

# Laurier/US Embassy Workshop on Environmental Migration and Displacement

## Workshop Report

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19 April 2016



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Laurier/US Embassy Workshop on Environmental Migration and Displacement

## Report on workshop outcomes

19 April 2016

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Workshop date: 22-22 January 2016, Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Ontario

Workshop website: <http://www.laurierenvironmentalmigration.com>

Workshop sponsors:



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# Laurier/US Embassy Workshop on Environmental Migration and Displacement

22-22 January 2016, Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo Ontario

## Report on workshop outcomes

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### **Summary**

A two-day workshop was held in Waterloo, Ontario, in January 2016, for the purposes of reviewing current knowledge about environmental migration and displacement, identifying priority areas for future research, and working toward creation of a research network to support policymaking in Canada and the US. Although both governments have made public statements in recent months warning of the consequences of environmental migration and displacement, neither country has any formal policy or any mechanism to measure or monitor it. The *Paris Agreement on Climate Change* contains an explicit commitment to establishing an international task force on climate change induced displacement, providing a stimulus for policy development by signatories, including Canada and the US.

The workshop generated a detailed review paper documenting the current state of knowledge (available as a separate document), and identified key priorities for research, which include a need for greater modelling and empirical research across multiple spatial and temporal scales, with attention to the linkages between migration and adaptation to environmental change. The workshop found there exist numerous opportunities for proactive regional cooperation between the governments of Canada, the US, and Mexico, notwithstanding obvious differences in domestic policy and planning priorities within each country. Environmental migration and displacement may therefore warrant trilateral discussion at future North American Leaders Summits. Potential next steps in advancing a policy-oriented research agenda include developing greater definitional clarity as to what constitutes environmental displacement and migration, and finding ways of framing the issue so that it is most compatible with policy making processes.

Workshop participants included experienced researchers from Canadian and American universities, with representatives from the Canadian, American, and British governments in attendance. The contents of this report do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of any of the governments participating in this workshop or of the event sponsors.

Financial support for the workshop was provided by the US Embassy Small Grant Program, Wilfrid Laurier University, and the Balsillie School of International Affairs. More details about the workshop are available at <http://www.laurierenvironmentalmigration.com>.

### **1. About the workshop**

A two-day workshop held in Waterloo, Ontario, January 21-22, 2016, which brought together leading researchers from Canadian and American universities, along with representatives from the US Consulate General in Toronto; Global Affairs Canada; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; and the British High Commission. The subject of the workshop was environmental migration and displacement (EMD), and discussions centered on three key subjects:

- Reviewing what is known and not known about EMD in the research community
- Identifying priority areas for future research, especially as it can support policymaking

- Envisaging the creation of a North American research network that would support policymaking in Canada and the US

The first day of meetings consisted of closed door facilitated discussions using a Chatham House rules format. The second day was a more open discussion that also included graduate student participants from the Balsillie School of International Affairs, the University of Waterloo, and Wilfrid Laurier University.

A public event entitled, “Environmental Refugees...the Next Wave?” was held the evening of January 21, 2016 with an audience of over 200 people in attendance. Opening remarks were given by US Consul General Juan Alsace and Wilfrid Laurier University President Max Blouw. This was followed by a panel discussion on how climate change and environmental degradation will affect global migration patterns in the coming decades, featuring Elizabeth Ferris, senior fellow at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service; Lori Hunter of the Institute for Behavioral Science at the University of Colorado-Boulder; and Elizabeth Fussell of the Population Studies and Training Center at Brown University. A video-recording of the complete event may be viewed at [www.laurierenvironmentalmigration.com](http://www.laurierenvironmentalmigration.com). Also available at this website is a preliminary briefing paper developed as part of the workshop, entitled, “Environmental Migration and Displacement: What we know and don't know”.

Financial support for this workshop and public event was provided through the US Embassy’s Small Grants program, Wilfrid Laurier University, and the Balsillie School of International Affairs, with additional logistical support provided by the Consulate General of the United States in Toronto and the International Migration Research Centre. It should be noted that the statements found in this report are not necessarily reflective of the opinions of the donors nor of the governments of Canada or the United States.

## 2. Rationale for the workshop

The effects of climate change and environmental degradation on migration and displacement patterns are becoming a more urgent concern for researchers and policymakers. According to the International Displacement Monitoring Centre, on average more than 25 million people globally are displaced by natural disasters each year.<sup>1</sup> Given that these figures estimate primarily the number of people immediately displaced by sudden-onset events, it is likely that the number of people who migrate for environmental reasons, including progressive phenomena like land degradation and pollution, is actually much higher. Environmental migration and displacement (EMD) is likely to increase in coming decades due to the combined effects of the emerging impacts of climate change and rapid population growth and increased urbanization in regions of the world already highly exposed to extreme weather events.

