

# FARM WORKERS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: GLOBAL MIGRATION

## Voices from the Field

Esteban lives in a half-finished palm-roofed adobe house with his wife Miriam and their five children aged seven months to nine years in a village in Guatemala. All of the children are small for their age. For breakfast, they have half a corn tortilla each. At school, they sometimes receive noodles and a high-calorie supplement drink. Dinner is another tortilla or two with salt or herbs- but no beans as the drought destroyed last year's entire crop. "My children have gone to bed hungry for the past three years. Our crops failed and the coffee farms have cut wages to \$4 a day" Esteban says. "We hope the harvest will be good, but until then we have only one quintal (46kg) of maize left- which is barely enough for a month. I have to find a way to travel north, or else my children will suffer even more."

*Names have been changed.*

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization drought-related crop failures directly affected 1 in 10 Guatemalans and caused extreme food shortages for almost 840,000 people. Families like Esteban's face the impossible decision to risk starvation or make the dangerous journey to the U.S. Since October 2018 more than 167,000 Guatemalans traveling in family groups have been apprehended at the U.S-Mexico border compared with 23,000 in 2016. Central America is a region that has felt the negative blows of climate change. Drought, fluctuating temperatures and unpredictable rainfall have reduced crop yields in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Guatemala experienced extreme heat and drought following a decade of prolonged rains and flooding, caused by colder pacific waters.

Central America is not alone in the devastating impacts of climate change. In 2011, Mexico had what was described as its worst drought on record. More than 1.7 million cattle died of starvation or thirst - and at least 2.2 million acres of crops withered across at least five states. U.S. trade deals have greatly contributed to the economic instability of Mexico and Central America. Corporate deals like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) have eliminated jobs, exacerbated climate change and destabilized communities. More frequent droughts alongside these free trade agreements have been pushing Mexican family farmers to migrate north.

According to the United Nations by 2050 there may be as many as 200 million climate-displaced persons. So-called natural disasters like hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, heat waves and droughts are becoming more frequent and devastating at an alarming rate.

Increasing numbers of people are being displaced from their lands, livelihoods and homes, leaving them as internally displaced people within their own countries or forced to migrate across international borders. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that 17.2 million people had to leave their homes in 2018 because of disasters that negatively affected their lives.

Climate change knows no borders and no place is immune to its impact. The consequences, however, fall more heavily on those that are more vulnerable. When families, communities, and entire nations are facing poverty or political instability, the effects of natural disasters or drought are felt more acutely. Addressing climate change must go hand in hand with addressing the challenges of displaced persons and migrants. As communities of faith we can support fair and just treatment of immigrants in our own country and around the world.

## Act!

Supporting the U.S. ratification of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families will protect the rights of migrants and their families. The convention seeks to reaffirm and establish basic norms in a comprehensive convention which could be applied universally.

## Learn More!

Citations, event planning resources, and links to additional resources;  
<http://nfwm.org/resource-center/harvest-of-justice/>

## About Us

National Farm Worker Ministry educates and mobilizes people of faith and conscience to support farm worker led campaigns to improve farm workers' working and living conditions.

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