

Title of Event: Virtual Book Launch: Canada in the Global Refugee Regime

Notetaker: Mahmoud Elmasry, uOttawa Refugee Hub Knowledge Team

Host of Event: LERRN: The Local Engagement Refugee Research Network

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Toplines:

- Canada in the Global Refugee Regime features distinct chapters that critically assess Canada's historical, domestic, regional, and multilateral engagements with international refugee protection systems.
- Speakers highlighted Canada's historic and contemporary role in shaping refugee protection through diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and initiatives such as the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, while emphasizing the need for renewed leadership in refugee resettlement, community sponsorship, and the UN human rights system amid declining global humanitarian commitments.
- A severe chasm divides Canada's international rhetoric and domestic realities, leaving a profound gap between the country's celebrated global reputation for championing refugee protection and its increasingly restrictive, complex, and precarious domestic immigration pathways.
- Successful refugee protection depends on flexible, community-driven approaches and strong government leadership rather than interchangeable or piecemeal programs. Civil society, diaspora communities, and local actors also play a critical role in shaping refugee protection outcomes, both domestically and internationally.
- Refugee protection systems are fundamentally shaped by political will rather than fixed international norms. At a time when many states are retreating from humanitarian commitments, Canada has both the responsibility and diplomatic capacity to act as a bridge-builder, convenor, and norm entrepreneur within the global refugee regime.

Presenter(s):

- James Milner, Carleton University (Moderator)
- The Honourable Bob Rae, Canada's Former Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations
- Adele Garnier, University of Laval
- Alice Nah, Durham University
- Ania Kwadrans, University of Ottawa
- Andrew Thompson, Balsillie School of International Affairs
- Delphine Nakache, University of Ottawa
- Dominique Marshall, Carleton University
- Jennifer M Hyndman, York University
- Johanna Reynolds, York University
- Nathan Benson, University of Ottawa

Circulated Materials:

Blog post: [Canada's Role in Global Refugee Responses by Nathan Benson, James Milner, and Delphine Nakache](#)

Key Points:

The Honourable Bob Rae – Foreword

- Wrote the foreword to the book, drawing on his extensive experience as the president of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to highlight the critical dissonance between Canada's global leadership image and its actual domestic realities.
- He notes that historically, the world faced a defining moral conundrum during the crisis of resettling Jewish people when most countries refused to act. Today, a similar pattern emerges as nations are once again shrinking their humanitarian responsibilities by claiming a lack of capacity, effectively shifting the burden back onto the Global South, which continues to shoulder the largest portion of global refugee protection.
- He also emphasizes the growing importance of academic scholarship and its reach into the public sphere. He concludes that bridging this gap is essential, as a well-informed public and robust academic data uniquely position communities to engage meaningfully in policy discussions and advocate for better, more equitable protection policies.

Delphine Nakache – The Disconnect Between Canada's International Image and Domestic Realities

- Analyzes the marked disconnect between Canada's international commitments to refugee protection and its actual domestic practices, serving as the starting point for examining the links between refugee policy and foreign policy. Internationally, Canada maintains a powerful reputation as a founding partner of the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI) and a leading promoter of the Global Compact on Refugees.
- In contrast to this global image, Canada's domestic landscape over at least the past two decades has become increasingly restrictive, harder to navigate, and defined by precarious pathways. This shifting domestic reality has occurred without any formal examination of its compatibility with Canada's broader international human rights commitments.
- She emphasizes that this significant gap between Canada's rhetoric in international forums and the restrictive domestic programs encountered by migrants on the ground has received very little legal analysis.
- She explains that the book begins to directly address this unexamined gap, offering a critical analysis of how Canada's actions in international forums align, or fail to align, with its domestic refugee and foreign policies.

Nathan Benson – The Contingent Nature of the Global Refugee Regime and Canada’s Role

- Nathan reflects on the 75th anniversary of the global refugee system, noting that it currently faces the most profound challenges in its history.
- He argues that we must think carefully about the specific roles that countries like Canada play and the subsequent impact those actions have on displaced people, because what happens next matters deeply and sovereign states are likely to have a larger say in the system’s future,
- He challenges the traditional perception of the global refugee regime, refuting the idea that it is a fixed package of norms and institutions operating automatically. Instead, he frames the regime as something entirely contingent; it functions in direct response to the interests of states and is fundamentally what states make of it.
- At a historical moment when several powerful nations are actively stepping back from their humanitarian obligations, the actions of states like Canada take on significantly greater weight. He highlights Canada’s unique capacity to operate as a convenor and a bridge-builder within the international community to sustain momentum for refugee protection.
- He states that the book explores the historical trajectory of where and how Canada has successfully built collective action, examining its use of various tools of engagement across three distinct regional contexts as well as identifying instances where Canadian involvement has been more muted.

Ania Kwadrans – The Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative: A Case Study in Canadian Engagement

- Co-wrote a chapter with Jennifer Bond providing a case study of the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI), a public-private partnership between the Government of Canada, the UNHCR, uOttawa, and philanthropic organizations.
- Operating across more than 20 countries and supporting over 40 programs worldwide, the GRSI serves as a primary vehicle for analyzing how Canada asserts itself as a global leader within the international refugee regime.
- Their analysis first outlines the GRSI’s core objectives, establishing that evaluating successful policy transfer requires first defining what Canada is attempting to transfer. They show that the GRSI aims to expand global resettlement through community sponsorship, strengthen local communities, and improve refugee narratives.
- Crucially, rather than strictly replicating Canadian policies, a deliberate shift from “private” to “community” sponsorship allowed for a broader, more flexible application worldwide. They note that the success of this global transfer is grounded in five core operational pillars rather than a rigid, context-dependent definition of the Canadian model.
- The final sections evaluate the theoretical frameworks necessary to analyze this mechanism, explaining the limitations of traditional policy transfer theory when applied to the GRSI. Because policy transfer theory is insufficient on its own, they engage with two additional frameworks – migration diplomacy and capacity-building – to fully capture how Canada exports its humanitarian expertise.

