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Climate Change Will Create 1.5 Billion Migrants by 2050 and We Have No Idea Where They'll Go

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By Izzie Ramirez
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The climate crisis has already created millions of invisible refugees and could create up to 1.5 billion more in the next 30 years. But under international law no country is obliged to take them in.



Central American migrants heading to the U.S. queue for a meal at a temporary shelter in Irapuato, Mexico, last November. Photo by Alfredo Estrella/AFP/Getty Images

Indigenous peoples and people of color are disproportionately affected by our global climate crisis. But in the mainstream green movement and in the media, they are often

forgotten or excluded. This is Tipping Point, a new VICE series that covers environmental justice stories about and, where possible, written by people in the communities experiencing the stark reality of our changing planet.

Gilberto Ysaías started thinking about leaving Honduras when he couldn't produce enough crops to provide for his family. As an Indigenous farmer, the hotter summers were wreaking havoc on his yearly harvest.

The criminal gang MS-13 then tried to extort Ysaías (his name has been changed here to protect his identity). When he couldn't cough up the cash, they tried to recruit his 11-year-old son.

Enough was enough. He heard that people could get asylum in the United States, so he and his son packed their bags and walked nearly 2,000 miles to get to the Texas border.

In March, they were detained upon entry to the United States and were scheduled for deportation. Now they are with their sponsor, waiting for a judge to rule on whether they will be granted asylum under the claim of gang violence.

Because climate change is not yet seen as a valid legal reason for asylum in any country, it is not included as a claim for their case. Yet the climate crisis played a central role in their decision to leave.

“Last summer, in my region, there was tremendous heat for a month, and half of all the plants dried,” Ysaías said in a case declaration. “Because of the heat, farmers are planting fewer crops and planting more grass for cattle. Because landowners are planting more grass, there are fewer jobs maintaining crops.”

Climate change—which the U.S. Department of Defense called a “threat multiplier”—can exacerbate poverty, conflict, and instability, which already plague impoverished nations like Honduras. According to new research from Stanford University, the economic gap between the richest and poorest countries is 25 percent larger today than it would have been without climate change.

The International Organization for Migration projects that between 25 million and 1.5 billion people will have to leave their homes by 2050. The poorest and smallest nations are the ones who are least likely to contribute to climate change, but they will be the first to be forced to migrate.

“Ultimately, they're coming here for reasons that may fall under protected ground for asylum, but the root cause is climate change,” said Gianvito Grieco, an attorney for the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), who worked on Ysaías's case.

Yet “climate change refugee” does not formally exist under international law. The United Nations (UN) 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines “refugee” as someone who crosses an international border for “a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a

particular social group, or political opinion.” That is usually interpreted as political oppression, not fear of sinking homes, scorched harvests, or devastated jungles.

“Just because it's become too hot in your country, or that yields are lower, or whatever result of climate change doesn't fall into that definition the way it's written now,” Grieco said.

Because of that, many lawyers take issue with the term “climate refugee,” since the designation of refugee doesn't cover environmental migration. Also, “climate refugee” assumes that there are only cross-border migrants, but most migrants will, in fact, move within their own borders.

“Legally, using the term ‘refugee’ implies rights and privileges under international law that simply do not exist—nearly all climate migrants will not qualify for traditional refugee status,” wrote Phillip Dane Warren, a lawyer at Columbia University, in *Columbia Law Review* in 2016.

This has forced individuals to litigate the term's nuances. In 2014, Kiribati resident Ioane Teitiota sought asylum in New Zealand “on the basis of changes to his environment in Kiribati caused by sea level rise associated with climate change.” New Zealand's supreme court dismissed his case, citing the Refugee Convention, and Teitiota was deported back to Kiribati which, even under zero emissions scenarios, will ultimately witness its communities consumed by the sea.

“It's like a double-edged sword,” Grieco said. “Do we want to change the law and try to include climate refugees and then risk that some kind of bipartisan compromise would actually scale back the protections that we have today? Or do we just try to find a way to get climate refugees in the framework that we currently have in place?”

Few migrants call themselves climate migrants

George Benson, an urban planner from Vancouver, said “his eyes were open” to climate change migration when he worked on a climate adaptation plan for the Philippines. There, he met with a group of farmers who struggled to adjust to extreme drought.

