

Doering-White, John, Alejandra Díaz de León, Carlos Arroyo Batista, and Karen Flynn. 'Humanitarian Aid and the Everyday Invisibility of Climate-Related Migration from Central America'. *Climate and Development* 0, no. 0 (2024): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2024.2312829>.

Humanitarian Aid and the Everyday Invisibility of Climate-Related Migration from Central America

Abstract

This article examines how everyday practices of humanitarian documentation shape the visibility of climate-related migration from Central America. Based on participant observation and interviews with migrants at a humanitarian aid shelter in Mexico, we argue that existing documentation practices may contribute to the everyday erasure of climate-related migration. We observed that migrants rarely mentioned climate change during routine shelter intake interviews, which primarily revolve around interpersonal violence as a driver of forced displacement from Central America. However, in the context of follow-up interviews, migrants explained that such interpersonal violence is often structured in complex ways by climate-related vulnerabilities. Interviews revealed that a variety of climate-related drivers, including inconsistent rainfall variability, deforestation, and land dispossession driven by the carbon credit industry, underlie and exacerbate the forms of interpersonal violence that existing legal regimes consider deserving of legal recognition. Our findings suggest that climate change as a driver of displacement may be obscured in everyday humanitarian encounters. They also point to the role that humanitarian spaces such as migrant shelters might play in documenting and drawing attention to climate-related forced displacement. Finally, we discuss how our findings contribute to emerging academic and policy discussions regarding the integration of climate-related displacement into existing humanitarian legal regimes.

Key Words

Climate change, migration, violence, humanitarianism, invisibility, Mexico, Central America

Introduction

A rich body of research points to the complex ways that climatic disruptions interact with political, economic, social, and demographic drivers of forced displacement (Hunter, Luna, and Norton 2015; Borderon et al. 2019; McMichael 2020). Researchers have also raised concerns about how oversimplified “climate migration” and “climate refugee” narratives may obscure the ways that climate-related mobilities are embedded within and shaped by an array of overlapping social, economic, political, and cultural processes (Boas et al. 2022; Sakdapolrak, Borderon, and Sterly 2023). This complexity poses challenging questions related to ongoing legal and policy advocacy efforts that call for governments to integrate climate-related displacement into existing humanitarian regimes that tend to revolve around making categorical distinctions between economic migrants and asylum seekers (Bergova 2021; Ibarra 2021; Draper 2024; Hiraide 2023).

Existing scholarship has tended to focus on how climate change interacts with other drivers of displacement to impact patterns of migration from sending countries. This study adds to this prior work by considering how everyday humanitarian practices may shape how these interactions are made visible and obscured in the context of Central American transit migration through Mexico. Our analysis draws on participant observation and in-depth interviews with 34 people who accessed a nongovernmental migrant shelter in Central Mexico, which we refer to as “La Casita,” in July of 2021.¹ Our data collection revolved around two interrelated questions. First, how do Central American migrants understand the role of climate disruptions in shaping why and how they migrate? Second, how is climate change as a factor shaping migration from Central America made visible and/or obscured within humanitarian aid spaces?

¹ Throughout the article, we have provided pseudonyms for names of people and organizations that participated in this study.

We found that people passing through La Casita rarely referred to climate-related disruptions during routine shelter intake procedures. In the context of follow-up interviews, however, migrants often connected their decision to leave home to climate change. We suggest that this disconnect may speak to the ways that legal frameworks focused on interpersonal violence incentivize migrants and aid workers to obscure climate change as a central factor driving forced displacement from Central America. Our analysis offers empirical and methodological insights into understanding the relationship between climate change, violence, and migration given the everyday demands of humanitarian aid within migrant shelters, where most encounters between aid workers and migrants are fast-paced, short-term, and framed primarily around violence.

The Climate Change-Violence Nexus in Central America and Beyond

Climate change is a growing driver of migration from Central America, one of the world regions most vulnerable to climate disruption (Eckstein, Künzel, and Schäfer 2021). In recent years, the growth of family units arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border has been driven largely by people fleeing rural areas that have been heavily impacted by climatic disruptions (FEWS Net 2020). Well before the dramatic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and hurricanes Eta and Iota, repeated droughts, increasingly erratic and severe storms, and crop diseases have decimated crops, causing increased food insecurity throughout the region (Bouroncle et al. 2017). The cumulative impact of these climate-related disruptions has been comparable in some areas to extreme weather events like Hurricane Mitch in 1998 (Bacon et al. 2017). These climatic disruptions are related to anthropogenic climate change and they are expected to intensify in the coming years (CEPAL 2018). This study builds on two existing bodies of scholarship.

