who has been forcibly displaced due to violations of political or social rights has the right to seek refuge from its country of origin and to be granted asylum in another country (Weerasinghe, 2018). The definition was formulated in the aftermath of World War II, during a refugee crisis involving 40 million Europeans fleeing fascist and Nazi totalitarian regimes. However, in recent decades, other factors have been determining refugee contexts, in such a way that the legal structure of international protection appears insufficient to address the complexities of a globalized and dynamic world (Moreira and Rocha, 2010).

In the face of such transformations, new refugee contexts have emerged, exerting pressure to recognize categories of refugees not covered by existing binding international protection instruments. Among the various factors that can trigger refugee situations, two in particular stand out due to their growing potential to disrupt human systems: the first is violence, which includes various forms of conflicts, civil violence and severe violations of human rights; and secondly, environmental factors play a significant role, as natural disasters and the adverse effects of climate change may act as major drivers of forced displacement (Weerasinghe, 2018).

Analyzing the current complexity concerning refugee crisis and facing those factors as drivers of forced displacement, the UNHCR has introduced a new operational concept which categorizes refugee contexts formed by the overlapping between violence factors and environmental factors. This concept, named *nexus dynamics*, aims at recognizing and revealing the complexity behind the "[overlap between] conflict and/or violence and disaster and/or the adverse effects of climate change" (Weerasinghe, 2018, p. 1) as a driver of forced displacement. According to Weerasinghe (2018), that overlapping process produces refugee contexts of singular severity and intensity, surpassing the international system's legal concept of people in need of international protection.

Given the recent emergence of *nexus dynamics*, this paper adopts an exploratory and conceptual approach. In the first chapter, the paper aims to present the paradigms of the legal institute of refuge, highlighting that the statutory documents guiding the application of international protection are rooted in a classical – and increasingly anachronistic – approach to the concept of refugee. It, then, engages with the growing body of literature on climate-conflict-migration nexus to construct a conceptual framework capable of capturing the multiple possibilities in which nexus dynamics may manifest. Through a critical review of existing debates and academic contributions, the paper aims to clarify the conceptual foundations of this literature, outlining possible directions for both theoretical and practical implementation of nexus dynamics.

The conceptual framework is complemented by an empirical analysis based on a relevant case study. In chapter 2, the article examines the 2010 Haiti earthquake as a typical case of refuge in context of nexus dynamics: a "situation in which a disaster exacerbated pre-existing State fragility" (Weerasinghe, 2018, p. 2). The historical context, which builds the ground for the theoretical analysis of the concept, generally considers the nefarious legacy of Haiti's colonial formation and the corrupt administration of political regimes since the dictatorship of François Duvalier (1957-1971), highlighting the challenges faced in national development since the country's independence. This historical background aims to demonstrate how the continuous dismantling of state apparatus led to the collapse of civic, political and economic structures in Haiti, turning the natural disaster a trigger for one of the most remarkable refuge movements in modern history.

Among the myriad of possibilities to explore nexus dynamics, the Haitian case was chosen to illustrate how a natural disaster can interact with a long-standing context of violence, resulting in the collapse of state structures as well as an unprecedented humanitarian and refugee crisis, featuring an important milestone in reshaping the contemporary conception of refuge. Different from relevant literature on the topic, this paper does not dedicate itself to a comparative analysis of empirical application of the concept. Instead, the purpose of choosing a single case study is to describe, with

reasonable depth, the sociopolitical background that justifies the structural condition of inequality and State-fragility in Haiti, evidencing the critical approach of the theoretical framework.

1. Refugees, A Concept in Motion

The post-war period led to an era of dialogue within the international system. In this context, the United Nations was established to coordinate efforts in addressing major international humanitarian challenges, including the refugee crisis. Confronted with the displacement of millions fleeing totalitarian regimes in Europe, the international community began to debate the responsibility of states to provide protection for those whose social and political integrity had been threatened, forcing them to flee their homes (Moreira and Rocha, 2010).

1.1 The International Regime for Refugees

The governance of an international regime for refugees reflects a complex structure of interests, since human displacements are political events (Hyndman, 2000, as cited in Moreira and Rocha, 2010). In this sense, understanding the refugee crisis requires acknowledging an essential duality: on one hand, a humanitarian dimension, rooted in the protection of human rights as safeguarded by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); on the other hand, a political dimension, which shapes how the protection regime functions. Compliance with international norms ultimately depends on the will of state actors, whose actions are driven by national interests that do not always align with the principles of international humanitarian responsibility (Moreira and Rocha, 2010). Therefore, the refugee debate is shaped by the conflict between state sovereignty and the human rights regime.

