

Ditchley Conference

A Hungry World on the Move: Migration, Food security and Climate Change Impact

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There is little doubt that [migration pressures](#) will increase given greater food insecurity in countries and regions that are expected to be most exposed to climate change. While this is mainly with respect to the global south, even more temperate zones are being affected as recent extreme weather events have demonstrated. How governments and societies should respond is an easier question than how can they respond given domestic and international politics, with the ongoing challenges of climate change being perhaps the most pertinent example.

From an immigration perspective, there are some realities that need to be considered:

- Increased political and social polarization, reflecting driven by social media and political tactics at both national and international levels, resulting in greater mis- and disinformation;
- Increased economic and social inequalities within countries;
- In many countries, immigration is divisive politically, Canada being one of the rare exceptions. Irregular arrivals rather than more managed immigration tend to provoke more negative public reactions;
- Migration policies and programs of the global north are largely designed for the benefit of receiving countries, with little to no attention to the needs of sending countries and potential migrants. The overall focus on addressing the demographics of aging societies as well as the recent focus on healthcare labour shortages and immigration are examples.
- Public opinion in Western countries generally, but not exclusively, favours more “familiar” migrants with perceived shared values as recently seen in the case of Ukrainian refugees in contrast to other groups. While consistency of treatment must be the objective, the reality is more complex; and,
- There is generally greater public support for economic immigrants who contribute directly to the economy in sectors as diverse as healthcare, tech and agriculture than for refugees and asylum seekers, as the benefits are more clearly perceived.

Canadian perspective

Canada’s geography has largely provided a barrier to large scale irregular migration compared to most other countries given the USA to the south, oceans to the east, west, and north, making it easier for Canada to manage migration flows and maintain public confidence.

While my fellow Canadians at the conference may disagree, some of the factors that will influence Canadian public reaction to larger scale immigration include:

- The degree to which irregular arrivals, perceived as queue jumping, particularly those at land crossings between official border points, continue to increase (2022 average to date of 3,000 per month), with birth tourism raising similar issues;
- While public opinion research shows general support for immigration and a general understanding of the need for immigrants to address labour shortages and demographic aging, there is less support for refugees and family class, and some worries regarding immigrant group cultures;
- Given the large numbers of immigrants and their descendants, concentrated in electoral districts (41 ridings out of 338 are visible minority majority ridings, with another 16 ridings over 40 percent) and the Canadian political first-past-the-post system, no political party can win an election without their support;
- Immigrants often perceive irregular arrivals as people jumping the queue rather than applying as they did and there is a diversity of views among immigrant and visible minority groups on overall immigration levels;
- The current government has ambitious immigration targets (increasing 341,000 pre-pandemic to 450,000 by 2024) that enjoys broad support among stakeholders and have so far attracted little to no criticism by mainstream political parties (Quebec, which selects its economic immigrants, is far more restrictive); and
- The ability (arguably inability) for the government to deliver these increases has become an issue with large backlogs across all immigration programs.

Possible broader lessons from Canada

Mitigation through greater support to countries with food insecurity and greater climate change impacts may reduce pressures on receiving countries. While it is likely impossible reduce long-term pressures, the impact ideally can be made more gradual allowing more time to prepare and increase absorptive capacity.

Key to public support is the perception that migration flows are being properly managed and not just arriving at the border. To the extent that migration and refugee flows have orderly processes and procedures, public understanding and support should be easier to attain. This is clearly easier for some countries than for others but even countries that have geographic and other barriers can expect to be tested more and more.

Messaging that links immigration to a country's interests (e.g., labour shortages) will be more powerful than general humanitarian messaging. Policies and programs that triage food and climate refugees based upon their ability to contribute to the receiving country economy and society are likely to be better received than those without such selection criteria.

Stories that focus on individual situations have greater influence than more overall analysis for the public. For example, the death of Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi galvanized support for accepting more refugees during the 2015 Canadian election and, more recently, the likely murder of Iranian Mahsa Amini over how she wore her hijab has galvanized protests in and outside Iran. Given that

the impact of individual examples and stories is more short-term, broader evidence and analysis are needed for governments and sophisticated stakeholders in order to effect sustainable change.

In short, longer term migration pressures are similar to climate change in terms of the political challenges at national and international levels. However, the Global Compact for Migration only provides a framework in contrast to the legally binding Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Moreover, the longer history of global and national environmental debates and negotiations has resulted in greater political consensus regarding the need for international cooperation to address climate change.

Issues related to climate change are largely economic in terms of the changes required while international migration is as much about more complex social change as it is about simple economic change, as we see in various debates over immigrant and national values.

Given that current narratives in receiving countries have focussed on economic benefits of immigration for receiving countries, shifting the focus to the benefits and costs to both receiving and sending countries would be extremely difficult given polarized public opinion and politics.