



# Climate Change & Forced Displacement

## Event Report

World Refugee & Migration Council

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### **World Refugee & Migration Council**

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## ► Introduction

As part of the World Refugee & Migration Council's (WRMC) project seeking innovative solutions for the global governance of climate displacement, the WRMC held a virtual event with the University of Toronto's Massey College to discuss and explore gaps in international governance and legal protection frameworks for the forcibly displaced.

Experts from Brazil, Canada and the United States engaged in a north-south dialogue to address managed retreat, the role of local community adaptation in the absence of national action, the applicability of the 1951 Convention and refugee designation for climate causes, and the multifaceted characteristics of climate displacement.

The WRMC's **Rosemary McCarney** moderated the discussion with **Dr. Robert McLeman** from Wilfrid Laurier University, **Dr. Erika Pires Ramos** of the South American Network for Environmental Migrations, and **A.R. Siders** from the University of Delaware about the rapidly accelerating challenges around climate displacement as the world prepares for COP26

## ► Discussion: Climate Change & Forced Displacement

The discussion began with an overview of the size and scale of climate displacement needing to be confronted and addressed. Dr. McLeman remarked that weather related events displace tens of millions of people worldwide each year – in the first 6 months of 2020 weather related disasters led to the displacement of an estimated 9.8 million people alone. Further, climate change

“We're moving into an era when there will be larger numbers of people each year displaced by weather related events amplified by the effects of climate change.”

– **Dr. Robert McLeman** on climate change and the increasing number of people that will be forcibly displaced due to it.

brought about by human activities that lead to desertification, deforestation, rising sea levels and other aspects of climate change are going to increase the severity and commonality of these events, increasing climate change induced migration and displacement.

The panelists discussed four “sets of uncertainties” facing the world regarding climate change, and how confronting them in the next 10-15 years may be able to address climate induced migration for the foreseeable future.

1. Greenhouse gas emissions – if the Paris Agreement is implemented to its fullest extent, then the world should be able to avoid many of the worst-case scenarios that accompany the continuation of the current trend in climate change.

2. Development pathways – currently over a billion people live on less than one dollar a day, in a more equitable world people have more capacity to adapt to changing environmental hazards other than through migration.
3. Demographic change – currently there are 7.8 billion people in the world, with the global population expected to rise to 10 billion by 2050, with most of the population growth occurring in South Asia and Africa, areas that are disproportionately impacted by climate change.
4. Migration policies – the world must decide whether it is going to work together to address climate change induced migration or continue a trend of rich countries building walls to keep out those affected by weather event related migration.

## ► Discussion (continued)

**Dr. McLeman** noted that If the sub-optimal policy option is taken on all four sets of uncertainties, 140 million people are estimated to be subject to climate change induced forced migration by the mid-century, while the number drops significantly if the optimal policy decision is chosen.

Further Dr. McLeman highlighted the importance of considering multicausality when assessing climate change's impact on displaced persons and the difficulties it present in developing policies oriented towards climate change led displacement. Climate change is at times the key driver of forced displacement, but many times it interacts with other social and economic factors that combine to drive forced displacement – such as basic social inequities tied to gender, age, income, and lifestyle amplifying people's vulnerability to climate change.

“Environmental degradation is going to lead to migration - Canada, the United States and all around the world – no country is going to be untouched.”

– **Dr. A.R. Siders** on the widespread impact climate change will have on people and countries around the world.

Following the introduction from Dr. McLeman, **Dr. Siders**, led an examination of what is known and unknown about environmental change as a driver of migration and displacement, and its impact on developing policies to confront climate change and displacement caused by it.

Dr. Siders brought attention to how experts model behavior associated with risk and climate change and the uncertainty of such modelling leading to a failure of

governments to act proactively and collectively to address the issue. Dr. Siders highlighted the difficulty in modelling risk and the propensity for humans to underestimate the risks that are posed to us. As a result, there is a strong reluctance to invest now to prevent future harms from climate change.

Dr. Siders also discussed the role cognitive biases such as the optimum bias play in policy leaders underestimating the risk of climate change led displacement and failing to enact policies to address it. A tendency exists for politicians to underestimate the risks that a climate change event will lead to migration. Political leaders fail to consider worst case scenarios.

## ► Discussion (continued)

Policy makers are faced with multiple challenges when attempting to model and develop policy responses to deal with climate change induced migration. Stemming from the multicausality discussed by the panelists, policy makers are faced with the problem of categorizing those impacted by climate change and how to equitably deliver resources and assistance, anticipating accurately where people will migrate from and to what area makes the logistics of pre-positioning and preparing challenging. The inability to easily define the root causes of displacement leads to difficulty in identifying environmental migration data from other types of migration such as economic and social factors.

Dr. Siders noted that people experience migration differently with many experiencing both loss and opportunity while others benefit, and others only

experience loss and harm. As of yet there is little understanding of the diverse experiences and how policy can intervene to ensure people experience less loss and harm.

The conversation then moved to a discussion of public policy at the local level and moving from immediate reactive policies to long-term policy design and strategy to confront climate change induced movement and those impacted by it.

