Dean Judith Kel...: It's becoming more and more clear that climate change is not something way off in the future, that it's here. It's clearly a pressing problem. And at the same time, we are also seeing a rise in people arriving at the southern border. And so these are two very pressing issues here in the United States. But how many people have thought about the fact that they might be connected? See, people in poor countries are escaping drought and other climate concerns and heading to richer countries, places with more infrastructure such as the United States. So take for example, three countries in Central America, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. They make up a region known as the northern tier. Migrants in general are usually more men. Well, more and more people from those countries are leaving and traveling as families and often they come in caravans. And so you may have heard news reports about them.

Speaker 2: Began with an estimated 11,000 on foot crossing from Honduras to go Guatemala. Now in Mexico, the caravan's smaller but still determined.

Speaker 3: Meanwhile, the caravan of migrants is one step closer to the United States.

Speaker 4: Setting off for the brutal journey north.

Dean Judith Kel...: Today we have two guests to talk about climate migration from two different parts of the world. We're going to start with Sarah Bermeo. Sarah is the Director of graduate studies for the Masters of International Development Policy Program here at Duke Sanford School of Public Policy. Welcome, Sarah.

Sarah Bermeo: Great to be here.

Dean Judith Kel...: It's great to have you. By the way, I'm Judith Kelley, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University and this is Policy 360. And this is the second in our fall series, Climate Conversations. So Sarah, in your work you'll explored sort of the intersection between climate change and migration, I said that I think these are connected. But can we really draw a clear line between climate change and migration from Central America to the United States?

Sarah Bermeo: Yes, we can draw a fairly clear line that climate change is one of the drivers of migration from Central America. And I think it's really important to underscore that it is not the only driver, poverty as well as violence are also key drivers that interact with climate change. So one of the things that I like to say when thinking about this holistically is people and in Central America we're seeing this with farmers, particularly family farmers in subsistence farmers who are being driven off of their farms because they've faced multiple years of drought in a row or perhaps due to rising intensity of hurricanes or very strong rainfall events that wipe out crops. They're being driven from their farms for those reasons.

But across the world we don't usually see people leave their countries because of climate change. People usually the normal pathway would be to move from an area of your country that's affected by climate change to an area of your country that's not affected by climate change or not as affected by climate change. This is where we see the intersection because the cities in Central America where you would normally see farmers move to if they were driven from for climate reasons from their farms, are actually quite violent places. They're often towards the top list of most violent cities in the world. And so they're not providing good internal migration route for people who are leaving their farms for climate change. So I like to sum it up and say people leave their farms for climate change, but they're leaving their country because of violence and it's really becomes very difficult to unpack who is fleeing violence and who is leaving for climate when they intersect so much.

Dean Judith Kel...: So are there cases also Sarah, where people may leave their farms for food insecurity reasons, but those very same food insecurity reasons are also contributing to conflict and conflict then contributes to further migration? I mean, is it possible for these factors to interact in multiple ways?

Sarah Bermeo: So globally I think absolutely. I think there's definitely evidence from places like Syria that we've seen food insecurity that leads to political protests that can contribute to violence situations. In Central America it's a slightly different situation and that the violence there, especially the gang violence, predate the recent droughts and the migration that we've seen due to the droughts. And so if you have a set of violence circumstances that really do not have much to do with climate change that go back to 1980s, 1990s and beyond in laying the seeds for that, including things like drug trafficking through the region, people have really pointed to demand for drugs in the US market as being a key driver of these drug smuggling roots from South America through Central America and then up to the United States. As well as weapons trafficking from the United States, there is no domestic weapons production in Guatemala, El Salvador or Honduras, and yet they have lots of weapons in are extremely violent places in some areas.

But then you do get, when people attempt to move in from the countryside to the city, they move into an area that is perhaps controlled by a gang and they are not members of that gang. And so then they might experience violence and then decide to further migrate away from the country. But we are seeing an increasing number of people who skip that middle step and just are going straight onto Mexico or the United States.

Dean Judith Kel...: Can you make this more real for us in the sense of let's talk about people. So one thing I mentioned earlier was that more families are coming and we certainly know more children are coming. Is that because they simply can't stay on the land anymore because of the food insecurity issues? Or why are we seeing the whole family come?

Sarah Bermeo: You're putting your finger on a really important issue. This has been a huge change from say around 2015, 2016 where you were still seeing a good chunk of the migration was that one family member going and sending remittances back home, which are very important for the economic wellbeing of these countries.

