

CLIMATE-FORCED MIGRATION IN ALASKA.

MAY 15, 2018 1:30-3:30

DR. ROBIN BRONEN: Hello. I'm Robin Bronen. I want to extend to Alaska my deep gratitude to the people and to Tom Kerns and Emily and Shelly and all the other folks who have made this possible.

I am currently in Geneva where I have just been attending the UN Framework Convention On Climate Change Task Force Meeting On Climate Displacement where the UNFCCC is trying to figure out how to avert, minimize or prevent the displacement of people caused by our climate crisis.

The displacement of people caused by climate change is going to be the greatest human rights challenge of our times and the indigenous peoples of Alaska are some of the first peoples in the world who are facing the excruciating choice of figuring out where they will be able to go because they are no longer -- many of the communities along the coasts of Alaska are no longer able to stay where they have lived for millennia because it is no longer safe.

So I'm going to start by talking about the climate crisis in the arctic and, hopefully, you have heard of the term polar amplification.

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1 And what that means is that the arctic region
2 of the world is warming two to three times faster than
3 the rest of the planet. And in this slide I'm showing
4 here these are maps from the National Oceanic &
5 Atmospheric Administration in the United States and
6 these are two maps that were taken last winter. So
7 winter of 2016 and 2017.

8 And as you can see on these maps the red
9 signifies increased temperature anomalies and I believe
10 it's on the left side of the screen where you can see in
11 November of 2016 the temperatures on that day were 45
12 degrees above normal and fine over Greenland.

13 And then if you look on the right side of the
14 screen that map shows February of 2017, once again the
15 hot spot [indiscernible] and thawing over Greenland
16 where temperatures once again. And its ability to stay
17 cold [indiscernible] permanent rise. These temperature
18 anomalies on these two separate dates have continued.

19 So this past winters these temperatures of 45
20 degrees above the norm happened two to three times
21 during the winter of 2017 to 2018. And between January
22 first of this year and March 31st the temperatures
23 reached above freezing over Greenland for 61 hours.

24 And it's important to remember that at that
25 time of year the sun does not rise above the horizon.

1 So for 61 hours between January 1st and March 31st the
2 temperatures rose above freezing when the sun was not
3 rising above the horizon.

4 In Alaska the temperature increases have been
5 dramatic. So during the year of 2016 you can see that
6 in Barrow, now called Utqiagvik, the temperature was 7
7 degrees Fahrenheit above normal.

8 And it's important to remember when I'm
9 talking about these temperature increases that the UN
10 Framework Convention On Climate Change, the Paris
11 Agreement, their aspirational hope in regard to
12 temperature threshold are 1.5 degrees Celsius, which is
13 about 3 degrees, to 4 degrees Fahrenheit.

14 And as you can see in Alaska during the year
15 of 2016 we have already exceeded those temperature
16 anomalies. And then this past winter we truly crossed a
17 threshold where you can see that the temperatures at
18 the northern most part of the state where Utqiagvik and
19 Kotzebu are were 10 degrees Fahrenheit above normal,
20 which is between 4 and 5 degrees Celsius above the norm.

21 This past winter it was raining along much of
22 the coast of Alaska and these [indiscernible] and the
23 temperature increased. And one of the most impacts is
24 on the arctic sea ice extent.

25 For those of you who are concerned about the
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1 warming of the planet I encourage you to look at what is
2 happening with our arctic sea ice because we are
3 radically losing the ice that normally covers the arctic
4 ocean. And as you can see these decreases in arctic sea
5 ice have been going on now.

6 There was a record low in 2007 and then again
7 in 2012 and the during the last three years we have had
8 record maximum number low extends. Meaning that in
9 March when the -- when the arctic sea ice is at its
10 maximum extent it has been the lowest ever recorded.
11 Last year, in 2016 and then this year in 2017 was the
12 second lowest.

13 And the loss of arctic sea ice has a
14 tremendous impact on the communities that reside along
15 the north -- the west coast of Alaska because arctic
16 sea ice has been the natural barrier that has protected
17 the communities from the storms that normally come in
18 during the autumn and now winter season.

19 And these changes have an enormous impact on
20 peoples human rights. And the ways that human rights
21 are impacted are -- include everything from the right
22 to life, to the right to be able to practice cultural
23 traditions and the right to subsistence.

24 And so because of these dramatic impacts on
25 indigenous communities in Alaska several of the
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1 communities have made the decision that the relocation
2 of their entire community is the best way for them to
3 adapt into the future.

