

Transcript – Ways & Means S8E7 Climate Migration: Why People Leave and What Might Help Them Stay

Lauren Rosenthal: From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways and Means. I'm Lauren Rosenthal.

In the town of Chiquimula in Eastern Guatemala, a band of women farmers have teamed up to dig a well.

Hundreds of plastic two-liter soda bottles are piled up at the edge of a pit. The women don't have a dependable water supply. So, they fill bottles with standing water from the bottom of this pit. And when the rain fails, they load the bottles into baskets, and carry the bottles to the fields to water their crops.

These women belong to a homegrown women's organization called Cocoe. They've called on the Guatemalan government to build wells and irrigation systems for small farmers.

For the past ten years, this region has been hit by a drought, and many of the working-age men in Chiquimula have migrated away. The lack of rainfall here makes it really hard to scratch out a living from the land.

Marisol's Spanish translated: There has been a lot of drought. We lost the crops, they gave out. You had to go look for a job because you couldn't grow anything. We had to buy corn and beans. We ended up doing that because sometimes pests would eat the crop, or sometimes it didn't rain, you see. A lot of drought.

Lauren Rosenthal: This woman asked us not to use her real name. So, we're going to call her Marisol. She's a single mother of three who has tried three times to migrate to the United States.

Each attempt to cross took weeks. Each trip cost \$18,000. The money was a loan from Marisol's cousin in Texas. Every time Marisol tried to reach the U.S., she was deported.

Marisol wants to give her children a better life than she had growing up. And she wants to help her aging parents. Because the droughts have made life in this part of Guatemala more precarious. And the people in Marisol's village are facing hard choices as the weather gets hotter and drier every year.

(Music)

Lauren Rosenthal: In this episode of *Ways and Means*: the hidden role that climate plays in the story of migration. How a changing climate drives thousands of people to enter the U.S. each year. And how relatively small, inexpensive changes on the ground could make a difference with a daunting geopolitical problem.

Marcos' Spanish translated, holding back tears: There are things that I wish I didn't remember. In the United States, it's not easy. It took two months to get there. I went because I didn't want my siblings to suffer. And I was able to help all of them, thanks to God. There wasn't one that I didn't help.

Lauren Rosenthal: Marcos is the kind of person we might think of most when we talk about migrants crossing into the U.S. at the southern border. Marcos came from Guatemala when he was a young guy in his 20s. He arrived in the U.S. alone and worked on landscaping crews in New York and New Jersey for six years. Sending back money to help his younger siblings.

But Sarah Bermeo says Marcos isn't quite so typical anymore. The story of migration has been changing, she says—the story of who is migrating, and why. Sarah is an associate professor of public policy and political science at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke. She grew up in a farming family in upstate New York. Now she studies relations between countries, with a focus on foreign aid, migration, and climate change.

In the late 2010s, she began studying migration out of Central America. At that time, a lot of unaccompanied minors were traveling to the U.S. border. From countries that were struggling with gang violence. Sarah says parents sent their children north to escape that violence.

TV News reporter: Children, young and alone. The pace of unaccompanied minors illegally crossing into the US is now being treated as a humanitarian crisis... (fades out).

Sarah Bermeo: At the time, a lot of those migrants were coming from cities in the area, and it was seen by many people, including myself, as a response to violence. So, in Honduras and El Salvador—these are two countries that in the mid-2000s vied for the dubious distinction of being the most violent countries on earth in terms of the number of people killed by homicides.

Lauren Rosenthal: Crime and violence were clearly pushing a lot of people to emigrate. But Sarah and her colleagues suspected there were other causes at play. The U.S. Border Patrol logs

how many people are apprehended at our southern border, and which countries they come from. But Sarah's team wanted to know: Where *exactly* were the migrants coming from, *within* their own countries?

Sarah Bermeo: And then in late 2018, 2019, there was this really odd shift in who was coming. Huge increase in the number of families arriving. So, parents arriving with minor children with them. And they were increasingly coming from rural areas.

Lauren Rosenthal: A lot of this *new* migration was coming from rural areas in what's known as the "Dry Corridor." Now, when we think of Central America, we might picture lush, tropical rainforests. But there's an arid zone the size of the U.S. state of Georgia that stretches across the region. People who live there are mostly subsistence farmers. And a lot of them live in poverty.

This region is extremely vulnerable to climate change. And in 2014 and 2015, it was hit hard by a severe drought.

Sarah Bermeo: Without international help, the 2014–15 drought could have turned into a famine. Which, we don't have famines in the Americas. That would have been unprecedented. And food aid managed to avoid that, but it still only brought people to just barely getting by.

Lauren Rosenthal: Then, in 2018, the rains failed again. Sarah says a lot of farming communities who struggled through the first drought could not survive a second one. People wondered if it was a one-off act of God? Or a new normal?

