

Policy Brief

MIGRANTS' MYTHS AND IMAGINARIES

UNDERSTANDING THEIR ROLE IN MIGRATION MOVEMENTS AND POLICIES

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August 2015
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, Canada



uOttawa

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge our sponsors whose support made this project possible, including: the Distinguished Visiting Scholar Program at the University of Ottawa, the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ottawa, the Hans and Tamar Oppenheimer Chair in Public International Law at McGill University, the Embassy of Mexico in Canada, the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa, the Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco in Canada, as well as Justicia for Migrant Workers (J4MW). We wish to give our special thanks to all the participants to the Symposium on the *Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration* for embarking on this journey with us – Anne-Christine Bloch, Christina Gabriel, Edmundo Meza Rodriguez, Evelyn Encalada Grez, Jackie Bonisteel, Joanie Durocher, Marianne Marchand, Mehdi Lahlou, Nathalie Mondain, Her Excellency Nouzha Chekrouni, Robert Mayrand, Stéphanie Garneau, and Ümit Kiziltan. Without your enthusiastic input, this project would not have been possible. We also thank our research assistants – Antonin Carrier, André Fecteau and Stéphane Paquette – for their excellent work.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the myth of the *Eldorado* evokes, international migration is partly shaped by the perceptions and imaginaries of migrants themselves. Beyond such cliché, however, there is little knowledge regarding the nature and influence of myths and imaginaries on migration dynamics. As symbolic collective representations of individuals' aspirations, hopes and dreams, myths and imaginaries constitute an important part of migrants' experiences and have concrete implications for the study of migration. This policy brief examines how migrants' myths and imaginaries influence the relationship between migration policies and migration movements.

This policy brief focuses on four myths and imaginaries that, after close analysis, shed new light on the dynamic interactions between migration policies and migration patterns. We have identified these four myths based on discussions held among researchers and practitioners during a one-day symposium that we organized at the University of Ottawa in May 2014:

1. The myth of the **“migrant-as-hero”**, which influences migrants' decisions to undertake risky journeys (mostly irregular) by evoking notions of honour and social recognition.
2. The myth of **freedom of geographical mobility**, referring to migrants' desire to move freely in the face of increasingly stringent travel requirements, which in effect augment the symbolic meaning attached to freedom of mobility.
3. Myths and imaginaries related to **(im)migration categories**, resulting from the internalization by (im)migration candidates of specific selection criteria in (im)migration programs that create high expectations among them about their migration prospects and experiences.
4. Myths and imaginaries related to **the country of destination as a country of human rights and better life**, which suggest that positive narratives about the social and political conditions in countries of destination are motivating factors for migrants, despite harsher asylum policies or difficult work conditions for them.

Based on a detailed analysis of these four myths, this policy brief reveals how myths and imaginaries intervene as an additional element in the relationships between migration policies and migrants' projects and strategies, and thus serves to move beyond simplified “dual” interactions between policies and migratory movements. We advance three policy-relevant recommendations:

1. More research is required to document the existence of a diversity of myths and to improve understanding of multiple influences migrants' myths and imaginaries have on the dynamics between migration policies and migrants' projects.
2. Because they have concrete implications at multiple levels, policy-makers should pay closer attention to migrants' myths and imaginaries.
3. Policy-making should adopt a more sensible approach to the particular context in which myths and imaginaries are (re)produced.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone has heard of the myth of the *Eldorado*. This myth, which emerged during the Spanish conquest of South America in the 16th century, offers a metaphorical representation of the foreign land as “prosperous” and refers to a place where it is relatively easy for migrants to begin a new and successful life (Salazar 2011: 586). This widely known myth suggests that international migration is partly shaped by perceptions and imaginaries. Beyond such cliché, however, there is little knowledge regarding the nature and influence of myths and imaginaries on migration dynamics. Our objective here is to help fill the gap in this area.

This policy brief aims to enhance the understanding of the relationship between migration policies on the one hand, and migration patterns on the other, by examining the role of migrants’ myths and imaginaries in this dynamic process. It is commonly assumed that legislation and policies exert an influence on migration movements and migrants’ strategies, and vice versa (Zolberg 1989; Brettel & Hollifield 2008; see Figure 1). However, the relationship between migration policies and migration movements is more complex than appears. We contend that one constitutive element of the relationship, which has received little attention from researchers so far, is migrants’ myths and imaginaries.

Myths and imaginaries are situated in the realm of symbolic meanings. They allow people to “work through their connections to a larger totality and communicate a sense of relatedness to a particular time, place and condition” (Schmidt Camacho 2008: 5). Because myths and imaginaries are shared “spaces” or “bonds,” they provide individuals with a sense of communion and belonging (Hall 1997; Anderson 2006) and are considered as true in the eyes of those who believe in them (Roussel & Smith 2008; Girardet 1986). Myths and imaginaries in the field of migration manifest themselves as common representations of the aspirations, hopes and dreams of migrants. They exist on an abstract level but constitute an important part of migrants’ motivations and lived experiences, and as such have concrete implications for migrants and the study of migration (Fortier 2012; Appadurai 1996; Schmidt Camacho 2008; Salazar 2010; 2011; 2013; Méndez & Rodríguez 2009; Castoriadis 1987). An examination of migrants’ myths and imaginaries is therefore essential to achieve a more complete and accurate understanding of the migration dynamics, since, as we argue here, myths and imaginaries influence in various ways the relationship between migration policies and migration movements.

In May 2014, we organized a symposium on *The Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration* at the University of Ottawa, gathering 15 experts on the subject, including researchers, practitioners, government and intergovernmental representatives. Researchers came from different disciplines (anthropology, economics, political science, sociology) and from various countries (Canada, Mexico, Morocco). As for practitioners, they were workers from Canadian NGOs, the Canadian Red Cross and lawyers. Government and intergovernmental representatives included the Moroccan ambassador to Canada, one civil servant from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), and an official from the International Organization for Migration (IOM). All participants were asked to reflect on the role of the myths and imaginaries of migration based on their knowledge and experience in the field (see Appendix A).

