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Climate Change and the Immigration Debate

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Arizona's draconian anti-immigration law has galvanized popular protest and reignited demands in many quarters for an overhaul of US immigration policy. For those hoping that Obama's next big legislative battle would be over climate change, however, the immigration firestorm could not have come at a worse time. Besides eclipsing climate change in public debate, the shadow of Congressional action on immigration scuttled the support of a key Republican, [Senator Lindsey Graham](#) of South Carolina, for a Senate climate bill. Without Lindsey, the climate bill doesn't have a prayer.

But apart from political minefields, are immigration and climate change such separate policy issues? Not if climate change is understood, as it should be, as a problem requiring urgent action both not only to reduce carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions but also to adapt to much more volatile local and regional climatic conditions driven by global warming.

A December, 2009 [review of recent scientific studies](#) concluded that the average global temperature has risen by about 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit over the last 25 years, and ice caps, glaciers, ice-sheets and Arctic sea-ice are melting at an accelerating rate. From a baseline of 1861, [MIT scientists](#) project a median rise in global temperature by 2100 of 5.1 degrees Centigrade—over 12 degrees Fahrenheit.

What does global warming have to do with migration? Plenty. Besides sea level rise, which will force people to relocate from coastal areas, global warming will change patterns of rainfall, creating drought in some areas, flooding in others, and more intense cycles of both drought and flooding in still other areas. With ecological degradation and uncertain harvests, food supplies and livelihoods are likely to collapse, especially in already ecologically stressed and poverty-stricken areas. If safety nets are non-existent or if they evaporate, social tension and violence are likely to erupt. Both loss of livelihood options and violence are push factors for migration and displacement. Exact estimates are highly uncertain but, according to a [report published by Columbia University](#), "the scope and scale could vastly exceed anything that has occurred before".

Most experts agree that 'climate migrants' are most likely to follow established internal and international migration routes. Drought and soil erosion have already pushed people out of poor, arid parts of Mexico. [A 1994 study by the US Commission on Immigration Reform found](#), based on Mexican government data, that some 900,000 people were leaving arid and semi-arid

areas of Mexico every year because land degradation made it impossible to make a living. How many returned, relocated within Mexico or migrated to the US is unknown. What seems clear, however, is that Mexicans hard hit by projected future declines in rainfall of 70 percent in the semi-arid and arid north will be forced to consider migration.

Besides declines in rain runoff—which will impact both smallholder farm dependent on rain-fed agriculture and large irrigated commercial farms—Mexico is vulnerable to sea level rise and to cyclone events. Tropical storm Noel in 2007 inundated some 80 percent of the state of Tabasco displacing, at least temporarily, up to one million people. Migration requires resources and the poorest Mexicans may have no option but to remain in place, even under extreme economic and ecological stress. Those with means or relatives in other parts of Mexico or the US have the option to migrate.

What should the US do to prepare for the impacts of climate change in Mexico?

First, through bilateral and multilateral initiatives, the US should support investment in climate adaptation projects in Mexico such as disaster risk management, water harvesting and storage infrastructure, and enterprise development aimed at diversifying livelihoods. Local investment in building resilience to climate change would work to decrease migration. At the Copenhagen climate conference last December, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton said that the US would mobilize up to \$100 billion of private and public monies for adaptation in the ‘least developed’ countries. Given the large stake in the welfare of its nearest neighbor, the US should take a proactive role in mobilizing adaptation financing in North America.

Second, the US should overhaul its immigration policy with an eye towards both human rights and climate change “push” factors from Mexico (and Central America). Many Mexicans already migrate to the US on a seasonal basis, returning home after working and sending back remittances. By increasing the uncertainty of rainfall and thus agricultural crops, climate change will give further impetus to [‘circular migration’](#). Rather than providing no option other than becoming undocumented workers, the US should facilitate and manage seasonal migration and disaster-related migration. It should also explore eligibility for permanent migration due to environmental stress.

Climate change will put new pressures on neighborly relations between the US and Mexico. Bigger fences and more interrogations will do little to hold back the underlying environmental and economic currents pushing people to migrate. Better to prepare for climate change and build cross-border solidarity. We are all going to need it.