

Interview - Nina Hall

Written by E-International Relations

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Nina Hall is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Johns Hopkins SAIS (Europe). Her research areas include transnational advocacy, global refugee and migration governance, and climate change adaptation. She has written on these themes in a book with Routledge, *Displacement, Development and Climate Change: International Organizations moving beyond their Mandates*. Nina holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Oxford and a Master's Degree from the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She was previously a lecturer in global governance at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, Germany and has worked with the World Economic Forum and the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Currently she collaborates with a global network of digital activists.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates occurring in your field?

International relations' scholars have shifted their focus from state actors to non-state actors, and from processes in the Global North to the Global South. These broad trends are interesting, and I am excited to see how these debates evolve. I've just been reading a new book by Craig Kauffman on grassroots global governance, which examines how local communities in Ecuador have an influence on global governance and is a good example of these broad shifts in IR.

My current research explores how the digital era is affecting advocacy in the global South and North. After President Trump's election there was great public debate on the influence of social media in political campaigning. There is also a significant academic debate examining the influence of the Internet on collective action, you can read for instance the work of David Karpf or Helen Margetts. However to date, I have seen much less scholarship in international relations examining how the Internet is challenging – or not – our theories of global governance. My research explores how our theories of international advocacy need to be reconsidered as the Internet is changing the tactics that activist groups use, as well as the organizational forms and strategies. For example, we now have Avaaz, Move On in the US, GetUp! in Australia and Jhatkaa in India. These are all groups that use Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook to mobilize people to take action on issues such as climate change, trade policy and refugee rights.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

When I started studying International Relations I was very interested in the UN. I researched and published on the role of the United Nations in East Timor in promoting women's rights, for instance. Like many IR scholars, I saw the UN and other international organizations as the key providers of global public goods.

Two elements have evolved in my scholarship. Firstly, I no longer see international relations as comprising of distinct issue-areas but rather see issues as crosscutting across many regimes and institutions at multiple levels. In the past, I may have focused on the World Health Organisation as the exclusive international expert on health, UNICEF on children, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on refugees. Now, most global issues are intertwined with others. Climate change, for instance, has implications across development, health and humanitarian organizations. There has been a significant shift in both the policy and academics debates about how institutions and regimes overlap more – and a large literature has emerged in IR on regime complexity and

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fragmentation to reflect this.

The second shift in my thinking has come with my current research on digital activist groups. I am now reconsidering how norm change occurs, and who drives it. This is part of a broader research agenda, which many constructivist scholars are engaged in. In the last decade, many scholars such as, Jacqui True and Mona Lena Krook, have challenged the conventional constructivist wisdom that norm change is a linear process and rather emphasized that norms are contested as they emerge and as they are implemented. My interest is in how new actors, namely digitally based advocacy organizations like Avaaz or MoveOn are contributing to that process.

Your recently published book focuses on the intersection between climate change, migration, and development. How would you say this intersection shapes relations between states today and in the future?

My book explores how climate change has consequences across a number of regimes including humanitarian, migration, and development regimes. Climate change is not just an environmental issue, but poses major challenges for developing countries and is likely to lead to an increase in the frequency and intensity of humanitarian crises. Therefore the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNHCR have to consider how they integrate climate change into their policies and practice. This has implications also for states – they have to think carefully about how to coordinate their policy-making and delegation across multiple international institutions. After all, states are ultimately responsible for endorsing the mandates of international organizations and providing adequate funding for them.

The big question is what will happen to global governance under President Trump's administration. In June, for instance, we saw the US pull out of the Paris Agreement and be highly critical of the UN. How Trump's presidency will unfold is not clear, we are seeing a number of states stepping up to defend global institutions and agreements. Immediately after Trump pulled the US of the Paris Agreement, there was a major meeting between the EU and China to outline how they would continue to push forward on mitigating climate change.

In addition, Fiji, a small island state in the Pacific which is strongly affected by climate change, and is hosting the 2017 UNFCCC negotiations in Bonn, also stated they would continue to lobby the US. That is not to say that it is going to be easy, and I don't want to portray a false sense of optimism that a small state like Fiji can convince Trump to step back into the negotiations. What it does mean is that these things are not static and can evolve as new constellations of actors at domestic and international level push for coordinated global action on climate change.