Based on the presentations and discussions from the Symposium, we have identified four contemporary myths and imaginaries prevalent among migrants:

1. **The migrant-as-hero:** This myth relates to notions of honour and social recognition acquired through (mostly) irregular migration. As a result of increased border controls, migrants become “heroes” in their attempts to reach, at their own risks, the country of destination. Undertaking the journey brings higher social status to migrants and their families in the communities of origin.
2. **Freedom of geographical mobility:** This myth takes into consideration the implications of visa policies for the mobility of wealthier migrants who previously could travel with ease. Given increasingly difficult and complex travel requirements, access to mobility has become a marker of social status and therefore highly desirable for this specific group of migrants. Freedom of geographical mobility represents the ability, in and of itself, to move freely, even if there is no plan to migrate and to settle elsewhere.
3. **Myths and imaginaries related to (im)migration categories:** When states develop and implement (im)migration programs, they convey clear messages about the migrant profiles they consider as the “best” fit through specific (im)migration categories. These categories, in turn, create high expectations among migrants who meet the program criteria and feel that they are ideally positioned to succeed in the new country. The focus of our analysis will be on the Federal Skilled Worker Program in Canada to illustrate this point.
4. **Myths and imaginaries related to the country of destination as a country of human rights and better life:** Social and political conditions in the country of destination are motivating factors for migrants. There is clear expectation among them and their families that they will benefit from better human rights protection, as well as increased personal safety, security and freedom. As will be shown in this policy brief, this is the case for Canada, a country that many migrants see as a “safe place” despite difficult working conditions for agricultural seasonal migrant workers and harsher asylum policies.

Before proceeding, two points of clarification are in order. The *first point* concerns our use of the terms “myths” and “imaginaries” in this policy brief. We understand “imaginaries” as being more grounded in a specific context, while “myths” are conceived as systems of thought in and of themselves. Whereas imaginaries emanate only at a certain time, in a certain place and from certain groups or individual characteristics (Méndez & Rodríguez 2009), myths are meanings that make sense in a variety of situations and are imagined and applied in numerous circumstances (Barthes 1972). Thus, by their very nature, myths mobilize a much larger group of people and communities, allowing them to relate to one another despite their differences. In this policy brief, we often use the terms interchangeably but in some specific cases, we use each term in a distinct manner.

Second, we use the four myths identified above as case studies to show the multiple interactions between migration policies, migrant projects and strategies, and myths and imaginaries. A limitation of our study is the paucity of empirical data in relation to this particular topic, which does not allow us to demonstrate with certainty the direct causality between these different spheres. However, we contend that these four myths and imaginaries reveal a number of *tendencies* whereby

policies, strategies and myths are closely intertwined and interact in many and varied ways. As in any new research field, we hope therefore that our findings will form the basis for further study on this understudied, yet very important topic.

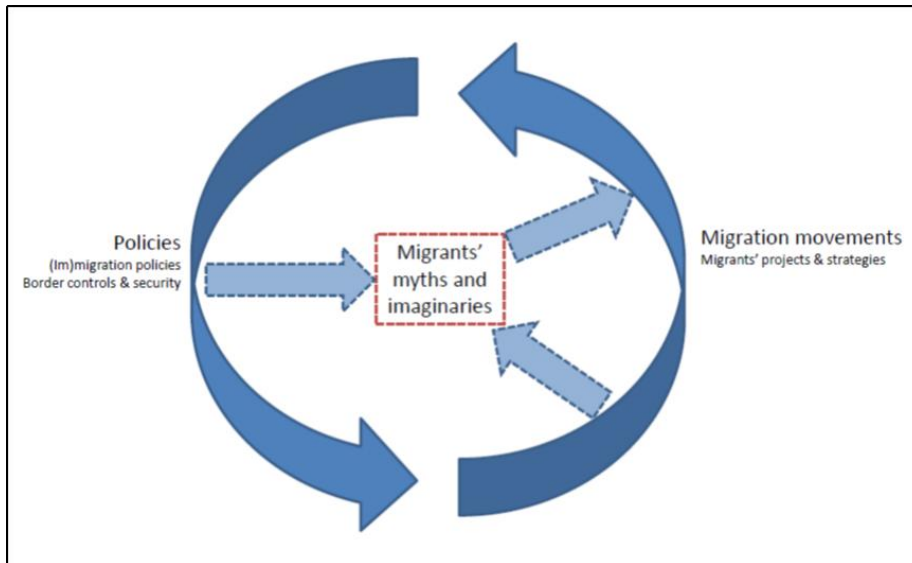


Figure 1. The place of migrants’ myths and imaginaries in the dynamic relationship between migration movements and policies.

Note: Figure 1 is a simplified representation of the relationships between policies, migration, and migrants’ myths and imaginaries, as we are aware that other factors also influence migration movements and policies, such as “push-pull” factors, context at local, national and international scales, and so on.

Figure 1 shows two main arrows representing the conventional way of understanding the relationship between migration policies and migrants’ strategies and projects. According to this simplified model, migration policies (expansive or restrictive¹) influence migrants’ decision-making and strategies. In turn, migrant movements contribute to shaping (or reshaping) migration policies. For example, research has shown that border controls drive would-be migrants to seek alternative routes, which in response often lead to increased border securitization and more irregular migration (as we further discuss below). Another example is immigrant selection policies. States use specific criteria to determine the most suitable candidates, thus shaping immigration avenues for potential applicants. When immigrants do not meet a society’s perceived needs, states respond by modifying their policies (more on this below). We advance that migrants’ myths and imaginaries (shown with the dashed box in Figure 1) constitute an integral part of the migration policy/migrant strategy dynamic. More particularly, as we demonstrate in our analysis, myths and imaginaries influence the interactions between migration policies and migrant projects in a variety of ways (as indicated with the dashed arrows in Figure 1).

¹ Expansive migration policies are characterized by generous programs encouraging the international circulation of people, whereas restrictive ones are those geared to limit the movement of people.

