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Climate Displacement: How Environmental Irresponsibility is (Partially) Responsible for Our Global Migration Crisis

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EXPERIENCE

Saba, a farmer's wife and mother of five children, fled her home in Yemen, where a civil war has ravaged the nation since 2015. Saba now lives in a refugee camp with her family. Her family was poor, but there was a small irrigation canal on their land. "Yemen's Houthi rebels captured the area, and four gunmen demanded control of the canal. She knew them well and knew they'd gone over to the rebel side and also knew they wanted the water. The collapse of government turned neighbors against neighbors and also left people ruthlessly grabbing what they could. 'The neighbors shot up our house,' Saba said. 'I had to have an operation to remove shrapnel from my body.'"¹

In Haiti, approximately 250,000 children – roughly 1 in 8, mostly girls – are trapped in child slavery.² It is common practice for rural parents, living in poverty, to send their children to live with families who are better off, hoping that the children will be able to go to school and have their needs met. Known as *restavèks*, these children are often exploited for domestic labor; physically and sexually abused; and deprived of education, nutrition, and childhood necessities such as playtime and friendship.

Oscar Lopez, a farmer from Guatemala, says, "When crop prices are good, I can take care of my family, but right now the drought is killing our crops. ... If I

lose my crop — that's it. I don't make any money." He has tried unsuccessfully to migrate to the United States in search of employment that will enable him to give his wife and five children stability and prospects. Oscar himself was forced to quit school after seventh grade because of poverty, and he is desperate to provide a better life for his children.³ Endemic to the economic instability Oscar and his community suffer are the pervasiveness of political conflict, racism against indigenous people, and gang violence in Guatemala.⁴ As another rural farmer reports, "Young people like him ... either move to the cities and try to make a go of it amid the gang violence, 'or they go north,' ... to the United States,"⁵ risking rape, death, and enslavement in hope of a better future.⁶



These stories – representative of millions of people around the world – have a few things in common.

First, they all involve human beings who have been displaced from their homes, or for whom leaving seems to be the only option; second, these people have been trafficked, or encounter a real threat of trafficking, when they leave home, as refugees and migrants are highly vulnerable to trafficking; and finally, their reasons for leaving home are motivated – at least in part – by changes in the climate that undermine their ability to sustain themselves or their families.

21.5 million people annually are forced to leave their homes as a result of climate-related hazards, including floods, storms, wildfires, drought, and extreme temperatures.

ANALYSIS

Currently, the United Nations (UN) estimates that 68.5 million people, the highest number in history, have been displaced from their homes.⁷ This includes 28.5 million refugees and asylum seekers,⁸ who are defined as people “who [have] been forced to flee [their] country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.”⁹ The astronomical figure of displaced persons also includes approximately 21.5 million people annually who are forced to leave their homes as a result of climate-related hazards, including floods, storms, wildfires, drought, and extreme temperatures.¹⁰ Tragedies like the widespread famine in Darfur, drought in India, and catastrophic hurricanes in the Caribbean tend to exacerbate conflict situations – for example, water scarcity in Yemen escalated the country’s conflict as people fought over the limited water supply,¹¹ and Climatelinks, a project of USAID, predicts that as the temperature in places like Guatemala increases, viable coffee production (a major export) will be pushed to higher altitudes, “leading to land conflicts” in an already violent region.¹² People displaced due to weather events and changing

climates are not considered refugees, and so have no protection under international law.

Migration and Human Trafficking

These increasing levels of global migration have been “matched by a massive increase in smugglers. ... Nearly 90% of migrants irregularly entering Europe in 2015 did so with the help of a smuggler.”¹³ Migration is thus an expensive and dangerous enterprise, since smugglers often turn to trafficking. According to a report by the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), “Certain factors can make an individual, a social group or a community more vulnerable to trafficking and related exploitation. These factors include poverty and inequality as well as human rights violations such as discrimination and gender-based violence— all of which contribute to creating economic deprivation and social conditions that limit individual choice and make it easier for traffickers and exploiters to operate. They tend to have a different and disproportionate impact on groups that already lack power and status in society, such as women, children, migrants (especially irregular migrants), refugees and the internally displaced.”¹⁴ Displaced persons, then, are often victimized twice: first when they are forced to leave their homes and communities; then when their instability, limited prospects, and unfamiliarity with their surroundings make them targets for traffickers.



