

Scholar describes a coming crisis of displacement from climate change

November 9 2016, by Liz Mineo

In one of the most dreaded science-fiction scenarios, entire communities are forced to abandon their homes because rising sea levels, droughts, and storm surges, driven by climate change, endanger their lives.

It's already happening in Alaska, where warmer temperatures are melting permafrost, eroding the state's northern coastline and causing severe and rapid loss of Arctic sea ice, which leaves villages unprotected from forces of nature.

To explore climate change and population displacement in Alaska, the Gazette interviewed Robin Bronen, a human rights attorney, senior research scientist at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, and co-founder and executive director of the Alaska Institute for Justice.

Bronen came to Harvard for a conference on climate change displacement sponsored by the International Human Rights Clinic, the Emmett Environmental Law and Policy Clinic, and the Harvard Immigration and Refugee Clinic.

GAZETTE: You were an immigration attorney for many years. How did you become interested in climate change?

BRONEN: I have lived in Alaska for the past 30 years, and 12 or 13 years ago I began noticing extreme changes happening in the

environment. I decided to take a climate-change course to understand the science of it, and went back to school to pursue a Ph.D. to research the question of whether political refugees, with whom I had worked, had any similarity to the population displacement that was taking place in Alaska.

GAZETTE: What did you find out? Are there any similarities between political refugees and environmental or climate refugees?

BRONEN: There are no similarities between them because the full legal concept of a refugee means that the person cannot depend on their national government to protect them. The government is either persecuting them or failing to address the persecution they're experiencing. When we talk about climate change and its impact on people, most people expect that their government is going to want to protect them, and most national governments do. In the early part of my work, I created the word "climigration" to describe the population displacement that was happening in Alaska. It means that people are being forced to leave their homes, but they're staying within their country of origin, they're not crossing international borders.

GAZETTE: Given that this is a recent phenomenon, what challenges does this represent for national governments?

BRONEN: My profound concern is that when it comes to the forced movement of people caused by climate change, we have no models. The only models that exist are those in which the government has forced the relocation of people within a country either because they're building infrastructure, like a dam, or the forcible relocation of Alaska indigenous people from the Aleutian Islands, which happened during

World War II, and 10 percent of the people died because of that. So what we know is that government-mandated relocation has been almost always uniformly disastrous. It has caused further impoverishment and fractured communities' social and cultural networks. We need to create a new model of how this can be done because we're talking about millions of people all over the world, and we have to ensure that their human rights are protected.

GAZETTE: Recent surveys show that only 45 percent of Americans think climate change is a serious problem. What can you say to those who are still skeptical?

BRONEN: In my 30 years living in Alaska, I've seen glaciers receding. Every time I fly out of Alaska, I take photographs of the glaciers that are around Anchorage, and you can see brown strips running up. We're experiencing increased temperatures, and they're causing an alarming loss of snow and ice and the melting of our glaciers at a rapid rate. The Arctic sea ice covers the Arctic Ocean, and when I started graduate school in 2007, climate scientists were saying that, because of climate change and warmer temperatures, the Arctic will be ice-free during the summer time by 2100, the earliest. Now they're saying that this could happen by 2020, the earliest. The Arctic sea ice is critical for protecting coastal communities from storms that come in from the Bering Sea, and the amount of Arctic sea ice has a deep impact on the weather that happens in the lower latitudes, like in the Boston-Cambridge area, which have been getting all of our snow. We haven't had snow for the last two winters in Anchorage.

GAZETTE: What communities are experiencing the worst effects of climate change in Alaska?

BRONEN: Increased temperatures, decreased Arctic sea ice, and rapid erosion have greatly affected three native communities: Kivalina, Newtok, and Shishmaref, located in the western region of Alaska. They all made the decision to relocate their entire communities. Each of them found relocation sites, and the communities voted, and they called government agencies for assistance to orchestrate the relocation. But none of them have relocated yet because we have no models about how to relocate populations within a country, and that means that there is no federal or state agency that has the mandate to provide technical assistance or funding for relocation or the responsibility to make this happen. These three communities can only be accessed by plane. They're small, with populations in the hundreds, who are living in dire situations. They don't have running water, their solid waste goes in a white plastic bucket that they dispose of in a landfill site, and landfills are eroding into the ocean. The lack of a government structure is strongly impacting their ability to be safe.

GAZETTE: What steps are necessary to confront the crises caused by climate change?

BRONEN: The Obama administration has been very invested in this issue. He established a federal task force on climate change, and one of their recommendations was to address the institutional gap. It's really a complex issue that is going to take longer than his administration, and I'm hopeful that we will be able to continue the work. In the past, the government forcibly relocated the Aleuts and other indigenous communities, and because of the horrific experiences from these relocations, they don't want to engage in relocations of populations. It's critical to think about how to protect [human rights](#) and make sure that [communities](#) that are on the front lines have all the tools to make informed decisions about whether or not to relocate, where to relocate, and how to relocate.

GAZETTE: What else would you like to see happening?

BRONEN: I'm hoping that the public becomes more aware about the importance of [climate change](#). This is an issue that doesn't only affect Alaska. It's going to be an issue for the eastern seaboard of the United States, for certain. There is no protection in place for Miami or southeast Florida. They cannot build sea walls to protect the 6 million people who live there because it's on porous land. The sea level is rising, and it's very likely that people from that region are going to have to be relocated. This is going to affect millions of people all over the world. Relocation is the last resort, the last option to protect people's lives, homes, cultures, and well-being, but that's the consequence of what we have set in motion with our enormous amount of greenhouse emissions.

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