4 And so these same human rights principles that
5 are being violated because of our climate crisis we need
6 to be embedding these human rights principles into the
7 ability for communities to be able to determine how to
8 adapt and to be able to maintain the life styles and
9 their traditions, cultural traditions, that they hold
10 dear and that are deeply connected to the land on which
11 they live.

12 At the Alaskan Institute For Justice we are
13 currently working with 15 Alaskan native communities who
14 are faced with this really, really, difficult decision
15 about how to adapt to these radical changes to the
16 environment.

17 And as you can see from this map they are all
18 coastal communities. And the communities of Kivalina
19 and Shirshmaref are two of the communities in Alaska
20 that made the decision to relocate well over a decade
21 ago. And the enormous challenges, despite their
22 tremendous advocacy to actually implement what they have
23 determined to be their long term adaptation plan, has
24 been extremely difficult. So while they made the
25 decision back in the early 2000s to relocate they have
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1 still not been able to relocate.

2 And none of these communities that we're
3 working with are connected by road systems to other
4 parts of the state. So when storms come in on the coast
5 they have no places to evacuate to and without that
6 arctic sea ice the storms are having a dramatic impact
7 on their communities with flooding and winds and the
8 inundation that is caused by the storm surges.

9 So in looking at the way that climate crisis
10 is impacting the ability of communities to stay where
11 they are it's the combination of these extreme weather
12 events that are happening with greater frequency.

13 So one of the things that we are doing at the
14 Alaska Institute For Justice is we're working with these
15 communities to document the impacts of the storms. And
16 this past winter season between October of 2017 and
17 February of 2018 there were 42 storms that impacted
18 these communities and, again, without the arctic sea ice
19 they experienced tremendous flooding and erosion which
20 is causing the land on which they live to permanently
21 disappear.

22 So it's the combination of the extreme weather
23 events with the erosion and permafrost thawing that is
24 causing the land on which their dwellings are to no
25 longer be able to remain there.

1 So as I mentioned the storms this past winter
2 were extremely severe and as you can see from these
3 pictures there's open water. In Shishmaref where I just
4 showed the map, which is close to the Arctic Circle,
5 there is open water in January of this year which is
6 extremely unusual. Normally there are multi feet of ice
7 protecting the coast.

8 And on the left Weston Golovin in October you
9 can see the extreme flooding that was caused by a storm
10 that happened in October.

11 Again, in regard to what just happened this
12 past winter these storms are causing tremendous impact
13 in the communities. So the road that you can see on the
14 screen that you're looking at is a road that goes to the
15 landfill for the community and that's where the
16 community puts their solid waste. And without access to
17 that solid waste landfill it can cause a public health
18 crisis because of their inability to dispose of their
19 solid wastes in a safe manner.

20 The issue of the communities being eminently
21 threatened by flooding and erosion has been well
22 documented by federal and state government agencies for
23 well over a decade. And as you can see these are some
24 of the reports that have been written by the federal and
25 states governments.

1 So back in 2003 the Government Accountability
2 Office did their first assessment of flooding and
3 erosion in Alaska native communities and at that time
4 they determined that there were four communities that
5 were seeking to relocate as their best long term
6 adaptation strategy and about 184 communities were being
7 threatened with flooding and erosion.

8 The US Government Accountability Office did an
9 update of their report in 2009 because despite finding
10 that the four communities at that time were seeking to
11 relocate none of them had yet relocated. And when they
12 updated the report in June 2009 the number of
13 communities that were seeking to relocate had quadrupled
14 from -- actually tripled from four to 12 communities
15 were seeking to relocate.

16 Governor Palin, she created the subcabinet on
17 climate change and the immediate action working group
18 worked really hard for about 18 months trying to problem
19 solve how state and federal government agencies could
20 work to facilitate the relocation of communities to
21 ensure that they had a long term adaptation strategy
22 that would protect their human rights.

23 So it's really important for me to explain
24 what I mean by planned relocation because it is

25 [indiscernible]. So first and foremost it is really
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1 important to understand that this is a decision of last
2 resort. That communities need to be protected in place
3 that is made at the community level.

4 Meaning that it needs to be not only voluntary
5 but it needs to be protecting the right to self-
6 determination. And if there's anything that you
7 remember from this presentation it is that the right to
8 self-determination must be embedded in any decisions
9 that are made in regard to where people are going to go
10 as sea level rise consumes the coasts of millions of
11 people all over the world.

12 The reason why the right to self-determination
13 is so important is because we have a horrific legacy of
14 government mandated relocations.

15 In Alaska the federal government forced the
16 relocation of the Unangan people during World War 2.
17 The Unangan people lived in the Aleutian chain in Alaska
18 and western Alaska and they were forcibly relocated to
19 the southeast part of the state. And as a consequence
20 of that relocation 10% of the population died.