First, our study contributes scholarship that examines causal relationships between climate change and asylum seeking. Prior studies have demonstrated significant, albeit complex causal relationships between climatic disruptions, violent conflict, and asylum-seeking in the context of rainfall variability (Abel et al. 2019; Dinc and Eklund 2023; Owain and Maslin 2018) and temperature

anomalies (Missirian and Schlenker 2017). In the Central American context, Sarah Bermeo and David Leblang (2021) have examined the role of weather volatility and violence in shaping forced migration from Central America. Comparing family unit apprehensions at the U.S. southern border with homicide rates and precipitation variability (how dramatically annual rainfall patterns deviate from 2-year averages in particular departments of Honduras), they find that when the homicide rate in a given department is higher, the strength of association between rainfall deviation and border apprehensions increases. They are careful to clarify that this association between rainfall variability and violence “does not support a sharp delineation between asylum seekers and climate migrants” (Bermeo and Leblang 2021b, 1). This may reflect a stepwise migration trend whereby a family leaves their land due to climatic changes but leaves their country because of a lack of safe internal resettlement options. This research raises critical questions about how state institutions categorize people whose displacement is shaped by a complex combination of overlapping factors.

A second body of research has focused on how people navigating forced displacement perceive themselves. Some studies show that smallholder farmers attribute crop disruptions to climate change, and that these perceptions mirror historical trends (Dinc and Eklund 2023; Tucker, Eakin, and Castellanos 2010). Others find that while smallholder farmers may acknowledge that climate change poses a significant threat to their livelihoods, their decisions to take actions to reduce climate risk are driven more by the volatility of crop prices and input costs (Eakin et al. 2014). In other words, while smallholder farmers may acknowledge the reality of climate change, it is not necessarily perceived as the core reason for making adaptations, including migration.

Our research builds on this prior research by examining how interactions with humanitarian spaces that play a key mediating role between migrants and state institutions may contribute to how the climate-violence nexus is perceived and whether it is formally documented. We focus in particular on how the everyday politics of performance and concealment that surround humanitarian spaces throughout Mexico might play a role in determining whether climate change remains visible or is obscured along the disruption-displacement-protection causal chain.

Infrastructures of Humanitarianism and Immigration Enforcement Across Mexico

Prior scholarship on undocumented migration through Mexico has demonstrated how a paradoxical interplay of border securitization and humanitarianism along transit corridors encourages migrants to both highlight and/or hide certain dimensions of identity and experience at various points along the route. These dynamics of (in)visibility are shaped in part by a moral economy of “compassionate repression”—the oxymoronic term coined by anthropologist Didier Fassin to describe the tendency for governments to combine discourses of humanitarian concern for migrants with the enactment of restrictive immigration policies (Doering-White 2018; Fassin 2005; 2011; Galemba et al. 2019).

The contradictions of compassionate repression are evident in reforms to Mexico’s General Population Law in 2008 and 2011 that contributed to the expansion of a loose network of nongovernmental shelters along key transit routes (“Ley de Migración” 2011). These reforms granted legal protections to civil society organizations that previously risked accusations of smuggling and harboring criminals for providing short-term sanctuary to undocumented immigrants (Basok et al. 2015). Since 2011, these migrant shelters have increasingly taken on the work of helping migrants access various forms of legal recognition, including Mexico’s “humanitarian visa,” which grants a year of status regularization to people who are victims of a crime whose injuries are “serious” and who are willing to cooperate in ongoing police investigations. However, the law also allows humanitarian visas to be granted “when a humanitarian or public interest cause requires admission or regularization in the country,” an exception that has potential implications for people fleeing climate-related violence, which we will return to in our discussion (“Ley de Migración” 2011).

This expansion of legal protections may appear compassionate. However, these reforms have emerged in parallel with initiatives like the Southern Border Program in 2014 that rationalized intensified policing in the name of humanitarian rescue (Arriola Vega 2017). Framing migrants as uniformly defenseless and organized crime networks—including smuggling operations—as uniformly exploitative have been central to the expansion of a repressive immigration enforcement infrastructure throughout Mexico (Galemba et al. 2019). Paradoxically, policing enacted in the name of protecting

migrants from smugglers has made it nearly impossible to cross Mexico without the help of one (Frank-Vitale 2023). Additionally, these policies have led to the emergence of highly visible checkpoints, raids, and detention centers that have added to the stigmatization and criminalization of migrants crossing Mexico (Doering-White 2022; Vogt 2017; Galemba 2017).

