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## Millions Displaced Tomorrow: A New Framework for Climate Migrants

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# **Millions Displaced Tomorrow: A New Framework for Climate Migrants**



Honors Thesis

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Department: International Studies

Advisor: Miranda Cady Hallett, Ph.D.

April 2020

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## Abstract

Millions of people are finding their livelihoods and security threatened as the effects of climate change intensify around the world. Migration as a response to the continuing ecological crisis is often the only pathway to safety. However, the future of such migrants is uncertain given the lack of mechanisms and systems to provide legal inclusion for displaced populations. In this paper, I challenge the existing international frameworks and point out the inadequacies in protecting victims of climate migration. To address these shortcomings, I suggest a new framework consisting of three features: systematic use of technology and data to determine populations in need of protection, the development of a system of bilateral and multilateral agreements, and the logistical and financial support of supranational institutions. I discuss the importance of framing in a world of increasingly militarized borders and anti-immigrant sentiment and advocate for climate change migration to be framed as disaster relief for the sake of political viability.

## Note

This project is a continuation of my independent study project through the School for International Training program in Geneva, Switzerland titled “The Impacts of Warming Coffee: The Climate Change-Coffee-Migration Nexus in the Northern Triangle of Central America”, in which climate change migration is illustrated by exploring the effects of climate change on coffee growing communities in Central America. This thesis project acknowledges the many ways in which the environment can pose an existential threat to humans in the form of sudden ecological disasters and slow-onset effects of climate change and seeks to create a realistic framework for permanent and well-supported resettlement in the wake of a worsening environmental crisis.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude and sincerest appreciation to everyone who supported me in this journey, including but not limited to family, friends, and faculty. I would especially like to thank Dr. Miranda Hallett for her continual guidance and phenomenal mentorship before and throughout the entire honors thesis process.



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## Introduction

Although environmentally triggered migration is far from a new phenomenon, the growing intensity of adverse effects of climate change in recent years has led to a more urgent need to facilitate the resettlement of the rising numbers of people fleeing climate-related disasters. Benoit Mayer (2011) explains the two options that emerged for those affected adversely from climate change. First, *in situ* adaptation, like mitigating flood damage by creating floating gardens to prevent further destruction that leads to migration, or secondly, resettlement. He asserts that there's a consensus among scientific and NGO literature that *in situ* adaptation is not always possible and resettlement becomes an unquestionable need (pp. 371-373). As more lives are altered by compounding effects of climate change, displacement due to environmental factors has become a key feature of the reality of the 21st century and is projected to continue.

By contextualizing the relationship between climate change and migration, the striking need for a new framework to address the millions of people displaced, or soon to be displaced, as a result of climate change becomes readily apparent. I have illustrated this relationship in previous work titled: "The Impacts of Warming Coffee: The Climate Change-Coffee-Migration Nexus in the Northern Triangle of Central America" in 2019. I will now review a number of crucial issues revealed in this project that must be taken into account in order to understand the need for a new legal framework around climate and human migration.

The first is the interconnectedness of factors that drive migration, and the difficulty in tracking the specifics of human movement. Undoubtedly, there are

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difficulties in understanding the precise impacts of specific drivers of migration, since the root causes are not easily singled out. There are often numerous factors that contribute to a decision to leave one's home. Those who are on the move are not marked with a wristband that indicates a single reason for migration. Rather, someone crossing a border in search for employment may be tossed in a category of labor migrant or economic migrant, without considering the fact that they may also be displaced persons-- suffering an adverse effect of climate change, which slowly or suddenly destroyed their livelihood. The search for employment is only part of the story, although it may be the most visible immediate goal. It becomes obvious once we examine real migratory decisions that the dualistic understanding of forced displacement versus voluntary migration in law, and in general discourse, is a false binary.

The second point is the importance of exploring climate change migration through a regionally focused lens. Climate change certainly does not affect the world homogeneously, and even within a region there are very significant disparities in how people's environments are transformed. It is therefore critical to target studies and eventually adjust policies to be sensitive to the situations and to the needs of the people in a specific region, keeping in mind the most vulnerable. For the purposes of this essay, my focus is Central American emigration. Migration from the three countries in the spotlight-- Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador-- is typically characterized as a response to economic turmoil and gang violence (Lynch, 2019, p. 12). Environmental factors are seldom associated as a trigger and are regularly overshadowed in public discourse and literature by alluring stories of violence.