Marcos is back in Guatemala now. And he lives in the country's dry corridor. He grew up in a farming family in Guatemala, one of 12 children. He says when he was younger, his family could produce three crops of corn each year.

Marcos's Spanish translated: Now, the time when you need the rain, it doesn't fall, not anymore. For that reason, we only plant a second crop of corn. We only get two harvests. So, we can't harvest, on the same land, the same amount. It's not possible. We used to harvest 8000 pounds. Now we get 2,000, or 1,500. It's a big drop!

Lauren Rosenthal: The drought has gotten so bad that for some rural states in Honduras and Guatemala, up to 7% of the entire population—That's one out of every 14 people—got

detained at the U.S. border. Between 2012 and 2019. And those are just the people who were intercepted by US Border Patrol – that doesn't include people who migrated elsewhere.

For migrants, traveling all the way to the United States is not a decision you make lightly. Here's Duke professor Sarah Bermeo again:

Sarah Bermeo: They were walking through hell to get there. I mean, they were likely to be attacked, they were likely to not have enough food, it's very hot—people die just from exposure to elements. These are not conditions you would subject yourself or your minor children to, unless you really felt things were unlivable back home.

(Music)

Lauren Rosenthal: For many people, the decision to migrate to the U.S. is really more of a last resort. After trying much less drastic options.

That was true for Marisol. She started working in the fields at the age of 5. At 15, to make ends meet, she got her first job in a store in downtown Chiquimula. When she turned 18, she went to the capital, Guatemala City, where she gave birth to her first child. She returned to Chiquimula and went on to have two more children. Now she dreams of moving to the U.S.

Marisol's Spanish translated: One of my children decided they want to stay in school. And I said, I am going to fight. I'm going to find a way to get them ahead. And I am going to work. And that was my decision to take the best action to help my children.

Lauren Rosenthal: Globally, people who move for climate reasons, or any reason, usually try to stay within their own country, at least at first. They might head to a nearby city in hopes of finding work, and if that doesn't pan out, they might set their sights farther.

This pattern is called "stepwise migration" and it complicates the story of migration that we're used to hearing. With stepwise migration, rural *campesinos* might leave their farms after crop failures. Only to find new sets of problems in nearby towns and cities. Which might force them to move once again. This makes it hard to pin down a single cause for their continuing migration.

Marisol got the idea to move to the U.S., from her cousin in Texas. With their financial support, she hired coyotes, and embarked on the long journey north.

Marisol's Spanish translated: The first time, I went in a van. I went to Huehuetenango; from Huehuetenango they took me to Chiapas. From Chiapas, I took another van to Oaxaca. These were long trips! From Oaxaca to Puebla, and from Puebla to Mexico City. From there to Monterey. I was there for about 10 days waiting because there was some problem. Then at last we went! But God only knows why, we didn't make it. Even after all that, we were caught, all of us.

(Music)

Lauren Rosenthal: Abrahm Lustgarten is a ProPublica reporter whose beat is climate change. He traveled to Central America to learn first-hand how people there have responded to changes in the climate.

In San Salvador, he met a woman named Delmira de Jesús Cortez Barrera. She grew up in a small farming community in rural El Salvador. The prospects there were bleak. When she got married, she moved with her husband to a nearby town, where she found work making bricks.

It became clear – that town had a problem with gang violence. After two years, Delmira's husband was murdered.

Suddenly, Delmira was a widow, with small children to take care of. Going back to her hometown wasn't an option. There still wasn't any work there. So, Delmira made her way to the capital city. That's where Abrahm met her. Delmira was selling pupusas at a roadside stand, for \$7 a day, six days a week.

At the same time, she was caring for her infant son and sending money back home to her parents. They had custody of her two older daughters.

By now, about one in five people from El Salvador has migrated to the United States. Delmira dreams of joining them. On the surface, Abrahm says her reason for leaving might seem pretty clear-cut: to get away from violent crime.

Abrahm Lustgarten: And if she migrates to the United States, she would accurately be described as a victim of gang and narcotics violence in El Salvador. But probe a little bit deeper in conversation with her, and her family grew coffee in their rural village, and there was a coffee fungus that is driven by warming, that has wiped out El Salvador's coffee crop, cut it by 70%. And so, their income dried up.

Lauren Rosenthal: That is why Delmira and her husband had to move in the first place – to a bigger town, that had serious problems of its own.

Abrahm Lustgarten: And this next town, where her husband was killed, had its own agricultural downfall as a result of warming and drought. And that led, as it has in so many places across Central America, for the gangs to come in and sort of fill this vacuum of economic need.

