As a longtime worker with refugees and immigrants, Robin Bronen has ample experience interacting with people displaced from their homelands. But now the Anchorage lawyer is looking at migration from a new angle: she’s writing a Master’s thesis that will establish a framework for the resettlement of people forced to relocate because of climate change.

“I’m taking this knowledge and expertise I have working with immigrants and refugees and putting it into a totally different context,” said Bronen, whose Master’s work at the University of Alaska Fairbanks is partially funded by an Alaska EPSCoR fellowship. “This thesis project is really relevant, given what’s happening not only in Alaska but also internationally.”

Bronen has more than 15 years’ experience working with refugees and immigrants in Alaska, including two as Alaska’s first State Refugee Coordinator, working with the federal government to facilitate the resettlement of political refugees in Alaska.

But Bronen didn’t enter grad school with the intent of studying displaced people. What drew her in was her concern over the mounting evidence of climate change and her desire to better understand the science behind it. It wasn’t until after Bronen enrolled in the UA’s Resilience and Adaptation Program as an interdisciplinary Master’s student that she saw the crossover between her work and her degree.

Bronen’s research focus on “climigrants” is an especially strong fit for Alaska EPSCoR, which promotes the integration of social science with hard science to examine the effects of climate change. And it’s also a huge issue: by one popular estimate more than 150 million people worldwide ultimately could be displaced because of climate change, Bronen said. That includes, at present, six villages in Alaska which will have to be relocated due to immediate risk of flooding or erosion.

Bronen is focusing her study on the village of Newtok, a community of about 330 people near the Bering Sea coast whose residents have already voted to relocate due to erosion and thawing permafrost. She has visited the village and been a regular observer at meetings of a planning committee coordinating the move. Bronen called the experience invaluable, noting that most scholars examining these issues have had little of such hand-on experience. “That’s what’s been pretty amazing for me,” she said. “It’s not theoretical, it’s watching this really intense process.”

Much of the global debate over the issue concerns whether international guidelines concerning political refugees can also be applied to environmental ones. Bronen said her experience suggests that’s not the case. “It felt like what needed to happen is a whole new paradigm had to be created,” she said.

Her thesis has several parts, Bronen said. First, she is working to establish the basic human rights principles that have to be taken into account in any relocation plan. Second, she is fleshing out the more pragmatic issues of relocation, in particular what sort of institutions and activities are needed to effect such mass migrations.

Without all of these guidelines in place, Bronen said, such relocations could be disastrous, pointing to the response to Hurricane Katrina as an example.

“(Katrina) was an enormous humanitarian crisis because government was completely unprepared to deal with what happened,” she said. “That’s what we’re looking at in regards to our future unless we figure this out. That’s my whole reason for doing this.”