Climate Change and Developing Nations

According to NASA, “Multiple studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals show that 97 percent or more of actively publishing climate

scientists agree: Climate-warming trends over the past century are extremely likely due to human activities.”¹⁵ As I have written elsewhere,

Although Earth’s climate has experienced fluctuations throughout its history, activities of human beings in the post-industrial era are driving the current changes at an unprecedented pace.¹⁶ In fact, studies show that 1 in 5 extreme rain events since the Industrial Revolution have resulted directly from the global warming caused by our greenhouse gas emissions, and heat extremes that occurred only once every 1000 days prior to industrialization are now occurring 4-5 times per 1000 days.¹⁷ In other words, human-induced climate change has been linked to an increase in severe weather events, globally.¹⁸



The carbon footprint of human beings is 11-times that of 1961,¹⁹ and almost one-third of the excess CO₂ that is in the atmosphere and driving climate change has been released by the U.S.²⁰ Further, while China now emits more CO₂ overall, “the US is still responsible for far more in terms of CO₂ emissions per capita (more than twice as much as citizens of China, Japan, or Europe).”²¹ In fact, “six regions (China, Japan, the Russian Federation, the United States, India, and the European Union) are responsible for 70% of global greenhouse emissions, [but] it is the people in developing countries who suffer the worst effects since they are ill-equipped to prepare for or cope with weather events that disrupt their normal way of life.”²²

Six regions (China, Japan, the Russian Federation, the United States, India, and the European Union) are responsible for 70% of global greenhouse emissions, but people in developing countries suffer the worst effects of climate change!

For example, in Haiti, monthly average rainfall has decreased by 5 millimeters per decade since 1960, the number of hot days has increased by 63, and there has been a “substantial increase” in the intensity of hurricanes. A new report by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has identified Haiti among 39 countries where conflicts and extreme climate change threaten access to food.²³ According to USAID, “if overall rainfall declines (during both rainy and dry seasons) as predicted, and as temperatures continue to rise and storms intensify, the yields of subsistence farmers will likely decrease, adversely affecting nutrition, limiting the ability of families to earn a living, and potentially impacting children’s ability to attend school,” all of which perpetuate displacement and *restavèk* slavery.²⁴

In Guatemala, approximately 40 percent of people are subsistence farmers, dependent upon stable weather conditions for their livelihoods. Unfortunately, in the past few decades, Guatemala has experienced variability in its climate, such as irregular starts of the rainy season, and frequent drought caused by the increased frequency and intensity of El Niño/La Niña cycles. The temperature has risen steadily and is projected to increase by 2.5-4 degrees Celsius in the next 30 years, and there is expected to be increased variable rainfall with heavy rainfall events followed by dry days, triggering more drought and flood events.²⁵ As Climatelinks has noted, “higher temperatures and more variable rainfall will further hamper productivity, increasing the risk of food and water insecurity among the most vulnerable, particularly indigenous groups.”²⁶ Importantly, there are few other options for these people, who “still struggle with high exposure to natural hazards and high rates of poverty (59 percent), malnutrition (54 percent) and maternal-

child mortality. [Guatemala] also has one of the highest rates of violent crime and of inequality in Latin America.”²⁷

Today’s problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis.
– Pope Francis

REFLECTION

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis urges us to adopt a framework of “integral ecology” – a sense of “just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.”²⁸ When we consider the interconnection between climate change, migration, and human trafficking, it is easy to see that our concern for any one of these issues necessarily should entail concern for the others. Because “everything is closely interrelated,” Pope Francis recognizes, “today’s problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis.”²⁹ He goes on: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.”³⁰ Our response to these issues must be holistic and authentically human – upholding the dignity of all our brothers and sisters, shouldering our responsibility for their well-being and the common good, and caring for the earth with the understanding that the goods of our common home are meant for all.