Myth of the migrant-as-hero

Since the 1990s, an increasing number of migration policies and border controls have been adopted in high-income countries as part of efforts to reduce the arrival of migrants deemed ‘undesirable’ (see among others Cornelius et al. 2004; Crépeau & Nakache 2006; Crépeau et al. 2007; Walters 2010; Triandafyllidou & Dimitriadi 2014). However, policies to heighten border control have failed to achieve their stated aim – namely, the “prevention” of unauthorized migration – and have instead pushed migrants to employ criminal networks to better their lives and to opt for increasingly more dangerous and perilous routes (Cornelius & Tsuda 2004; Calavita 2005; Cornelius 2005; Düvell 2006; Broeders and Engbersen 2007; Triandafyllidou 2010; Kraler & Rogoz 2011; ACME 2014; UN 2015²). Evidence for this are the growing casualties related to the crossings of the U.S.-Mexico border, the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa to Europe, and the Gulf of Aden from the Horn of Africa to Yemen (Bredeloup & Pliez 2006; Weber & Pickering 2011; Souiah 2013; IOM 2014).

Many studies have highlighted the importance of a variety of push and pull factors in contemporary migration movements, such as levels of development, issues of urbanization, and political conditions among others (Castles 2013; Castles et al. 2014; GCIM 2005). In addition, it has been shown that border controls are not always consistent, thus sending contradictory messages about (im)migration opportunities to would-be migrants (Cornelius & Salehyan 2007; Nakache & Crépeau 2007). Nevertheless, these factors alone are not sufficient to explain why individuals keep wanting to migrate and are ready to face the increasing risks and dangers of migration journeys. We contend that the myth of the migrant-as-hero plays an important role in this migration dynamic. In this myth, migrants are perceived as “heroes” for attempting the journey and acting on their desire to migrate.³ As border controls and immigration restrictions get harsher, the image of the migrant-as-hero gets stronger. Given the dangers and risks involved within this migration process, even those who attempt to cross borders become heroes, regardless of the outcomes. In this myth, the dangers and challenges of migration are valued as evidence of migrants’ sacrifice and risk-taking in order to meet their responsibilities and provide for their families. In contrast, those who do not try to migrate do not gain any special status and are even sometimes rendered ‘invisible’ in their communities.

² This point was also raised by Christine Bloch during the Symposium (Christine Bloch, communication, Symposium on the *Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa, 30 May 2014).

³ As a migration expert noted, myths and imaginaries feed migration regardless of the reality conveyed through statistical data (Piché 2014). Migrants’ hopes of positive outcomes rest therefore on a whole set of ideas and images that may not reflect the reality.

Vignette 1: Migration is *jom* in Senegal

Nathalie Mondain⁴ has conducted extensive research on migrant communities of origin in Senegal. In particular, her focus has been on the meanings and impacts of migration for those who stay behind (Mondain 2011; Mondain, Diagne & Randall 2012; Mondain, Randall, Diagne & Elliot 2012). Her findings reveal that migration, even attempts to migrate, bring recognition, honour and a certain social status to migrants and to their families. So much so that in Senegal, migration is referred to as *jom*, which is generally used to mean both success and honour. *Jom* is increasingly used in the context of migration to acknowledge the sacrifice and hardship that migrants experience through migration. It also refers to migrants' sense of responsibility to their family that is induced by the migration project. Migration is thus referred to as *jom* as a way for migrants to be recognized and honoured for migrating, even if they fail in reaching their destination. Consequently, the simple fact of undertaking the migration project gives individual migrants recognition from their family and community for attempting the journey, and for acting upon their desire for a better life. In this sense, migrants become heroes.

This case illustrates that migration dynamics in the context of increasingly restrictive border control policies cannot be understood without considering the performative power of migrants' myths and imaginaries. As shown in Figure 2, there is a feedback loop between migration strategies and the myth of the migrant-as-hero. Restrictive policies lead migrants to adapt their migration strategies, in this case by taking increasingly dangerous routes and resorting in greater numbers to migrant smugglers. This in turn feeds into the myth of the migrant-as-hero, as the increasing risks migrants are ready to take reinforce the image of migration as a heroic endeavour. This means that the prestige and recognition gained through border crossing are determinant in migration strategies. The myth of the migrant-as-hero then contributes to mobilizing a set of skills and strategies related to "surviving the risks" at the multiple stages of the migration project. In Figure 2, the absence of direct or visible linkage between migration policies and the myth of the migrant-as-hero should not be interpreted as meaning that there is no relationship between the two, but rather that the relationship is mediated by migrant strategies.

⁴ Nathalie Mondain. Communication. Symposium on the *Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa, 30 May 2014.

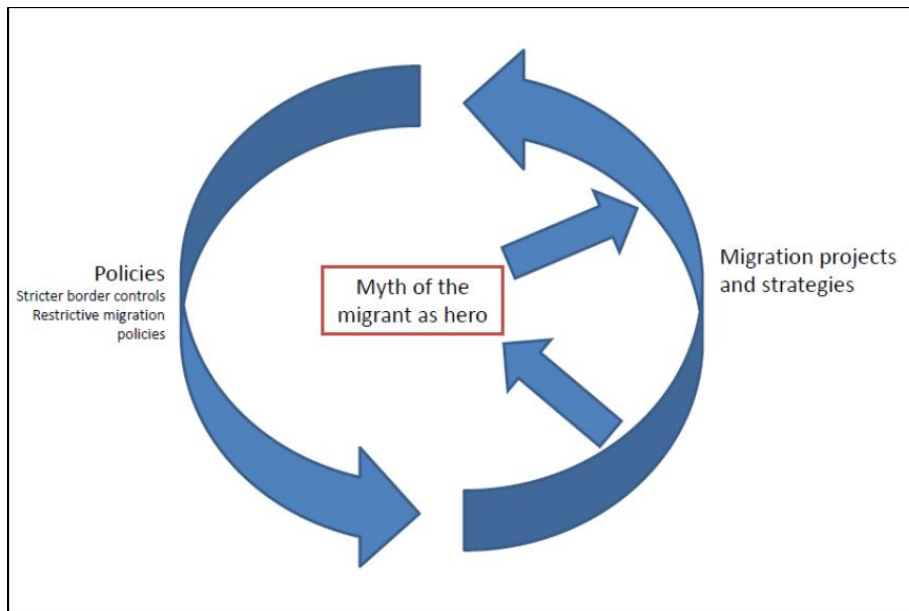


Figure 2. Myth of the migrant-as-hero

In sum, the myth of the migrant-as-hero contributes to understanding why most restrictive border control policies are counterproductive. Although it has been documented that migrants find ways to circumvent state controls at their own risks, existing studies overlook the importance of collective ideas, perceptions and motivations behind individual strategies and projects. The myth of the migrant-as-hero discussed here encapsulates in part these collective dimensions.