Canada and the US are already sources of and destinations for EMD. Most EMD that originates within Canada and the US takes the form of internal population movements that occur in the wake of severe droughts, extreme weather events, floods, and wildfires. The largest volume of environmentally related migration destined to the Canada-US region arrives from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, although acute air and water pollution may be starting to stimulate small amounts of migration from large urban centres in Asia and Africa.<sup>2</sup>

At present, neither the American nor Canadian governments have any formal policy on EMD, nor are there presently any formal mechanisms to track EMD within or to Canada or the US. Article 50 in the *Paris Agreement on Climate Change*, negotiated in December 2015, contains a commitment to establish a task force to determine how best to address climate change induced displacement.<sup>3</sup> Although Canada and the US

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<sup>1</sup> See International Disaster Monitoring Centre, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

<sup>2</sup> See examples from studies at the website <http://www.environmentalmigrationtocanada.org/>

<sup>3</sup> For full text see <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/l09r01.pdf>

are each expected to begin the process of ratifying the *Paris Agreement*, neither country has to date made any specific public statements regarding its position on article 50. In the past year US President Obama has publicly raised concerns about the risks of EMD,<sup>4</sup> and Canadian foreign minister Stéphane Dion released a speech in March 2016 outlining his government's concerns about climate change, security, and migration.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, a growing volume of research on EMD is being conducted by researchers at Canadian and American universities, reflective of global trends. Although much of this research and its findings have direct implications for Canadian and American policymaking, there are few established channels of communication on this issue between researchers and governments within each of the two countries, and none that link policymakers and researchers at a regional level in a coordinated fashion. This workshop therefore sought to initiate discussions among North American researchers and government agencies in Canada and the US about the potential creation of a coordinated, regional network to promote and foster policy-oriented research on EMD. It is worth noting that such initiatives have already appeared in Europe in various forms, such as the UK government's Foresight project on global environmental migration,<sup>6</sup> and research projects and networks funded by the EU and the European Science Foundation.<sup>7</sup>

***A note about definitions:*** For this workshop, participants worked with the following definition used by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), that an environmental migrant is any individual or group "who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their homes or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad."<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Key findings from the workshop

The importance of spatial scale: EMD can occur across a wide range of spatial scales, from the local to global. The bio-physical impacts of climate change will manifest differently at different scales, and will present varying challenges for developed and developing nations. Further, the impacts in one nation may be felt in others as a 'knock-on' effect. All of this means that EMD events can span jurisdictional scales from local/municipal governments, through to state/provincial governments to federal/national governments and international agreements. There are many questions that have yet to be answered by researchers in terms of how planning and policymaking for EMD can be scaled up from local to higher levels and vice versa. There are also unanswered questions about the policymaking implications of internal versus cross-border/international EMD. Using the example of food security, participants discussed how droughts in North America could affect food exports and global food prices, placing pressure on developing nations struggling with food security. How such scenarios would in turn interact with global EMD is unclear, providing an example of where additional research would be beneficial.

The importance of temporal scale: Any discussion of EMD must take into account the multiple temporal dimensions associated with environmental degradation and environmental issues more broadly. EMD can be the result of environmental events and processes of a sudden-onset and/or progressive nature, with each type requiring different policymaking responses. Policymakers tend to focus on short-

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/21/obama-says-climate-change-is-a-security-risk-why-are-republicans-laughing/>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en.do;jsessionid=459b411f0bc15a5548e77105ee343a33e3108a77a1168e7b005c8dc0b00aab1a.e38RbhaLb3qNe3aQaN90?mthd=index&ctr.page=1&nid=1044349>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migration-and-global-environmental-change-future-challenges-and-opportunities>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.ccema-portal.org/article/read/each-for-project-publications> and [http://www.cost.eu/COST\\_Actions/isch/IS1101](http://www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/isch/IS1101)

<sup>8</sup> From *IOM Outlook on Migration, Environment and Climate Change*, Geneva, 2015

term/immediate responses to EMD events after the fact, and tend not to focus on longer-term policy initiatives that are necessary for preparing proactively for EMD. Because government action on EMD usually takes place as in-the-moment responses of a crisis-induced nature, policymaking is typically slow to recognize EMD when it is driven by incremental but systematic changes to the environment. As time passes after a particular EMD event, policymaking attention to the underlying causes of that event tends to wane as policymakers turn their attention to newly emerging issues. It is therefore important that researchers maintain their attention on EMD events even long after they have passed, as they will continue to provide grounded evidence for future policy and planning approaches. Also, because it is not a new phenomenon, a thorough examination of past EMD events helps policymakers better understand how EMD processes unfold, and may enable the identification of warning signs and tipping points for future EMD events. In other words, EMD is a case where hindsight supports foresight.

A need for greater modelling and longitudinal research: While empirical research on EMD continues to grow, attempts should be made to link climate modelling being carried out by physical scientists to EMD research, in the hopes of developing predictive EMD models and/or the identification of key thresholds, tipping points, and time lags between environmental triggers and migration responses. Longitudinal research that examines changes in vulnerability and EMD over time is particularly important. There is also need for greater research on 'trapped' populations who are unable to migrate during EMD events, and the feedback effects of out-migration on the vulnerability of the population left behind.

Migration as Adaptation: Researchers increasingly see EMD as being inherently linked with adaptation, and may in some instances be seen as a form of adaptation in and of itself. Given this, policymaking discussions about building adaptive capacity and resilience to environmental hazards and change should also consider the effects of institutional, administrative, and structural barriers to mobility and migration that exist at all levels.