Catholic social thought (CST) calls this last point “the universal destination of goods,” meaning that each of us is called to use the earth’s resources and all material goods sustainably and generously, so that others and future human beings will be able to access the goods needed to sustain themselves. This is because “God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone.”³¹ The universal right to use the goods of the earth, CST maintains, “is a *natural* right, inscribed in human nature. ... It is innate in individual persons, in every person, and has *priority* with regard to any human intervention

concerning goods, to any legal system concerning the same, to any economic or social system or method.”³² In other words, human structures and systems such as national borders, market forces, and private property are to be maintained in the service of the natural rights of human beings, such as the right to access to goods for sustenance and human flourishing, and the right to migrate to other lands when one’s own home is unsafe.³³ This is not to say that things such as borders and private property should be eliminated – to the contrary, they are critical to human flourishing in society. Rather, CST maintains that human systems and structures must be directed toward the common good and the flourishing of all if they are to serve their purpose.



While private property is necessary for ensuring that goods are used fairly and that human beings have individual and familial autonomy – essential elements of human dignity,³⁴ a person “should regard the external things that [he or she] legitimately possesses not only as [his or her] own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only [him or her] but also others.”³⁵ Further, the goods of the earth must be “*equally accessible to all*, so that all may become, at least in some measure, owners.”³⁶ This is why CST reminds us that while the works of mercy and, specifically, alms-giving, are necessary means of meeting the needs of the poor, charity also involves a socio-political dimension that is critical to justice. In fact, “When we attend to the needs of those in

want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice.”³⁷ Thus, the responsibility to use goods to benefit all human beings extends beyond individuals to the State. Indeed, “the common good is the reason that the political authority exists.”³⁸ In the words of St. Augustine, then, we should “apply the law legitimately, that is, to the end prescribed in the commandment, which is charity undefiled.”³⁹

Just as it is an affront to dignity to deny people the right to private property, so too is it degrading to ignore our responsibility to use our goods to facilitate the integral development of others. As Christians, we are explicitly called to take in strangers and welcome foreigners.⁴⁰ It is a fallacious mindset that dismisses the plight of migrants seeking safety and stability by saying “we can’t take in everybody,” or “it’s not our problem,” or, without evidence, “they pose a threat to our economy or national security!” Similarly, it is irresponsible to adopt consumption habits that negatively affect earth’s climate, saying “climate always fluctuates,” or “my personal contribution is negligible,” or “our economy can’t support the necessary modifications for achieving sustainability!” Of course the economy and national security can give compelling reasons for policy decisions on these issues, but those reasons always must be shaped by considerations of the global common good. (I should note, here, that in North America, refugees and immigrants have a net positive impact on the economy;⁴¹ and, further, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has found that a person’s original “citizenship is unlikely to be a reliable indicator of potential terrorist activity.”⁴²) As we read in *Seeking Refuge*, “Too often, [Christians have] allowed politicians or media who describe refugees as a menace to speak for us on these questions. If we cheer them on, or if we merely stay silent, millions of vulnerable, displaced people throughout the world will associate

“Too often, [Christians have] allowed politicians or media who describe refugees as a menace to speak for us on these questions. If we cheer them on, or if we merely stay silent, millions of vulnerable, displaced people throughout the world will associate Christians – and the Jesus we claim to follow – with apathy, or worse, hostility, toward refugees.”
– *Seeking Refuge*

Christians – and the Jesus we claim to follow – with apathy, or worse, hostility, toward refugees.”⁴³

By denying our responsibility to uphold God-given natural rights, such as the right to security and sustenance, in favor of constructed social-political

systems, such as the economy or national borders, we distort the moral fabric of society. While a strong economy and national borders are essential tools for promoting integral human development and securing natural human rights, we must always remember that they are just that: tools; and those in need should be welcomed to share in the goods they facilitate. This is why Pope Francis recognizes that “an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human.”⁴⁴






In our efforts to care for the earth and the poor, we should embrace our interrelationality as creatures of God and rejoice in the majesty of all creation, for all of creation – including our human brothers and sisters – graces us with the opportunity to encounter God.⁴⁵ Let us adopt the reverence of Augustine, who said, “I spoke to all the things that are about me ... and I said, ‘Since you are not my God, tell me about [God].’ ... Clear and loud they answered, ‘God is [the One] who made us.’ I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things, and their beauty was all the answer they gave.”⁴⁶

We have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*.
– *Laudato Si'*, 49