2018 and 2019 and describe it as almost seeing one of those [inaudible 00:06:12] COVID curves. All of a sudden you just see a huge increase in families fleeing Honduras and Guatemala, particularly where the rural areas are relatively large and we're devastated by droughts in 2014, 2015 and then again in 2018. So they really didn't have much recovery time. They're traveling through extremely dangerous areas in order to get to the US border. They're really facing some severe hardships and they're bringing their children through this and they know that. There's very strong communication along these, they know what risks they're taking and they're willing to take them because they really don't see a viable pathway forward for them if they stay where they are.

Dean Judith Kel...: How does this make you think, Sarah, about climate change? Because you are literally saying that we just have to go back five years and we're seeing drastic changes in the migration patterns. Have we turned a corner here? Is this something different? Is there any deescalation?

Sarah Bermeo: It's a great question and I can't answer it of course for sure, because who predicting the weather is difficult and predicting climate is even more difficult. But I do think that the reports that have come out, the Global Climate Reports, part of the IPCC assessments, that have come out over the past year really suggests that the impacts of climate change are more immediate and more profound than what was expected even five years ago. And in areas like Central America that are expected to be hit by multiple different types of climate impacts, so everything from hurricanes to droughts. I'm not particularly optimistic that without adaptation, people will be able to remain where they are. I do think there are policies that could be put in place that would help the situation, but I don't think we can just wait for the climate to get better because that's looking less and less likely.

Dean Judith Kel...: So you mentioned policies and when I think about your own work, Sarah, you've actually far longer than going back to looking at when these big drops happen and we saw this surge towards the south. You have been in your book, Targeted Development, you have been thinking for a long time about how we address the situation in some countries and why we would want to address the situation in some countries and how we would go about that. Can you talk a little bit about your perspective from your prior work on what that has to say in terms of viable policies for us now?

Sarah Bermeo: Yes, foreign aid, which has some success stories and some non success stories in its past. But one thing that foreign aid has actually done a fairly good job with in the past is helping rural communities. So helping bring agricultural technologies and developments to communities that might be still using not very up to date techniques. And there are groups working in Central America right now that are doing fantastic work with small scale farmers and what they're doing is they're going out and they're providing farmers with information that the farmers hadn't had before. So maybe these farmers had never had their soil tested to see what types of fertilizer would be useful on their soil. And so they're going in and they're testing their soil and then they're providing the farmer with information about their soil quality and the fertilizers that would work. They're providing them with information about planting cover crops, which helps with both climate adaptation and mitigation. They're helping them think about what types of seeds are going to work best on their farms.

They're doing all of this and then trying to assess impact relative to lots of land where these new techniques have not been found. They're actually seeing some pretty strong success rates in terms of increasing crop yields and farmer incomes, including in the 2018 drought where fewer people on these new types of plots were pushed below the minimum levels of food needed than what we're seeing on the traditional types of plots. That said, globally, so when we think of about the fact that small scale farmers, there's hundreds of millions of small scale farmers worldwide, many of them are going to be hit very hard by climate change and of tracked climate finance, the last year that I have data for this is 2017, 2018 year only 1.7% of the tracked climate finance globally is going to small scale farmers. So, unless that is scaled up and unless there are methods put in place to help scale out to multiple layers of farmers rather than working with just small groups of farmers that we won't be able to make enough progress on this issue quickly enough to allow families to stay where they are.

I think really important to understand, some people want to migrate and I think that there should be legal pathways for migration for people who do. Many of these people actually for years and years and years we're choosing to stay on their farms. They didn't particularly want to migrate. If they had ability to adapt in place, many of them would choose to do so. And so it's finding policies that help give them food security for now and hope that there's a viable future that they can adapt in place that is going to have an impact on those migration levels from the rural areas. It's not of course going to affect migration that's being driven by violence from the city.

Dean Judith Kel...: So you make a really interesting point, Sarah, here about the one third of the small farmers that we are not targeting nearly proportionally with, really under a subsidizing or under helping them with from a foreign perspective. And so from a migration perspective, you know get sort of proportionately more people that are needing to move per acre if you don't help them?

Sarah Bermeo: That can certainly be true. And there's also another aspect of this that at least in Guatemala and Honduras, many of these populations are marginalized communities, many of them Indigenous populations. Guatemala has a very large Indigenous population, I believe over 40% of the entire country is Indigenous. And many of these small scale farmers come from those communities that have been marginalized by their government in the past and so now they're feeling the effects not just of climate change but also of decades of neglect for their communities when it comes to public policies from their own government.