In this previous work, I illustrate the role of climate change in Central American out-migration, examining specifically the coffee growing industry. Although Central America is historically an arid region, recently the frequency and intensity of droughts is rising which significantly impacts agricultural production, including coffee (p. 15). The sensitive crop is also severely threatened by rising temperatures and irregular weather patterns attributed to climate change (p. 17). The rising temperatures also worsen the spread of Coffee Leaf Rust (CLR), a disease that reduces coffee cherry yields and devastates coffee growing communities.

This brings us to another major point. Climate change can have devastating effects on entire communities which either directly leads to migration or exacerbates other factors that trigger migration. Most coffee farming in Central America is done by smallholder farmers. For example, 97% of coffee producers in Guatemala are considered smallholder farmers, with the majority owning on average 1.2 Ha of land (Tay, 2018, pp. 2-3). Therefore, when rust and rising temperatures threaten coffee yield across an area, many more people are affected than would be in a situation where a drought threatens large conventional corn farms like those in the United States.

After a 2011 rust epidemic in Central America, roughly 80,000 hectares of land in Honduras was infected, wiping out half of the harvest for 30,000 farmers and completely destroying about 10,000 farmers' harvests (Ward, Gonthier, and Nichols, 2017, p. 1082). After such farmers' livelihood is destroyed, they are left with little choice in many cases but to move from their homes, either within the country, or transnationally. Whether the loss of agricultural production is seen as the driver itself, or conceptualized as the amplifier of other phenomena that lead to the exodus of coffee producers, there is an

undeniable relationship between climate change and the movement of people that is exemplified by the story of coffee production in Central America.

Lastly, it must be understood that temperatures are continuing to elevate, and consequently the numbers of people on the move are projected to rise with them. Those who are displaced from climate change lack international protection and are often vulnerable to human rights abuses as they navigate a world of increasingly closed and militarized borders. However, the environment is progressively being recognized as a driving factor of human movement worthy of projection by international law as well as individual governments' laws in response to both sudden and slow-onset disasters attributed to climate change. The responses to these disasters must not be a one-size fits all solution, but rather a number of regionally sensitive resettlement arrangements that take into account the need for protection. By recognizing and responding to the vast cultural, demographic, and ecological differences between and within different regions, policies can adequately and accurately safeguard the human rights of the millions of people who will inevitably be displaced by climate change.

## **Terminology**

Within public discourse around migration in general, it's common to find a variety of terms used to label people who move such as migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, and internally displaced person, among others. These technical and legal labels are often contested and there has been no consensus around an appropriate label for those displaced from climate change. Those affected by sudden or slow-onset environmental disasters are not identified under a single conceptual or legal category and would find it



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difficult to seek refugee status given the current framework laid out in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 protocol.

In these widely accepted and ratified regulatory frameworks, the term “refugee” is limited to “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UN General Assembly, 1951, p. 152). Despite this association of refugee status with human persecution, in the 1980s before the phrase “climate change” entered the scene, the term “environmental refugees” was commonly used by experts in the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). At this time, these organizations used “environmental refugee” to refer to people who had been forced out of where they lived due to an environmental disruption, whether it was considered temporary or permanent (Faiste and Shade, 2017, p. 5).

Thomas Faiste and Jeannette Shade (2017) track the development of the terminology and show how an “environmental refugee” became a “climate refugee” before the use of the term “refugee” for those displaced by ecological factors became heavily disputed and rejected by the United Nations altogether. By the time the IPCC came out with its 4th report in 2007, “environmental migration” became the norm (p. 6). Compared to “refugee,” the term “migrant” is more of an umbrella term and defined by the IOM as “a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons” (IOM, 2019, p. 130). In essence, the terms are often ambiguous and there has yet to be a global consensus given the complexity of the international

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frameworks and the interconnectedness of the many factors that drive people from their habitats.