21 At the end of World War 2 the federal
22 government brought Unangan people back to their homes
23 and they found that the American soldiers, who had
24 inhabited the island during the war, had looted and
25 destroyed a lot of their possessions.

1 We also have current examples of government
2 mandated relocations and it is when governments make the
3 decisions to implement a development project where the
4 government has made the decision that they want to, for
5 instance, build a dam and as a consequence of that the
6 people living where the dam will be are told that they
7 need to move from the lands on which they're living.

8 And in that process people talk about
9 participatory decision-making. And what has happened as
10 a consequence of those forced relocations is that people
11 have ties and the loss of their cultural connections.
12 And that consequence has been almost uniform in regard
13 to the relocations that have happened as a consequence
14 of development projects.

15 So this right to self-determination is
16 essential when we are talking about planned relocation
17 but climate displacement and population displacement in
18 general.

19 The other thing that is critically important
20 in understanding this is that when I'm talking about
21 planned relocation I'm talking about this as a disaster
22 risk production strategy. And what I mean by that is in
23 the context of the climate crisis we're going to be
24 experiencing more frequent and more intense extreme
25 weather events.

1 And what is critically important is that
2 relocations occur while people are still living in the
3 places that they call home. Because if people are
4 displaced after an extreme weather event then they're no
5 longer able to really fully implement their right to
6 self-determination and be able to make all of the
7 decisions necessary in regard to protecting their human
8 rights in regard to livelihoods and how they want to
9 maintain their cultural connection to land.

10 And, as I've said, their human rights, peoples
11 human rights must be protected in this process.

12 So there are three major governance
13 challenges. And at this meeting that I've just been
14 attending at the UN Framework Convention On Climate
15 Change Task Force On Climate Displacement, one of the
16 things that I learned, which I knew but it was affirmed,
17 is we have no models.

18 So there are no national policies anywhere in
19 the world that tell us how to go about relocating an
20 entire community as a result of our climate crisis.

21 And so in the United States that is one of the
22 major issues. There is no government agency at a state
23 or federal government level that has the mandate or
24 funding to do a community wide relocation.

25 The Denali Commission was designated by
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1 President Obama in 2015 to be the lead federal agency in
2 Alaska to address the need for relocation to occur and
3 for several Alaska native communities. And at the time
4 that President Obama made that designation there was not
5 additional funding attached to it.

6 So the Denali Commission has done
7 extraordinary work with very limited resources. And
8 with the recent congressional budget cycle the Denali
9 Commission just got a substantial amount of funding
10 which they are going to use to facilitate the relocation
11 of one of the communities called Newtok that has been in
12 a relocation process now for about 20 years.

13 And of all the communities that are facing
14 relocation they are in the most dire situation because
15 they are not only experiencing storm surges because
16 they're close to the coast but the river they're next to
17 is moving and swallowing the land on which a lot of
18 homes are built.

19 The second issue, and this is actually the
20 much more difficult and complicated issue and this is
21 the issue that we are working with, the 15 Alaskan
22 native communities that I've previously mentioned and
23 trying to figure out. And so this issue is if we're
24 going to make sure that we protect peoples human rights,
25 that we're doing everything to support peoples right to
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1 self-determination, and if relocations occur prior to
2 population displacement then we need to figure out at
3 what point in time should a community think that
4 relocation is their best adaptation strategy.

5 And we have no models in regard to how to
6 figure this out and this is one of the most critical
7 issues that we are now focused on. And as I keep
8 repeating it's how can human rights be protected in this
9 process where we have no models or guidelines on how to
10 do it.

11 So as I mentioned President Obama took a
12 significant step when he released his reports on the
13 Task Force Climate Preparedness And Resilience and
14 acknowledged in that report that the -- it was critical
15 for the federal government to take a leadership role in
16 figuring out the complex challenges associated with
17 climate related displacement because, unfortunately,
18 Alaska is not the only place in the United States that
19 is faced with this issue now.

20 There are communities in the Louisiana and
21 Washington state, indigenous communities, that are also
22 faced right now with this really, really difficult issue
23 of trying to relocate their populations to safe and
24 higher ground.

25 But it's not only indigenous communities. We
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1 know from the research and work being done that cities
2 such as Miami and New York are also threatened by sea
3 level rise. And Miami, in particular, is particularly
4 vulnerable because the land on which that city rests is
5 porous. So sea walls are not going to be able to
6 protect the city from sea level rise because the ocean
7 is actually rising up from the ground.