In parallel with the UNHCR's institutional development, a significant improvement was achieved by the 1951 Convention. The classic refugee concept evidences the fragility and the limitation inherent in the way international refugee protection was originally conceived. According to the document, it is considered a 'refugee', and therefore enjoys the rights at the international level referring to this category, any individual who:

As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2010, p. 14).

Thus, the established concept refers to the possibility, rather than the obligation, for States to grant refugee status. Refugee status itself is legitimated by the condition of fear based on persecution, which includes forced displacements generated by the violation of first dimension human rights (political and social rights). In addition, the *non-refoulement* principle prevents States from expelling individuals entering their borders, whose lives may be at risk due to sociopolitical factors which characterize them as refugees. That means that States had to take responsibility for individuals who were not part of its population, which is a milestone for the international protection regime (Moreira and Rocha, 2010).

In the 1960s, the decolonization of numerous African and Asian countries gave rise to new displacement flows that were not contemplated by the 1951 Convention. To address these legal limitations and enable the UNHCR to operate in regions previously excluded by the Convention, the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees was adopted; this document recognizes international protection as a right applicable to any forcibly displaced person within the terms of refuge elaborated by the Convention - including in cases after the pre-established date of 1st January 1951. Both mentioned documents form the current international institute of refuge and are the only highly ratified documents responsible for ensuring the legal framework of international protection for refugees, providing the theoretical and legal bases for UNHCR's action measures.

However, the ratification of such legally binding instruments was not always followed by national political efforts to comply with international protection guidelines. After the 1980s, liberal states began implementing a series of unilateral measures aiming at restricting asylum concessions in response to refugee flows, operating in contradiction to the principles set forth in the refugee regime. Ghezelbash (2020) referred to this shift as a form of political subterfuge – a turning point between the global debate and its political implementation –, in which the establishment

of legal commitments to refugee protection was contradictorily accompanied by restrictive policies to prevent forcibly displaced people from accessing refugee status[1].

Lavenex (2024) reinforces this idea by explaining that the fundamental issue of the refugee regime lies in its institutional foundations, where the universalism of human rights meets the particularism of the state order. Geopolitics, in turn, play an important role in the effectiveness of the refugee regime, as refugee norms are more likely to be implemented when there are perceived strategic or economic benefits. Conversely, support for these norms tends to diminish when hosting asylum seekers offers no such advantages.

1.2 The Transformation of Refugee Contexts

According to Moulin (2012), throughout the second half of the 20th century, especially with the end of the Cold War, profound political, economic, social and environmental transformations had a direct impact on the formation of refugee contexts, further widening the gap between the classic concept of refugee and the contemporary reality of international forced displacement. This ongoing transformation in the nature of conflicts/violence and climate change has been incorporated into the refugee debate, significantly contributing to the recognition of alternative categories of people in need of international protection.

In 2017, the UNHCR officially recognized that the risks associated with refugee status – such as persecution, threat to life, freedom and/or physical integrity –, are sensitive to broader contexts, including armed conflict, public disorder, widespread violence, famine in the context of civil conflict, and both natural and man-made disasters (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017). This highlights the emergence of a systemic perspective in the analysis of contemporary refugee contexts.

1.2.1 Violence Factors

One of the aspects that underwent a profound transformation in the post-Cold War period, which is relevant in triggering forced displacements, is the new structure and dynamics of armed conflicts.

The traditional conception of conflict and/or violence as driver of refuge, based on the experience of the totalitarian regimes of World War II, is used by the 1951 Convention to refer to any type of threat or violation of human integrity, whether sociocultural or political. At that moment, such concepts assumed a state logic of repression and systematic violence against any social, political or ethnic group who was considered against the regime (de Araujo and Barichello, 2014). However, for Dupuy and Rustad (2018), researchers from the *Peace Research Institute Oslo* (PRIO), the configuration of conflicts has changed since 1945. Whereas interstate and colonial wars once accounted for half of all armed conflicts globally, their frequency has declined sharply, giving way to intrastate and civil conflicts – those occurring within the geopolitical boundaries of a single state.

