Article

Seeking Solutions in Brasilia

January 15, 2024

A two-day workshop on policy responses to aid climate refugees

“Environmentally-Induced Displacement and Religion in Latin America and the Caribbean: Engaging the Normative and Legal Landscape” is the second workshop of the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS) project examining environmentally-induced displacement held in Brasília. The first of these workshops was held in Tijuana, Mexico. The event in Brasília was designed to propose, consider, and discuss solutions to address the needs of a growing population of environmental refugees. Brazil’s recent history reveals how this influx of migrants is a culmination of human-made political, economic, and environmental crises.

Regime Change, Commercial Expansion, and Climate Change in Brazil

Source: Aquivo Nacional (Brazil).

In 1964, the US government backed a coup that toppled the left-wing government of João Goulart in Brazil. This is one of several instances in which the United States instigated regime change in South America and the Caribbean. In many of these cases,

including Brazil, the United States sought to replace leftist with right-wing, anti-communist regimes that were more favorable to the American domination of the global marketplace.

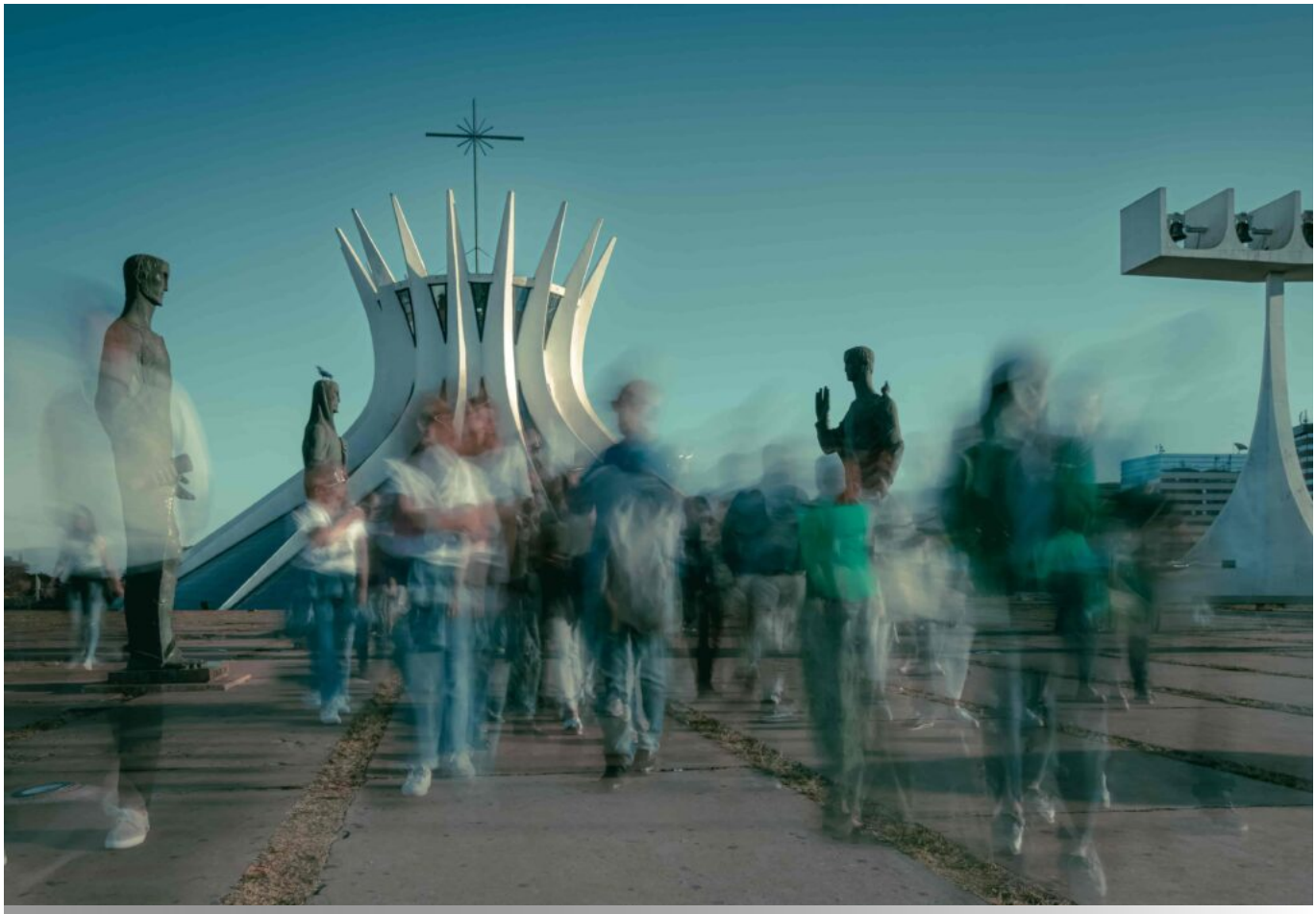
In retrospect, it is now clear that these regime change operations facilitated the unchecked corporate expansion that has devastated the environment and forced thousands of people from their homes. In Brazil, deforestation, water pollution, air pollution, and land degradation are all significant problems. Commercial agriculture, one of the major causes of land degradation in the country, has left thousands of agricultural workers unable to make a living. In addition to these factors, food and job insecurity in Brazil have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Migration Policy Initiative, over 500,000 environmental and economic refugees traveled from Brazil to the United States in 2019.