Dean Judith Kel...: Thank you Sarah, like you to stay with us as we are going to welcome Kerilyn Schewel and start speaking with her. Kerilyn is a sociologist and senior researcher at the International Migration Institute and she's working along with you, Sarah, at the Duke Center for International Development. And Kerilyn's research is examining how development reshapes patterns of human migration and she has a new book that focuses on rural Ethiopia. So welcome Kerilyn.

Kerilyn Schewel: Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

Dean Judith Kel...: Well we're happy to have you here. And I think your part right now also of currently leading a new project at Duke, Rural Development and the Capability to Stay.

Kerilyn Schewel: Yes, that's correct. This is a project that is funded by the Social Science Research Council. It's part of their program on the Scholarly Borderlands Initiative. And the basic aim of that program is to bring together a network of researchers, development practitioners, other stakeholders to really think about what are alternatives to world development that are environmentally sustainable, participatory and empowering.

And so this past summer we held a workshop here at the Sanford School. We had over 25 people participating from different world regions. We had a lot of regional case studies where we were trying to learn from both governmental and non-governmental approaches to world transformation and to basically learn from particularly participatory approaches that we're trying to integrate local knowledge into the development process. Next summer we'll have another workshop that will be in Uganda. It's in collaboration with the McKay University as well as the Development Innovations Lab. And that one will really be focused on learning from one organization that's doing work with small holder farmers in Uganda.

Dean Judith Kel...: So research seems to show a troubling phenomena as far as I understand that the level of immigration appears to be rising when countries are developing and moving from low to middle income status. So without even thinking about climate change, as these poorer places are developing, more people are deciding to leave. Is that right? And if so, why is that?

Kerilyn Schewel: That's an excellent question. It's a very counterintuitive phenomenon, but that is definitely a relationship that's supported by the research. We see that as countries move from middle income status, you have a redistribution of the population from rural to urban areas. This is just part and intrinsic of this urbanization process that's associated with industrialization and development. But interestingly, we also see a kind of patterned relationship with international migration. So we also see a rise in international migration from developing countries. And it's often not the poorest countries that have the most international migrants, it's actually middle income countries that have the most migrants outside of their borders that are sending the most migrants-

Dean Judith Kel...: Is that like a resource and information thing? I mean suddenly they may have the resources to actually move and now they start to learn about the options. So, what's driving that?

Kerilyn Schewel: Yeah, that is an excellent question and that's precisely the question I've been trying to understand in Ethiopia and in particular in rural Ethiopia. And I think it's many things happening all at once. You have this transition from people who have had economic systems grounded in subsistence that are moving into more market cash based economies. You have the rise of formal schooling, whole generations of young people who for the first time are going to school and are developing new kinds of ideas about what is good work and what kind of lives they want to live. And what this often means is people stop wanting to be subsistence farmers or small holder farmers and they start to develop aspirations that are more oriented towards urban lives and salaried work or at least wage based work. And so with these new kinds of aspirations, at the same time people are gaining access to higher incomes, better infrastructure, connectivity, things that actually can facilitate movement. So, you have this twofold process in a way of expanding aspirations and at the same time expanding capabilities to migrate.

Dean Judith Kel...: And resources to do so. Is there any country or are there any best practices countries have developed to mitigate that? Countries that have gone from low to middle income and taken steps that have made people want to stay more?

Kerilyn Schewel: I think there's more examples maybe of countries that have tried to capitalize on it. So migration in many cases brings with it opportunities for development. In terms of the financial remittances, migrants send home, financial remittances, outpace overseas development assistance or foreign direct investment and so this is a real source of development aid that goes directly to the families that need them and they can allocate it how they want. The Philippines is one example that's really tried to, in a way, overtrain nurses so that nurses can then work in other countries and the remittances that are sent home are sort of seen as a development stimulus.

I think in some ways there's a lot that can be learned. I think about how migration can be in a way harnessed for development. And it's very related also to climate related migration. This is going to bring many challenges to societies, especially when it's not planned for well. But when it is, it actually can bring not only new forms of income that can increase resilience of vulnerable households, but it's also a way of transferring knowledge and skills.