But only in the last decade of the 20th century the reality of conflicts was definitely transformed. During the Cold War, international conflicts were conditioned and promoted by the prevailing ideological bipolarization. With the end of the Cold War, international conflicts shifted away from the state-centric logic of bipolarization to give place to a civil dynamic, giving prominence to new, non-state actors. As they assume a civil nature, those conflicts give rise to new motivations – such as ethnic, identity-based, religious and territorial – and occur predominantly within national borders, with the main consequence being that civilian populations become primary targets (Moulin, 2012).

1.2.2 Environmental Factors

Climate change has increasingly become an indispensable component in any conjunctural analysis. Today, the impact caused by environmental degradation and its consequences on the increase in forced displacement flows are recognized worldwide. According to Ramos (2011), the way environmental factors manifest as drivers of forced displacement has been increasingly aggravated by human activity since the second half of the 20th century.

Since the early 1990s, IPCC reports have increasingly highlighted the wide-ranging human and ecological risks associated with climate change, emphasizing its inevitable impact on exacerbating environmental vulnerability among populations across diverse geographic regions. Reports from (IPCC, 1992, 1995, 2001 and 2007) point to numerous and severe consequences of environmental imbalances, including altered rainfall patterns, fluctuations in global

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[1] This was evident in cases such as the United States implementing interdiction policies on the high seas avoiding Haitian and Cuban asylum-seekers to reach U.S. shores (Ghezelbash, 2020).

average temperatures, severe droughts, floods, torrential storms, erosion and rising sea levels (Ramos, 2011). However, identifying environmental factors as primary drivers of forced displacement is a complex and contentious issue, as their impact on human systems manifests in different intensities and forms. Moreover, it remains unclear how human displacement and environmental factors interact (Burrows and Kinney, 2016).

Among the various environmental causes that can force a group of individuals to move, short-term events stand out. These events encompass natural tragedies, such as volcanoes and earthquakes, but also those caused by human action, such as nuclear accidents and biological warfare (da Cunha, 2008). However, some events may manifest over the long term, such as the adverse effects of climate change, which are more difficult to be perceived, measured and controlled. Those long-term processes significantly contribute to forced displacement, as seen in droughts and floods affecting agriculture, the destruction of coastal cities due to rising sea levels, or the loss of inhabitants' ability to extract material resources from ecosystems devastated by climate change (da Cunha, 2008).

Notably, in light of recent global transformation processes – particularly those related to violence and environmental issues –, new categories of refuge have emerged in response to the recognition of evolving global demands for international protection.

1.3 Nexus Dynamics: Interaction Between Drivers of Forced Displacement

In order to support recommendations for the application of international protection measures in emerging refugee contexts, the UNHCR, in collaboration with international research institutions and migration specialists, conducted a study on the overlap of environmental and violence factors as drivers of forced displacement. This research examines how their combination exacerbates situations of human vulnerability, resulting in specific refugee flows. The study, titled *In Harm's Way: International protection in the context of nexus dynamics between conflict or violence and disaster or climate change*, was published in 2018 by Sanjula Weerasinghe, a UNHCR consultant.

Nexus dynamics refers to forced displacements occurring in contexts where factors of violence and natural events overlap, presenting significant risks to the safety and survival of populations and, consequently generating flows of intra- or cross-border refuge (Weerasinghe, 2018). The cited research, particularly regarding the 2010 Haitian earthquake and the armed violence in Somalia between 2011 and 2012, examines refugee flows in contexts where conflict and/or violence intersect with natural disasters and/or adverse effects of climate change, highlighting the overlap of such factors as a condition that generates and exacerbates human vulnerability, ultimately leading to forced displacement (Weerasinghe, 2018).

In this way, the concept illustrates the potential interaction and dynamism between violence and environmental factors, emphasizing how their convergence can create refuge situations marked by heightened socio-environmental vulnerability – as seen in the cases of Haiti and Somalia. Accordingly, nexus dynamics aims to examine *how* environmental and violence factors interact in ways that: (1) exacerbate situations of socio-environmental vulnerability among affected populations; (2) generate large-scale and particularly intense refugee flows; and (3) prompt specific legal responses from receiving States, especially in light of the challenges with applying the 1951 Convention and the growing relevance of regional legal frameworks for ensuring international protection.