A rich body of ethnographic scholarship has examined how these ambiguities of compassion and repression circulate in and around nongovernmental migrant shelters to shape how, and to what extent, migrants reveal or conceal information with aid workers and fellow migrants while en route. Over the course of making multiple attempts, migrants learn to enact what Noelle Brigden (2018) has referred to as “survival plays,” improvised reenactments of gendered and racialized social scripts such as “indigenous farmer” or “impoverished beggar” in order to elicit or avoid attention from aid workers and authorities. Similarly, Wendy Vogt (2017) and Díaz de León (2023) have examined how these racialized and gendered performances often take place in the context of fluid and ambiguous relationships between migrants and smugglers, where it is difficult to draw a clear line between victim and victimizer. Doering-White meanwhile, has examined how, in a context where victim’s traumatic experiences have been weaponized to expand repressive immigration enforcement, shelter workers learn to strategically overlook signs of trauma and vulnerability given the fact that migrants often have good reason to reveal or conceal certain aspects of their identities, what they experienced before migrating, and what they have encountered while en route. In what follows, we examine how these everyday politics of (in)visibility and compassionate repression may speak to the ways that humanitarian documentation impacts the climate-violence-asylum nexus described above.

Data and Methods

This paper draws on participant observation and in-depth interviews with 34 migrants at a migrant shelter in Central Mexico in July 2021. La Casita primarily provides short-term bodily aid to people crossing Mexico via freight train. Doering-White has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork at La Casita since 2014. Díaz de León has also conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork within migrant

shelters across Mexico since 2015. The current study received institutional review board approval from the University of South Carolina.

We approached data collection from a position of accompaniment that strived to harmonize our research questions and methods in ways that contributed to the shelter's everyday operational needs (Frank-Vitale, Vogt, and Balaguera 2019). Our recruitment strategy attempted to minimize the potential for people accessing the shelter to feel compelled to participate in exchange for receiving services. Most days, we split time assisting with the shelter's routine intake procedure and conducting follow-up interviews. This included explaining the shelter's rules and conducting a standard intake interview that documented migrants' journey. During these intake interviews, we introduced ourselves as researchers interested in understanding why people had left home and what they had experienced while *en route*. We also introduced ourselves a second time to the shelter's guests when everyone lined up for meals. We always reiterated that participation in interviews was voluntary and that willingness to participate in an interview would not impact a person's ability to receive shelter services. Finally, we made a point of sitting in the shelter's common areas and waiting for shelter guests to approach us about participating in an interview. Sometimes, we initiated follow-up ourselves.

We conducted interviews with 29 men and 5 women. This gender breakdown is consistent with the overall demographic profile of shelter guests.² Reflecting recent data showing that most people are fleeing Central America from agricultural areas, 25 of 34 shelter guests referred to themselves as "campesinos" (country folk) or referred to their home regions as rural. Seven interviewees cited Hurricanes Eta and Iota, which hit land seven months prior to our fieldwork, as a key event leading them to migrate. Interviews focused on understanding how migrants understand the relationship between slow- and rapid-onset climatic disruptions and other drivers of displacement. Throughout the findings section we provide references that support claims made by interview

² That men made up 85% of our participants is a limitation of this study that should be taken into account when considering the interpretation of our findings. Women make up nearly half of recent people migrating to the United States from across Latin America (IOM). Several scholars have closely examined the gendered dimensions of migration through Mexico, including Balaguera (2018), Vogt (2016), Brigden (2017), and Angulo-Pasel (2018).

participants. That being said, the purpose of our interviews was not to assess the accuracy of interview participant's claims and it is possible to some participant's experiences are isolated cases.