Myth on freedom of geographical mobility

Beginning in the early 1980s, visa regimes have been extensively used by high-income countries to prevent the movement of people from source countries to their territory. Australia, for example, requires visas for all foreign nationals wishing to enter its territory, whereas Canada, the United States and EU member states require visas only for the nationals of countries deemed to be the source of large numbers of asylum-seekers (such as Iraq and Afghanistan) or overstayers (such as Morocco or Nigeria) (Crépeau & Nakache 2006: 12). Over the years, applying for a visa has become increasingly difficult and cumbersome. For example, in their application for travel authorization, it is not rare for individuals to have to provide a return ticket, proof of funds, residency authorizations, etc. While it has been widely documented that visa requirements make it impossible for poorer migrants or state persecuted asylum seekers to leave their country of origin with the proper travel authorization (Gibney & Hansen 2003; Bigo & Guild 2005), less has been written on the implications of such policies for better-off migrants who could travel with ease prior to these changes. Yet, their ability to travel has also been affected in many ways (Gabriel 2013), rendering mobility increasingly desirable and valuable in the eyes of this specific group of migrants. It is in this particular context that the myth on freedom of geographical mobility emerged.

This myth relates to the relative loss of freedom to travel for middle and upper class individuals from low-income countries in a context of increasing visa requirements imposed by high-income destination countries. Increased visa requirements augment the desire to access mobility and contribute to reinforcing gaps between those who have and those who do not have access to international mobility. These requirements produce imaginaries associating access to mobility with social privilege. Obtaining proper travel authorizations becomes a marker of higher social status. Access to mobility in this context becomes an end *in and of itself*, whether or not the project of mobility is acted upon.

Vignette 2: Freedom of mobility and the Moroccan middle class

During the Symposium, Mehdi Lahlou⁵ explained that until the mid-1980s, the Moroccan middle class could travel to Europe without the need of special authorization or documents – that is, it had free access to travel and mobility. Given that the Moroccan middle class could easily afford to travel to Europe compared to poorer Moroccans, its access to and freedom of mobility was a privilege associated with its middle class status. This privilege was curtailed when several European countries imposed visa restrictions to nationals of Morocco and other North African countries, and this was compounded when the European Union applied the Schengen Agreement measures to control and restrict the movement of third country nationals to the European space after 1997. As a result of these measures, the Moroccan middle class lost its freedom of mobility and its easy access to travel to Europe. Having lost this privilege, the Moroccan middle class has been seeking to regain it by undertaking the onerous process of applying to acquire the travel authorizations needed to go to Europe (Chattou et al. 2012).

This case illustrates the intermediary role that imaginaries play in the relationship between migration policies and migrants' projects. Policies of increased mobility restrictions seem to directly influence individual and collective imaginaries about access to mobility and freedom to travel (see Figure 3). More specifically, the implementation of stricter travel requirements deepens the gap between those who can travel/move and those who cannot. Obtaining those travel documents therefore becomes meaningful, not only for providing access to mobility and freedom to travel, but also because these documents carry symbolic value as markers of privilege and social status for those who can acquire them (especially among members of middle and upper classes in countries of origin, who had little difficulty travelling in the past). Thus policies related to travel requirements shape collective imaginaries of mobility as markers of social status. Imaginaries related with freedom of geographical mobility in turn influence individuals' mobility decisions and strategies (i.e., they undertake the onerous process of acquiring the necessary travel documents), regardless of whether they have concrete projects to move or travel. This migration dynamic may be relevant to also understand the propensity of the growing middle and upper classes in some

⁵ Mehdi Lahlou. Communication. Symposium on the *Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa, 30 May 2014. See also M.Lahlou 'Les migrations internationales à partir du Maghreb depuis le printemps arabe' Public Conference, University of Ottawa, May 28 2014.

emerging countries (e.g. Brazil, China, India, etc.) to increasingly seek travel and other mobility opportunities (OCDE 2014; Global Mobility Survey 2013).

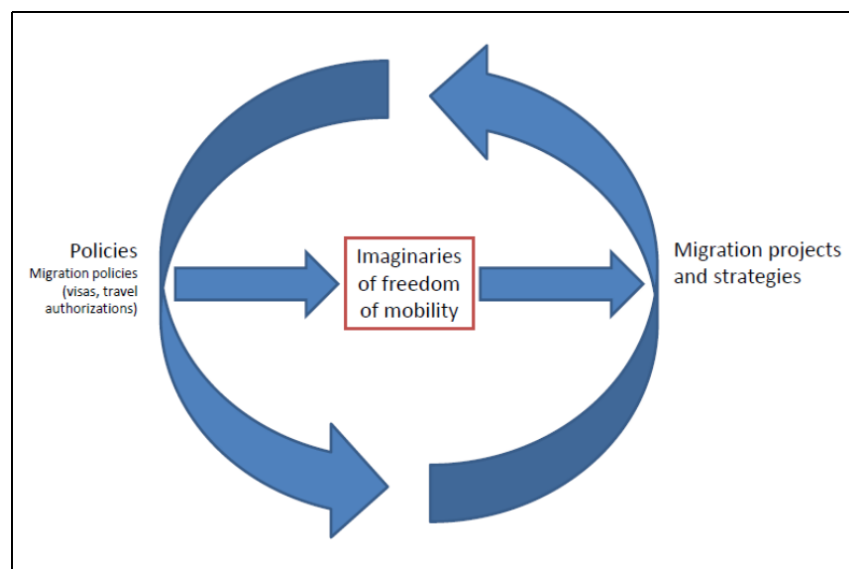


Figure 3. Imaginaries on freedom of geographical mobility

Myths and imaginaries related to migration categories

Many high-income countries have developed programs geared specifically to attract the 'best and brightest' (im)migrants (Shachar 2006; Dauvergne 2008). In Canada, this race for international talent has led to the creation of a number of (im)migration categories and programs – such as the international student category, the Canadian Experience Class (CEC), the Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP), the Federal Skilled Trade Program class, and the Provincial Nominee Program. These categories and programs have created images and profiles of 'ideal' (im)migrants expected to bring specific skills in a number of occupational sectors deemed to face labour shortages. The Canadian FSWP will be used here to illustrate the impact (im)migration categories and programs may have on migrants' imaginaries and projects.⁶

The FSWP was traditionally the major source of immigrant admission to Canada's economic stream, but the program's importance has decreased from 84.8% of the total admitted economic migrants in 2005 to 36.8% in 2014 (CIC 2015). It should also be noted that the FSWP has recently undergone major changes. As will be discussed below, even if applicants under the FSWP continue to be assessed under the points system,⁷ the overall result of these changes is that fewer skilled workers

⁶ A similar analysis could be undertaken with other categories where human capital is an important factor in the selection process, such as international students.