Such ambiguous terminology is rooted in the complexity of migration itself, and the interacting reasons people end up on the move. There is not simply a clean dichotomy of voluntary migrants and forced refugees. Benoit Mayer (2011) notes that “climate migrants should surely be considered closer to political refugees than to ‘ordinary’ migrants” (p. 381), since those fleeing in both cases are trying to escape environments where survival is questionable and fundamental rights are clearly lacking. In my writing and for the purposes of this discussion, I intentionally use the term “climate migrant” or phrases like “those displaced by climate change” in order to be inclusive of all individuals who are moving as a result of climate change, regardless of what degree of choice they are perceived to have in the matter. The lack of consensus over definitions and labels is only the beginning of the intricacies in the world’s response to climate migrants.

## **Bridging the protection gaps: who is responsible to address displacement?**

It’s well established in both scholarship and political debates that there is a fundamental gap in international law and existing legal frameworks when it comes to addressing those on the move due to climate change. The United Nations General Assembly, in their 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants recognizes a significant number of people who left their homes because of climate change and discusses the reality that those we currently call migrants and refugees actually

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experience common challenges and vulnerabilities (p. 2). Therefore, they call the movements of these people “global phenomena that call for global approaches and global solutions”. They follow this up by declaring that “no one state can manage such movements on its own.” (UN General Assembly, 2016, p. 2) This approach has implications for the discussion of “burden sharing” where it must be recognized that one state should not have to host an entire community displaced by climate change.

In their 2018 Global Compact on migration, The UN General Assembly recognizes the necessity to “enhance cooperation on international migration in all its dimensions” (p. 2). This includes strengthening their mapping abilities to be able to predict and address movements that resulted from both sudden and slow onset natural disasters (p. 10). Taking into account adverse effects of climate change, the Global Compact also discusses the need to integrate displacement considerations into disaster preparedness strategies between neighboring countries. Such strategies would include contingency planning, evacuation planning, mechanisms of registering or screening displaced people and addressing their needs, and so on (p. 10). In the same section the Compact advocates for developing regional approaches to address vulnerabilities and provide humanitarian relief. This compact is non-binding, and the authors recognize national sovereignty when it comes to a state’s right to determine legislative and policy measures to implement their suggestions. This leaves the question of how to approach the implementation of these grand ideas. They suggest that implementation requires support from the global, regional, national, and local levels (p. 3).

In Joseph Caren’s *The Ethics of Immigration* (2013), he challenges the current organization of the world and the increasing implementation of strict border control in

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response to the many types of immigration. Rather than creating a specific plan or policy proposal, Carens' goal is to "challenge complacency" and to illustrate how current practices deny basic freedoms and maintain harmful inequality (p. 295). Carens' specific focus is on states' responsibilities to admit and resettle refugees. Although I believe those displaced from climate change should not legally fall under the current refugee framework, Carens' list of duties to admit refugees is inseparably linked to a state's duties to accept climate migrants.

Carens' list of reasons that generate a state's duty to accept refugees include a causal connection, where the state has a duty to accept refugees since their actions have led to the destruction of livelihoods. "We should already be starting to think about environmental refugees," he wrote in 2013, noting that there are arguments suggesting that rich democratic states should accept more 'environmental refugees' since they are largely responsible for anthropogenic climate change. Although there may be merit to this argument, at this point in time this specific causal link is not well developed and, in fact, not necessary to advocate for a just system of climate migration governance.

Humanitarian concern is Carens' second reason for a state to accept refugees. Simply put, "...they have an urgent need for a safe place to live and we are in a good position to provide it" (p. 195). Safety and security of those migrating is often threatened, and it is reasonable to call for humanitarian aid to prevent unnecessary insecurity or even loss of life. Environmental disasters that lead to displacement make resettlement a humanitarian obligation.

Lastly, Carens argues, on page 196, that being a part of the state system presupposes a duty to correct the failures of the nation-state system. Humans drew

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boundaries on top of land, and when the land cannot be lived on, for whatever reason, there must be a safe remedy for one who has fled across a boundary in order for these lines to remain legitimate. Under the modern nation state, we should recognize that there will be failures in any social institution that we create. In fact, it is our duty to correct these failures. Supporting safe and orderly movement of people, particularly by those affected adversely by climate change between states is possibly the most visible failure today in the context of the nation state. To address this failure, philosophers like Carens entreat us to consider our ethical obligations, and legal experts like Benoit Mayer work to re-imagine the legal mechanisms through which we protect those on the move.