Given the *multi-causality* and complexity inherent in contemporary human displacement, refuge can only be understood within the framework of nexus dynamics by recognizing that the formats and intensities of interaction (*nexus*) between factors of forced displacement are countless, generating diverse refugee contexts (*dynamics*). In other words, the varying interactions between conflict/violence and climate change generate distinct situations of human vulnerability, each representing "distinct nexus dynamics" (Weerasinghe, 2018, p. 2). This emerging concept reflects efforts to understand the ever-changing reality of refugee crises through a development-oriented approach, in which climate-related displacements are not viewed as the result of a direct cause-and-effect relationship between environmental impacts and refugee flows, but rather as part of a more complex equation in which adverse environmental factors must be analyzed in conjunction with the societal structures they interact with (Bose, 2024).

1.4 Displacement in Nexus Dynamics

A representative model of the construction of the refuge context involving climate change was developed by The Government Office for Science (2011) to illustrate how the interaction of environmental factors with a country's socioeconomic and political framework can trigger refugee flows.

The methodology proposed by the report (2011) identifies five structural categories (drivers) that influence human displacement (refuge or migration) and shape the context of refuge: (a) environmental factors, including vulnerability to ecological risks, land productivity changes, housing conditions and the security of essential resources such as water, food, and energy; (b) social factors, encompassing conditions related to education, and family structure; (c) economic factors, such as employment opportunities, income levels, material well-being, agricultural prices, and purchasing power; (d) political factors, referring to variables within the political structure, including persecution, conflict, social/individual freedom, and migration conditions; (e) demographic factors, such as population size and density, social structure and regional/national sanitation conditions.

The categories mentioned by the report (2011) are key drivers of displacement. The behavior of such factors significantly affects the formation of the refuge context, determining the degree of vulnerability by which a society is exposed to an environmental risk as well as the decision to stay (facing the existing threat), or to move (facing the unknown).

Environmental factors, in turn, exert a transversal influence on this structure. Its impact on each displacement factor depends on the very nature of the environmental event (in intensity, format and duration), as well as on the material, socioeconomic, geographic and political conditions of the impacted region. According to the report, the economic dimension is the most sensitive to environmental impacts. Given that in many regions – particularly those where human systems are locally dependent on natural resources – material human reproduction is based on the predictability and stability of natural variables, environmental disruptions can severely undermine local livelihoods and contribute to displacement, as their primary impacts are on "rural wages, agricultural prices, exposure to hazard and provisioning ecosystems" (The Government Office for Science, 2011).

Lunstrum and Bose (2022), strengthen this latter idea by engaging with literature that argues climate-related displacements should not be reduced to a passive analysis of climate change. Instead, such displacements are tied to socioeconomic-political variables embedded in the structures of inequality of certain societies. Rejecting what they refer to as *environmental determinism*, the authors further contribute to a more nuanced understanding of natural factors as drivers of displacement, not only by highlighting inequality as a critical variable shaping the impact of environmental processes, but also by pointing to the Anthropocene[2] as a source of environmental instability (e.g., forest degradation, biodiversity loss, disruptions in rainfall patterns, risks stemming from nuclear activity). In this sense, displacement may result from environmentally mediated causes that are, ultimately, human-induced.

Nowadays, millions of people live under the context of overlapping factors of violence and adverse effects of climate change. Given the reality of civil conflicts and their potential for widespread human rights violation combined with the growing impact of adverse environmental factors, nexus dynamics represents the unprecedent configurations of contemporary refugee contexts (Weerasinghe, 2018). In this way, Bose (2024) highlights the contribution of the new concept, as it allows for an analysis that considers the *overlapping* and *amplifying* effects of these factors.

The next section brings a brief historical context of the Haitian nation, so as (1) to emphasize Haiti's condition of chronic structural fragility, concerning the development of a modern society, as well as (2) to explore the context of civil violence to which the country is subjected to and how a particular environmental disaster – the 2010 earthquake – contributed to generate one of the most severe humanitarian crises of the 21st century, triggering an intense flow of forced displacement in nexus dynamics.

2. The Haitian Disaster

At the beginning of 2010, a 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck Haiti, marking the most powerful seismic event to hit the country in over two centuries. Already burdened by severe economic, financial and political limitations, Haiti was not prepared to withstand the scale of the disaster. The earthquake's epicenter, located just 22 kilometers from the capital, Port-au-Prince (Bilar et al., 2016), caused widespread devastation, resulting in extensive human casualties and material losses across the country. According to Weerasinghe (2018), the flow of Haitian refugees resulting from the 2010 earthquake is a typical case of refuge in nexus dynamics, since the phenomenon of forced mass displacement was triggered by "a situation in which a disaster exacerbated pre-existing State fragility" (p. 2).