⁷ The points system gives value to a specific set of criteria that are considered as important factors of employability (age, education levels, language proficiency, employment experience).

are eligible to apply under the FSWP. In what follows, our discussion focuses on the FSWP as it existed before the implementation of these major changes, that is, at a time when the program was open to all skilled workers and was solely assessed under the points system.

In the past, the FSWP allowed for admission of all workers in skilled occupations based *solely* on their prospective employability assessed under the points system. Thus, an applicant's overall capacity to adapt to Canada's labour market was evaluated through a series of criteria taking into consideration factors such as levels of education, English or French language skills, and work experience. Such specific criteria created expectations among migrants regarding their settlement and integration prospects in Canada based on their human capital, especially their skills as highly educated professionals.

The myths and imaginaries associated with the FSWP relate to these well-defined eligibility criteria. Successful applicants were deemed as ideally positioned for economic and social integration in the Canadian society, thus projecting those ideals on them and generating migrants' imaginaries of successful employment and settlement in Canada. These imaginaries of success existed not because of naive would-be immigrants who did not understand the Canadian system, but precisely because migrants' skills, educational achievements and other human capital characteristics were so clearly identified as valuable and coveted by Canadian immigration programs and in the selection process of applicants.

Vignette 3: Canada's Federal Skilled Worker Program

According to Christina Gabriel,⁸ (im)migration categories generate not only myths and imaginaries associated with particular groups of (im)migrants (e.g., international students, economic immigrants, family class immigrants, refugees), but also hierarchies of the good and most desirable (im)migrants. In particular, the FSWP came to represent the 'ideal' immigrant for Canada because highly skilled workers – those with higher levels of education and socio-economic status – were considered to be able to easily participate in the Canadian labour market. These images were based on a 'neoliberal rationale' valorizing global competitiveness and workers who invest in their own human capital (e.g., through education, training, and language skills), and therefore who are 'productive' and can contribute to the Canadian economy – at the expense of other classes of immigrants, such as those from the family class and humanitarian class. These images were internalized by the mainstream Canadian society as well as by FSWP applicants and immigrants who believed that because they were highly educated and had invested in their human capital, they would be able to rapidly integrate the labour force and become productive workers.

⁸ Christina Gabriel. Communication. Symposium on the *Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa, 30 May 2014.

Moreover, as Robert Mayrand⁹ noted, the competitive selection process of the FSWP through which skilled foreign workers were admitted had the effect of defining migrants' expectations about their immigration experiences and boosting their confidence in their capacity to successfully settle in Canada. Given the strict eligibility criteria of the FSWP that valued high levels of human capital, central in this imaginary was the expectation that they would achieve a successful career and quickly enjoy the social mobility associated with it.

Vignette 4: Aspirations of skilled foreign workers and the FSWP

Myths and imaginaries also operate among candidates for immigration in their country of origin. Stéphanie Garneau¹⁰ noted that in many low-income countries with fragile economies, highly educated skilled workers are confronted with few prospects and opportunities for professional development. In such contexts, emigration to a high-income country is considered a strategy for successful career advancement, and thus a path toward social mobility. Since countries like Canada are actively seeking to attract skilled workers, applicants under the FSWP believed that there is an important need for educated professionals like themselves, and that they would achieve their full potential by immigrating to Canada. In other words, their migration project was built on an imaginary combining successful economic integration in Canada and increased prestige and social status in the country of origin.

These imaginaries about successful employment and settlement contrasted, however, with the situation many immigrants experienced once they arrived in Canada. In spite of being more educated and skilled than previous cohorts, immigrants arriving under the FSWP since the early 1990s and 2000s faced more challenges in the settlement process, including their credentials' lack of recognition and difficult labour market integration with consequences such as deskilling, unemployment and underemployment (Reitz et al. 2013; Chicha 2009).

Given this reality, why did the FSWP remain so attractive to skilled immigrants? A number of factors could explain this, such as the influence of historical patterns of migration on immigrants' strategies and decisions, and/or problems related to the transmission of information (whether it is distorted or not received by would-be applicants). However, these factors alone cannot explain why, cohorts after cohorts of skilled individuals would still want to go through the selection process and come to Canada, especially after numerous criticisms were voiced regarding the mismatch

⁹ Robert Mayrand. Communication. Symposium on the *Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa, 30 May 2014.

¹⁰ Stéphanie Garneau. Communication. Symposium on the *Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa, 30 May 2014.

between immigrants' skills and labour market needs (see below). We believe that the imaginaries of successful employment and of a smooth settlement process that the FSWP created were feeding immigration projects and strategies, even if on an individual level the integration experience was difficult and sometimes led to failure.