In his 2011 article, Benoit Mayer presents five guiding principles, some of which he pulls from outside international legal documents, to illustrate what an ideal framework would look like. Given the fact that climate change migration can be foreseen well in advance, unlike many cases that result in political asylum claims, he determines that well-planned and voluntary resettlement should be preferred over emergency disaster relief (p. 389). In addition to an early response, his second guiding principle is the necessity to respect individual and collective rights, and Mayer adds that collective resettlement is important to preserve social structures (p. 393). Taking a global approach is his third principle, since climate change is clearly a global problem (p. 393). He then goes on to ask the question: who pays for it? His answer is the application of the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility that recognizes that climate change is a global problem, but that countries have different abilities and responsibilities when it comes to resettling climate migrants” (p. 395). Lastly, he includes the principle of subsidiarity, which he adapts from the treaty on the European Union, which ensures the

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individual states and communities have agency in assisting their populations in resettlement, but when they cannot, it becomes the responsibility of the larger communities to intervene and ensure human rights are accessible (p. 398). Applying this principle to climate migrant resettlement, if, theoretically bilateral agreements fail, political leadership from within the region must step in to assist in ensuring a safe journey to resettlement.

Of course, Mayer's ideal framework is international in nature, given the global reach of climate change, however, he does raise an important point regarding the possibility for regional agreements and the communal approach to solving this puzzle while still acknowledging the diversity in resources of the potential states involved. I would agree with Mayer in that a new framework ideally should be guided by the idea of creating well planned voluntary resettlement programs, common but differentiated responsibility, a recognition of collective rights, and a principle of subsidiarity if nations are unable to take care of people on the move. Of course, principles vary across regions and interests shift as new leaders come to power. With this in mind, there are a number of different ways in which scholars, politicians, and international bodies have envisioned the appropriate response to millions of people being displaced as a result of climate change. Below, I describe a potential framework that draws on these principles, with particular attention to the ways such planning might manifest within the Central/North American regional system.

In an ideal world: no matter my occupation, location, or situation, if I decide that the place that I reside is no longer livable, I should have the right to leave such a place and go somewhere else. The process for doing so should be simple and understandable. If

my search for a new residence happens to be over the lines drawn by other people, I should explain my situation to the political entity that claims jurisdiction/sovereignty in the space, and they should ask if I need help. If I am fleeing a hurricane, this owner should give me temporary protection until returning to my home is no longer threatening. If I flee rising sea levels flooding my home and must leave, this landowner should offer me a permanent pathway to safety where I can participate socially and economically. I should not have to understand hundreds of dense pages of legal documents and have to argue my case. In other words, any ideal solution to the problem of environmental displacement must take as its starting point the fundamental needs of vulnerable people who must leave their homes and should provide them with practical and manageable pathways forward.

Indeed, there are precedents in policy and practice for the establishment of such remedies. Globally, migration due to environmental factors is neither new, nor completely ignored in regional agreements or international debates, as Vincent Chetail from the global migration center at the graduate institute of Geneva remarked in an interview for my previous research (Lynch 25). However, considering the empirical reality of the current inadequacies in protecting those moving in response to the environment, it's time to expedite the application of a more comprehensive new framework. Rather than a top-down, "one-size fits all" remedy conceived by the United Nations, a new framework would be more effective if it consists of a system of tailored agreements that can fit the varying needs of many communities living in diverse regions.

An adequate system designed to protect those displaced by climate change must contain pathways to safe and orderly resettlement. A war that has created a political

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refugee may end, and the previously unlivable places may find peace; so, the person displaced could reasonably decide to move back. However, if the ocean has taken your home as a result of climate change, or you have succumbed to unprecedented effects of desertification, return may never be possible. It's important to envision sustainable and lasting remedies to migration related to climate change disasters, just as we account for the possibility of political refugees requiring permanent resettlement (even as others are given an opportunity to repatriate).

## **Towards a Framework for Climate Migration**

In recognizing the design flaws of the current arrangements, the question becomes: in what direction must we head to ensure the survival and security of millions of people displaced by climate change? An effective and sufficient system would look like a collection of flexible bilateral and multilateral agreements between nations. These agreements could potentially address migration more comprehensively, but at minimum they should include contingency plans to protect those who are forcibly displaced -- either suddenly, or as a result of slow onset ecological disasters. Every region is unique culturally, historically, and politically. Local complexities make it difficult to establish a universal standard for how to assist those displaced. Given the difficulty with implementing one-size fits all legal frameworks into vastly different regions, it would be far more effective to structure bilateral and multilateral agreements that are more tailored to fit the specific needs of those on the move and the recipient nations. International bodies should support these agreements and monitor their effectiveness to ensure that



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millions of people moving will be able to enjoy human rights. The United Nations should monitor and support, rather than enforce rules in this case.