“People were saying, ‘I don't understand the community that I live in. I don't understand why the seasons change the way they do now,’” Benson said. “These are people that live this life for generations—with all of that embodied knowledge and practice—which is, in many cases, no longer relevant.”

Benson founded the Climate Migrants and Refugees Project with three colleagues to help develop resources for Canadian cities to respond to what could be millions of climate migrants. One challenge is that few migrants self-identify as climate migrants. It's hard to advocate for a group that doesn't even know it exists, Benson said.

“There's not necessarily a clear sense of identity that many people have as climate migrants and refugees,” Benson said. “It tends to be something that's a bit further in their background as far as why they migrate.”

'We want to be climate leaders instead of climate victims'

It's difficult to navigate through a form of immigration that technically doesn't exist without the assistance of law firms that are willing to take on the challenge.

“Climate migration is the human face of climate change,” said Ama Francis, a climate law fellow at Columbia's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law. “Having a passion for thinking about how to make migrants' lives easier and to provide legal solutions for them is just one avenue for coming into this issue.”

Francis hails from Dominica, a small Caribbean island, which like the rest of the region, is increasingly facing unusually strong hurricanes. She thought that studying both immigration and climate change would help her and her island have the legal tools to fight climate change.



Ninety percent of homes were destroyed after Hurricane Maria swept through Dominica in 2017. Photo: Michael Lees

“We’re called the ‘nature island of the Caribbean’ and I think that's a well-earned title,” Francis said. “More than half of the island is protected legally, but climate change is a new challenge for us.”

Like Puerto Rico, Dominica was devastated by Hurricane Maria in 2017. Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit called the country a “war zone.” Ninety percent of homes were destroyed and 20 percent of the population left the island after the storm.

“My own mom was displaced and lived in St. Kitts, the neighboring island,” Francis said. “My granny lived without her roof. It was devastating to the island and to me personally.”

Afterwards, her mom moved to the U.S. and then Barbados, where she is now. She says many others moved between multiple places after the storm.

Dominica then swore to become the world’s first “climate-resilient nation.” Currently, it’s working with the World Bank to figure out a financing sector (Dominica's damages from Maria are estimated at \$1.3 billion) and plans to use geothermal energy from renewable sources, even though its emissions are minimal.

“We want to be climate leaders instead of climate victims,” Francis said.

Francis now is working on disaster displacement and local and regional climate migration solutions at Columbia University’s Sabin Center, with a focus on small island developing states like Dominica. It’s a first step to getting legal protection locally, while the international community scrambles to figure out what to do.

More than 150 countries are trying to solve the issue of climate change migration. In 2015, the monumental Paris Agreement called for a task force to “address displacement related to the adverse impacts of climate change.” And New Zealand indicated in 2017 that it may create a new visa category for displaced peoples of the Pacific.

The United States, however, is not one of those countries. It abstained from voting on the 2018 Global Compact of Migration, which aims to reduce the risks and vulnerabilities migrants face, and also plans to withdraw from the Paris Agreement.

The responsibility for raising awareness about climate change migration should fall on the governments that are creating the crisis and making immigration difficult, said Abril Gallardo, an immigration activist for Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA).

“The reality is that there are so many influences of the U.S. or other countries that have gone into countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and even Mexico to exploit their resources,” Gallardo said. “They go into their homes. They take everything from there and they're expecting them to just stay there and die.”

But they don’t stay. Despite the dangers and risks of migrating, especially as the Trump administration continues to make it more difficult, people still try to move to the U.S. in hopes of finding work and safety.

“The people coming over, they know what the narrative is in this country,” Grieco said. “During the child separation crisis, the fact that people were still coming—that tells you exactly how bad the situation is in their country.”

It’s not just Trump’s anti-environment and anti-immigration policies that are hurting the prospects of climate migrants; it’s that those two positions are often united, said Benson.

“There are a number of people who are in opposition to any meaningful climate policy. They are also significantly vocal, in often quite frightening ways, about the need to curtail immigration to resist the movement of people into the country,” Benson said.

Gallardo, an immigrant herself, emphasized the importance of not assuming that migrants only care about immigration issues.

“We care about climate change. We care about education. We care about wages and we care about health care and we care about immigration,” she said. “And a powerful thing that I see is that the more Trump’s administration is trying to create a dividing rhetoric, the more we are coming together.”