

photo essay

# Children growing up on the move

A visual story of climate change  
and the uncertain futures of  
migrant families

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**Nicoló Filippo Rosso is an award-winning Italian photographer, based in Colombia, whose photographs have been exhibited around the world. Since 2016, Rosso has documented life in La Guajira, an impoverished region of northern Colombia. Over the past three decades, climate change has worsened desertification and made living conditions increasingly harsh there. More recently, he has photographed Venezuelans who live in camps in La Guajira and elsewhere in Colombia, and Central American migrants en route to the USA–Mexico border.**

Rosso shoots in black and white to make his photographs feel more universal: “It’s a way to look at Latin American migration and then reflect on people migrating from Syria, Afghanistan, Africa,” he explains. Although the circumstances of every migrant vary, “it’s the same psychological trauma.”

Migration “explains the state of the world now,” says Rosso. In 2020, a total of 82 million people were displaced worldwide, including 35 million children. “It’s about climate change, violence, totalitarian governments, dictatorships and war. It’s a huge issue of human mobility from the south of the world to the north.”

↓ Venezuelan migrants climb into a coal truck whose driver has offered them a ride. They’ve crossed from Venezuela into north-eastern Colombia and are now attempting to reach Bogotá. “This is an epic journey,” says Rosso. “People walk such long distances, and they don’t know where they’re going. Children grow up on the move. The journey can last months.” **La Donjuana, Colombia, 2018**





← A Venezuelan woman builds a shack in the desert of La Guajira, near the Venezuelan border. Since 2018, tens of thousands of Venezuelans have moved to several large migrant camps, in harsh landscapes, on the outskirts of indigenous villages. Migrants “come into Colombia looking for better conditions, and what they find is one of the most impoverished regions of the continent,” says Rosso. Lacking money to travel elsewhere, “they’re waiting to see where to go or what to do.”  
**Uribe, La Guajira, Colombia, 2019**



← Venezuelan children on the outskirts of a migrant camp in La Guajira. Children here lack reliable access to water, food, healthcare and education, and are at risk of exploitation by gangs controlling the border areas. Although La Guajira is extremely dry, Rosso explains, “when it rains, these camps flood. There is no sanitation, so can you imagine the living conditions for the children? They are unaware of what’s going on, so they even play with dark water.”  
**Maicao, Colombia, 2020**

↑ Residents of La Guajira fill tanks with water. A Bogotá-based NGO supplies water to 32 indigenous communities in the region. “Since the rivers dried up and there is no water, they have to rely on aid,” says Rosso. “The trucks come every two weeks, so that water has to last.”  
**La Guajira, Colombia, 2016**



↑ A 19-year-old Venezuelan named Jeiliza, who is seven months pregnant with her first child. After leaving Venezuela, she spent a year in one of La Guajira's migrant camps. There is no antenatal care for migrant mothers in the camps. Those on the move walk until they are physically unable to. Those in the camps either look for transport to a hospital or rely on indigenous midwives to assist with childbirth in the camp – starting the odyssey of a new member of the migrant generation. **Uribia, La Guajira, Colombia, 2019**



↓ A Venezuelan mother and her family inside their shack. Because of Covid-19 lockdowns, a local NGO closed its educational programme for migrant children. The struggle to keep children safe and clean puts added stress on caregivers. “The boys are doing homework by themselves,” says Rosso. “They really want to study.” **Uribia, La Guajira, Colombia, 2020**



↓ Indigenous Colombians walking through the tracks of bulldozers that destroyed their home, which they said was bought out from under them by a local gang. Threatened with violence and without access to water, agricultural families in La Guajira move within the region or migrate to cities, where they often end up living on the street due to lack of work. **Riohacha, Colombia, 2016**

→ A primary-school classroom in the Chamelecón neighbourhood of San Pedro Sula. Two months after hurricanes Eta and Iota struck Central America, the classroom was still covered with mud. The hurricanes prompted one of the decade's largest waves of migration to the USA. "The governmental response was very scarce," says Rosso. "This picture talks about children without showing children, it talks about climate change very directly, it talks about lack of access to education." **San Pedro Sula, Honduras, January 2021**



→ A Honduran girl stares out from inside a bus. A migrant caravan left Honduras in January 2021, two months after the devastating hurricanes. Refugees and migrants left home despite the fact that many borders were officially closed due to Covid-19. "I'm trying to make this story known through the emotion of the people," says Rosso. **The border between Honduras and Guatemala, 2021**









→ A woman and two young children cross the Rio Grande in Mexico and walk towards the US border. Asylum seekers often turn themselves in to American authorities to initiate a formal request for political asylum. However, due to public health laws during the pandemic, many of them will be expelled from the USA and sent back to Mexico. "Migration is a universal condition," explains Rosso. "I thought I should not focus on a specific reportage but just embrace migration as a phenomenon of our time." **Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, 2021**

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