Lauren Rosenthal: Abrahm also traveled to Guatemala, to a rural state that's been hit especially hard by drought. To get there, he and his guides wended their way by truck through rugged, steep terrain. Then, they dropped into some lowlands, where the temperature got hotter. They arrived at the village of Panzós and pushed on to some outlying fields, connected by rutted dirt roads.

They made it to a small farming collective. That had been struggling with drought and flooding. There, Abrahm met a woman named Eva María Hernández. She lives in a house with a rocky dirt floor and a corrugated steel roof. The walls are made of milled wood, with gaps between the boards that let in air and light. It's a pretty sturdy house though, compared to some of Eva's neighbors. They live in homes that still have grass roofs.

On the wall, at Eva's place, there was a formal portrait of Eva and her husband, Jorge. Jorge had spent five years, trying to grow corn on the family's land. For five years, it almost never rained. When it finally did, the river flooded, destroying the corn.

The family was out of options. Jorge thought about looking for work nearby, but no one was hiring. He thought about going to the capital, Guatemala City, where other people he knew had already moved.

Abrahm Lustgarten: And what rural men, especially Mayan men who move to Guatemala City do, is get jobs as security guards somewhere. Which means, in a very rough and often violent city, they're the people posted at the door that are supposed to defend some product, or storage, or something inside. And they're very often victims of violence themselves. So that was a scary and not profitable proposition in his view.

Lauren Rosenthal: Jorge knew of coyotes who could get him all the way to the United States. He didn't have a plan for what to do when he got there. But he convinced his father to pawn his last four goats to help pay for the journey. Within a few days, Jorge and his 7-year-old son were on their way to the Texas border.

Abrahm knew the decision to migrate to the U.S. couldn't have been easy – that it would be complicated and difficult. But he was still surprised by just how emotional, and conflicted, and even desperate Jorge's decision really was.

Abrahm Lustgarten: I shouldn't have been surprised to see how excruciating the decision is to leave behind family and children. I don't think we think about that a lot when we, in the United States, read news coverage about the border, border politics, immigration politics—you know, all these people want to come and take advantage of what we have here. We give a lot less thought to what they trade to make that happen. And so—naive on my part, I fully admit—but I was really just stunned to be a part of that. It was just a community that was grief-stricken. Not just by Jorge's departure, but a lot of other men had left, and no one was happy or hopeful about that. And so that was very, very surprising.

(Music)

Lauren Rosenthal: Underneath it all, it's climate change that's helping to drive thousands of people from their home countries. The decision to leave is not easy. And neither is the journey north. For a lot of people, it's filled with hardship and loss.

But experts say it doesn't have to be this way. There are solutions – simpler, and cheaper than we might think – that could give people the tools they need to adapt to life in a changing climate. And that could give people options – the ability to *choose* – to stay much closer to home.

Take Jorge. The farmer, whose picture was on the wall back home when Abrahm came to visit. The land that he was farming on, where crop after crop just died in extreme heat. It sits just a mile away from a major river. That means irrigation is possible. But according to Abrahm, Jorge and his neighbors didn't have the funds to set it up.

Abrahm Lustgarten: The cost of simple irrigation from that river, for him, might have been around \$800 or \$1,000, maybe a couple thousand dollars for the whole community.

Lauren Rosenthal: They asked the Guatemalan government. And they asked nearby corporate farms. No one would stake them the money.

Abrahm Lustgarten: And no one was responsive, or willing, or able to supply that basic kind of infrastructure. But imagine if they had. And how much further he'd be able to get from his own land.

(Music)

Lauren Rosenthal: With a couple thousand dollars, those farmers might have had a shot at saving their farms. Which would have allowed them to stay put. No dangerous migration north, no need to leave their village, or separate from their families.

That didn't happen for Jorge's region in Guatemala. But nearby in El Salvador, it did. In a farming community strained by drought, Abrahm met a farmer named Carlos Guevara. Along with failing crops, Carlos said farmers had to deal with gang violence and cartels. And Carlos knew that if he could make it to the U.S., he'd be able to send money home – to help his family get by.

Carlos emigrated to the United States three times. Three times he returned to El Salvador. Then agents from the World Food Program arrived and built greenhouses for local farmers to use.

Abrahm Lustgarten: And he had so much food! And it was just like there was greenery everywhere. And there's these huge, ripe, juicy tomatoes and peppers. And they had food for their family, and they were selling food, and they were making a profit, and they'd used that profit to buy a cow, and they had milk, and these things that they hadn't had in years. And he had no interest—as long as these facilities were available to him, he had no interest in leaving again, and going back to the United States again.

(Music)

Lauren Rosenthal: Those greenhouses Carlos used—they weren't cheap. But Sarah Bermeo says there are less expensive ways to help Central American farmers. That would still work for them.