Lumber from illegal deforestation. Source: Wilson Dias/Agência Brasil via Wikimedia Commons.

Drought in Petrolina, Brazil in 2013. Souce: Wilson Dias/Agência Brasil [1], [CC BY 3.0] via Wikimedia Commons.

A Solutions-Oriented Workshop in Brasília, Brazil (January 23-24, 2020)

The Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS) partnered with the South American Network for Environmental Migrations (RESAMA) and the Research Centre on Environmentally Displaced Persons at Paraíba State University (NEPDA). The meeting was hosted by the Institute of International Relations at the University of Brasília. The workshop's goal was to develop and discuss solutions to environmental displacement. The two-day workshop was divided into six sessions, each focused on a different aspect of the issue.



Time lapse of pedestrians outside the Cathedral de Brasília. Source: Edson Junior via Pexels.

Source: Eduardo Vieira via Pexels.

After the introductory session, Session 2 provided an overview of asylum law in Latin America and the Caribbean. In Session 3, panelists discussed legal developments in defining refugees and refugee rights between the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention and the more recent Global Compact for Migration. The 1951 Convention defined the duties, responsibilities, and powers of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and articulated the legal category of "refugee" as well as the international legal protections afforded with that category. The 2018 Global Compact was developed to increase international cooperation in response to recent migratory trends.

Session 4 focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the 2013 Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage (WIM) associated with Climate Change Impacts, which seeks to increase financial support, technological support, and expertise to mitigate damage caused by “extreme weather events and slow onset events.”

Session 5 highlighted the work of religious organizations and faith-based actors in responding to environmentally vulnerable populations. This included an examination of how faith traditions have historically contributed to concepts such as spiritual accompaniment (a term used in Christianity to denote the process of guiding an individual in their spiritual journey), sanctuary, and the harm principle.

Session 6 involved a discussion of how recent political developments in Latin America affected the efforts to improve responses to environmental migration. These developments include the resurgence of extreme right-wing ideologues in politics and growing hostility toward migrants and refugees. A full description of the workshop’s schedule and participants can be found in the document below.

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The Crisis of Environmental Refugees: Addressing Knowledge Gaps to Meet Governance Challenges

Building on the workshop themes, a follow-up public forum was organized to assess future research, action, policy, and collaborations on the subject of environmentally-induced displacement. One of the direct outcomes of the workshop and forum in Brasília was Jayesh Prathod’s article “Legal Protections for Environmental Migrants:

Expanding Possibilities and Redefining Success.”

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