



Climate Migrants:

Hospitality and Solidarity in a Global Context

Policy Brief
June 2021



Introduction

The implications of climate change are increasing and have negative effects on individuals' livelihoods, affecting their economic opportunities, environment, traditional ways of living, and health. As a result, climate change is one of the driving factors influencing migration. It is worth emphasizing that migration is a complex issue with other influential factors that are difficult to separate from one another.

The Latin America and Caribbean region is at an increased risk of the negative effects of climate change. These effects are felt disproportionately by communities who already experience oppression and inequities. Migration, especially when spurred by natural disasters, may place people in precarious situations where they are more at risk of human rights violations. As a society, we have a responsibility to move towards reconciliation and justice for communities that have been displaced or forced to migrate due to issues related to climate change.

The Jesuit Universal Apostolic Principals call us to walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice. Although barriers exist to serving and accompanying climate migrants, there are organizations that are doing the work to uphold the inherent dignity of these communities. Supporting their work is a vital part of upholding our responsibility to solidarity with vulnerable communities. In addition, multilateral collaboration between organizations, governments and communities is needed in order to make sure that there is institutional support that meets the needs of families and communities.



Important Takeaways

1. The impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather events and environmental degradation, affect migration and internal displacement.
2. Due to the complex situations facing climate migrants, it is often difficult to identify who is considered a climate migrant. There is little to no specific support for climate migrants due to the fact that they are not included under the definition of "refugee".
3. Latin America and the Caribbean is a region that is vulnerable to climate change and it is estimated this could cause 17 million people to migrate.
4. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants, including climate migrants, are more vulnerable due to a number of individual and structural factors such as healthcare, stigmatization, living conditions, and language barriers, explicitly in vaccine rollout is essential to ensure equitable access.
5. Legal protections for climate migrants must be expanded in order to meet growing needs. In addition, support in countries aimed at climate adaptation and resilience is key.
6. Organizations that accompany migrants must be ready to shift their services to meet the changing and emerging needs of climate migrants.

Problem Statement

Climate factors have historically played a role in shaping migration. In the 1930s, the Dust Bowl caused many people to migrate away from the drought-stricken south-central United States to the West Coast. Slow-onset environmental change and natural disasters are no different and have a link to internal displacement. The average global temperature is expected to be between 1.8°C and 4°C hotter by 2099. As global climate patterns change, there is an increase in extreme weather events such as hurricanes, droughts, and heatwaves. In 2019, there were almost 1,900 natural disasters. Although oftentimes these events lead to temporary displacement, people living in “high threat areas” without the resources to recover from these recurring events may eventually be permanently displaced. Climate change may lead to increased environmental degradation, reduced crop yields, and decreased access to natural resources, driving the forced