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[2] *Anthropocene* is a concept introduced by Nobel Laureate in chemistry Paul Crutzen to describe the structural environmental transformations and imbalances caused by human activity, making humans the primary driver of global environmental change.

Magalhães (2017) characterizes the Haitian State as one that has historically contributed to the expulsion of its own population, due to the persistent and severe conditions of material deprivation and low quality of life that a large part of the population has been forced to endure in order to remain in their place of origin. Consequently, Haiti can be understood as a *repulsion State*, one that systematically generates the conditions for population displacement, due to its political, economic and social structure pushing a significant portion of the population into the chronic poverty and socio-environmental vulnerability.

2.1 Haitian Historical Background and the Perpetuation of Underdevelopment

Haiti, along with other Latin American countries, had its economic structure based on the colonial exploration model, a system resulted of European imperialism. This system conditioned, in general, the shaping of these nations into a *systemic periphery*, subservient to the expansionist aspirations of the European mercantilist capital (Ribeiro, 1995, as cited in Magalhães, 2017, 2017).

According to Magalhães (2017), the Haitian economy has historically been based on a primary export system centered on mineral extraction and monoculture. For the consolidation of this system, its pre-existing indigenous community was annihilated within a generation of European occupation, followed by the incorporation of enslaved African labor through the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade. As such, what takes place in Haiti is, according to Magalhães (2017), a particular version of capitalism, through which the development of productive forces is fueled by the exploitation of enslaved labor force.

According to the author (2017), such a process condemns the Haitian economy in relation to the international economic system to a historical position of dependency, in a way that the country remains "tied (...) to a set of domination relations, that have capitalism as a driving force in global scale", and that the possibility of development of this country is "broadly conditioned to the nature of relations that it establishes in a so-called international system" (Grondin, 1985, pp. 86-87, as cited in Magalhães, 2017, p. 50). Thus, Haiti finds itself in a subordinate position, with a diminished chance of progress and economic self-sufficiency.

After centuries of domination and intense exploitation of natural resources, the São Domingos Revolt (1791-1804) – led by an enslaved contingent of Haitians and inspired by the aspirations of the French Revolution – formally ended the colonial condition of Haitian territory and declared the country's independence. However, this did not eliminate the numerous contradictions and competing interests within the newly emergent society (Castor, 2008, as cited in Magalhães, 2017). It is described as a 'formal' end because the system of domination practiced by the French Crown was transposed into the capitalist phase in a new form: the marginalization of Haiti within the international division of labor (Magalhães, 2017).

What is observed in the history of Haiti is that, following the revolution that led to its independence, the new nation was treated as a pariah within the international system, subjected to blockades and boycotts that hindered its path toward modern development. This historical trajectory explains how, despite severing its ties with its colonial metropolis, Haiti remained in a peripheral and subservient position within the global system, becoming one of the poorest countries in the world – even in comparison to other former colonies in the Americas.

As such, it is evident that the historical factors driving the displacement of the Haitian population are directly linked to its colonial past and its peripheral position within the capitalist economic system. In this context, several factors can be identified as significant contributors to the ongoing structural fragility of the Haitian nation, such as the substantial indemnities imposed for the recognition of its independence; the internal fragmentation of social classes in constant struggle for power; the illegitimacy of the ruling classes, distorting the national interest; the legacy of slavery and the non-inclusion of former enslaved in society; the lasting of the economic model of monoculture and its blockage to the economic formation of a modern society (Magalhães, 2017).

The 20th century revealed the enduring consequences of the burdens imposed by Haiti's colonial past. According to Buss (2013), the principal forces perpetuating the country's chronic structural fragility include persistent instability in the governance of public institutions; the negative effects of racism; unequal income distribution coupled with diminished prospects for social mobility; the perpetuation of an authoritarian, violent and exclusionary political system; and the pervasive culture of corruption.

Politically, Haiti experienced successive regimes that reinforced the pillars of structural fragility described above. Between 1957 and 1986, Haiti was governed by a military regime led by the Duvalier family, characterized

predominantly by political violence. This violence endangered a prolonged period of internal political division, where maintaining power was contingent upon the suppression and annihilation of any political opposition.