Findings

In what follows, we compare migrants' responses to the shelter's standardized intake interview with migrants' responses to in-depth follow-up interviews. We begin by discussing general response patterns to standardized intake interviews that we observed while shadowing shelter workers and conducting intake interviews ourselves. We then discuss several reasons why migrants' responses to the shelter's intake protocol tends to be cursory. Next, we draw on follow-up interview data to discuss interviewee's responses to questions about climate-related drivers of migration. We outline three patterns surrounding the intersection of climate disruption and violence that we identified among interviewee's responses. The first pattern is the dissolution of protective social capital due to weather-related displacement, the second is the link between deforestation, drug trafficking, and development, and finally, we talk about the "green" economy as a driver of displacement.

Everyday Practices of Humanitarian Documentation

At La Casita, aid workers walk every new arrival through an intake interview that documents basic demographic information, a person's reason for migrating, and whether they have experienced various forms of violence since entering Mexico. These interviews tend to take place quickly and in public. Migrants' responses to these interviews tend to be brief and generalized. For example, migrants tended to answer the question "Why did you leave your home?" with responses such as "there is no work," "because of threats from gangs," and "insecurity."

There are several potential explanations for this relatively cursory response pattern. Most people arrive at the shelter after several days of travel under brutal conditions. They are hungry, exhausted, and anxious to change out of dirty, sweaty, and soot-covered clothing. Aid workers recognize that eating, bathing, and resting is the priority. Nonetheless, they complete intake interviews when migrants first arrive because some migrants are anxious to leave the shelter as quickly as

possible. Waiting to conduct intakes would sacrifice fully documenting who is entering the shelter and what they have experienced. Doing so is important because La Casita contributes data for yearly reports on migrant flows, trends, and human rights violations as part of a network of shelters with standardized intake protocols.

The only other instance when migrants were prompted to share their reasons for migrating was during daily presentations from the shelter's legal advocate. Each day the lawyer would ask everyone at the shelter to gather and spend ten minutes explaining the two most common mechanisms for regularizing immigration status in Mexico: refugee status and the humanitarian visa. Both legal categories require migrants to demonstrate that they experienced interpersonal violence, whether in their home country or in Mexico. Understandably these public interactions rarely involved substantive conversations about what a person had experienced, although migrants did sometimes seek out the lawyer after she finished her presentation.

These interactions show that there are few spaces to privately and safely discuss reasons for leaving and the forms of violence that migrants might have experienced on their home countries and in transit. There is no mention of climate change in the intake interviews or in the talk by the lawyer. If we only looked at the intake interviews, we could conclude that "poverty" and "violence" are the only two reasons for leaving Central America. However, as we will show in the following sections, climate change and violence often interact with each other as reasons for leaving. By paying attention to the more complex narratives with in-depth-interviews we can learn how the effects of climate change are obscured and overlooked when prevailing institutional narratives only consider violence and poverty.

The ambiguous intertwining of climate change, violence, and poverty

Climate-related drivers of migration were clearly visible in nearly every follow-up interview that we conducted. In general, respondents detailed how climate disruption, violence, and scarcity intertwine in complex ways to drive forced displacement. In what follows, we outline three ways that violence, scarcity, and climate-related migration intersect: Internal displacement as disruptor of protective

social capital; the interrelation of deforestation, drug trafficking, and development; and the “green economy” as a driver of displacement in contexts of widespread corruption and impunity.

Weather-Related Displacement and the Dissolution of Protective Social Capital

Several participants described how resettling in new communities in the wake of acute weather events disrupted food availability and the forms of social capital that provide protection from gang-related violence. In the intake interview, the reason for leaving in this case would have been “because of the violence;” a response that obscures the role of climate change in shaping displacement.

Nelson, a 22-year-old from Escuintla, Guatemala, for example, began his response to our initial question about what his life was like back home by focusing on criminal gangs, or *maras*. “[Gangs] are really what makes someone leave their country because they force people to sell drugs or commit assaults or robberies. And if you don’t do it, they kill you. So that’s why one fights to get ahead by getting out and not returning, because you don’t want to die.” Gang violence was clearly salient in his narrative. After, we asked Nelson about his thoughts on climate change and whether it played a role in his decision to leave home. He responded by talking about the negative impact of inconsistent rains, including extended periods of drought interspersed with sporadic flooding from heavy storms. “Two or three years ago, the rain was regular, but more recently we have been experiencing drought. It doesn’t rain at all and then it rains too much, and we lose all our crops.” He then went on to explain that these inconsistent rains compounded the impact of heavy flooding in the region several years earlier. The flooding, Nelson explained, “took everything away. We lost everything.” Studies have shown that inconsistent rain and droughts can lead to food scarcity in the next planting season (Bacon et al. 2017). As subsistence farmers, the family did not have the capital to repair damage from floods or to start planting again, so they decided to sell their land and rent a house and a plot of land in a nearby community. The effects of the inconsistent climate coupled with the lack of infrastructure to endure changing weather eventually forced Nelson’s family off their land and into a new area where they lacked social capital.