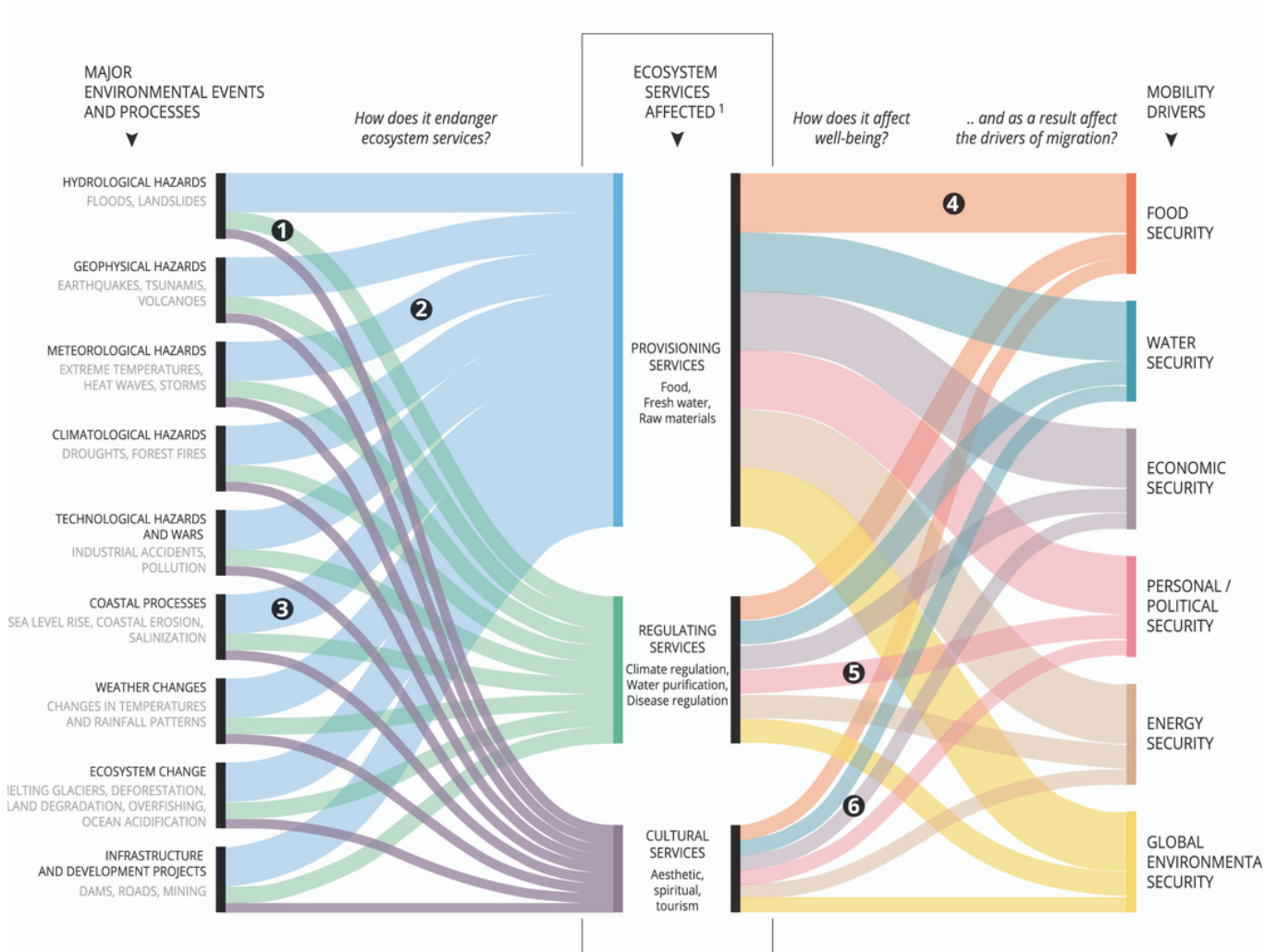
displacement of communities due to the uninhabitability of the land and an inability to continue traditional livelihoods.

Climate change is linked to increased economic inequality between developed and developing nations by 25% since 1960. The richest 10% of the global population creates 50% of emissions while the poorest 50% emit only 10%. Communities living in poverty are the most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change and often the least prepared to cope with these consequences. A World Bank analysis found that in 52 countries studied, the majority of people living in poverty faced higher exposure to droughts, floods, and heatwaves as compared to the population as a whole. It is clear that the increasing climate crisis will continue to exacerbate inequalities and the negative consequences will not be felt evenly.

Figure 1: Environmental changes and impacts on mobility

Ecosystem services

Relation to environmental change and impacts on mobility



Examples:

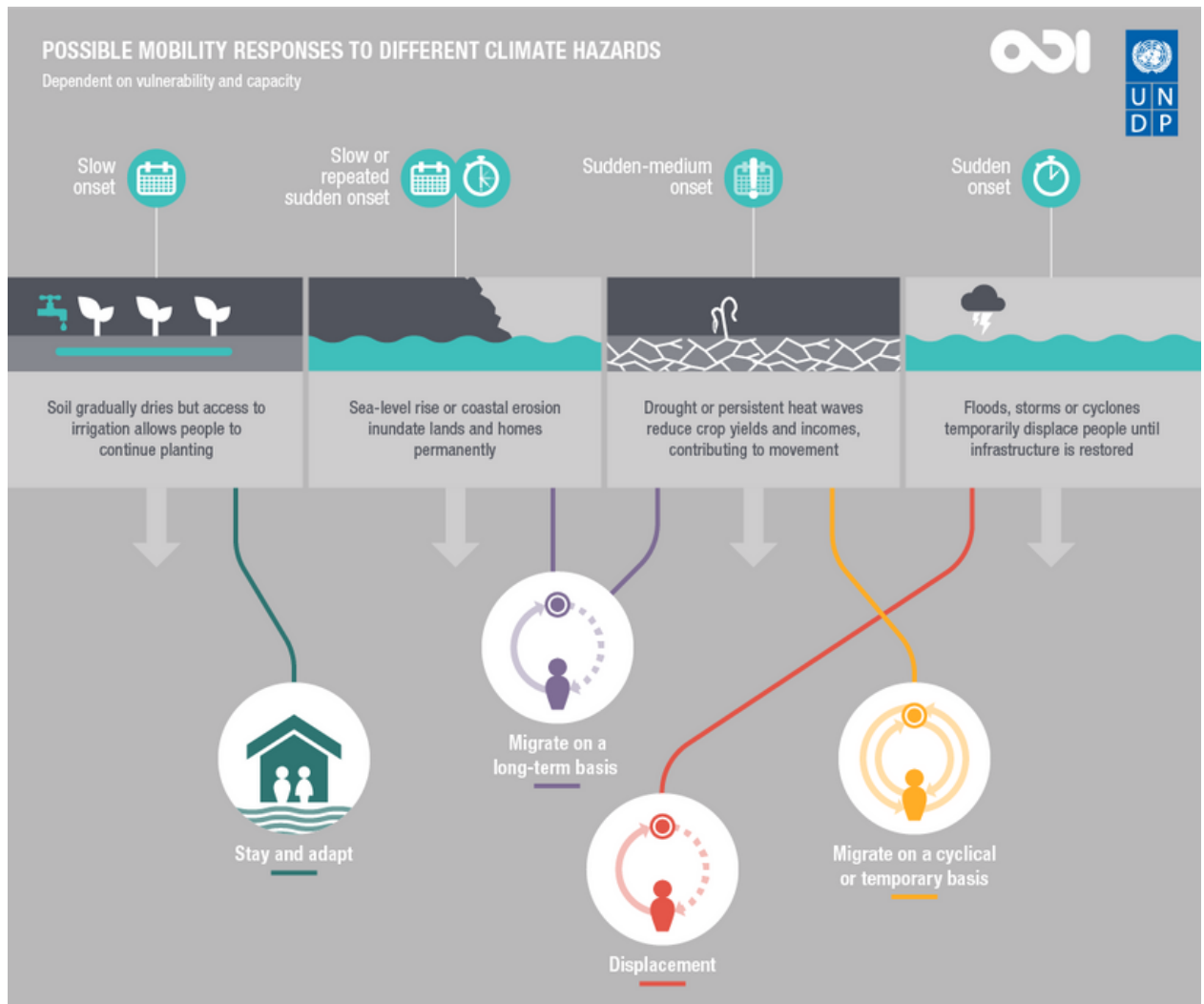
1. Cyclone destroying mangrove > jeopardizing protection from future hazards
2. Loss of agricultural land > Crop yield decrease
3. Sea level rise and saltwater intrusion > freshwater resources affected
4. Loss of crops > famine and malnutrition
5. Epidemics > public health risks (and potential social unrest)
6. Tourism affected job losses

Climate Migrants Globally

Over 1 billion people live in countries with high rates of exposure to climate-related hazards and with limited capacity to recover after the occurrence of a natural disaster. In 2017, approximately one-third of all people who were forcibly displaced were forced to move due to “sudden onset” weather events such as flooding, forest fires following droughts, and intensified storms. In 2019, this number rose to 24.9 million people from 140 countries. In 2020, disasters displaced 30.7 million people in 149 countries. It is estimated that the number of people needing humanitarian assistance due to climate-related disasters could double to over 200 million every year by 2050 if there is no serious effort to combat climate change and increase disaster risk reduction. Although slow-onset environmental processes such as drought and sea-level rise are driving factors for migration, there is still limited data about the actual amount of affected

people worldwide, but do not have the resources available to build resilience in the face of poverty, food insecurity, and conflicts made worse by climate change. Gender, age, class, and cultural norms are all contributing factors that affect a person’s mobility. In addition, people may choose to stay because of their historical and spiritual connection to the land and the importance of this piece of their identity. While there is still limited data on the number of climate immobile people, they are important to consider when thinking about interventions that enable climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Figure 2: Possible Mobility Responses to Climate Hazards



Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are especially vulnerable to adverse impacts of climate change. Temperature changes, sea-level rise, heat extremes, and changing precipitation patterns have devastating effects on the most

biodiverse region in the world. In 2010, 98 of the world's most serious natural disasters took place in LAC, 79 of which were related to climate change. The CAF Development Bank of Latin America found that in 2014 50% of the population in LAC was living in countries with 'high' or 'extreme' climate vulnerability risks.