At this historical moment, a defining element of Haiti's structural fragility emerged: the culture of violence embodied by the Tonton Macoute, a large armed civilian group established to defend an authoritarian regime, which governed the country through a police state and civil terror. According to the UNDP report, "violence became a means of achieving and preserving absolute political power" (Faubert, 2006). The regime of social terror established by militia actions inaugurated a modus operandi for maintaining domestic order based on violence and civil repression.

Following the deposition of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986 through a military coup, Haiti entered yet another period of political instability, marked by provisional governments, fraudulent democratic election processes, external interference and public mismanagement (Buss, 2013). According to Gauthier and Moita (2010), the harmful legacy of that regime was decisive for an irregular political transition to democracy, which "was in fact much more a stark opposition to a dictatorial and exclusionist regime than the embracing of democratic culture" (Gauthier and Moita, 2010).

From that point onward, Haiti went through a period of severe political instability, in which successive regimes rose to power to be prematurely deposed, often under strong interference of international forces and the involvement of Haitian military forces. Such inconsistencies contributed to a dysfunctional democratic formation (Buss, 2013) and to the erosion of Haitian sovereignty *vis-à-vis* the international system (Fouron, 2012). Among the main political events that corroborate this narrative are the empowerment of militia groups, their involvement in criminal activities, the intensification of internal power struggles, the political-military presence of the United Nations Stabilization Mission, and the recurring and systematic episodes of human rights abuses.

2.2 Nexus Dynamics, A Case Analysis

A brief historical overview of the collapse of the Haitian state reveals the extreme fragility and vulnerability in which the nation found itself when confronted with the 2010 earthquake. Deeply compromised, structurally distorted and severely limited in its institutional capacity, Haiti was unable to manage the crisis, resulting in one of the most intense and complex refugee flows ever recorded.

On January 12, 2010, a devastating earthquake struck the entire Haitian nation, triggering a serious flow of forced displacement. The damage estimates indicate a truly national catastrophe. According to Échevin (2011), of the 2.8 million people affected, more than 220,000 were killed and more than 300,000 were injured. It is estimated that more than 660,000 people (Échevin, 2011) have been forcibly displaced, internally or internationally, while more than 1.5 million Haitians have had to settle in hundreds of displacement camps (Amnesty International, 2013). In economic terms, the 2010 earthquake generated a loss of 120 percentage points of GDP, amounting to loss of US$ 8 billion (Buss, 2013). Other losses can also be calculated, such as government capacity itself, considering the destruction of ministerial buildings, as well as the death of ⅓ of public servants (Buss, 2013).

To understand the magnitude of the earthquake's impact in terms of forced displacement, it is important to consider the formation of the broader refugee context. As Weerasinghe (2018) argues, conflicts, human rights violations, fragile rule of law, non-inclusive governance, the adverse effects of climate change, and natural disasters are all recognized drivers of refugee flows. As stated, all of these factors composed the Haitian context of 2010. The author further observes that "(...) these factors often overlap and reinforce others as root causes of displacement" (Weerasinghe, 2018), which reveals the nexus dynamics structure of the Haitian case. In this sense, the resulting human vulnerability and forced displacement are products of environmental impacts acting upon a social framework already deteriorated by structural violence, making the disaster's consequences markedly more severe.

A crucial aspect regarding the Haiti case – which reinforces the nexus dynamics narrative – is the fact that the Haitian earthquake was "more than twice as lethal as any previous magnitude-7.0 event" (Bilham, 2010). In other words, given its proportions, the disaster had a greater impact when compared to other disasters of similar magnitude. Therefore, it is evident that the staggering impact of the disaster, beyond the natural shock itself, reflects a society with limited resilience and adaptative capacity to external shocks, due to a social, political and economic structure weakened by long-standing conditions of violence.

[Many researchers] have portrayed Haiti as 'a failed state' and have argued that the devastating impact of the seism was due, not so much to its destructive powers, but to the country's chaotic domestic situation and the failure of the Haitian state to fulfill even its basic obligations towards the population (Fouron, 2012).

Similarly, Faubert (2006) emphasizes that the perpetuation of the Haiti's culture of violence is a historical phenomenon, created and reinforced by political regimes themselves – most notably, Duvalier and Aristide. Armed groups, such as the Tonton Macoute, were established for explicitly political purposes, serving the interests of these regimes. As these governments collapsed, the groups transitioned into organized criminal operations, fueling cycles of violence and civil disorder. This evidences how violence in Haitian society functions simultaneously as both a *cause* and a *consequence* of the country's crisis of governance and underdevelopment, affecting all structural dimensions of society and further entrenching poverty and human vulnerability (Heinemann and Verner, 2006).

