



Roundtable (from the left to the right):  
Robin Bronen (University of Alaska Fairbanks), Cosmin Corendea (Golden Gate University San Francisco),  
Koko Warner (United Nations University, Bonn), Elizabeth Marino (University of Alaska Fairbanks)

Summer Academy 2008:  
Expert talk about climate change and environment-related migration

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## Drowning human rights

***Environmental change is already causing large-scale migration. Experts estimate the in the next decades up to 200 million people will have to migrate. In Alaska and the Small Island States of the Pacific Ocean communities are being forced to leave their homes because of changing climate.***

***Koko Warner spoke at the Summer Academy with Elizabeth Marino and Robin Bronen, an anthropologist and a lawyer from Fairbanks, Alaska, as well as with Cosmin Corendea, a lawyer from San Francisco.***

**Koko Warner:**

Elizabeth, Alaska is a place where climate change impacts are already felt. Ice and permafrost are melting, sea level is rising, and the result is that people already need to move today. You work in the area. What is happening out there?



**Elizabeth Marino:**

In Alaska right now, climate change effects are so dramatic that some communities need to move. Take Shishmaref, a barrier reef island village that is eroding away. Planning for relocation has been going on for at least three decades. While the situation is complex, it is surprising to me that the United States government has so much difficulty moving 608 people from Shishmaref just five miles. If this indicates the preparedness governments have in terms of planning proactive environmental migration due to sea level rise, then we can predict serious problems in the future.

**Robin Bronen:**

Climate change is occurring much faster than expected, and the government is in crisis. In Alaska the communities are willing to move, but the institutions involved have no mandate and no expertise. Up to now the government has invested more in technical solutions and for many years spent millions of dollars on erosion control and flood prevention. Now it realizes that these methods of disaster relief are insufficient. Technology is not the answer to protect these communities.

**Koko Warner:**

When the evacuation does take place, how can the government make sure that relocation is successful and that the people will adapt to their new environment?

**Elizabeth Marino:**

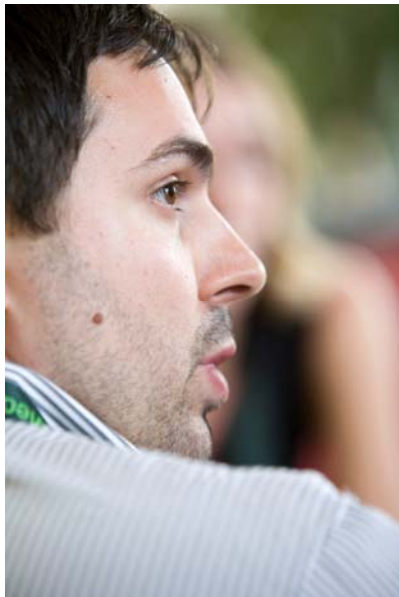
The people have a distinct cultural heritage that has to be valued and must be protected. Relocation of the people on the island is not just a matter of infrastructure, money, and space, but also an issue of home, tradition, health, and way of life. Planning successful relocation must recognize cultural patterns and local groups must be empowered to shape relocation efforts.

**Robin Bronen:**

The relocation of Alaskan communities has many dimensions. The social and human rights perspective are of utmost importance.

**Koko Warner:**

Cosmin, I heard that Sheila Watt-Cloutier and 62 other Inuit of Canada and the USA have accused the US government for being responsible for global warming. Does this make sense and does it have any chance?



**Cosmin Corendea:**

The interesting part of this is that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has already accepted the petition. The fact that the Court accepted this case has laid the legal precedence that climate change is real and that the US and/or other nations have caused the problem. This means that the Inuit case cannot be ignored. In Alaska the Native village of Kivalina is suing the oil companies to hold them responsible for their need to relocate. However, what the final outcomes of these cases will be is still open.

**Koko Warner:**

Cosmin, you also worked in Tuvalu and Kiribati in the South Pacific. People from these small island states also face a dire situation. People have to move right away. How is the situation?

**Cosmin Corendea:**

The small islands are negotiating relocation with Australia, New Zealand and other potential host countries. These countries will probably allow assisted immigration. However, the Pacific islanders are losing their homes and their socio-cultural as well as political environment, not just land. Although they may have a place to immigrate, social integration will be difficult. I also work on the Maldives case. The situation there is different and even worse: the group of Maldives islands does not belong to any relevant regional protection system like e.g. the African Union and therefore essentially their perspective is much more limited. In a matter of years, the Maldives will disappear and no country is ready to offer assistance. When people are drowning, a rescue in the last second is never a sustainable migration solution. This leads to conflict and tremendous social problems.

**Koko Warner:**

But this will definitely attract journalists. Doesn't media coverage help to force solutions?

**Elizabeth:**

In Alaska the media has been successful in attracting attention to the problems in Shishmaref and other communities. Whether or not this will lead to solutions we have yet to see.

**Koko Warner:**

Is Alaska an archetype, a kind of case that has relevance for other areas in the world?



**Robin Bronen:**

Yes, Alaska is not unique. There have been unexpected ecological feedback loops in other places as well. This is creating an extraordinary humanitarian crisis, but there are currently no governance structures to address the relocation of people due to climate change. It is critical that people's human rights are protected as climate change progresses.

**Koko Warner:**

So, finally we need national but also global plans and international commitments.

**Robin Bronen:**

Yes. The challenge is that an international framework and agreements to be accepted and ratified by relevant countries will take 5 years or even longer.

**Cosmin Corendea:**

But the people on the small islands already have wet feet. They cannot afford to wait much longer. They need immediate action.