In this section, I will delineate how we can move towards this type of regionally responsive framework using the Central/North American region as a case study. I explain what features a functioning framework will include at a minimum: First, is systematic data-gathering and data-sharing at the regional level as a way of identifying the populations at risk for climate-related vulnerability with mechanisms to provide immediate protection to individuals who need it. A second criteria would be the development of a system of bilateral and multilateral agreements that are built around current migration patterns resulting from climate change. These agreements should offer, at the very least, safe ways to temporarily shelter, with options for permanent resettlement on a case-by-case basis to allow for orderly responses to anticipated displacement. Lastly, the logistical and financial support of supranational institutions to provide firmly established monitoring bodies to track and ensure that regional agreements are effective. Every step must be taken carefully to mitigate the potential crisis of thousands of more people leaving their homes and making dangerous journeys to places that have no clear plan in place to assist them.

When one is displaced because of climate change related factors, they often find themselves in a legal limbo given the complex nature of migration and slowly-adapting migration law. Most migrants, and even most displaced people, do not fit the refugee requirements as defined in the aforementioned 1951 Refugee Convention and subsequent 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, even if the environment they're leaving is completely unlivable. In this legal limbo-- forced to move, but with no recognized right

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to migrate-- vulnerability is common and peoples' rights are threatened or even completely invisible. Lacking permanent legal status can make one more susceptible to labor exploitation, for example.

An updated system of migration governance that is people-centered is the remedy to the intensifying vulnerabilities of those displaced from climate change. In response, there are three different registers of thinking. The first would be the ethical ideal. Ideally, there would be an immediate global recognition that climate change is forcibly driving people from their homes, resulting in thousands of people finding themselves in vulnerable and dangerous situations. Ideally, the recognition of such an alarming reality would lead to internationally motivated and well-funded responses to ensure the rights of those displaced are protected. Of course, in a world where borders are militarized and anti-immigrant sentiments are high, there needs to be a more politically viable solution. This thinking is in a more pragmatic register. In order to be politically viable, climate change migration must be dealt with transparently and through comprehensive ground-up regional approaches that are tailored for particular regions, with careful attention paid to each nation's ability to fund and support safe resettlement. Lastly, in order to sell a pragmatic solution, we need to think in terms of framing. A specific narrative framework that presents this movement in response to climate change as disaster displacement is necessary, and migrant resettlement should be diplomatically and tactfully constructed as a form of disaster relief.

In many cases, ecological crises are observable, and exacerbation of environmental catastrophes is predictable. It's only a matter of time before many locations become unlivable. Since these events are to a degree, foreseeable, it's possible

to establish contingency plans for what to do when the people are forced to leave. For example, the process of desertification is usually gradual; it allows quite a bit of time for experts to calculate the potential numbers of people that are forced to move and for neighboring states to decide how many of these people they are able to resettle and for what duration. As noted above, coffee growing communities in Central America are deeply affected by climate change and there is a clear link between rising temperatures in the area and lower coffee yield, whether it's due to easier spreading of agricultural diseases, or more intense and longer droughts. Migration as a result of this phenomenon is predictable and observable through modern technology and data analysis. However, it's not being tracked in any kind of systematic way; countries are not sharing this information and analyzing it together as a matter of regional security. I will discuss below the importance of collaborative research and data gathering in greater depth. People living in these coffee-dependent communities are left with little choice but to move elsewhere and many migrate transnationally in the total absence of any policy or institutional support.

The United Nations and other international bodies known for their data collection like the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the South Centre must conjoin research efforts and share data accordingly to best inform those governments involved in establishing regional contingency plans for climate disaster relief. In a world of satellite imagery, artificial intelligence, and endless amounts of information at the fingertips of billions, an unexpected disaster should be extremely rare. Satellite imagery is already being used by

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academics to track the movements of migrants by measuring the intensity and location of nighttime lights (Niedomysl et al., 2017, pp. 591-605). Additionally, organizations like the IDMC are beginning to use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to be able to monitor where people are moving within nations (Lynch, 2019, p. 15).

