



Executive Summary: Panel 6 – Refugees, Migration, Borders, and Identity

The prior five panels in this 2021 Canada-Germany colloquium threw themselves at issue areas that represent major global challenges and opportunities for the two countries to intensify a partnership to promote greater multilateral cooperation.

The prior panels concluded that

- a) positive outcomes on climate change, global health and the pandemic, human rights and democracy protection, cyber-security and disinformation, and economic prospects and equity are all inter-linked;
- b) and without progress, they all contribute to the pressures of unprecedented global migration.

These global pressures on the international system and the responses of Canada and Germany to refugees, skilled labour recruitment, immigrant integration, and the management of diversity and pluralism, were the focus of the sixth panel of the series on September 20. It was chaired by Canadian Senator and migration scholar and advocate of refugee rights, Ratna Omidvar.

Welcomes from Ben Rowsell and Dr. Norbert Eschborn on behalf of the sponsoring institutions, the Canadian International Council and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, re-emphasized the commonalities of approach to world affairs of Canada and Germany. Respective Ambassadors, Stephane Dion for Canada and Sabine Sparwasser for Germany, noted the elections in both countries this week. They reminded of the perceived political need of our governments to demonstrate they are in control of borders to ensure that refugees are welcome.

In setting the scene, Senator Omidvar underlined that the tension between global migratory pressures on people displaced by poverty, crime, persecution, conflict, drought, and Covid-19, and the concurrent diminishment of receptivity to refugees, indeed represent major national and multilateral policy challenges.

Geographic exposure is highly unequal. Most of the world's 82 million displaced people are in the global South. Of these, 86% of the world's 23 million trans-border refugees are harboured by essentially "unwilling" and under-financed adjacent host countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Jordan, Turkey, Colombia, Iran and others.

The UNHCR has not been equipped to cope. The world community needs to enhance the agency's finances, operational mandate, and the commitment of more member states to accept refugees. With the exception of Germany's remarkable absorption of a million Syrian refugees in 2015, refugees accepted for settlement are what one panelist would term "a drop in the bucket." The Chairman suggested that limited resettlement by a few enable wealthy countries enabled the world to "ignore the lives of millions."

Canada and Germany are among the very few countries that still pursue recruitment immigration for settlement. However, our "addiction" to highly-skilled workers who bring economic benefit undervalues our increasing dependence on immigrants who are also essential workers in such vital fields as long-term care and agriculture.

The good news is that for our two countries at least, national identities are becoming more inclusive, as German Writer Jan Plamper emphasized in his landmark 2019 book ("Das Neue Wir" - the "new we").

In placing these issues before the panel, the Chairman asked how Germany and Canada can converge to reconcile competing policy tensions and to intensify multilateral cooperation by bringing others into the fold.

Issue presentations followed from Dr. Fen Hampson, President of the Global Council on Refugees and Migration, on current international trends and prospects, Ulrike Kober of the Bertelsmann Foundation on Germany's integration of refugee children, and Dr. Ayelet Shachar on the virtual outward protective extension of the national borders of wealthy countries targeted by migrants.

Dr. Hampson described the current and anticipated global migration picture as being desperate, again emphasizing the crushing burden of hosting refugees for countries adjacent to conflict and crisis.

Efforts to update the overtaken multilateral post-World War Two system for refugee rights and re-settlement such as the UN General assembly's Global Compact on Refugees and the 2018 Intergovernmental Agreement on Migration need to be reinforced by new agreements to correct the chronic underfunding of assessed national contributions (as exists for UN peace-keeping) and by the mobilization of contributions from world agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank, and from supplementary sources such as civil society, the international business community, or even from re-purposing assets frozen under anti-corruption provisions in various jurisdictions.

Canada and Germany indeed need to "lean on" developed countries unwilling to take in refugees to contribute at least offer much more in financial and international political support.

The second presenter, Ulrich Kober, reported on the extent to which German public authorities have been able to respond to educational and integration urgencies affecting refugee children. Between 2015-2017, around half a million asylum requests were lodged on behalf of minors and Germany had to absorb 130,000 refugee children and youth in the school system which is roughly equivalent to building 500 "additional schools." Half of the refugee children were from homes where the adults had no or only primary education. Their incomes were also considerably lower than German norms. Thus, the challenge of including these young persons in the education was not only quantitative in terms of numbers but also qualitative in terms of equity.

With regard to early childhood education, shortcomings endure in pre-school kindergarten spaces, partly because of a shortfall in trained staff. However, the vast majority of educators think inclusion is working well. With regard to school education, 80% of refugee youth express satisfaction with their socio-cultural and educational accommodation. Yet, academic language is a challenge and only few profit from special language courses. With regard to vocational training, Germany's internationally renowned "dual system" works as an "inclusion engine" for refugee youth, too, keeping youth unemployment down, even though Covid-19 has disrupted progress. (Subsequently, a panelist who noted that disadvantaged family background can indeed impede integration, urged Germany to restore the benefits and efforts of the 2015 emergency reception programs.)

Mr. Kober closed by asserting that Germany can learn from the "world leader of equity in schools" Canada ensuring all-day schooling for refugees, teacher training for managing diversity in classrooms and special support for schools with disadvantaged neighbourhoods. German authorities know what must be done to ensure equity and excellence in schools and now is the time for further action.