8 And people are now -- agencies, government
9 agencies like the National Oceanic & Atmospheric
10 Administration in the United States is documenting what
11 they are calling Sunny Day Flooding, which is flooding
12 that is happening in cities along the east and south
13 coasts of the United States that are happening with high
14 tides. There are no storms that are occurring. It's
15 just regular high tides that are flooding the streets
16 and communities that are along the coast.

17 So President Obama's decision to recognize
18 that there was a significant institutional gap at the
19 federal level was a huge step forward. And the
20 unfortunate part of the change in administration is
21 despite his best efforts and the best efforts of his
22 administration they were not able to problem solve this
23 issue. And so we are still left with this huge
24 institutional gap in the United States as the climate
25 crisis accelerates.

1 And so what I am now going to talk about are
2 solutions. Because it is critically important that we
3 start envisioning how it is that we're going to protect
4 people faced with this existential crisis of where to go
5 as the land on which they live disappears.

6 And so I've come up with what I call an
7 adaptive governance framework where you always start
8 with protecting people in place. And the way that I
9 think of protection in place and human rights is if we
10 have the technology to protect places like lower
11 Manhattan from the sea level rise that's coming.

12 That that technology needs to be made
13 available to the peoples who live in the atolls in the
14 South Pacific and the Indian Ocean, the Marshall Islands
15 and Tuvalu, because that is what climate justice means
16 is giving the resources to those places so that people
17 do not need to leave the places that they love and call
18 home and that they're able to be protected in place.

19 So in this adaptive governance framework we
20 always start with protection in place. And,
21 unfortunately, also recognize that technology is not
22 going to be able to protect us because we do not know
23 how fast or how much sea level is going to rise.

24 And so the next piece in creating this
25 adaptive governance framework is figuring out what the
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1 indicators are that relocation needs to occur. And when
2 we think about planned relocation and think about this
3 as a long term process, meaning communities are not
4 going to be able to be relocated in a year or two years
5 if we're talking about protection of human rights and
6 the right to self-determination so communities are
7 leading the way and making all of the decisions, so we
8 need to figure out what those relocation indicators are
9 so that we can start a relocation process where
10 communities are leading the effort and they have the
11 technical assistance and support from state and federal
12 government agencies.

13 So the way that we are working with the 15
14 Alaska native tribes to actually operationalize this
15 adaptive governance framework and protect people's human
16 rights and it all starts with community based
17 environmental monitoring.

18 I would say that is the most important message
19 and along with human rights protections that I can share
20 with you. Because what we know from doing this work is
21 that the modeling and scenario planning is not helpful.

22 The modeling and scenario planning is at a
23 really high resolution. And we're talking about the
24 climate crisis and ecosystems specific responses to how
25 like, for instance, sea level rise is going to effect
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1 individual places.

2 It's critically important that we have on the
3 ground information about how that environmental change
4 is happening and that link that with how that
5 environmental change is impacting peoples health and
6 well-being.

7 The other reason why community based
8 monitoring is critically important is that hazards or
9 vulnerability [indiscernible] are by baseline data but
10 what we've seen and the work that we've done is those
11 hazard assessments or vulnerability assessments, they're
12 often done by outside consultants who come into
13 communities, do assessments and then leave and don't
14 leave the community with any ability to actually
15 continue to do the monitoring necessary to figure out
16 how the hazards that are identified, the environmental
17 change that's happening, is going to continue.

18 And the third reason why this is critically
19 important is what we know is the climate crisis is going
20 to continue forever, right, for generations to come.
21 And so we need to be thinking about processes that can
22 be dynamic and ongoing and based in community
23 empowerment.

24 So in doing this work in Alaska the way that
25 we started was trying to identify where government or
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1 non-governmental agencies were doing community based
2 monitoring. And what we found was that there were very
3 few government agencies doing, or non-governmental
4 agencies, doing community based monitoring.

5 We've partnered with the Alaska Coastal
6 Hazards Program because they have been installing
7 community based erosion monitoring in different places
8 in Alaska.

9 So last summer we went to five communities and
10 installed erosion monitoring tools and the communities
11 then are working with the Alaska Coastal Hazards Program
12 to document the erosion that is happening so that they
13 then can understand, along with state government
14 agencies, the predictive rate of environmental change.

15 We are then identifying where communities can
16 get access to technical assistance and funding. Because
17 one of the issues is, as I mentioned, there are no
18 government agencies designated that have the
19 [indiscernible] 30 community relocations.

20 So we are looking at current federal and state
21 government agency programs so that we can assess how
22 those programs can change to be more responsive to the
23 community needs as they're looking at relocation as
24 their long term adaptation strategy.