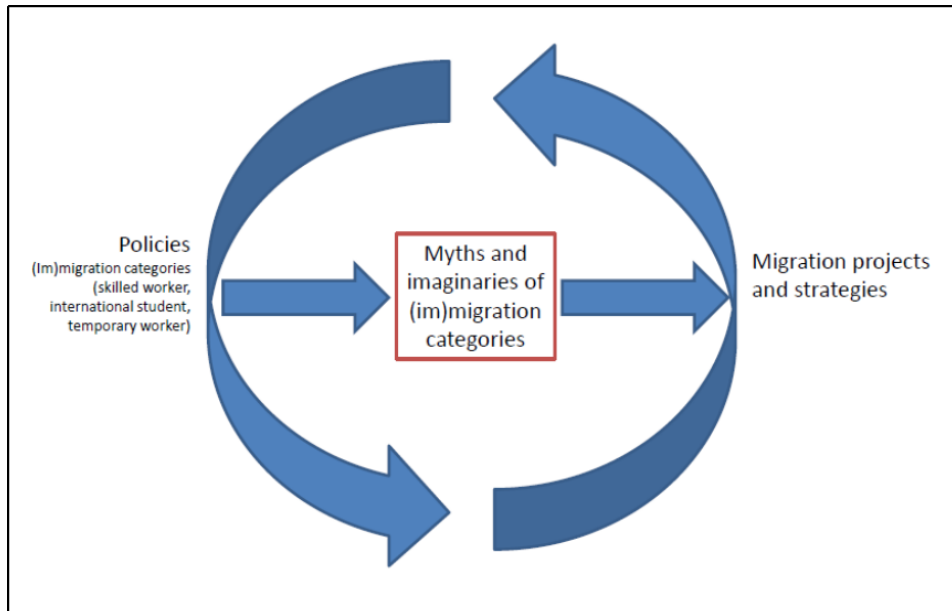


Figure 4. Myths and imaginaries of (im)migration categories

As shown in Figure 4, the imaginaries of (im)migration categories can be understood as a mediating force between (im)migration policies and (im)migration projects and strategies. The mediating force acts as a distortion of the (im)migration prospects by misrepresenting the information provided by (im)migration programs and the selection process. To some applicants, this may function as a prediction of their successful settlement. Imaginaries of (im)migration categories also provide a certain picture about labour market dynamics in Canada whereby it appears that individual merits prevail. Based on these images, (im)migrants develop expectations that their personal skills will help them trump settlement and economic integration challenges.

In the mid-2000s, the FSWP was criticized for not being sufficiently linked to Canada's labour market needs (Hawthorne 2006; Reitz 2005). This shortcoming was first addressed by introducing eligibility rules and revising the points system (language became the most important selection factor; points for a Canadian job offer were increased, while those for foreign work experience were reduced, etc.; see Baglay & Nakache 2014: 6-7). In addition, in January 2015 Citizenship and Immigration Canada introduced *Express Entry*, a new electronic application management system ranking applicants from the economic class on a point scale and awarding half of the points to those with a job offer from a Canadian employer.¹¹ All applicants under the FSWP must now use Express

¹¹ Under Express Entry, interested applicants must complete an "online profile." Based on this profile, applicants are ranked against others in a pool and "only those who get an 'Invitation to Apply' from CIC will be able to apply" (CIC 2015).

Entry, and it is important to understand that those who successfully pass the FSWP points system can remain in the pool if they do not rank sufficiently high under the new points scale established by Express Entry (The Economist 2015). It is likely that these recent changes introduced by the federal government to the economic class, whereby employers play a larger role in the successful selection of immigrants, will generate further expectations and imaginaries among (im)migrants. We advance that the ongoing existence of highly specific (im)migration categories and selection criteria will continue to feed would-be migrants' imaginaries about their (im)migration prospects and experiences in Canada. Candidates who will be selected after such a competitive process (having met all of the program criteria and having ranked high under Express Entry) will likely expect a smooth and easy transition to settlement. In turn, it is reasonable to assume that these expectations will feed even stronger imaginaries about successful employability and social mobility.

Myths and imaginaries of Canada as a country of human rights and better life

The myths and imaginaries of Canada as a country of human rights and better life relate to the perception of Canada as a benevolent, democratic country where residents enjoy a good quality of life, supported by progressive social policies and respect for the rule of law. Although not as directly linked to migration policies as the myths and imaginaries discussed above, the positive images of Canada created by these myths and imaginaries are strongly compounded by the prominent narrative of Canada as a country built by immigrants (Reitz 1998).

The myths and imaginaries of Canada as a country of human rights and better life are present among several categories of migrants, notably temporary migrant workers and asylum seekers. As discussed during the Symposium, some temporary migrants choose to come to Canada not only because of employment-related opportunities, but also to gain access to a higher degree of freedom and equality, especially gender equality that is sometimes missing in their country of origin.

Vignette 5: Latin American women and access to gender equality through Canada's Temporary Migrant Worker Programs

The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) began in 1966 with Jamaican nationals coming to Canada to meet seasonal demands in agriculture. In the 1970s, the SAWP expanded to include workers from other Commonwealth countries as well as Mexico.¹² This program was traditionally dominated by male migrants coming to specific Canadian provinces (mainly Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec) to fill labour shortages in agriculture (Basok 2004). More specifically, the program favoured the recruitment of low-skilled male migrants who were married and had families – which they had to leave behind – thus ensuring their return to their home country. Extensive research has been conducted on the SAWP's harsh working conditions (NFB 2003; Basok 2004; Hennebray 2012; Hennebray & McLaughlin

¹² For history and background information on the SAWP, see Hennebray (2012) and Fernandez et al. (2013).

2012; McLaughlin 2013; McLaughlin & Hennebry 2013). More recently, however, the program has become increasingly attractive to Latin American migrant women as well. This is because the SAWP is one of the few migration options available to Latin American women (especially single mothers) from rural and impoverished areas with high unemployment rates to access labour and thus support their families (like for their male counterparts). Yet, beyond the financial benefits that the SAWP provides, influential in these women's decision to apply to the SAWP is the image of Canada as a country that values, promotes and respects gender equality and freedom. Thus, according to Evelyn Encalada,¹³ an expert and migrant activist who has worked with SAWP migrants for over a decade, one key factor in Latin American women's motivation to come and work in Canada through the SAWP is the hope of gaining access to a society where gender relations are more equal than in their countries of origin - that is, where, as women, they can work and be treated as equals to men.

During the Symposium, several stories of asylum seekers were also shared to illustrate the prominent role of this myth in influencing individuals' decisions to seek protection in Canada.¹⁴ It is important to note that, over the past decade, the projection of Canada as a benevolent country has been eroded with the adoption of stricter border control measures (such as the increasing use of immigration detention and removal), and more stringent asylum and citizenship laws and policies, which have made it increasingly difficult for migrants to get a secure status (Crépeau & Nakache 2006; Arbel & Brenner 2013; Macklin 2014; Dauvergne 2013a; Dauvergne 2013b). In spite of these changes, large numbers of migrants keep coming to Canada with expectations that there is a better life for them in this country. This signals that the imaginaries of Canada as a country of human rights and better life seem to prevail, at least in the short term, and continue to have a strong influence over migrants' decisions to choose Canada as their destination country.