Could you tell us a little about how intergovernmental migration organizations, such as the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), have evolved the discourses of their mandates in relation to climate change?

My book explores in depth how UNHCR's discourse, policies, operations, and structure evolved to engage with climate change. In brief, UNHCR's position evolved from an outright rejection of the term 'climate refugee' in the mid-2000s, to an engagement with the UNFCCC and debates on disaster induced displacement between 2008 and 2016. Their initial skepticism was because refugees cannot legally be someone who is primarily fleeing from climate change accordingly to existing international refugee law. In fact, it is widely accepted that the term 'climate refugee' is legally incorrect (and for more on this read Jane McAdam's work) but the term is still sometimes used in popular discourse.

UNHCR in 2008-2009 became more engaged in debates about the impact of climate change on displacement when Antonio Guterres was the High Commissioner of UNHCR. Guterres spoke of five mega-trends that were driving and leading to increased displacement, and climate change was one of these.

Although UNHCR is not mandated to provide assistance or protection to all displaced peoples, Guterres put forward a broader vision for UNHCR. He implied it should be taking responsibility for all displaced peoples, and not just refugees and stateless peoples who conventionally fall under UNHCR's mandate. Guterres wrote op-eds in major

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newspapers and in 2011 asked states at a ministerial meeting for a mandate to assist those displaced by natural disasters. However, the vast majority of states did not endorse this. Nevertheless, Guterres shifted UNHCR's position significantly. Now there are several people in UNHCR working on the intersection of climate change and displacement, and exploring what the appropriate future frameworks are to protect those people. One of the initiatives that came out of Guterres work, and with the support of proactive states such as Norway, was the Nansen Initiative. This subsequently became the Platform on Disaster Displacement, and a place for interested states to explore how to protect and assist those displaced by natural disasters at regional and international levels.

Could climate change be linked to conflict and displacement?

Climate change is likely to impact on many people's livelihoods and lead to an increase in humanitarian disasters. However, I am skeptical of linking climate change and conflict or displacement in a directly in a causal way. It is problematic to say climate change causes conflict, because the link is rarely linear or clear cut. For instance, a common argument is that climate change leads to resource scarcity and then resource scarcity means that people will fight. In contrast, there are scholars who also say that it is resource abundance, not resource scarcity, which drives conflict. My book details the complexity of the linkage between climate change and displacement and how it has evolved over time

A second problem with directly linking climate change to conflict, or displacement, is that it ignores the political dimensions and decisions. The United Nations Environmental Programme, for instance, issued a report in 2007 that argued that climate change was a contributor to the conflict in Darfur. The problem with this argument, if taken to its extreme, is that politicians– such as President of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir – and military leaders are absolved from their responsibility. You have to be very careful about the casual links you draw between climate change and conflict and the political implications of these arguments.

Antonio Guterres was appointed United Nations Secretary General this year. Do you think his legacy, as former head of UNHCR, will influence the priorities of and the direction the UN will take?

The jury is still out on how Guterres will use his previous experiences as the High Commissioner for Refugees in his current position. There is no doubt that his experience as the head of major UN organisation enabled him to gain the critical experience to take on the role in the first place. And I would note that there was a lot of debate about his appointment and the selection process. There was a campaign to have a woman elected as the UN Secretary General, for the first time, and there were a number of very experienced women candidates such as Helen Clark, the former head of UNDP and former Prime Minister of New Zealand, and Christiana Figueres, the former head of UNFCCC. They both had similar levels of experience to Guterres in that they had run major UN organizations and Clark had also been prime minister of her country, New Zealand, but did not make it through even to the final rounds of the election process. Although Guterres is a good leader for the UN, it is a pity UN member states did not choose a woman.

In terms of Guterres' priorities, I recently read one of his early speeches as UN Secretary General where he outlined one of his core roles as providing peace and security. This is a conventional understanding of the UN's core role. What is interesting though is that he also made reference to multiple drivers of conflict, including climate change, population growth, rapid urbanization, food insecurity, and water scarcity, which he had focused on at UNHCR. Guterres is acknowledging that issues are so intertwined that you can't just deal with climate change on its own, as it has a major impact on peace, security, and other areas of the UN such as its development and humanitarian mandates. In addition, Guterres does see a link between climate change and peace and security. He is not extenuating that link in an academic sense, but he is saying it is a driver in some senses of conflict.

