

70 Year Protecting People Forced to Flee

Region: North America

Hosting/organizing institution: Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN)

Session Title: North America Within the Global Refugee Regime

Co-Moderators

- Julie Crowley - Regional Director, Central & West Africa, IDRC
- James Milner - Project Director, LERRN

Speakers

- Mustafa Alio - Managing Director, Jumpstart Refugee Talent
- Jennifer Bond - Managing Director, Refugee Hub
- Elizabeth Ferris - Research Professor, Georgetown University
- Ana Macouzet - Senior Policy Advisor, Open Society Foundations
- Bob Rae - Ambassador of Canada to the United Nations
- Leah Zamore - Director, Humanitarian Crises, New York University

Context/Background of the panel

This session considered the role of North American states (Canada, the US and Mexico) as actors within the refugee regime. Some of these actors include refugee representatives, the private sector, academics, NGOs, and local or regional governments. The panel took stock of past forms of engagement as donor states, host states, resettlement countries and leaders in policy development and diplomatic engagement. Looking forward, it also considered how North American perspectives can help advance dialogue on future questions and challenges facing the regime, including:

- Refugee inclusion and leadership
- Addressing diverse forms of displacement, including climate migration and IDPs
- Linking humanitarian, development and peace-building responses
- Advancing localization and the inclusion of local perspectives in global discussions

The panel included a critical reflection on power relations between actors in the refugee regime and the changing political context within which UNHCR's mandate is pursued, including commitment to multilateralism, public discourse, and public support for refugees.

Major points and Recommendations/Conclusions on the way forward

1. Address root causes of displacement

A key recommendation was the need to address the root causes of forced displacement, particularly the political factors that are at the heart of conflict and longstanding refugee crises. Ambassador Bob Rae, Canada's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, remarked that "no matter how much money we give to UNHCR, there is no humanitarian solution to the humanitarian crises we see around the world." Instead, the causes

of displacement are political, environmental, and economic. Panelists urged the actors in the regime to have the courage to tackle these underlying crises causing displacement through the UN system and beyond.

2. Mainstream refugee leadership and prioritize refugee voices

Acknowledging that refugee situations are increasingly long-term rather than short-term emergencies, the panel emphasized the need to prioritize refugee voices, experiences, and leadership. Ambassador Bob Rae stressed that “being a refugee and being stateless should not mean you are voiceless or that you are not heard.” The Ambassador argued that humanitarian assistance needs to be paired with opportunities for work and education. Otherwise, “we are treating people as objects, not as subjects.” Mustafa Alio, who made history as the first Refugee Advisor in the Canadian delegation at an international refugee meeting, highlighted that “UNHCR needs to transition from merely consulting with refugees to an equal partnership with refugees in creating solutions.” With dwindling resources for humanitarian assistance due to donor fatigue and a higher number of displaced people, the refugee regime needs to find better ways to use limited resources. Alio argued that an important lesson learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that refugee-led organizations are valuable partners in delivering cost-effective humanitarian assistance. They also provide a unique perspective informed by the experiences of those directly affected by displacement.

3. Rebuild societal consensus for refugee protection

Community organizations like sponsorship groups have been important in providing solutions for refugees beyond the actions of governments. Professor Jennifer Bond, who leads the University of Ottawa Refugee Hub and the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, highlighted the importance of rebuilding public support for refugee protection. Community sponsorship allows citizens to get involved directly with refugee protection and to become advocates for welcoming policies. UNHCR’s attention to public support is crucial to counter negative portrayals of refugees. Indeed, as Julie Crowley pointed out, one of the major issues is “the growing negative and toxic narrative about refugees and the forcibly displaced. A lot needs to be done to counter misinformation and break down the unfounded myths about these vulnerable populations. Again, this should only be done in partnership with refugees and refugee communities.”

4. Expand and institutionalize protection for internal and climate-related displacement

Professor Beth Ferris drew attention to groups of displaced people who currently do not benefit from refugee status and as a result are outside of the global refugee system. That includes Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and those displaced by environmental and climate-related factors. UNHCR should expand efforts to examine gaps, develop inclusive strategies, and engage development actors so that individuals who do not qualify for refugee status may still be supported.

5. Strengthen support for host countries through a new economic vision

Leah Zamore, Director of the Humanitarian Crises program at New York University’s Center on International Cooperation (CIC), provided a valuable lesson from history on how the U.S.-

funded Marshall Plan helped rebuild Europe and support refugees after World War II. According to Zamore, “this sort of economic vision that went behind the Marshall Plan” is needed today to assist major refugee-hosting countries. Zamore proposed that North American countries could leverage their participation in international financial institutions to support refugee-hosting countries by offering debt relief or financial stimulus packages.

6. Promote regional cooperation on migration issues

Building on new political will, Ana Macouzet called for restarting regional dialogue among the leaders of Canada, the United States and Mexico to seek common interests related to migration. Working together, these countries can strengthen refugee protection across the region, recognizing that current approaches to migration management in the region have been inhumane and ineffective. North American countries should engage with Central American leaders and regional mechanisms such as the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS) for the Americas.

7. Seize the current moment

The speakers agreed that while the COVID-19 pandemic has been catastrophic, it provides a unique opportunity to learn from North America’s history and reflect on opportunities going forward. Through US funding for UNHCR, resettlement and community sponsorships, participation in the UNHCR’s governance structure, and recognition of gender-based persecution, North America has played a critical role beyond the North American region. The resounding conclusion was that there is no better time than the present to begin casting a vision for refugee protection in the coming years. Following President Joe Biden’s inauguration, there is a new opportunity to incorporate international displacement issues in post-pandemic recovery plans. Recognizing that 85% of the world’s refugees are hosted in the Global South, North America can support and engage with host countries in the Global South as partners. Through bold ideas and creative thinking, UNHCR can seize the opportunity of the current moment to work with governments, civil society actors, and refugees to improve responses to displacement.

Top three quotations from the session:

“Address the underlying crises, the political challenges that lie at the heart of why people are where they are.”

Ambassador Bob Rae

“We need another Marshall Plan for refugees and countries that host them given the kind of economic dysfunction and crises in a lot of the main host countries.

Leah Zamore

“UNHCR needs to transition from merely consulting with refugees to an equal partnership with refugees in creating solutions.”

Mustafa Alio

Link to the recording: <https://youtu.be/P762Whsi22g>