I was talking with one student in the masters in International Development Policy Program and he's from Thailand and he was sharing about how he had done some research with agricultural workers who had left Thailand, gone to Israel, worked seasonally in their agricultural sector and then returned to Thailand and were implementing new practices around drip irrigation that they had learned in Israel, but then were implementing on their farms back in Thailand. So it's also an important way of transferring knowledge and skills that might also increase climate resilience and lead to better development outcomes. So I tend to see it more from that lens, not necessarily something that needs to be stopped per se, I but actually something that there's real opportunities and benefits from.

Dean Judith Kel...: What we've been talking about mostly here has been the relationship between economic growth and immigration. But is there something that you think is sort of overlooked when it comes to climate change and migration?

Kerilyn Schewel: Yes, there is. I think immobility is actually quite overlooked. And I think what Sarah was describing for Central America, these are very real and distressing instances of what you might call distressed migration. And I think in a way, what I'm describing in Ethiopia is this rise of an almost development driven migration, a kind of opportunities migration. Now when climate change happens and a drought strikes, this doesn't necessarily lead to more migration, it actually reduces the resources people have to migrate, actually kind of hinders that opportunity migration. And so in the area where I've done field work, that's really what I saw after several droughts, many resources just didn't exist to allow people to move to town or to move abroad. You had people who couldn't even afford to send their children to school that year because of the drought or people who wanted to get married but couldn't get married because the husband couldn't afford the dowry or people who wanted to migrate internationally to the Middle East as domestic workers, but they couldn't afford the fees that year. So, really during and following years of drought, people expressed this feeling of being trapped in the village. I think that's a reality in many poor places that this climate related immobility is actually a major humanitarian and development issue that is maybe overshadowed by our focus on climate related migration.

Dean Judith Kel...: So when we think about some of the journeys, Sarah maybe going back to you, we certainly hear a lot about the journeys and the caravans then just the families traveling together on these hazardous conditions. So what does it actually take for a family to undertake a journey like this? Related to Kerilyn's point about immobility, is there some point at which you just stuck or is there some point at which it doesn't matter how stuck you may feel, you just going to start walking? I mean, how does that work?

Sarah Bermeo: It's an excellent question and I think one of the things that we're seeing, and this is one of the reasons that I love working with Kerilyn, is her focus on Ethiopia and my focus on Central America. We're actually talking about countries at different level standards of living. And so Central America, while poor income per capita still significantly higher than what you see in Ethiopia. And I want to go back, one of the points that Kerilyn made and Judith, one of your questions to Kerilyn was about this link between income and migration and how in some countries seeing income rising, we see migration go up. And one of the points that Kerilyn brought up that some of this is stress, when in Central America what we're seeing is stress migration or I've been playing around with the idea of tipping point migration, people who weren't going to migrate and now are. So people who when they just were thinking about that income migration relationship thought to themselves, were going to stay where we are, but then a new stressor comes in and it tips them over into making the decision to migrate. I think that we don't have good evidence on this so far. So this is coming from anecdotal evidence as opposed to a more robust study.

But I think what we're seeing in some areas of Central America right now is a situation where people, if they don't migrate today, will lose the ability to migrate. So for instance, you have a small number of assets and your crop has failed and you can use those assets to either feed yourselves in place for one year and hope that your crop will grow next year. But then if it doesn't, you have no more assets to sell off because you used them. Or you can use those assets to sell them to finance migration, which from Central America often involves paying a smuggler, a coyote, to bring you through Mexico and up to the US border.

And so I think we're almost at this exact inflection point that's exactly wrong spot when it comes to thinking about people's decision making and income and migration where some people are saying, I can migrate today or not migrate at all and the risk is too great so I have to use my assets to migrate today. And that's going back again to, I think if we could give people that hope that if they stayed where they were, which up until now they have wanted to do, they have been able to finance migration and have chosen not to that if we can help them stay where they are and have hope that they can build a viable future there, that many of them would choose to do so. But I want to be very clear that I think the situation Kerilyn is describing in Ethiopia is different just because you're starting from very different levels, kind of at an average across country at very different levels of income for capita.

Dean Judith Kel...: This is totally out of the blue, but this really makes me think about the Dust Bowl years in the United States and it related migration. And I'm just wondering whether that connection reverberates with you at all.

