

*Global Migration Challenges Speaker Series*

*The Global Migration Challenges series offers accessible, policy-focused conversations with leading experts, civil society, and practitioners. The series is presented with support from Immigration, Refugees, & Citizenship Canada, and the Canada Research Chair in Global Migration.*

*This report was prepared by students from the Lab's Graduate Student Research Initiative. For more information please email: [migration.munkschool@utoronto.ca](mailto:migration.munkschool@utoronto.ca).*

**Report 5**

**Forced Migration in Central America: The Causes of 'Caravans' and  
Canada's Response to a Regional Crisis**

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**Participants:**

**Arnau Baulenas Bardia:** Human rights lawyer, Instituto de Derechos Humanos, Universidad Centroamericana, San Salvador, El Salvador

**Jean-Nicolas Beuze:** UNHCR Representative in Canada

**Carol Girón:** Regional Coordinator of Policies and Programming, Scalabrini International Migration Network, Guatemala City, Guatemala

**Discussant:**

**Patricia Landolt:** Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto

Issue

The North of Central America (NCA) – El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala – is facing a severe displacement crisis; between 2011 to 2016 there was a tenfold increase in refugees and asylum-seekers from the region. This mass movement was prompted by extreme poverty, corruption, gang violence, and weak state faculties. As increasing numbers of nationals cross irregularly into Mexico, many attempting to reach the US, regional displacement has international implications. In order to manage the mass influx of people, states need to implement a comprehensive regional approach to promote

responsibility-sharing that addresses prevention, protection, and long-term solutions. Within this context the panel unpacked the divergence between root causes and public perceptions of “caravans”, the limits of international protection processes and civil society, the policies of the new Mexican government, and Canada’s role in the crisis.

### Discussion Summary

Mr. Beuze began the discussion by explaining that the key public misperception of the regional crisis is the cause of movement: people are fleeing for their safety rather than “in search of a better life”. States in the region are unable to protect vulnerable populations from gang violence in the form of forced recruitment, sexual harassment, sexual slavery, extortion, and direct conflict. The violence has been compounded by local authorities’ stigmatization of the poor, limited access to basic resources, lack of trust in the judicial system, and the expansive networks of criminal organizations. Mr. Bardia added that while many attempts to move “legally”, the long duration of the asylum process and difficulties obtaining evidence in support of claims have exposed individuals to danger prompting case abandonment and “illegal” movement to the North in order to survive.

Moreover, the panelists noted that contrary to media portrayal, “caravans” are not new; people have always moved in groups as a safety strategy. What is new is the volume of people in need of services and international protection. Ms. Girón noted that the magnitude of the humanitarian emergency is straining civil society organizations that do not have adequate resources to address protection needs due to the number and level of vulnerability of those displaced. Services are necessary for both refugees and migrants, but the distinction is too often overplayed in the media. The difference in categorization does matter for state responsibility in terms of the principle of non-refoulment, but it does not apply to provision of basic services.

### Lessons Learned

The NCA refugee crisis is the responsibility of Canada, Mexico, and the US, yet current efforts are failing. The asylum process itself is not efficient enough to handle the number of people fleeing nor the immediacy of violence. Consequently, Bardia asserts that international organizations should review their processes.

However, any procedural changes will be ineffective if countries are not open to receiving those displaced. Canada and the US have both been shirking their responsibilities. For instance, the speakers believe that Canada is applying the first country rule too strictly. Moreover, Beuze notes that Canada should be granting people protection under s. 96 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, not s. 97 as the former recognizes individuals as refugees under the 1951 Convention grounds, while the later only recognizes a person as needing international protection.

Politically, Canada and the US might view Mexico as an attractive alternative to taking in asylum seekers. However, although Mexico has strengthened its asylum process, not enough is being done to ensure the country is equipped to deal with the crisis. Currently, only the US provides support to Mexico and it is politically motivated. Moreover, many asylum seekers do not trust the Mexican authorities; many feel betrayed as they were not informed that they would be detained if they claim asylum in Mexico.

Furthermore, deportations exacerbate the problem. While some international organizations pay for return flights, removed persons are inadequately prepared for return. Moreover, the NCA countries are not ready to receive these people back; people are being returned to the same situations that forced them to leave. As such, international organizations and states need to address root causes and support other host countries instead of sending people back en masse.

Finally, the use of the term “caravan” by the media has been used in certain political agendas to produce fear out of a sense of invasion. As such, the language of the mass movement of people from the NCA needs to be refocused in order to not feed prejudices that might hamper support for those in need of international protection.

### In Conversation

Mr. Beuze spoke with students from the Global Migration Lab Student Research Initiative after the event to further discuss the crisis. Their conversation centered on crisis management, the complexity of movement, and the role of Canada.

Keen on methodology, the students asked if the crisis should be managed using a regional or a country-specific approach. Mr. Beuze responded that the two are not mutually exclusive; there needs to be national plans from host countries in order to visualize how their socio-economic specificities will enable to integrate more incoming migrants while aggregated to inform a regional strategy. Moreover, Mr. Beuze added that donor countries such as Canada play a mediator role to establish a regional comprehensive approach within Latin American countries by opening the discussion among civil society stakeholders and public entities.

The conversation then moved to a discussion on cross-border impacts of national policies. Specifically, the students inquired if we could anticipate movement of Salvadorian visa holders from the US to Canada due to the Trump administration’s intended halt to their protected status or a comparative answer will be applied for the Protective Haitian Status in Canada. In response, Mr. Beuze first noted that the end of TPS for Salvadorians has been blocked by court proceedings. Moreover, he emphasized that we cannot assume that

the end of a status in the US would immediately provoke movement North. In the case of Salvadorians, many have links in the US which mean moving to Canada will be more difficult to restore their previous lifestyle. Finally, there is still a wrong causality assumption since the suppression of the TPS as the actual number of inflows of Salvadorians and Hondurans hasn't been fluctuating since last year

The students then inquired if the Canadian government had given any justification for not hosting resettlement from the NCA last year. Mr. Beuze responded that there was no justification given but noted the government allocates a limited number of spaces to resettlement with quotas for other countries. Thus, it is important to remind the government that this is an opportunity to save lives.

The conversation ended on an inspiring call to action: "This is our neighborhood. This is right next door. We cannot just turn a blind eye."

The Global Migration Lab Student Research Initiative thank Mr. Bardia, Mr. Beuze, and Ms. Girón for their insights into the NCA forced migration crisis.