Climate Change “Refugees”

The Isle de Jean Charles is disappearing. Rising sea levels, resulting from climate change’s impact on glaciers, have consumed 98 percent of the island’s mass.¹ This is not a distant, exotic, Pacific island. It is part of the state of Louisiana. The sixty people whose ancestors have lived on the island since the 1830s are now relocating inland. Headlines have called them “America’s first climate refugees.” These people are members of the Choctaw nation, one of five Native American nations that Presidents Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren forced to migrate from their homes in the southeast section of the United States during the “Trail of Tears” following the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The inhabitants of Isle de Jean Charles escaped the forced march of their peoples and established their own community in Louisiana. Now they must migrate again. The federal government has allocated $48 million to relocate these climate change refugees to the mainland.²

Other climate refugees are left to cope on their own. Journalist Christian Parenti met Jose Ramirez on the south bank of the Rio Grande River waiting to cross. Ramirez, a fisherman from the Mexican state of Michoacan, had become an environmental refugee when a “red tide” of toxic algae blooms drove the fish away from the region where he fishes. Human impact on the environment in the form of poverty and modern agricultural practices have directly contributed to the environmental disaster.³

The term refugees in the chapter title is in quotation marks because historically refugees has had a specific, limited meaning in international law. The United Nations 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol require states to provide asylum for individuals who are fleeing war or political persecution—for example, current refugees from Syria. To date, there is no UN convention requiring nations to accept those who migrate because climate change makes it impossible to survive where they live, as is the case with Jose Ramirez. “Migration—whether permanent or temporary, internal or international—has always been a possible adaptation for people facing environmental changes.”⁴ While estimates vary wildly, the International Organization for Migration forecasts that 200 million people will be internally displaced or will migrate to another country by 2050 due to climate change.⁵ Try to imagine a population equal to nearly two-thirds of all U.S. citizens forced to leave their homes. Across the globe, both pastalists and farmers are well attuned to shifting weather patterns. They quickly adjust to those shifts by migrating to cities in times of drought and returning to the countryside when the rains finally come.⁶ A Mexican farmer puts it bluntly: “My grandfather, father and I have worked these lands. But now times have changed ... the rain is coming later now, so that we produce less. The only solution is to go away, at least for a while, [to the United States].”⁷ These statements demonstrate, as the International Organization for Migration notes, that while some examples of environmental migration seem clearly forced


⁵. Ibid., 2; see also the International Organization for Migration, “Migration, Climate Change and the Environment: A Complex Nexus,” www.iom.int/complex-nexus.


⁷. Ibid., 7.
and others arise from proactive decisions, there is a wide grey zone between these two poles. While the case of the inhabitants of the Isle de Jean Charles illustrates the first pole and the case of Africans who migrate back and forth between country and city without waiting for disaster to hit illustrates the proactive pole, most climate change refugees fall somewhere in-between.

In many poor countries or regions, internal displacement due to climate change can put a great deal of pressure on the ecosystems and the communities to which migrants flock. This can cause a cascading effect. For example, in the northwest of Kenya, rival ethnic groups fight over access to water holes for their herds or raid their enemies' cattle to replenish stocks that have died off. Sometimes the sporadic clashes break out into full-scale battles. "Climate change," argues Parenti, a journalist who has studied the impact of climate change in the world's conflict zones, "arrives in a world primed for crisis. The current and impending dislocations of climate change intersect with the existing crises of poverty and violence. I call this collision of political, economic, and environmental disasters 'the catastrophic convergence.'" The Pentagon views climate change as a threat multiplier, that, combined with other factors, can turn micro battles over water into much larger conflicts. The military approach to this threat multiplier is to reinforce "fortress America" for example, access to water into limited capacity. The vast numbers of poor people are adrift in a sea of chaos. If a rich nation were to haul even a small portion of the poor on board, the boat would swamp and all the people would perish. Hardin developed his theory before climate change was fully grasped, but he might argue that it represents a huge wave that threatens even a well-provisioned lifeboat. To take on board even a small fraction of the potentially 200 million dislocated people by 2050 would sink all of the lifeboats. Those on the lifeboats respond by arming their boats to guard against "boarding parties." 

What is your response to Hardin's argument for lifeboat ethics? What assumptions are embedded in the lifeboat metaphor? Are these assumptions valid in your judgment?