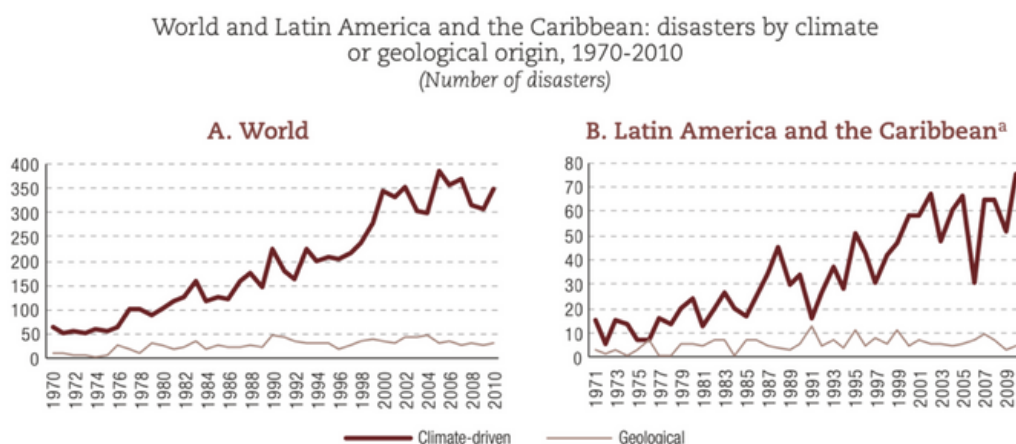
These climate vulnerability risks were developed based on exposure levels to natural disasters and the capacity that countries have to build climate resilience. The World Bank estimated in 2018 that LAC was one of the three regions (along with sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia) that will generate 143 million more climate migrants by 2050. In addition, LAC's number of 'internal climate migrants could reach over 17 million, roughly 2.6% of the total population of the region.

As illustrated in Figure 3, there are regional differences in the rate of disaster occurrences between LAC and globally. Brazil and Bolivia are two regional examples of climate

related disasters. In 2019, Brazil and Bolivia were listed among the top 5 countries most affected by internal displacement. Brazil had one of the highest numbers of disasters globally, with more than 295,000 events that included floods, landslides, droughts, and coastal erosion. Bolivia had 77,031 cases of new displacements due to flood disasters.

Natural disasters are not the only concern linked to climate change for this region. The number of people from Central America displaced to the U.S. in 2050 is estimated to reach up to 30 million due to food insecurity caused by climate change.

Figure 3: Regional differences in disaster occurrences



From "Disasters, economic growth and fiscal response in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean", by Omar D. Bello, CEPAL

Brookings 2019, "The climate crisis, migration, and refugees", available at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/>
World Bank, 2020, "Internal Climate Migration in Latin America", available at <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/983921522304806221/pdf/124724-BRI-PUBLIC-NEWSERIES-Groundswell-note-PN3.pdf>
Available at <https://scioteca.caf.com/bitstream/handle/123456789/509/caf-vulnerability-index-climate-change.pdf>
Universidad de Navarra, 2020, available at <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/detalle/-/blogs/climate-refugees-will-raise-nations-should-find-the-way-for-shelter-them>
Escribano, 2020, available at <https://rosanjose.iom.int/site/en/blog/what-new-displacements-due-violence-and-disasters-americas-look>
Salinas & Watkins, 2020, available at <https://blogs.iadb.org/sostenibilidad/en/the-climate-crisis-could-drive-massive-human-displacement-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>

In the Dry Corridor of Central America, which is a region that stretches from Panama to southern Mexico, erratic weather patterns have destroyed crops for five consecutive years. In the Dry Corridor, losses associated with drought over the past 30 years are estimated to be almost \$10 billion, half of which were in the agricultural sector. In 20 countries across LAC, agriculture accounts for 5-18% of their GDP, making agriculture an important part of regional economies. Increased heat waves due to climate change may cause the loss of over 2.5 million jobs by 2030 in the region among people who work outside who will no longer be able to survive working in such extreme temperatures.

Political and economic practices have also had a negative impact on climate change. Deforestation and mining have depleted and polluted local water supplies. This has long-term impacts on local farmers and food security, which contributes to the increased migration.