ACTION

Please consider pursuing the following steps to assume personal responsibility for addressing this global crisis,⁴⁷ remembering, with Augustine, that God has “called us to be poor in spirit, to be patient and to mourn, to hunger and thirst for holiness, to be merciful and clean of heart, and to be peacemakers.”⁴⁸

1. **Visit the UN’s “[Lazy Person’s Guide to Saving the World](#),”** where you will find manageable suggestions for reducing your own carbon footprint, advocating for public eco-responsibility, and helping to facilitate justice for all.
2. **Be a friend to the refugees and immigrants in your community,** and speak out against stereotypes and fear.
3. **[Calculate your carbon footprint](#)** so you know where your action is most needed. **[Consider off-setting your unavoidable emissions](#)** by investing in sustainable development projects.
4. **[Urge the U.S. government to accept more refugees](#) and [oppose the Affordable Clean Energy Rule](#),** which is set to roll back emissions restrictions!
5. **[Pray for a global “ecological conversion”](#)** that will respond to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.
6. **Buy sustainably-sourced products whenever possible. Buy used when you can’t do so.** Look for certified fair trade labels such as [Fair Trade USA](#), [Fairtrade America](#), and [Rainforest Alliance](#).
  
7. **[Recycle more stuff](#);** use less water and avoid purchasing bottled water; eat less meat; turn lights and electronics off when not needed; adjust the thermostat up or down a few degrees.
8. **For more information,** watch the webinar “[Who Is My Neighbor in a Climate-Threatened World](#),” hosted by [Catholic Climate Covenant](#).
9. **Write to your policy makers** to tell them that you stand for refugees, immigrants, and the stewardship of creation. Write a letter to the editor to inspire your local community and catch the attention of your legislators. [Click here](#) for tip sheets and templates.
 - a. Some thoughts and information to help with this, for those in the U.S. (feel free to copy/paste whatever is useful):
 - i. Despite the fact that refugees and immigrants have a net positive impact on the economy – creating jobs through entrepreneurial efforts and working in industries often

neglected by American workers;⁴⁹ and the fact that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has found that a person's original "citizenship is unlikely to be a reliable indicator of potential terrorist activity,"⁵⁰ U.S. immigration policy is becoming increasingly restrictive. In 2017 and 2018, we have seen increased border control measures in the United States, including

- Drastically lowering the annual refugee admission cap (which is far greater than the actual admission number) from 110,000 to 45,000 – the lowest cap since 1980, and proposing to lower it again to 30,000 in 2019;⁵¹
- Instituting a ban on travel to the U.S. for people from Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen;
- Revoking the Temporary Protected Status of Haitian people escaping after the earthquake decimated their homes in 2010
 - Ignoring the US Customs and Immigration Services staff report that found that "many of the conditions prompting the original January 2010 TPS designation persist, and the country remains vulnerable to external shocks and internal fragility";⁵²
- Issuing a "zero-tolerance" policy on irregular border crossings, which included separating young children from their parents and deporting people without a fair hearing
 - Violating international law, which maintains that regardless of their method of entry, "all persons, including both smuggled migrants and trafficked persons, should be given full opportunity (including through the provision of adequate information) to make a claim for asylum or to present any other justification for remaining in the country of destination on that basis."⁵³

It is important to note, too, that children who are placed in institutionalized settings are at elevated risk for trafficking, and those who experience discrimination, particularly by Americans, become highly vulnerable to radicalization. Thus, it is at least plausible to suggest that these "border control" measures actually run counter to the security and economic prosperity of the U.S.

- ii. Along with restricting immigrant access, the U.S. has been rolling back environmentally-responsible policies. Beyond loosening requirements on things like pollution from coal production and fuel efficiency in cars,⁵⁴ the U.S. rescinded its signing of the Paris Accord, citing (dubious) economic reasons.⁵⁵ The Paris Accord "brings all nations [except the U.S.] into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects, with enhanced support to assist developing countries to do so. As such, it charts a new course in the global climate effort."⁵⁶ The primary goal of the Paris Accord is to keep global temperature rise below 2 degrees Celsius from pre-industrial levels. Every nation (except the U.S.) and nearly all climate scientists support this effort. For more information, see National Geographic's ["Running List of How President Trump is Changing Environmental Policy."](#)

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