What would you say is the most concerning aspect of climate change in relation to humanitarianism and humanitarian crises?

That is a hard question to answer, as there are so many challenges. One key challenge is getting adequate funding for slow-onset climate change. Slow-onset climate change includes droughts, which develop over a longer period of

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time than fast-onset climate change (floods and storms), and there is less attention to them until they really get to a crisis point. Humanitarian agencies are very aware of that it is hard to get states, and publics, to adequately finance preventative measures to prevent droughts, which may lead to famine, from becoming a major humanitarian crisis. We should hope that humanitarian donors will become more proactive at releasing funding before crisis hits.

“Environmental refugees”, “climate migrants”, and “climate change displacement” have become buzzwords in policy and politics. Are these words accurate reflections of the current processes unfolding?

The debates have evolved quite a bit from when I started my PhD in 2009. Then people used the term ‘climate refugee’ and ‘environmental refugee’ a lot. However, these terms were problematic as I discussed earlier, and thanks to the very good work of activists, academics, and other experts these are no longer used in the policy discourse. People sometimes use the terms ‘climate migrant’, ‘climate change displacement’ and ‘disaster displacement’, which are broader terms and cover people affected by climate change and also those affected by an earthquake. After all, one of the limitations if you only focus on ‘climate change displacement’ is that you ignore all those affected by an earthquake.

There is also a second shift in the debate, towards more thinking about migrants in vulnerable situations. In September 2016, the UN held its first major high-level summit on migration and refugees at the UN General Assembly. States agreed to work towards two global compacts: one on refugees and one on migration over the following two years. The Global Compact for Migration implies we need to assist those who fall outside the refugee framework and are vulnerable because of the causes of their displacement and/or the situation they find themselves in when they migrate. For instance, they may be sitting in prisons in Libya or trafficked across the Mediterranean.

You also recently explored digital activism as a campaigning tactic amongst civil society organizations (NGOs). To what extent is this tactic successful for political change?

This is the big question that I want to tackle in the next few years. There has been a large academic and popular political debate between those who see digital activism as ‘clicktivism’ and those who see it as transformative. I want to go beyond this ‘clicktivism’ debate as I don’t think that advocacy is so neatly divided anymore between what is offline and online anymore. This is a false dichotomy. I’m interested in how established advocacy organizations, such as Oxfam and Greenpeace, use digital tools alongside their existing repertoires of stunts and public protests to push social change. I’m also fascinated by how new organizations, such as Avaaz, Move On and 350.org have emerged in the digital era of the last 20 or so years and what their impact is. What distinguishes these new organizations is that they are able to campaign using these social media, WhatsApp, and email and reach millions of people. Avaaz have 42 million people on their email list.

Moreover, these groups don’t just use send out email petitions, they are also getting out people onto the streets and organizing vigils. For example, a digital advocacy group here in Germany called Campact has got thousands of people protesting against the Transatlantic Trade and Intellectual Property (TTIP) agreement. In Australia, GetUp mobilized thousands on the streets to stop the Australian government returning refugees to an offshore detention center. In short, we have a range of advocacy groups that are working offline and on-line to advance their campaigns. My current research agenda aims to unpack when and how offline and online advocacy have an impact.

What is the most important advice you can give to young scholars of international relations, particularly those interested in your field?

My first advice, which was passed onto me, is that we need more research on global migration governance. There is a large body of scholarship on global environmental governance and global economic governance, but there is very little on the global migration regime. This is partly because we have a weak international regime for migration, and states are very reluctant to give any international organisation power over migration rights. Yet there is a need for scholarship to seek out where and what sorts of institutions are working at international, regional, national, and local levels to protect and assist migrants.

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Secondly, there is need to re-conceptualize global governance. We need to think about the ways in which different actors – not just state officials sitting in capitals making decisions that shape global governance – are shaping global governance. These may be Columbian environmental activists, or South East Asian children's rights organizations. Most of the digital advocacy groups that I focus on are nationally based and target national decision-makers but their campaigns have international implications. While traditionally we think of international relations as occurring between states, we should consider how non-state actors at all levels influence international affairs.

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This interview was conducted by Evangelina Moisi. Evangelina is an Associate Features Editor for E-IR.