



Bronze sculptures depicting climate refugees by Jens Galschiot near the COP23 venue

“You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.”

These words, attributed to famed anti-racist activist Angela Davis, permeated my thoughts as I walked through the halls of the 2017 UN Climate Change Conference in Bonn, Germany (referred to as the “COP,” for conference of parties). The major question for this year’s COP was how exactly to implement the terms of the Paris Agreement. Surrounded by passionate climate experts proposing their own models for radically transforming the world, I especially sought to track issues relating to climate equity, including financing for developing countries, strategies for adapting to climate change, and loss and damage. Hopping from meeting room to negotiation hall to exhibit booth, I learned about so many interesting issues and projects, such as sustainable energy access initiatives like the [Africa Renewable Energy Initiative](#) and the [People-Centered Accelerator](#). Two topics, however, I found were particularly compelling: climate-induced migration for island nations and violence against indigenous environmental activists.

This year the conference was hosted by Fiji, an island archipelago nation that is [no stranger](#) to the threats associated with climate change. In particular, the high potential for territory loss and population displacement as sea levels rise and swallow coastal

communities whole means that many island nations fear that climate change is not just a looming threat, but an existential one. Indeed, “existential threat” was a common refrain among island nations throughout the halls and meeting rooms. Protecting coastal communities from these threats was thus a salient topic at the COP, with migration and relocation of such communities to higher ground being one proposed remedy.

Speaking on a panel about climate migration on Monday, Frances Namoumou of the Pacific Conference of Churches, a group that works with Fijian communities, emphasized the gravity of non-economic loss, specifically cultural loss, due to climate change. In 2012, Vunidogoloa became the [first community in Fiji](#) to relocate due to climate change. Namoumou stressed the loss that occurs when a coastal community like Vunidogoloa, whose social structure and livelihood are based on a marine way of life, must move to higher ground inland. Namoumou urged the audience not to think of these efforts as “relocation”, but actually a forced migration and a severe human rights violation. Reverend Tafue Lusama of the Church of Tuvalu buttressed these points, stating starkly that as coastal communities are forced to transform their cultures to escape rising tides, “relocation” really means the death of the people. For the residents of Tuvalu, an atoll nation, there is no safe higher ground; any relocation effort would mean escaping to another country and assimilating into another culture. For this reason, said Lusama, the people of Tuvalu have chosen not to pursue relocation efforts but instead continue to fight for aggressive climate policy to save Tuvalu. If you save Tuvalu, he said, you save the world.

Albeit unexpectedly, the idea of salvation echoed during discussions regarding environmental activists on the frontlines of defending against climate-destructive industry. [Recent research](#) shows that environmental activist defenders are killed at a rate of nearly four per week, with the death toll rising to 200 in 2016. These activists are often indigenous women who are trying to protect their community and way of life. The high-profile [murder of Berta Caceres](#) was particularly jarring – Caceres was an indigenous Honduran activist from the Lenca community who had recently won the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for her successful work launching a grassroots campaign to resist a proposed dam project in her community.

On Wednesday, activists gathered at the COP to discuss the rise of violence against environmental defenders, and raise awareness of these trends as a human rights and climate justice concern. Nina Gualinga, a Kichwa leader in Ecuador, discussed the plight of indigenous environmental activists in her country, who are subject to increased harassment, criminalization, and violent threats. Women, often the vanguard of these fights in Ecuador, are also especially vulnerable to threats of sexual violence. Gualinga specifically

expressed frustration towards the Ecuadorean government boasting about its emissions reductions during the COP negotiations, arguing that such efforts are really the work of environmental defense from Ecuador's indigenous people. These concerns were reiterated by Carol González Aguilar, an indigenous Colombian leader from [La Organización Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonía Colombiana](#). When asked what UN negotiators can do to protect indigenous people from the threats of climate change, González Aguilar stated plainly: "We don't need you to think for us. We need you to listen." She mentioned that besides activism, indigenous people in Colombia are also working to create environmental solutions, such as preserving traditional medicinal knowledge. In concluding her presentation, González Aguilar offered the audience an anecdote: a pessimistic journalist had recently told her that there was no salvation for the Amazon. González Aguilar countered that this journalist was wrong - by defending the forest, her people were the salvation for the Amazon.

The outlook on climate change is not a rosy one. The Global Carbon Project has reported that [carbon emissions are rising](#) after a three-year plateau. It remains to be seen whether key outcomes will come out of this year's COP, with many decisions expected to be tabled for 2018's meeting. And in the meantime, those most vulnerable to climate change and environmental destruction will likely continue to suffer. But coming to this international space and learning about efforts to fight for climate justice from communities most *in need* of climate justice was truly powerful. These communities fight daily to radically transform the world, and perhaps will be its salvation.

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