Barriers to supporting climate migrants

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of climate migrants, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean. Multiple risk factors, including natural disasters, a public health crisis, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities, can create disastrous situations. Travel restrictions and border closures that were put into place as a way to slow the spread of COVID-19 have impacted mobility and migration. Migrants may be forced to use irregular routes, which have heightened danger and health and protection risks. Migrants and internally displaced people often find themselves in precarious or overcrowded living conditions, increasing the risk of contracting COVID-19. Migrants and internally displaced people often find themselves in precarious or overcrowded living conditions, increasing the risk of contracting COVID-19.

UN WFP, available at <https://www.wfpusa.org/the-dry-corridor-in-central-america/>
MPI, 2021, "Climate Extremes, Food Insecurity, and Migration in Central America" available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/guatemala/climate-extremes-food-insecurity-and-migration-central-america-complicated-nexus>

World Bank, 2020, available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/11/12/agriculture-food-systems-latin-america-caribbean-changes#:~:text=The%20agricultural%20sector%20in%20LAC,region%20but%20the%20entire%20planet.&text=Protecting%20the%20region's%20environmental%20wealth,nutrition%20security%20are%20particularly%20important>

Salinas & Watkins, 2020, available at <https://blogs.iadb.org/sostenibilidad/en/the-climate-crisis-could-drive-massive-human-displacement-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>

Olson, 2021, The New Humanitarian, available at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/11/18/honduras-dry-corridor-hurricane-eta-iota-climate-change-food-security>

Escribano, 2021, available at <https://rosanjose.iom.int/site/en/blog/human-mobility-and-xxii-forum-ministers-environment-latin-america-and-caribbean-why-it>

IOM, 2020, "COVID-19 and the risk of exacerbating existing vulnerabilities" available at https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/ICP/MPR/migration_factsheet_6_covid-19_and_migrants.pdf

UN News, 2021, available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1090582>

They may face stigmatization and discrimination, affecting their ability or willingness to seek medical care. According to UNHCR, a study of 90 countries developing national COVID-19 vaccine strategies found that 57% have included refugees as a targeted population. This leaves a gap between those who do not meet the legal definition of a refugee, including climate migrants.

Legal Protections for Migrants and Refugees

Currently one of the main barriers to supporting climate migrants is a lack of official protections for people who are displaced due to natural disasters or climate change. They are not covered under the current UN definition of “refugee” and therefore are not eligible for the same services or legal protections as refugees. The 1951 convention on the Status of Refugees created a global definition of refugee, which is “an individual who is outside [their] country of nationality...who is unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on his/her race, religion, nationality, or member of a particular social group or political

opinion”.

This definition does not include people who are displaced from their homes due to the effects of climate change. However, guidance made in 2020 from UNHCR related to the 1951 Refugee Convention notes that “people may have a valid claim for refugee status where the adverse effects of climate change or disasters interact with conflict and violence”.

There is an increasing importance for services focused on immigrants and refugees, specially offered through nonprofit organizations committed to doing the work to uphold the inherent dignity of these individuals.

Global Compact on Refugees

In 2018, the Global Compact on Refugees was affirmed by the UN General Assembly. This framework has four key objectives: (1) to ease the pressure on host countries; (2) enhance refugee self-reliance; (3) expand access to third-country solutions; and (4) support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.

U.S. Executive Orders

On his first day in office, President Biden signed an Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, which specified that climate considerations would be an essential element of foreign policy. President Biden also signed an Executive Order on Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration on February 4th, 2021. This executive order calls for a report on climate change and how it impacts migration.

Temporary Protected Status (TPS)

TPS is a humanitarian designation for people within the United States who have been affected by temporary conditions in their country of origin, including environmental disasters. Individuals who apply for and receive Temporary Protected Status cannot be removed from the U.S. and are eligible for work authorization and travel authorization. Eleven countries are currently designated as being eligible for TPS, including Haiti, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. The expansion of TPS has been discussed as a potential

legal protection for climate migrants who are unable to return to their home country due to the effects of climate change. However, this protection is temporary and does not provide a pathway to citizenship or a permanent solution for those who receive it. Although migrants may one day wish to return to their home country, the uncertainty about changes in the conditions of their home country and their ability to return make offering a pathway to citizenship important.

Organizations Accompanying Climate Migrants

Without specific legal protections for climate migrants, nonprofit organizations and networks who work with migrants often fill in the gaps to provide services for migrants.

Climate migrants often need support in building social safety nets in their destination country. They are also at risk of being exploited and having their human rights violated. They tend to seek employment in the informal economy, putting them at risk. Climate migrants benefit from social and employment support.