The reality revealed from this data must be recognized within regional agreements and mechanisms must be clearly established to adequately and smoothly resettle those forced from their land with clear pathways to permanent residency, given the irreversible nature of some effects of a rapidly changing planet. Regional frameworks built around current patterns of human movement are necessary to ensure safe and healthy migration. In Olopa, Guatemala, nearly half the residents have fled to the United States after the coffee growing community suffered heavy losses directly related to rising temperatures (Kahn, 2014). The surrounding countries have the information to create a regional agreement to prepare for those displaced from Olopa. The governments of The United States, Honduras, and Mexico to name a few neighbors, should establish a contingency plan with the government of Guatemala, informed by accurate data and input from the local communities to ensure the safe and necessarily permanent resettlement of those displaced. There is a glaring need for carefully tailored and preemptive solutions to potential problems associated with “unexpected” numbers of people crossing borders, considering the complex differences amongst regions, and since climate change does not affect nation-states homogeneously.

With a goal of regional resilience and the avoidance of human rights catastrophes, new migration governance is necessary in the form of contingency planning. A modern relevant example of a functional regionally focused framework to address displaced

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people is known as MIRPS, or the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework. This framework, born from the 2017 San Pedro Sula Declaration, is designed primarily to address forced displacement and facilitate the protection of refugees in Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and more recently El Salvador (p. 6). Despite the fact that this framework is intended to assist refugees fleeing human persecution, and is careful to exclude those displaced from climate change, it still remains an incredibly valuable model to use in constructing a framework for the protection of climate migrants, since those displaced from human persecution often experience similar vulnerabilities as those displaced from climate change.

As mentioned in the beginning, the relationship between climate change and migration is complex, and people are driven from their homes for many interrelated reasons. Sudden-onset disasters like hurricanes, floods, etc. require neighboring countries to be prepared for the increasing frequency of sudden ecologically destructive events (IPCC, 2018, p. 4). Offices on the ground of neighboring countries should be able to assess these events and determine when protection should be offered. Such protections would not need to be ongoing; rather, offices coordinating climate-related migration processing could respond to both acute and slow-building situations of forced migration in an *ad hoc* way if they were provided with appropriate discretion.

The United States' Temporary Protected Status (TPS) is an example of an *ad hoc* application of certain legal protections. This mechanism even recognizes environmental disasters as qualifying for the status "such as an earthquake, hurricane, or epidemic, that results in a substantial but temporary disruption of living conditions, and because of

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which the foreign state is temporarily unable to adequately handle the return of its nationals” (American Immigration Council, 2018, p. 1). The problem with TPS is that it’s more reactionary and is effectively a temporary promise not to deport people. Legal frameworks must provide a permanent plan for those who are unable to return to their places of origin. Benoit Mayer (2011) points out the fact that migrants who are accepted on a temporary basis are more likely to be admitted into a country only when the country can take advantage of them, and therefore, he advocates for climate-related migration to be seen as permanent in nature and to allow for full naturalization and citizenship status to protect against exploitation (pp. 390-391). However, TPS grants people the ability to obtain work permits and allows for other privileges that one may not have had access to before. Although this sense of temporary protection is not ideal, it is the seed for something far greater.

Ideally, a temporary protective status would be more active in providing protection and assistance to somebody beyond a promise not to deport people on an indefinite but temporary basis. In the event of a sudden disaster like a hurricane or a more slow-onset disaster such as a disease like coffee leaf rust threatening communities’ livelihoods, a surrounding coalition of nation states should have in place a plan to offer protections such as emergency housing and other direct assistance to those who have lost everything. Contingency plans for unexpected natural disasters, which are understood to be exacerbated by climate change, must be well established around the world in order to prevent any type of additional burden to victims of natural disasters.

People employed through the agriculture industry are among some of the most vulnerable because of the rapidly worsening effects of climate change. Thousands of

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people in coffee producing areas remain the poorest and most sensitive to market and climate shocks (Eakin, Tucker, & Castellanos, 2005, p. 1). As described above, the coffee farming communities of Central America are in need of particular consideration in order to protect those who cannot sustain their livelihoods as a result of climate change.