Prior research shows that internal displacement can destabilize forms of social capital that otherwise insulate communities from gang-related coercion and other forms of violence (Barrios 2014). For Nelson, moving to a new community meant moving away from trusted neighbors and into an unfamiliar community that was experiencing social upheaval as dislocated families, including several affiliated with rival gangs. “I felt more tranquil in the old neighborhood because we all knew each other. We spent time together and we took care of each other. Because when we had to leave, all this stuff with the gangs started happening.” For Nelson and for many other people we met, relocating due to climate change meant being newly exposed to violence.

By selling their land and relocating to a new community after the flood, Nelson’s family lost their land. According to Harvey and colleagues (2017), smallholder farmers with insecure land tenure are less likely to have implemented adaptation strategies than farmers who own their land because they are hesitant to make long-term investments. This lack of attachment to the land can affect a community’s resilience to future weather events, as having adequate community infrastructure is essential for making sure that weather events do not become disasters (Lowe, Ebi, and Forsberg 2013). Nelson did not feel the need to invest in someone else’s land. The loss of attachment to the land not only affects the income and food security of the family unit but can have wider consequences for the resilience of the whole area.

When we only give migrants the opportunity to talk about poverty or violence, we lose the complexities and nuances of their decisions to relocate. Scarcity prevents people from avoiding and responding to climatic events (floods and droughts). These events, then, can disperse a community and weaken social ties and social capital which in turn often leads to increased vulnerability to organized crime and other forms of violence. People who decide to mobilize are responding to the interaction of all these forces. As we will show in the following sections, direct climatic events are not the only ways in which climate change affects the lives of people in Central America.

Deforestation, Drug Trafficking, and Development

A second dimension revolves around the intersection of drug trafficking, deforestation, and development. Central America has had some of the highest rates of deforestation in the world over the last two decades (FAO 2020). Climate change is among several intersecting factors that shape deforestation, including contested property regimes, high poverty, agribusiness expansion, and infrastructure megaprojects (Redo et al. 2012). These factors often intertwine in complex ways with illegal logging operations and drug trafficking. There is a correlation between accelerating deforestation and the emergence of cocaine trafficking corridors in eastern Honduras and Guatemala's Peten region (McSweeney et al. 2014). According to McSweeney and colleagues, drug trafficking leads to deforestation through the construction of clandestine roads and landing strips; by emboldening and providing capital to state authorities, land speculators, and timber traffickers; and by creating new incentives to launder money by buying and "improving" land (489-490).

Jose Alfredo's motivations for migrating from Olancho in Eastern Honduras exemplify this dynamic. In the area of Catacamas, in Olancho, illegal logging is used to clear the land to sell illegal timber and then to raise cattle unlawfully (Silva Ávalos 2020). An older man, Jose Alfredo explained how he has seen how the decimation of local forests over time has affected not only the climate but the sense of cohesion and safety in his community. Superficially, his reasons for leaving could have been left as "escaping violence". However, in his interview we see how logging affects the sense of insecurity in his community.

He told us that "there used to be forest [where I live], but now, over the years as people have continued processing pine the number of areas with trees has gone down." With fewer trees, "there is a lot of difference in the climate" such different patterns of summers and winters, less rain but more intense storms. And when it rains hard like that the storms hit harder. Later, he explained that the financial insecurity that has resulted from the ways that more intense storms impact deforested areas contribute to what he described as a "climate of insecurity," which he associated with the "coming to power of gangs in the area" and police who fear them, who don't go to some areas if called.

This story connects illegal economies, climatic disruption, and displacement (Velásquez Hernández 2020). Scholars have documented how people in Central America are being pushed off the

lands by development projects and illegal economies such as illegal logging and drug trafficking (Navarro-Lashayas 2021). In Jose Alfredo's case, the illegal logging industry increased violence and impunity in his community. Vulnerability to storms and erosion brought on by logging also increased his vulnerability to poverty and food insecurity. He chose to migrate internationally after implementing several other mitigation strategies. In this case, land acquisition for development or exploitation is the driver of displacement. In the next section we will show how even "green" projects have the potential to displace people and create conflicts between communities (Cavanagh 2018).