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) follows an integral human development model. CRS's model is based on the premise that both individuals and communities possess natural, physical, financial, social, political, and spiritual resources that can be enhanced. Poor people and nations are not flailing around in a turbulent sea. Nor are they merely victims of calamities. They are also not significantly different from people who are not poor and could easily find themselves needing help from others. A social science term for CRS's approach in the field is "asset-based community development." Assets crucial to livelihood can be diversified: water resources can be managed better; soils can be enriched organically; drought-resistant seeds and crops can be introduced.

10. Ibid., 16, 20, 52.

Lifeboat Ethics continued

Philosopher Garrett Hardin popularized the term "lifeboat ethics" in explicit contrast to environmentalists' use of the term "spaceship Earth." A spaceship implies a captain who gives orders.
Several principles guide CRS's implementation of its asset-based community development approach: begin with community-level participation; honor local knowledge and skills; recognize social differences; and seek to empower those on the margins. Following these principles builds a community's capacity to respond to unforeseen challenges.\(^\text{14}\) The end result is a resilient community, one that can build its own lifeboat. "Resilience" is a term used by ecologists to describe the capacity of ecological systems to withstand shocks that would alter their self-organizing and self-sustaining processes. Ecologists use the term "adaptive capacity" to refer to the ability to modify resilience, for example, by introducing elements that strengthen biodiversity.\(^\text{16}\) Those who study the impact of climate change on human communities and those, like CRS, who work with communities vulnerable to climate change also follow this basic guiding principle: "Invest in resilience: Increase people's resilience to the impacts of climate change so that fewer are forced to migrate."\(^\text{17}\)

As mentioned, climate change refugees are not protected by legally binding, international conventions. In response, the five authors of the report "In Search of Shelter: Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement" argue that nations should agree to "integrate climate change into existing international and national frameworks for dealing with displacement and migration."\(^\text{18}\) However, there are several thorny issues that must be faced and resolved in this process. First, in cases of war or political persecution relocation may be temporary, with return to one's homeland at least a possibility. But the changes wrought by climate change, as seen with Isle de Jean Charles, will be either permanent or last for a century or more. Second, a large grey zone exists between forced and voluntary migration in the case of climate refugees. A generous set of international guidelines must tilt in favor of the vulnerable parties, that is, the migrants. Finally, it is clear, especially in light of the Syrian refugee crisis, that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and nongovernmental organizations that partner with it are stretched beyond their limits in dealing with "traditional" refugees and internally displaced peoples. Their resources must be drastically augmented.\(^\text{19}\) The time to gear up is now, not when millions of people find their livelihoods severely compromised by climate change.

The Case of Coffee

In 1982, Carlos Cano became a refugee. In the midst of a civil war and brutal military repression in Guatemala, Cano's father moved his family to Chiapas, Mexico. They stayed for sixteen

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\(^{14}\) Ibid., 58.


\(^{17}\) Warner et al., "In Search of Shelter," v.

\(^{18}\) Warner et al., "In Search of Shelter," v.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
Carlos Cano shows the coffee leaf rust decimating coffee farms in Guatemala. Years. Peace accords awarded returning refugees acreage in mountainous coffee-growing regions. These families started from scratch but eventually built viable coffee farms. In 2012, however, Carlos became a migrant once again, leaving his home to find work in Mexico. Why? The culprit this time was not civil war, but a fungus: coffee leaf rust.

In 2012, some Guatemalan growers lost 85 percent of their coffee crops. The spread of the fungus, which is directly related to climate change, affects coffee-growing regions across Central America. As temperatures climb, the range of the fungus moves up the mountains, jeopardizing coffee crops at ever-higher elevations.

Because of the work of CRS, Carlos was only a temporary climate refugee. Through a “Green Coffee” project, CRS fieldworkers meet with growers to explain what is going on and then to work with them to create solutions. Some growers have introduced new crops like macadamia beans and avocados; others are supplementing their incomes by raising bees. CRS introduces new farming techniques to enrich the soil and encourages the replacement of old coffee trees with fungus-resistant trees. Change has not been easy. “But we have done it,” says coffee grower Jose Luis Mateo Mendoza. “We have encouraged ourselves.” Back in Guatemala, Carlos agrees. “Despite how difficult the situation has been to get back on our feet, coffee has been the most important thing for us. And it is something . . . we have to keep working at.”

Reflect and Discuss


2. Compare and contrast CRS’s use of an asset-based community development approach with Hardin’s lifeboat ethics. What sort of ethical concepts are implied in the way that CRS acts in the field?