Sarah Bermeo: So, when I grew up in western New York, we had something called agricultural extension, right? If you needed some help figuring out, Hey, why is this particular plot of land not growing? There were people who could test your soil for you. There were people who could give you advice. You could call somebody and talk to them or even have them come out to your farm and look at it. Those type of services are almost non-existent in these agricultural communities.

Lauren Rosenthal: Sarah is working to figure out how to get more foreign aid to people like Carlos. The greenhouses the World Food Program built in El Salvador are a rare success story. Sarah says that, up to now, the story of foreign aid for climate adaptation has mostly been about missed opportunities.

She says less than 10% of the aid that goes to Central America is targeted at agricultural areas. But those are the places that are losing a huge percentage of their population. Sarah says it's a lot faster to help struggling farmers than to solve their countries' social and economic problems.

Sarah Bermeo: So, if we think of things like violence, or lack of government capacity, or corruption, that are driving people to leave—we also have lack of agriculture prospects that are driving people to leave. Which one of those should be politically the easiest to tackle, right? We certainly can't turn a blind eye to violence and lack of opportunity in cities. But if we're looking to have an impact in the short term in migration, we should be investing in these rural communities.

Lauren Rosenthal: And that doesn't always mean big projects. Sarah has learned from working with experts at Catholic Relief Services, that there's a range of cheap, scalable solutions. Like teaching farmers to plant cover crops rather than burning up each season's leftovers. You can plant trees in strategic spots to decrease erosion. And you can test their soil so farmers can make informed decisions about crops and their fertilizer.

In northern Honduras, a British nonprofit called the Inga Foundation has been teaching a technique where crops are planted between rows of trees. It's called "alley cropping." It's better for the farmer, and better for the environment, than the old slash-and-burn methods of managing land.

Pedro Santos: Buenas tardes... (sound fades)

Pedro Santos is a 71-year-old Honduran who bought a plot of farmland in the late 1980s. *[Rooster crowing in background]* He calls it "El Tesoro Escondido," or "Hidden Treasure," and it lies uphill from his house, one mile away. Every day he walks 45 minutes up a steep trail to tend to his fields, and 45 minutes back down.

Pedro's Spanish translated: Right now, I'm growing cacao, lemons, and litchi, which is also called rambutan.

Lauren Rosenthal: The Inga Foundation showed Pedro how to use alley cropping, and now he's a believer.

Pedro's Spanish translated: The summers are getting hotter and hotter, right? Well, I know now which plants are drought-resistant, so I don't have any problems. There are people who think denuding the land and burning it is a great boon. But that makes the drought worse, because when it rains, the water runs off, which makes the heat less endurable. So far only a few of us have adapted by reforestation.

Lauren Rosenthal: Sarah Bermeo has talked to NGOs that are doing exactly the kind of work that helped Pedro, testing soil and advising farmers on how to make their crops more resilient. She asked these NGOs whether the programs could be expanded – on a wider scale.

Sarah Bermeo: And they said to me, we absolutely could scale this! We just don't have the funds to scale it. So, there are programs out there that are working, that have been proven to work, that could be scaled to reach thousands and thousands more farm households. And the money is lacking.

Sarah Bermeo: You know, farmers are smart! Maybe I'm biased because I grew up on a farm, but farmers are smart. And if you show them evidence that something works, and in some cases maybe you need to provide them a little bit of capital, or a little bit of insurance—farmers can also be risk-averse if they're subsistence farmers, because if they try out this new thing and it doesn't work, they don't have food for their kids, right?—but if you provide them with the information that they need to make decisions, they can make the decisions themselves.

(Music)

Lauren Rosenthal: We in the U.S. have decisions to make, too. We can wrangle over border policy and try to find resources for the thousands of people who are coming here in search of refuge. Or, as we confront our own challenges, we can help Central American farmers adapt to the shifting climate.

Either way, big changes are in the forecast, and the time to plan, *and* to act, is now. Because climate migration isn't coming sometime in the future. It's already here.

(Music)

We'll have links to Sarah Bermeo and Abrahm Lustgarten's work on our website, waysandmeansshow.org.

Ways and Means is produced by Carol Jackson and Alison Jones. This episode was produced by Marc Maximov. Reporting from Guatemala was provided by Juan Carlos Narvaez Gutierrez, with help from Nayeli Garci-Crespo in Mexico City. Elly Goetz and Elias Santos helped with reporting from Honduras.

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Our engineer is Johnny Vince Evans. And I'm your host, Lauren Rosenthal. Thanks so much for listening.

Announcer: The Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University offers masters programs with a focus on energy and the environment. Choose from a Master of Public Policy, Master of International Development Policy, or an international Master of Environmental Policy based at Duke Kunshan in China. A master's program with a focus on energy and the environment. Find out more at Sanford-dot-duke-dot-edu.

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