Adele Garnier – A Necessary Re-Assertion of Government Resettlement

- Co-wrote a chapter with Shauna Labman on the Canadian government's role in resettlement, detailing how Canada established global leadership in refugee resettlement, specifically during the early 2000s by aligning with the UNHCR's focus on refugee vulnerability over strict domestic integration requirements.
- She states that the chapter also notes how sustaining global resettlement commitments requires navigating intense domestic pressures to reduce overall immigration numbers, and that federal resettlement strategies must also account for distinct provincial operational dynamics, notably in Quebec, which operates its own independent resettlement policy.
- The final sections of the chapter emphasize that effective humanitarian architecture depends on treating Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR), Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR), and Asylum programs as complementary, non-interchangeable pathways.
- She emphasizes that these distinct streams cannot substitute for one another; rather, they must work in tandem to maximize Canada's capacity and integrity as a resettlement leader.

Alice Nah – Canada's Influence on Refugee Protection in Southeast Asia

- Co-wrote a chapter with Martin Jones on Canada's influence on refugee protection in Southeast Asia, focusing on two distinct regional crises: the Indochinese refugee crisis of the 1970s, which served as a significant moment for refugee policy and practice development in Canada, and the mass displacement of the Rohingyas following the crisis in 2017.
- Their chapter examines the role of Canada vis-à-vis other major states like Australia, China, and the US that shape regional policies, noting that Canada operates within a multilateral response influenced by these actors as well as its own domestic concerns regarding national security, irregular migration, and transnational crime. Within these constraints, Canadian diplomats have acted as norm entrepreneurs, leveraging political opportunities to advocate for stronger protection mechanisms.
- The analysis highlights how diaspora and civil society have driven this engagement, showing that the Rohingya community in Canada, alongside previously resettled Indochinese refugees, were instrumental in pushing for a stronger Canadian role.
- Furthermore, Canadian civil society organizations have fostered solidarity and refugee protection principles in Southeast Asia, exemplified by the Canadian Council for Refugees organizing a conference that ultimately fostered the creation of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network.
- The final section concludes that while Canada's sharing of good practices and solidarity remains important, its interventions should not dominate over civil society and local communities, ensuring that its approach instead fosters local ownership and accountability for refugee protection.

Andrew Thompson – Kicking the Hornet’s Nest: Leveraging the UN Human Rights System to Protect Refugees

- Co-wrote a chapter with Jennifer Kandji exploring how Canada has historically leveraged the UN human rights system to support refugee protection, noting that the most significant policy innovations within the system have consistently emerged in response to situations of mass displacement.
- They present four case studies where Canada played a leading role or championed these innovations:
 - Diplomatic engagement regarding the ad hoc working group on human rights in Chile;
 - The rapporteur on human rights and mass exodus responding to Cambodian refugee flows in the late 1970s;
 - The implementation of human rights monitors and field offices in Rwanda to foster conditions for refugee return post-genocide;
 - The strong backing for Human Rights Council commissions of inquiry to gather evidence for future legal cases against perpetrators.
- Their analysis contrasts this historical leadership with current federal priorities, noting that the Carney government has been silent on pursuing a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, following the Trudeau government’s proposed policies for seeking election to the council for 2028. Crucially, of the six priority policies named by Trudeau for the election bid, refugee protection was not included.
- They recommend that the Carney government should actively pursue election to the Human Rights Council, and if they do, they must add refugee protection as a distinct seventh policy pillar to align with Canada’s legacy of human rights advocacy.

Dominique Marshall – Traditions in Canada’s Engagement with the Global Refugee Regime

- Wrote a compelling historical chapter organizing the biography of Leslie Chance around six distinct periods that directly coincide with foundational milestones in international refugee protection. This narrative spans his early career and his involvement with the United Nations, culminating in his presence at the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention.
- She states that the chapter expands beyond this historical biography to sound an alarm regarding the preservation of institutional memory, arguing that it is not only the modern refugee regime itself that is currently threatened.
- The history and archives of the entire protection regime, stretching from top-tier international institutions down to local grassroots organizations working on the ground, are in deep jeopardy because archival preservation is often the first thing to be eliminated when funding and programs are cut.
- To prevent the erasure of this critical historical legacy, she notes that her upcoming work will focus directly on specialized archival projects designed to rescue and preserve these endangered records.

Jennifer Hyndman and Johanna Reynolds – “Dear Canadian State, What Happened to Your Pledge to Keep Extended Families Together in Refugee Resettlement?”

- Co-authored a chapter examining how the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSR) has been utilized as a de facto family reunification program in the absence of other viable domestic policy options for keeping extended families together. To understand the factors that sustain private sponsorship over time, they conducted extensive interviews and focus groups across five provinces between 2017 and 2021.
- The research reveals that regardless of which resettlement stream refugees initially used to arrive in Canada, whether as Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR), PSR, or Blended Visa Office-Referred refugees, the PSR program was subsequently utilized by all streams to sponsor remaining family members.
- They also note that Canada already possesses the operational knowledge to keep families together, highlighting how Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, operating then as Citizenship and Immigration Canada, successfully recognized arriving Kosovars as intact family units under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, facilitating their collective resettlement to Vernon, British Columbia.
- Consequently, they stress the urgent need for a responsive and flexible policy that actively challenges the strict boundaries of the nuclear family for the purposes of resettlement. They ultimately argue that any resettlement process remains fundamentally incomplete and potentially damaging if it fails to inherently consider intact family units as a core part of the structural pathway.