Realistically, a disaster relief plan for Central American coffee farming communities must be expertly led, data driven and rooted in collaborative collective action. Temporary protections need to be offered to address the imminent threat to safety and security, and pathways to permanent citizenship must exist.

In 2019, between Central and North America, what is known as the largest migration corridor in the world, over 60 million people were classified as migrants according to the UN (United Nations, 2019). Yet, under the current system, it's nearly impossible to find how many of these people could be considered environmentally displaced. Accuracy is key in policy formation. Therefore, painting an accurate picture of where those Central American coffee farming communities are, and how they have been impacted by climate change is the starting point for writing an adequate relief plan. National and regionally specific data regarding internal displacement from the experts at the IDMC, and transnational migration monitored by those at the IOM is available and continuously being monitored. Research from these organizations, beyond keeping numbers, gives expert insight into why migration is happening and where people who migrate go. Looking more closely at this kind of data in tandem with satellite imagery, the phenomenon of Central American coffee-growing communities migrating because of climate change can be better understood and more adequately addressed.

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As data is analyzed, collective action must be taken in the efforts to resettle and protect the rights of those who are displaced from climate change. Cooperation is necessary on an international and national level, as well as amongst civil society, including the public and private sectors. Regionally, in recognizing the general trend of movement from Central America to North America, the governments of The United States, Mexico, and Canada must work with those of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador under the close guidance of experts to discover what populations involved in the coffee growing process are displaced from climate change. Together, these countries should be able to understand specifically the needs of people from coffee farming communities and coordinate adequate humanitarian responses. For example if, like in Honduras in 2011, coffee leaf rust ravages the farms and transforms the lives of thousands of people involved in the production process, neighboring governments (local and national) as well as the multiple organizations and institutions involved must be able to ensure primarily the immediate safety of those affected as well as provide them with a pathway to reestablish long term self-reliance, even if that means citizenship in another state.

As expressed, regional contingency plans to protect those displaced from environmental disasters linked to climate change must be supported by these international bodies in the form of money but also in the form of research. This isn't to say the United Nations should fully fund a regional contingency plan for displaced people's resettlement, but for those cases of necessity in which no surrounding nation has the means, emergency funds should be accessible. This would be in line with the aforementioned principle of subsidiarity. As we imagine a functional system of migration governance that would result in orderly and safe movement of people once their



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environments become unlivable, it's necessary to explore the ways in which this system would manifest itself in the modern political context.

## **Displacement as disaster: the importance of framing**

In the 21st century, it would be an understatement to say that migration has been an increasingly politically polarizing subject. From “caravans” of people gathered like an army “invading” the United States to harrowing images of distressed children crawling off of boats after escaping the Syrian Civil War, migration and how to address it are very popular topics of conversation. There is certainly an observable hierarchy of who deserves to be in the United States in political discourse, as the diversification of migration streams in the 21st century was met with a xenophobic backlash. Such anti-immigrant trends within the political context can help explain why protections for, and even acknowledgement of, climate migrants is lacking.

The current binary structure of U.S. immigration law classifies all who arrive at the border without authorization as either labor migrants, who have no claims to stay in the U.S., or as asylum seekers, who may have a right to reside here if they can prove they are refugees. A family whose coffee farm was destroyed by rising temperatures and CLR that has decided to leave in hopes to survive will not qualify for asylum, but they may not be accurately identified with the concept of “labor migrant”-- as someone who is simply choosing to move in order to find a new job and a better life. In light of antiquated U.S. immigration laws, climate migrants have a better chance of protection if the protective actions were motivated by a desire to provide humanitarian disaster relief, at least until

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immigration law catches up with the aforementioned realities and seeking asylum on the grounds of environmental threats is normalized.

Framing is a powerful tool in advocacy, and an integral piece of the puzzle if we wish to change the way that displaced people are treated around the world. Framing involves the use of specific language and narratives to create an image to represent something. Caution must be used when constructing an image of a climate migrant because oftentimes, framing becomes reality as we simplify knowledge for the purpose of dissemination. Benford and Snow call framing, when used as a verb, an “active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction” (p. 614). This is because framing is actually an active and fluid act of creating a picture for a purpose. It is a constantly evolving process which requires human effort to drive its evolution. They also note that framing is contentious because as the frames evolve, they are regularly deployed to challenge or dispute alternate frames within a political context (614). The intense politicization of migration in the 21st century can help to explain why addressing the needs of those displaced from climate change as refugees is highly contested.