Sarah Bermeo: I'm so glad you asked that question because one thing that I have been thinking about that I think is under studied or underappreciated right now when we think about migration is the literal geographic size of a country. And as we're facing climate change, the countries that have internal places to move to that are not affected by the same phenomenon are going to have more viable options for internal migration than are say, small island states or countries like those in Central America, which are small and kind of surrounded by ocean on both sides in some cases. Whereas in the Dust Bowl in the US terrible historical circumstance, there's two different ways of being able to migrate. There's being able to economically able to migrate. There's also politically and legally challenges to migration. And so in the Dust Bowl in the US you may have had situations where people economically couldn't migrate, but legally and politically they could because they could move to other places within the US that were not facing that same climate phenomenon.

In some of the countries, especially smaller geographic countries that are being affected by climate change, there are not going to be a lot of internal migration areas that are not affected by that same climate phenomenon. And that's something that I think we're going to have to grapple with as an international community.

Dean Judith Kel...: It's fascinating. Kerilyn, if you had an opportunity to sit down with some policy makers today and give them one piece of advice, be it about how to handle the migrants as they're arriving here or how to think about their situations in their home countries, et cetera, what would be the one thing you would want to tell them?

Kerilyn Schewel: That's a great question. I think one thing I would like to emphasize maybe is what it looks like to really embrace migration as an adaptation strategy, that this is one of the ways households cope with climate change and populations increase their resilience to climate change. And while investments definitely need to go to support communities to adapt in place where possible, facilitating migration is really going to be one of the most important strategies we have to increase our resilience to climate change in the future.

Dean Judith Kel...: Sarah, do you agree? Do you have different advice?

Sarah Bermeo: I do. I would say that any policy maker thinking about climate migration going forward has to be thinking about a two pronged solution. One is that we are going to need more legal pathways for migration. There are going to be some places where it is not going to be possible or desirable to adapt in place. And there's lots of studies that show that migrants can be hugely beneficial to the receiving countries as well as sending remittances back home. And so looking for those mutually beneficial ways to increase legal pathways is going to be hugely important.

And then to circle back to what Kerilyn was saying, also thinking about climate adaptation and this many countries as well as international organizations, many developing countries, are really pushing the fact that so much climate finance is focused on mitigation, which is hugely important. I don't want to downplay that.But there hasn't been as much finance for climate change adaptation and there's less involvement of the private sector in climate change adaptation. And so really thinking about what it means to help farmers adapt in place or to build urban resilience, particularly areas where you might have mega cities that are already experiencing some really harsh conditions in the informal settlements around the outside of them that are seeing big influxes of people from their own countries into these areas because of sea level rise or storms or drought. And really thinking about increasing adaptation funding so that people can either adapt in place, migrate internally into more resilient situations, but then also thinking about what those legal pathways for international migration look like.

Dean Judith Kel...: Well, you both know so much about this and I think that's wonderful because you are now together launching a new program on climate related migration. Is there something you want to tell us about what that's going to do relative to what you've been talking about today?

Kerilyn Schewel: Sure. I think one key limitation to addressing the challenges and opportunities of climate related migration is that we don't understand well exactly how climate change is going to impact migration. There's still a lot of uncertainties and knowledge gaps around where people will go, what kinds of adaptation might enable people to stay, how best to support origin in receiving societies as well as the migrants themselves, as Sarah was saying. And to address these knowledge gaps, we really need interdisciplinary research. We really need climate scientists who understand what kinds of climate changes we can expect to see in the future. What places are going to be the hardest hit, different levels of exposure to climate stress. But we also need social scientists who can tell us about who's the most vulnerable, how people make migration decisions, the characteristics of those who are more likely to migrate or to stay or potentially become trapped, and how development policy can influence these outcomes for the better. So I think that's one main motivation in launching this new program on climate related migration, is to kind of build across disciplinary platform of researchers at Duke to better understand this relationship between climate change and migration.

Dean Judith Kel...: Well perfect. Thank you both for joining me. Sarah Bermeo is the Director of Graduate Studies at the Master of International Development Policy, the MIDP program here at Duke Sanford School of Public Policy. We will have a link to a fascinating conversation on this topic that she recently had with the United States Institute of Peace at our website, policy360.org. And Kerilyn Schewel is a sociologist and senior researcher at the International Migration Institute and a lecturing fellow at the Duke Center for International Development. And her new book is called Moved by Modernity, How Development Shapes Migration in Rural Ethiopia, which is going to come out soon from Oxford University Press. Again, there's more at our website, policy360.org, where you'll also find episode 140 about satellites machine learning and climate change. And there will be more coming on climate change this fall. So, I'll be back soon with another episode in our series of climate conversations. I'm Judith Kelley