**Ms. Pires Ramos** outlined that in Latin America to assist persons displaced by environmental factors, the use of humanitarian visas for temporary migratory admission facilitates cross border-movements. However, as Ms. Pires Ramos pointed out, the use of humanitarian visas and temporary residencies are by definition not a permanent solution and fails to guarantee security.

“When implementing policy, we cannot only focus on the international agenda, but also focus on the regional, national and local level.”

– **Erika Pires Ramos** on the need to look beyond the international level and design policy that corresponds to the needs of different geographic areas.

Ms. Pires Ramos echoed Dr. Siders by highlighting the necessity of increased knowledge and better data to enact local level policies that help those most displaced by climate change. More work is required to understand the needs of the displaced persons including the context that migration is taking place, the communities and cultures of the displaced persons, and where groups are more vulnerable than others.

## ► Discussion (continued)

Returning to the international agenda to confront climate change driven displacement Rosemary McCarney posed the question of where climate displaced persons locate their rights in the multilateral system and where do they find the duty bearers to hold those responsible for their displacement accountable?

In response, Dr. McLeman emphasized that climate change impacts a huge spectrum of people ranging from those with high levels of agency in terms of being able to make decisions about migration to people who might be completely displaced involuntarily with nowhere to go, few resources to assist them, and even to people who are completely immobile and need to move but lack the means to do so.

Unfortunately, within the current system many of these individuals are by-and-large

on their own as the international system does not have a comprehensive and non-voluntary framework to address the issue. Furthermore, the panelists poignantly remarked that until national governments start to take responsibility for addressing the underlying causes of displacement or to help when persons are displaced for environmental reasons, it is difficult to see strong, formal international mechanisms to address the issue.

The panel concluded with a Q&A period that involved a discussion of the difficulties of multicausality in attributing displacement to climate change. While reliable data is difficult to attain and prove causality, the panelists agreed that it cannot stand in the way of developing public policy. As such there is a need to use the data available and develop different categories and models to understand climate change driven

migration with more targeted data than has been done in the past. Furthermore, there is a need to take action and take action quickly as environmentally led displacement continues to accelerate. Finally, international, national and local public institutions together with refugee migration mandated and climate change mandated NGOs can work to develop policies that can lay the policy groundwork that can seek to address climate change displacement.

For a full recap of this event, you can watch the event in full on the [event page](#). To stay up to date with more news and events from the WRMC, [subscribe](#) to our monthly newsletter and be sure to visit our [webpage](#) on a regular basis.

## ▶ Panelists & Moderator



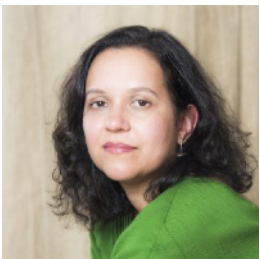
**Rosemary McCarney**, WRMC Special Advisor and Moderator

Rosemary McCarney is Senior Fellow in Foreign and Defense Policy at Massey College, University of Toronto, Senior Advisor to the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response and is a member of the Board of the WRMC. She was Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations (2015–2019).



**Dr. Robert McLeman**, Professor of Geography and Environmental Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University

Robert McLeman is Professor of Geography and Environmental Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. He is the author of many influential studies on the impacts of climate change on migration and displacement, including the widely used textbook, *Climate and Human Migration: Past experience, future challenges* (Cambridge University Press). A former Canadian foreign service officer, he has served as an advisor on climate, migration and security issues to government departments and agencies in Canada, the US, and Europe, several UN agencies, the World Bank and the OECD.



**Erika Pires Ramos**, Brazilian federal attorney, co-founder, South American Network for Environmental Migrations

Erika Pires Ramos is a Brazilian Federal Attorney and Researcher. She holds a PhD in International Law from the University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil. She is co-founder of the South American Network for Environmental Migrations – RESAMA (founded in 2010). Currently she is involved with the Latin American Observatory on Human Mobility, Climate Change and Disasters (MOVE-LAM), an initiative developed in partnership between RESAMA and University for Peace – UPEACE – in Costa Rica. She also collaborates with research groups in Brazil: Research and Studies Centre on Environmentally Displaced Persons (NEPDA-UEPB), Human Rights and Vulnerabilities (Catholic University of Santos), the Observatory of Community Protocols of Consultation and Prior Free and Informed Consent and, Law, Development and Decolonization (Sao Judas Tadeu University).



## ▶ Panelists & Moderator



**Dr. A.R. Siders**, Director of External Relations, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency

A.R. Siders is an assistant professor at the University of Delaware in the Disaster Research Center, Biden School of Public Policy and Administration, and department of Geography and Spatial Sciences in the College of Earth, Ocean, and Environment. She holds a JD from Harvard Law School and a PhD from the Emmett Interdisciplinary Program in Environment and Resources at Stanford University. Siders previously served as an environmental fellow at the Harvard University Center for the Environment, a legal fellow at the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University, and a Presidential Management Fellow with the U.S. Navy.



## World Refugee & Migration Council

Chaired by former Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, the World Refugee & Migration Council offers bold thinking on how the international community can respond to refugees through cooperation & responsibility sharing.

This conference was made possible through a partnership with [Cuso International](#).

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