Considering the political sensitivities associated with migration, it would be most effective and accurate to frame the response to climate migration as disaster relief. When constructing an image of a climate migrant, it’s important to ensure that those displaced from climate change are conceptually distinct from labor migrants or traditional refugees and thus have different needs in order to find safety. Both slow-onset and sudden effects from climate change are typically characterized as disasters, and resettlement in the name of disaster relief is important to avoid the potential political roadblocks that would likely

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emerge if one were to advocate for expanding the definition of refugees to encompass those displaced from climate change. Disaster-relief framing would be sufficient in establishing a sense that migrants displaced by climate change are deserving of protection. We need not attempt to expand the definition of refugee, since the goal is to establish systematic and lasting protections for climate migrants.

Despite the importance of presenting advocacy in terms that work with the current field of political possibility, it's important to note that political viability changes over time. Twenty years ago, it would have been much more difficult to convince the world of the need to devote time and resources to resettle those impacted by climate change. However, as science revealed the painful reality for many affected by climate change and the world began to listen, governments and almost every corner of civil society began to take a vested interest in how the actions of people affect the planet. A clear example of the shifting viability of particular policy proposals would be criminal justice reform in the United States. Jody Armour explains the bipartisan transformation in the political popularity of being tough on crime. He recounts that "A few years ago, the idea that being tough on crime would be a liability – not an asset – was unthinkable for both Democrats and Republicans." (Armour, 2019, p. 1). Armour attributes the success in the criminal justice reformers to the power of activists and writers reframing mass incarceration as a civil rights crisis, intertwined with race, poverty and government policy.

An important part of this re-framing of criminal justice policy was the data and evidence emerging from research, which exposed the negative consequences of the system created by the "tough on crime" policies of the 1980's and 1990's. The director of

the National Institute for Justice, Nancy Rodriguez (2019), published a paper on the value of scientific research in creating a better criminal justice system. She highlights the importance of policy leaning on research and emphasizes the role of both social and physical sciences working together to inform policy for criminal justice reform on many levels (pp. 292-293). The act of publicizing data and exposing the empirical reality of how policies (or lack of policies) affect real people in a technical and scientific way is a valuable method that should be used in framing climate migrant resettlement as disaster relief.

In efforts to construct policy around human displacement, disaster and risk framing are incredibly powerful. In a study by Pranathi Diwakar (2019), she illustrates how the government of Chennai, India was wildly successful in moving its urban slums to the outskirts of the city as a result of framing residents in the slums as being acutely vulnerable to natural disasters (pp. 1314-1315). Leaning on data and research to drive decisions proved to be effective in inspiring criminal justice reform in the U.S. and the use of disaster relief framing was successful in garnering support for slum relocation policies in Chennai, India. In terms of framing, it is likely that combining a disaster relief approach with expert-driven research and data will be successful in attracting support for a new framework for climate migrants. Well-informed advocacy and careful framing is necessary to accurately represent climate migration and thus inspire policy makers to take expeditious action to protect the human rights of climate migrants.

## Conclusion

As our society transforms, and more devastating phenomena that lead to irregular migration are exposed, like the struggles of producing coffee in land where temperatures are rising and droughts are becoming more intense, the following question is critical. What can we do as scholars/policy actors to “nudge” the world towards the ideal, while recognizing the need to modify ideals in the short and medium term for pragmatic ends?

In this essay, I have pointed out the inadequacies of the current international frameworks in protecting victims of forced migrations attributed to climate change and have advocated for an updated framework rooted in principles of human rights and regional subsidiarity. This framework’s regional character allows for policies to be flexible and sensitive to local complexities and varying vulnerabilities. Of course, since adverse effects of climate change are felt around the world, there is a critical need for global support and coordination, whether it’s in the form of sharing data, research, and best practices, or institutional advising.

As we imagine a world where human rights are respected in every step of the migration process, whether the migration is considered forced or voluntary, advocacy and narrative framing plays a critical role in executing the nudge towards the ideal. Activism around climate change is already bold and abundant, but climate migrants must not be left out of this discourse. The message must put the human person at the center. Scenarios driving people from their homes vary immensely. However, whether classified as IDP, asylum seeker, labor migrant, or refugee, there is one thing we all share, and that is humanity.

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