Vignette 6: Seeking asylum in Canada: human rights matter

For his research on the migration industry and its role in migration movements from Mexico to Canada, Edmundo Meza Rodriguez¹⁵ interviewed many Mexican migrants living with precarious status in Toronto. During the Symposium, he presented the case of a Mexican policeman who claimed asylum in Canada. Fearing for his life and for his family's security, this policeman decided to seek protection in Canada in large part because of the images and 'myths' about Canada that were conveyed by friends, the media, the migration industry, as well as the Mexican and Canadian governments. The policeman explained that over time, news channels, movies and soap operas had created the image of Canada as being very 'good' to its citizens and immigrant population. After his refugee claim was denied, he

¹³ Evelyn Encalada. Communication. Symposium on the *Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa, 30 May 2014. *We can add link to trailer of new documentary.*

¹⁴ Jackie Bonisteel. Communication. Symposium on the *Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa, 30 May 2014.

¹⁵ Edmundo Meza Rodriguez. Communication. Symposium on the *Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration*. Ottawa, University of Ottawa, 30 May 2014.

decided to stay ‘illegally’ in Canada. However, he told Meza Rodriguez that his current experience of living in fear of deportation by Canadian authorities is actually worse than what he was living in Mexico, where he feared persecution.

What can explain that, even when migrants face significant human costs (family separation, harsh working conditions, increased insecurity) and diminished human rights protection, they are still driven to choose Canada as their particular destination? We contend that their decisions are informed by images of Canada as a country where they see a certain degree of guarantee that their human rights will be protected and that they will have access to a better life. In this case, and unlike the other imaginaries discussed above, there appears to be no direct link between the images migrants have of Canada as a country of human rights and better life and the various restrictive migration policies adopted by the Canadian authorities in recent years (thus the use of a dashed arrow to represent migration policies in Figure 5).

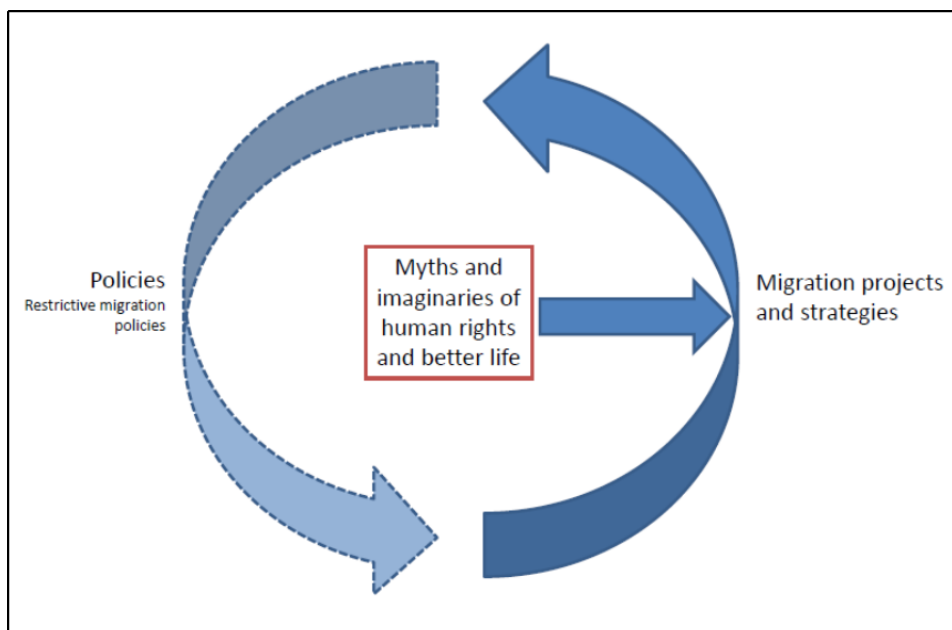


Figure 5. Myths and imaginaries of human rights and better life

However, this is not to say that policies are not informing migrants’ myths and imaginaries. These myths are based on a positive narrative of Canada as welcoming and generous for immigrants, a narrative that has been built on policies and programs that over many years shaped the country’s immigration history. In other words, there appears to be a disconnect between *current* policies and broader myths and imaginaries of Canada as a country of human rights and better life. Although it is too soon to say whether this disconnect will disappear over time, the examples discussed above suggest that even when migrants are aware of harsher policies, they still hold on to a range of broader (historical) myths and imaginaries. These findings suggest that such broader myths and imaginaries can prevail over time and can play an influential role in migrants’ strategies and

projects over fairly long periods. Moreover, the myths and imaginaries of human rights and better life give resilience to migrants' projects and strategies in the face of fluctuating migration policies.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In this policy brief, our primary objective has been to bring to the fore the influential role that myths and imaginaries may play in migration dynamics. Paying more attention to these myths can shed light on the complexity of the relationship between migrant movements and migration policies. The study of myths and imaginaries can thus serve to move beyond assumptions of relatively simplified 'dual' interactions between migration policies and migrants' projects and strategies by revealing how myths and imaginaries intervene as an additional element in these relationships.

Moreover, the analysis of myths and imaginaries contributes to refining our understanding of the relationship between migration policies and migrants' projects and strategies. As others have underlined (Townsend & Oomen 2014), migrants react to changes in policies and it is important to examine how migration policies are received, perceived and acted upon. Most notably, the study of myths can help enrich our understanding of the mental frame surrounding migrants' decision-making: migrants make active choices as individuals; yet, as this policy brief shows, there is also a collective imaginary in which these choices are embedded. These imaginaries are all the more so powerful that they give meaning to these individual choices.

Our findings also show that migration policies can sometimes feed myths and imaginaries, thus leading to unexpected outcomes. We have demonstrated this with the myth of the migrant-as-hero, whereby harsher border controls have enhanced rather than diminished individuals' risk-taking in their migration journeys. Likewise, the myth on freedom of geographical mobility reveals how stricter travel requirements contribute to enhancing the desire for mobility among the most privileged classes of migrants in some low-income and emerging countries. This case underlines the fact that policies are often developed on the basis of simple assumptions regarding the relationship between migration policies and migrants' reactions and strategies. Consideration of the collective imaginaries that often act as important factors in migrants' thinking and decision-making could reduce the current disconnect between migration policies and migrant strategies. For example, as we have shown, Canada as a country of human rights and better life plays a role in Latin American women's willingness to participate to the temporary migration program for agricultural workers despite the difficult work conditions and the absence of permanent residency avenues for them under this program.