The third presenter, Dr. Ayelet Shachar channeled insights from her many years researching refugee rights and the changes in the way national border protection has evolved, especially for wealthy countries that are migratory and refugee target destinations. The overall effect has been to "de-territorialize" national border protection in ways that may undermine refugee rights.

The historic Westphalian system of fixed national borders, protected even by walls, that defended against entry (The Great Wall of China) or even exit (the Berlin Wall), gave way first to the post-1989 euphoric moment when the world seemed increasingly borderless, and then to borders that shift in time and space as a protective device from waves of refugees that destabilized public acceptance.

National border controls are consequently being pushed outward virtually in concentric circles by which prospective migrants are screened far from the destination country, with visa screening performed in country of origin, enforced by airlines at points of embarkation, and tracked by digital metric record-keeping on individuals ("borders in our bodies"), so that asylum-seekers are assessed as often as possible remotely.

The motives are, in general, to assert the effectiveness of national sovereignty over admissibility by controlling numbers of migrants actually accessing the land border itself.

Dr. Shachar fears the dilution of refugee and asylum-seeker rights by the distanced approach to assessment but endorses the outward deployment of visa officers (such as Canadians sent to Syrian refugee camps in the region) which can enable better preparation for eventual settlement. This is part of her broader policy recommendation that human rights attach to the "shifting border."

But the nub of the "trilemma" involved is the often-irreconcilable tension between legal obligations states have taken upon themselves and efforts at national control - seen as necessary to maintain public support for the admission of adjudicated asylum-seekers and recruited immigrants - and the spontaneous and essentially uncontrollable surges of migrants fleeing harsh international conditions and security crises.

The current crisis in Afghanistan has reinforced border protection and political messaging in several potential recipient countries that a repetition of the 2015 experience of Germany, for instance, when refugees were accepted without prior security clearances, will not be permitted.

Dr. Shachar urges scrupulous international attention to refugee rights and to emergency needs, requiring open humanitarian corridors, and that countries keep Embassies open in countries in chaos, to the extent possible.

The rich debate that followed reinforced concern especially over the tensions between the national political urge to control the situation and the spontaneous refugee events apt to surge out of control.

One intervenor reflected that our agencies, services, and scholars may have focused too much on "integration" and settlement of incoming migrants, and not enough on the forces propelling migratory waves, and their regional and other impacts. Such inward-looking preoccupation brooded excessively about "the burden of Europe" and not enough about the fateful realities and humanitarian vulnerabilities of migrants and the international causes and remedies of their situation.

Intervenors criticized democratic political behaviour. They agreed that "selling" migration in developed democracies which requires political communicators to emphasize its demographic and economic upsides, valorizes only skilled workers, and even investor-class migrants (increasingly ill-viewed for their adverse impact on local issues, such as housing price inflation), in order to win acceptance for small numbers of involuntary asylum-seekers in need of protection.

The Canadian propensity to enable visa entrants who are highly-skilled swift access to naturalization and citizenship while impeding it for essential workers with lower skill levels deserves hard scrutiny. It was pointed out that in current election campaigns in both countries, these issues received little candidate attention except to re-emphasize border protection.

There was wide support among panelists for the beneficial impact of engaging private sponsors as a way of putting selection more directly in the hands of citizens, though numbers involved are inadequate to bursts of mass displacement. Still, enabling community hosting initiative and responsibility can be a powerful tool for successful settlement, and counters polarization over the desirability of refugee and migrant intakes.

Overall, it was also agreed that political communication needs "re-balancing" from repetitive emphasis on control that can perpetuate the fear of immigration.

Panelists urged greater effort to celebrate the real positives of immigration such as its contribution to national achievement (e.g., the German refugee-immigrant inventors of the life-saving Pfizer vaccine), and underlining the paradigm shift in Germany from 2013 that increased naturalization levels considerably and counters the notion that anti-immigration attitudes are hardening.

The wider question of whether the world can co-operate was asked repeatedly. As in previous panels, there was regret expressed over the quality of national political leadership on these issues. It is imperative that UNHCR be empowered to provide protection of refugees as intended.

"Pushing borders out" as is being done in extreme cases by Australia in Samoa and Nauru assessment centres, by Denmark and the UK, in Africa, and by the US regarding Mexico, and elsewhere, is indeed concerning to panelists on human rights grounds. Regional "deals" such as Turkey/EU are unreliable and indifferent to refugee long-term welfare, though asylum-seekers themselves are acquiring increasing degrees of agency that merits support from governments as well as from civil society.

In closing the debate, the Chair reviewed the main issues discussed, and urged Canada and Germany to

- a) further improve their example for integration of immigrants and valorization of diversity and pluralism;
- b) and to renew their effort to bring other countries into the multilateral fold, with UNHCR as the hub.

She again emphasized the contribution of civil society in our countries, and private sponsorship, and urged much greater attention to the burdens assumed by the "secondary" adjacent countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Venezuela, Colombia, Iran, and others.

Finally, Ben Rowswell urged participants to knit the contacts and communications made here into an ongoing network for cooperation on the issues, which is a main intention of the colloquium itself.

Jeremy Kinsman, Rapporteur
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