

## Great Decisions--What is Climate Migration and how does it impact U.S. national security interests?

By Elena Patton 27 January 2023



*Dr. Michele Devlin, a professor of Environmental Security at the U.S. Army War College, engaged with a packed audience about climate migration. Her presentation was part of USAWC's 8-part Great Decisions lecture series, Jan. 20, 2023.*

Families and entire communities are displaced and forced to migrate for various reasons: war, ethnic conflicts, persecution, economic degradation, natural disasters, etc. However, climate change is not explicitly addressed when discussing migration. A professor of Environmental Security at the U.S. Army War College engaged with a packed audience about climate migration.

Dr. Michele Devlin discussed climate migration—how environmental issues are forcing people to flee their homes and countries—impacts every corner of the world, including the U.S., what it means for those displaced populations, and the impacts it has on U.S. national security. Her presentation is part of USAWC's 8-part Great Decisions lecture series.

Each speaker addresses one of the year's most significant foreign policy issues identified by the Foreign Policy Association, Jan. 20, 2023.

Devlin focused on coastal communities in the Indo-Pacific, the Arctic, and the U.S. Pacific Coast. She has worked with native communities in the Arctic and migrants from the Pacific Islands at a meatpacking plant in Iowa and has communal connections to the California coast.

She began her presentation by defining key terms—refugees, internally displaced populations, and environmental migrants. Environmental migrants are known by various terms. However, there is no agreed-upon definition, resulting in agencies justifying not helping them or not learning how.

There have always been environmental factors—flooding, wildfires, hurricanes, and tornadoes—that have forced people from their homes. Environmental migrants can be vulnerable populations who are forced from their homes but do not/cannot cross international borders or the wealthy residents of Montecito who were temporarily evacuated from their homes due to mudslides.

Environmental migration is also a multi-causal phenomenon, increasingly complex because it is intertwined with other economic and social issues. In other words, the climate is a migration amplifier, explained Devlin.

Because environmental factors manifest over time, leaving is not an immediate, overnight decision. This can lead to repeated exposure to reoccurring environmental disasters, putting a vulnerable population at more risk.

In terms of national security, environmental migration presents multiple challenges. Environmental insecurity can lead to governmental and social insecurities. Some take advantage of those insecurities and vulnerable populations by committing transnational organized crimes, violent extremism, human trafficking, and environmental crimes—illegal logging, fishing, and mining.

Devlin offers a way forward for helping those forced from their homes and protecting our national security interests in the face of an increasing environmental crisis. Taking an interagency approach, the future will involve reducing climate change effects, working toward global social equity, integrating diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of national power, working with partners and allies, etc.

These complex challenges, however, present opportunities: forming and

strengthening civil-military relationships, revitalizing new communities with economic growth and diversity, etc., explained Devlin.

The next Great Decisions lecture will take place on Feb. 3, 2023. Dr. Evan Ellis will discuss Politics in Latin America.

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