White House, 2021, Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/>

White House, 2021, Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/04/executive-order-on-rebuilding-and-enhancing-programs-to-resettle-refugees-and-planning-for-the-impact-of-climate-change-on-migration/>

USCIS, available at <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/temporary-protected-status>

Available at <https://www.humanrightspulse.com/mastercontentblog/climate-and-migration-in-central-america-the-aftermath-of-eta-and-iota>

Jesuit Migrant Network

The Jesuit Migrant Network (Red Jesuita con Migrantes or RJM) is an organization linked to the Society of Jesus. RJM seeks justice and reconciliation through the defense and promotion of the rights of migrants, displaced people, and refugees in Latin America and the Caribbean. RJM focuses on three regions: South America, Central America, and North America, and the Caribbean. The network coordinates advocacy and awareness initiatives relating to policy and hospitality, and works to ensure that host countries are equipped to provide support to incoming migrants. This includes climate migrants.

Jesuit Service for Migrants and Refugees (SJMR)

SJMR offers legal assistance, education and job training opportunities, psychosocial support, and help with integration into host communities. This integration includes language classes and helps attain the necessary legal identification documents.

Fé e Alegria Brasil

Brazil has been a destination for Venezuelan migrants in the past years. Since 2018 an estimated 900,000 Venezuelans have migrated to Brazil, of whom about 264,000 have applied to stay in Brazil, the rest have continued on to other Latin American countries. The average rate of entry of Venezuelan migrants into Brazil is roughly 500 a day. As of February 2020, 6,000 Venezuelans were hosted in camps and host communities in Roraima. This state is one of the main points of entry for Venezuelans, and many continue onto the state capital of Boa Vista. It is estimated that Venezuelans made up one-fifth of Roraima's population in 2019. Roraima has struggled to support the influx of migrants, especially as a state with the least developed economy in Brazil and a health care system that is increasingly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. Shelters are operating at full capacity, leaving an estimated 23,000 of Venezuelans living in abandoned or very damaged buildings while an estimated 3,000 are on the streets.

Available at <https://www.redjesuitaconmigranteslac.org/somos-red>

Available at <https://sjmrbrasil.org>

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-brazil-usa/u-s-backs-program-to-settle-venezuelan-migrants-in-brazil-idUSKBN1ZR2I8>

Boadle, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-brazil-usa/u-s-backs-program-to-settle-venezuelan-migrants-in-brazil-idUSKBN1ZR2I8>

<https://www.acaps.org/country/brazil/crisis/venezuelan-refugees>

Available at <https://www.acaps.org/country/brazil/crisis/venezuelan-refugees>

Medecins Sans Frontieres, 2019, available at <https://www.msf.org/struggle-venezuelan-migrants-and-asylum-seekers-northern-brazil>

Available at <https://www.archbalt.org/fearful-venezuelan-migrants-find-warm-welcome-from-church-in-brazil/?print=print>

Fé e Alegria Brasil runs a community center for vulnerable children and adolescents that provides education and social assistance for Venezuelan and Haitian migrants as well as Brazilian families. The center provides educational and recreational activities for children and employees help connect families with relevant social programs. Portuguese classes are offered for Spanish-speaking migrants. The community center has expanded its meal program to include both on-site meals for enrolled children and food baskets for their families to meet the nutritional needs of the community. In addition to their community centers, Fé e Alegria Brasil plans to open a shelter for migrant families and youth to live temporarily on their journey of resettlement to other parts of Brazil.

Conclusion

Climate change is a pressing issue that has devastating socioeconomic consequences, especially on communities who are already at the margins. As a result of the effects of climate change, the amount of climate migrants, especially from Latin America and the Caribbean, is increasing.

To support the needs of migrants, we must:

- I. Utilize already existing frameworks, such as the Global Compact on Refugees;
- II. Expand current definitions and legal protections to include climate migrants;
- III. Be aware of the impacts that climate change will have on the work of those organizations committed to upholding the inherent dignity of these communities and
- IV. Look to adjust services to meet needs and;
- V. Support networks and organizations, such as the Jesuit Migrant Network, which play a vital role in advocating for policies that center accompaniment and solidarity for climate migrants.

Pope Francis said in his Pastoral Orientations on Climate Displaced People, “Let us remove, one by one, those boulders that block the way of the displaced, what represses and sideline them, prevents them from working and going to school, whatever renders them invisible and denies their dignity”. We each have an important role to play in upholding the inherent dignity and worth of migrants displaced by climate change.