"Green" Economy as a Driver of Displacement

A third and related pattern of violence and climate-related migration revolved around the "green" economy. An increased number of people are being displaced by measures taken in the name of mitigating the effects of climate change (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012; Cavanagh 2018). Green economy initiatives have been shown to contribute to forced displacement by closing off access to natural resources in the name of carbon sequestration and through the expanded extraction of minerals such as nickel and lithium that are used in "renewable" energy products like batteries (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012; Vigil 2018).

Francisco, a young, indigenous peasant from Guatemala, explained to Doering-White that he feared he was becoming prey of a land grab. His experience is emblematic of the ways that institutionalized efforts to combat climate change in one area can drive forced displacement in another area. His land consisted mainly of several hectares of forest, which he selectively harvested for timber, and a few cultivated plots. During his interview he discussed how "refugees", as he described them, began occupying the fringes of his land in Eastern Guatemala with the support of nickel mining speculators. Over the past two years, he explained, internally displaced farmers from other regions had begun settling at the margins of several hectares of land that he owns in the Guatemalan highlands.

I'm losing land to these invaders. They buy people off. They pay elected officials, and they pay people to seek refuge (*refugiarse*) on our land. So those people have started living on my

land and telling me, ‘This is *my* land. Go to the government and check.’ Well, yea, you go to the government, and they tell you that land is yours but they don’t do anything.

Francisco identified nickel, a key ingredient in electric car batteries, as being ultimately behind government authorities deciding to look the other way as “invaders” occupied his land. This rather cut-and-dry experience of displacement through “invasion” intersected with a more ambiguous way that efforts to combat climate change can drive migration. Francisco explained that over the past five years, representatives from a variety of carbon sequestration initiatives had begun offering to help members of his community convert their land into protected land trusts. In exchange for not cultivating their land and agreeing to stop the harvesting of timber, they offered to a yearly cut from the carbon credits that corporations purchased to offset their emissions. Francisco, however, has avoided these offers because of suspicions that these organizations are in fact an attempt to force indigenous communities off their land. Francisco’s experience is in line with research showing that sustainable development initiatives that have the aim to stemming migration can in fact exacerbate out-migration by providing the lump fund necessary to finance an undocumented journey through Mexico (Clemens and Postel 2018).

Discussion: Tracking the causal thread

Research on the climate-violence-asylum nexus has tended to examine to what extent we can make strong causal claims about how climate change impacts violence that in turn leads to an increase in asylum seeking. This paper adds to this work by attempting to understand how humanitarian aid practices might shape how these relationships are documented and understood. It is important to note that people who are impacted by these intersecting factors may not actually make those connections themselves, at least not at first blush. In some instances, for example, interviewees dismissed climate-related disruptions as a reason for leaving home only to later explain that climatic disruptions in fact played an important role. This finding aligns with existing research that shows that migration is not unidirectional and monocausal and that there is not a simplistic explanation for climate mobilities (Boas et al. 2022). Various forms of violence, poverty, and climatic disruption intersect to lead people to migrate.

A woman named Deisy, for example, began her conversation with Díaz de León by explaining that she had decided to leave because of relationship problems with her husband. When Díaz de León followed up by asking whether Deisy had noticed changes in the weather, she responded, “the climate is behaving like it always does”. Much later in the interview, she revealed that she had been profoundly impacted by the hurricanes.

Díaz de León: What would you share, I don't know, with people in the United States who might not understand the situation that you are living here in Mexico?

Deisy: That it's not ok what they are doing, that we also want to get ahead (*salir adelante*), that we have children to take care of (*mantener*), we have family, and the hurricane left us...it did serious damage where my mom lives (*donde vive me mama se llevó un gran pedazo*). You think seeing my family in that kind of poverty isn't sad?

Díaz de León: So you left in part because of the hurricane?

Deisy: Yes.

Díaz de León: And when did you leave now, not earlier (*ahorita*)?

Deisy: We lost a lot

Díaz de León: What did you lose?

Deisy: The entire coffee crop we had, our sugar cane crop, too, gone. Just gone. Half the house too.