To conclude, this policy brief highlighted four main myths and imaginaries that intervene in migrants' decision-making in a number of particular contexts today. Other myths could be identified by undertaking more in-depth empirical studies; indeed, myths and imaginaries emerge out of specific contexts and circumstances, and most likely also vary between social groups based on differences such as class, gender, ethnicity/race, religion and so forth.

At this stage of our exploratory research, we suggest three policy-relevant recommendations:

1. Myths and imaginaries cannot be disregarded as simple 'irrationalities': they are in fact an integral part of migrants' experiences and decisions. Therefore, more research is required to improve understanding of the multiple influences myths and imaginaries have on the dynamics between migration policies and migrants' projects. Moreover, it is important to recognize and document the variety of myths and imaginaries that migrants hold (both collectively and individually) by taking into consideration their specific context, both at macro- and micro-scales – from the global and regional, to the national, local and even individual level.
2. Policy-makers should pay closer attention to migrants' myths and imaginaries despite their symbolic and abstract nature, because they have concrete implications at multiple levels. First, myths and imaginaries have the power to influence migratory movements and strategies – including the choice of migration routes, migrants' decisions to undertake risky migration projects, etc. Second, given their influence on migration decisions and strategies, myths and imaginaries have concrete implications for migrants themselves, who sometimes pay a high human cost in their attempts to migrate. Third, the influence of myths and imaginaries on migration patterns may result in unintended policy outcomes. For example, in a context of increased border controls, migrants will not necessarily be deterred from migrating; rather, they will try anything to circumvent such controls and will gain recognition for their 'heroic' behaviour, even if they fail in reaching the destination country. Likewise, and this is our fourth point, myths and imaginaries can help to explain why some policies may be inefficient (e.g., migration categories that do not succeed in attracting those migrants wanted by states, or mismatches between images of ideal immigrants and labour market needs). Thus policy makers ought to take myths and imaginaries seriously in the process of policy-making since (im)migration policies will most likely feed would-be migrants' imaginaries about migration opportunities and experiences, and thus their migration projects, decisions and strategies.
3. Recognition of the influence of myths and imaginaries is important for policy-making as it guarantees a more sensible approach to the particular context in which myths and imaginaries are created and reinforced. Paying attention to these myths is a first step in understanding the specificity of migrants' conditions, and in realizing that the messages that migration policies and policy-making involve can be interpreted in a variety of ways, thus leading to many possible migration outcomes.

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APPENDIX A: PROGRAM OF THE SYMPOSIUM

The Myths and Imaginaries of Transnational Migration

Symposium organized by Delphine Nakache, H  l  ne Pellerin and Luisa Veronis

Friday 30 May 2014

University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada

Programme

9h00-9h15 Mot de bienvenue et introduction / Welcome and introduction

Delphine Nakache, H  l  ne Pellerin et/and Luisa Veronis

9h15-10h45 Th  me 1 / Theme 1: Construction des mythes et imaginaires: par qui et comment? / Construction of the myths and imaginaries: by whom and how?

Mod  ratrice/ Chair : Luisa Veronis

Table ronde / Panel : Son Excellence Madame Nouzha Chekrouni (Ambassadeur du Royaume du Maroc au Canada), Joanie Durocher (OIM), Evelyn Encalada Grez (OISE/UT; J4MW)

Discussion de groupe / Group discussion

10h45-11h00 Pause-caf   / Coffee break

G  n  reusement offert par l'Ambassade du Royaume du Maroc au Canada / Graciously offered by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco in Canada

11h00-12h30 Th  me 2 / Theme 2 : Les mythes entourant les liens entre la migration et le d  veloppement / The myths about the linkages between migration and development

Mod  ratrice / Chair : H  l  ne Pellerin

Table ronde / Panel : Mehdi Lahlou (INSEA, Maroc), Marianne Marchand (UDLAP, Mexico), Edmundo Meza Rodriguez (UDLAP, Mexico), Nathalie Mondain (uOttawa)

Discussion de groupe / Group discussion

12h30-13h30 Pause d  ner / Lunch break

13h30-15h00 Thème 3 / Theme 3: Les catégories de la migration et les imaginaires migratoires / The categories of migration and imaginaries

Modératrice / Chair : Luisa Veronis

Table ronde / Panel : Christina Gabriel (CarletonU), Stéphanie Garneau (uOttawa), Robert Mayrand (SITO)

Discutant / Discussant : Ümit Kiziltan (CIC)

Discussion de groupe / Group discussion

15h00-15h15 Pause-café / Coffee break

15h15-16h45 Thème 4 / Theme 4: Les enjeux de la sécurité, les contrôles frontaliers et les mythes migratoires / Security issues, border controls and the myths of migration

Modératrice / Chair : Delphine Nakache

Table ronde / Panel : Anne-Christine Bloch (Croix-Rouge Canadienne), Jackie Bonisteel (Perley-Robertson, Hill & McDougall), Mehdi Lahlou (INSEA, Maroc)

Discussion de groupe / Group discussion

16h45-17h15 Conclusion et mot de clôture

Conclusion and closing remarks

Hélène Pellerin

17h30-19h00 Réception / Reception

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Delphine Nakache is an Associate Professor in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa. She teaches in the areas of public international law and migration and refugee law. Her research and writing interests include securitization of migration and citizenship policies, migration and human rights standards, and employment standards. One of her current projects focuses on the protection of temporary migrant workers in Canada and on their pathways to permanent residency. She also recently started a new collaborative research entitled "Securitization of migration and asylum in Canada: A comparative analysis of policy consequences and human rights impacts."

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Luisa Veronis is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Ottawa. Trained as a social geographer, she is interested in issues of immigration and transnationalism, citizenship and identity, governance and the nonprofit sector. She is currently involved in a number of collaborative projects on the experiences of minority groups in the transborder city of Ottawa-Gatineau, the influences of environmental conditions on international migration to Canada, and the production and consumption of multicultural media.

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