Prospects for Regional Cooperation: There are reasons for both skepticism and optimism regarding the potential for regional cooperation at the policymaking level between the United States and Canada on the topic of EMD. In terms of skepticism, there is not a strong history of the two countries cooperating on immigration policy, apart from safe-third-country agreements. Further, the current volume of international EMD to North America from overseas places of origin is smaller than internal EMD within the North American region, so the need for coordinated Canada-US policy on international EMD may not urgently needed at the present moment. On the optimistic side, there has historically been cooperation between Canada and US in responses to emergencies and natural disasters. In this context, there may be opportunity for increased cross-border policy and planning, in which EMD is discussed as part of bilateral disaster response and assistance. Shared interests in the Arctic, where some smaller communities are already in need of relocation due to climate change impacts, may also represent a potential opportunity for greater Canada-US discussion and cooperation.

Domestic policy differences: In Canada and the US, government agencies often operate as policymaking silos, and every policymaking agency that is either directly or indirectly tasked to address EMD will have its own interests. Which agencies are involved and the relationships between these agencies present potential challenges to policy coherence and coordination in the effort to generate a workable EMD policy within each government and between the two countries. The tension between long term EMD policy/planning and short-term turnover in elected government officials presents an additional challenge. It was noted that the UK government has a law requiring the government to regularly produce 5-year assessments of its actions with respect to climate change. While this could potentially be a model for Canada and the US, the UK law emerged during a timely confluence of heightened public concern about climate change and a favourable political climate.

Policymaking on EMD has to date been *ad hoc*: Participants could identify numerous Canadian and US government actions and initiatives that have been taken on an *ad hoc* basis in response to specific EMD events, but could not identify any longer term coordinated or broad-based policies. Examples included the US providing Temporary Protected Status permits for people unable to return to natural disasters in Central America, Haiti, and the Philippines. Canada has similarly instituted temporary immigration measures in response to past events like the Haitian earthquake. Since EMD events will continue to arise, a more forward-looking policy discussion would clearly be beneficial.

A need for definitional clarity: The framing of EMD is an important consideration for policymakers, and establishing definitional clarity is particularly important. For example, in the US there is a substantive difference in immigration processes as they apply to people designated as economic/labour migrants versus people entitled to humanitarian entry. There is no cap on the number of individuals permitted to enter the US for humanitarian reasons, but there is a firm cap on economic migrants, who experience processing backlogs and long waiting times as a result. Were EMD were to be officially recognized, how it ends up being defined would have significant practical implications for larger institutional processes and for migration in other categories.

#### **4. Priorities for future research**

How to better understand EMD across spatial and temporal scales: EMD occurs within the context of larger complex systems, and is simultaneously a product of (and an influence on) labour markets, security dynamics, political will, demographic processes, popular perceptions, culture, social cohesion, insurance and finance, and legal frameworks. One opportunity is to bring migrants themselves into the research process, including diaspora networks and migrant communities. This recognizes the importance of remittances, circular migration, and transnational social networks in building capacity in source countries where EMD is experienced. Another opportunity is to create open-ended collaborations between researchers and policymakers who have dealt with EMD in the past, and mine such cases for data that provide insights into how policies can best be designed in the future. Additional research is also needed on the conditions, structures, and decision-making processes that help determine those who move versus those who stay in the face of environmental pressures. As a way of kickstarting Canada-US policy-oriented research, it may be useful to create a pilot project that conducts an exploratory case study of a country experiencing EMD that is also an important source of migration to Canada and the US. Such a study could focus on examining how institutions in all three countries interact to shape and respond to EMD and larger migration flows over time.

How to 'frame' EMD most effectively for policymaking: Participants identified pros and cons of the various ways of framing EMD discussions, such as security, migration, climate change, and/or development assistance issues. Framing EMD as a security issue would make it most immediately accessible to policymakers, but concerns were expressed that some security narratives could reinforce general anti-immigration sentiments unnecessarily. It was proposed that framing EMD as a human livelihoods issue is compatible with a security perspective, but avoids problems associated with anti-immigration narratives. EMD could also be framed as a migration policy issue, but depending on the timing and competition from other global issues, it may receive less traction among policymakers when framed as such. Framing EMD as a climate change issue is consistent with recent global support for action on climate change, such as through the Paris Agreement, but past experience has shown that climate change issues often become lodged in a single policymaking silo (typically environment ministries) and may not engage other key government departments.

Institutional mapping: related to the previous point, it was proposed that an institutional mapping exercise be done to identify key actors, interests, relations, and systems of interaction within the Canadian and US governments on issues of EMD. A discourse or textual analysis method might be used to analyze the

language of websites, mandates, reports, and press briefings, to better understand the language and organizational norms of each policymaking department and use this knowledge to present EMD in ways most consistent with these.

Trilateral coordination between Mexico, Canada and the United States: It is clear that all three countries have a shared interest in EMD issues, and that EMD provides an entry point to larger trilateral discussions of migration that is less contentious than other topics. EMD might therefore be a useful agenda item for future North American Leaders' Summits.

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