That framework evidences that the overlap of environmental and violence-related factors is rooted in the socioeconomic and political structure of the affected society, so that the interaction between these forces ultimately depends on the strength and quality of the underlying structural conditions. In this sense, the systemic formation of the Haitian refugee context becomes clear. The post-disaster displacement flow was not solely the result of the earthquake's magnitude, but rather of a society with severely limited adaptive and resilience capacities in the face of external shocks, a condition stemming from chronic underdevelopment, perpetuated by the long-term, harmful presence of multiple forms of violence, including the actions of armed militias, authoritarian repression, and pervasive crime and corruption. It is precisely this convergence of factors, as suggested by the nexus dynamics approach, that largely explains the scale and complexity of Haitian forced displacement.

The outcome of this process was a contingent of hundreds of thousands of people under emergency post-natural disaster displacement, who were not covered by the classical definition of refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention. In response to this humanitarian crisis, the receiving States (particularly Brazil and Mexico) implemented regional protection mechanisms, including internal political initiatives and *ad hoc* legal measures to provide protection and shelter to Haitian migrants. In Brazil, the government's application of a broader refugee framework was based in the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, which considers the widespread violation of human rights as a justifiable condition for the application of international protection (Zeferino, 2014).

Haiti's experience in 2010 calls attention to viewing the contemporary refugee phenomenon from a different perspective. Among the many cases that underscore the urgency of expanding legal criteria for international protection, it stands as a compelling empirical example of the shifting dynamics that characterize current displacement contexts (Zeferino, 2014). Specifically, it illustrates the emerging drivers likely to shape forced displacement in the 21st century: a structural condition of underdevelopment in which factors of violence and the adverse impact of natural events critically erode public, economic, and societal resilience, thereby pushing the most vulnerable segments of society into displacement (Weerasinghe, 2018). This evolving perspective is, therefore, crucial for prompting the international system to reevaluate the variables at play in forced displacement and to strengthen its political and legal commitment to ensuring effective international protection.

3. Conclusion

It is noteworthy that the 21st century will be marked by numerous crises rooted in capitalism, spanning environmental, resource-related, geopolitical, and socioeconomic dimensions. Conditions of widespread poverty, social inequality, structural unemployment, depletion of natural resources, non-inclusive governance, effects of climate change and civil conflicts are among the most visible direct and indirect consequences of the contemporary political-economical arrangement; in turn, the refugee phenomenon is multidimensionally linked to other contemporary crises, calling for a renewed perspective on its dynamics and potential solutions.

The reality of refugee contexts has been changing since the 1951 Convention was drawn up. If some time ago the major cause of refugee flows was mostly originated in the persecution and/or violation of first-dimensional human rights (social and political), today refugee flows are contexts that are strongly threatened by the emergence of climate change and its innumerous possibilities of social, economic and geographical impact. These possibilities involve situations of generalized violence, including the action of non-state groups and the promotion of civil conflicts, which generate massive violations of human rights, as well as the chronic and widespread global condition of poverty. Such transformations changed in essential terms how the contemporary refugee crises manifest.

These considerations point to the refugee crisis as fundamentally rooted in a broader development crisis. In contrast to the post-war era, when Europeans fled the terror of totalitarian regimes, contemporary displacement increasingly stems from chronic conditions such as famine, poverty, unemployment, environmental vulnerability and widespread violence. The Haitian case clearly exemplifies this shift. The historical trajectory of population expulsion from Haiti reinforces the concept of nexus dynamics, illustrating how forced displacement is not merely the result of isolated

shocks, but rather a consequence of long-standing underdevelopment. Within this context, destabilizing natural events serve as catalysts for refugee flows of exceptional intensity and severity.

This paper encourages further research into nexus dynamics, recognizing that the complexity of such global phenomena demands robust academic contribution to address people-centered and context-specific policymaking. Nexus dynamics offers a theoretical framework that enables a multidimensional analysis of human vulnerability by fostering a deeper understanding of the pre-existing societal conditions of a given region or country – which are key to competent analysis of State fragility. Further studies could draw from fields such as Human Geography and Development Studies, providing valuable insights to this emerging topic. Therefore, the international system stands to benefit from a solid body of literature not only to promote structural reform within the refugee regime, but also to foster a broader understanding of underdevelopment within the evolving structures of inequality in the 21st century.

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