25 So as I mentioned the community based
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1 monitoring that we're doing is the essence of how we are
2 implementing this adaptive governance framework and
3 we're integrating indigenous acknowledge with western
4 acknowledge and we are doing that not only with erosion
5 monitoring but with the documentation of the storms that
6 have been happening.

7 So when we documented these storms that have
8 been occurring along the coast of Alaska we provide that
9 information to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric
10 Administration for (1) for that agency to understand the
11 impacts of the storms on the communities and (2) for
12 that agency to be able to provide better information to
13 the communities in regard to the forecasting that is
14 being done. So that they can provide more accurate
15 forecasting so communities can be better prepared for
16 the storms that are coming and that are causing such
17 harm as they occur.

18 This next summer we are going out to two
19 additional communities, to not only install erosion
20 monitoring, but also permafrost thaw monitoring.

21 And from my understanding it's going to be the
22 first time in Alaska where we're installing both of
23 these community based environmental monitoring tools at
24 the same time so that the community can get a holistic
25 understanding of the environmental change that is

1 happening.

2 And then we're going to be working, again,
3 with the Alaska Coastal Hazards Program. We're honored
4 to partner with also the Woods Hole Research Center. For
5 them they're going to be coming with us to install the
6 permafrost thaw monitoring tools. And we're going to
7 work with those agencies to figure out how to integrate
8 this information so that there can be a holistic
9 understanding of the predictive weight of environmental
10 change so that communities can plan for their future and
11 understand what their best long term adaptation strategy
12 may be and, perhaps, relocation may be their decision as
13 the best choice for how to protect themselves in to the
14 future.

15 So I'm going to close by just affirming how
16 important the arctic is to the rest of the world and
17 that the arctic is in the middle of a massive
18 transformation.

19 The National Oceanic and Atmospheric
20 Administration issued a report last December. They do
21 it annually and in December of 2017 they said that the
22 frozen regions of the arctic that have existed for
23 millennia will no longer exist in the decades ahead.

24 And I'm sure you know that will not only have
25 tremendous consequences on the peoples who live in the
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1 arctic but on the entire planet and it is urgent,
2 urgent, that we reduce our greenhouse gas emissions,
3 stop fracking, stop new oil and gas exploration and then
4 also focus on adaptation because we're not mitigating
5 and we're not preparing for adaptation.

6 And so as a person who has lived in the arctic
7 for a very long time I'm very concerned that we are not
8 preparing for the future that is coming our way in the
9 not very distant future. And what I'm talking about is
10 not in the very distant future. I'm talking about five
11 to ten years.

12 So I really appreciate this opportunity to
13 share with you the work that we're doing in Alaska with
14 the Alaska native communities that have been at the
15 forefront of advocacy in the United States and
16 resilience because they inspire me every day with their
17 knowledge and perseverance and determination that they
18 will adapt as our climate continues to change.

19 Thank you.

20 I'm happy to answer questions about what I
21 I've shared.

22 DR. THOMAS KERNS: I have a question. This
23 is Tom.

24 Has your work been mostly with native
25 communities along the west coast of Alaska?

1 And have you done work up north on the North
2 Slope or Prudhoe Bay too?

3 DR. ROBIN BRONEN: No. We're only
4 working with the communities on the west coast of
5 Alaska. So the communities that we're working with
6 asked to work with us.

7 DR. THOMAS KERNS: Are you framing your
8 arguments with, you know, your advocacy work in human
9 rights terms?

10 DR. ROBIN BRONEN: Yes. It's absolutely
11 critical that we are thinking about the enormous human
12 rights violations that are occurring because people are
13 no longer able to stay in the places that they call
14 home.

15 And it's critical that we think about the
16 human rights protections that need to be put into place
17 and when thinking about where people will go.

18 DR. THOMAS KERNS: In the meeting that
19 you've just been at in Geneva that's also about climate
20 forced migration, I think, is that right?

21 DR. ROBIN BRONEN: Yes.

22 DR. THOMAS KERNS: And do they think in
23 human rights terms also?

24 DR. ROBIN BRONEN: Yes, they do. You
25 know, there are a number of NGOs who are present who are
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1 advocating that human rights protections have to be
2 front and center with this issue. And so, yes, there
3 are human rights are being embedded in the conversation.
4 The question is what the implementation will look like?

5 DR. THOMAS KERNS: Thank you.

6 DR. ROBIN BRONEN: You're welcome.

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8 [youtube.com/watch?v=yAuMU_cIMHU&t=3s]

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