Deisy then went on to explain that in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, the family was evacuated to a temporary shelter where they slept on the floor. After the storm had passed, the family returned to their land and built a makeshift shelter out of metal sheeting. Importantly, however rather than the discomfort of sleeping on the floor in temporary shelters or the loss of the family's subsistence crops, Deisy explained that it was her strained relationship with her husband, a member of the military police who was often away for extended periods, that ultimately led her to leave Honduras.

Like Deisy, many migrants identify triggers for migrating that are not directly related to climate change. They talk about being threatened by gangs, fired from their jobs, pressured to migrate to improve their family's economic position, for example. Climate mobilities are multi-directional social processes impacting places of origin, transit, and destination (Wiegel, Boas, and Warner 2019; Boas et al. 2019). Migration is a complex process. The ways in which people react and adapt to climate stressors are varied and, as our interviews have shown, include internal displacement, temporary relocation, mitigation strategies, as well as international migration. Learning about how climate change affects people's lives provides context for their decisions to leave. These are important stories that need to be heard and documented.

Conclusion

We have compared observations from standardized intake interview procedures and in-depth follow-up interviews at a humanitarian shelter that assists Central Americans who are in the process of migrating through Mexico. Our data suggests that climate disruption as a driver of forced displacement from Central America may remain formally invisible within migrant shelters. Whereas migrants rarely mentioned climate-related drivers of migration in the context of standardized shelter intake interviews, most interviewees shared nuanced and complex understandings of the ways that climate disruption and various forms of violence intersect to drive forced displacement in the context of in-depth follow-up interviews. Factors that help explain this disjuncture include the organizational and capacity constraints of migrant shelters; the fact that both migrants and aid workers interact in a context where secrecy and opacity are protective; and a humanitarian policy context that does not formally recognize climate disruption as a valid category of suffering.

Our core finding—the formal invisibility of climate migration—is a simple one, yet the empirical and methodological implications of this study are significant. Empirically, our findings help illuminate some of the mechanisms that may explain why asylum seeking does not map on to the statistically significant relationship between rainfall variability and out-migration rates from Honduras in Bermeo and Leblang's recent work. This finding emerges out of our methodological decision to prioritize the operational needs of our shelter collaborators and to adapt our research questions

accordingly. Migrant shelters have the potential to play a pivotal role in documenting the complex interplay of climatic disruptions, violence, and poverty in shaping forced displacement from Central America. However, like La Casita, shelters tend to not to have the staffing and funding capacity necessary to deepen the quality of their documentation work.

This study also has broader policy implications. Our findings speak to the importance of critically examining ongoing efforts to integrate climate-related migration into existing legal and humanitarian regimes. While climate-related displacement is not currently considered in asylum determinations in either the United States or Mexico, there are ongoing efforts to integrate it into existing humanitarian legal frameworks. In 2021, for example, the Biden administration called for the integration of climatic disruptions into refugee protection and resettlement frameworks that have historically provided legal recognition to asylum seekers based on identity-based interpersonal persecution and torture (The White House 2021). This executive order is in conversation with the 2019 ruling issued by the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding the case of Ioane Teitiota, a man from the Pacific nation of Kiribati who appealed New Zealand’s denial of his asylum claim as a “climate refugee” in 2016 (Bergova 2021). Climate justice advocates have lauded this ruling for establishing the legal precedent that governments must consider human rights violations caused by the climate crisis when considering deportation of asylum seekers (Ibarra 2021). Clear legal categorizations may facilitate the identification of rights and obligations; however, it is crucial that we as researchers take into account how migrants themselves perceive the role of climate change in shaping their experiences of forced displacement. As our findings suggest, these perceptions may themselves be informed by interactions with humanitarian organizations while crossing Mexico.

Finally, our findings speak to various practical considerations for integrating climate-related displacement into existing humanitarian infrastructures, as well as potential pitfalls. At a basic level, it would be relatively easy for migrant shelters to ask about climate disruption during intake. Such data might inform ongoing advocacy around climate displacement. At another level, there are opportunities for existing humanitarian legal mechanisms to accommodate climate-related displacement. For example, the Mexican government has demonstrated a willingness to flexibly

deploy the humanitarian visa at various points since the visa was created in 2008. While the visa was initially intended for victims of human rights abuses within Mexico, it has also been issued *en masse* at various high-pressure moments, whether in terms of surging numbers of people crossing Mexico and/or during moments of significant popular/press attention. It is helpful to play out these scenarios—even if only tentatively—given recent policy developments at the national and supra-national level discussed above.

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