

International Migration and Current Challenges: Transforming the Debate on Human Mobility

United Nations University Migration Network

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- The UNU Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) explores problems and promotes solutions related to the environmental dimension of human security.
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Context: The Importance of Language

The language used to discuss migration is of central importance. There is a gap between the lived realities of migration and the policy language used to describe it. Language like “illegal” and “irregular” constructs migrants as the exception to the norm and connects them with issues of crime. Instead, migrants who cross the borders undocumented or enter through legal channels and overstay are only responsible for an administrative offence. When referred to as “illegal”, migrants are criminalised and associated, in the perceptions of societies of destinations, with human traffickers and smugglers, and for that reason treated as criminals. Migrants may not hold or be willing to use their documents for various reasons, from the real loss of documents to the lack of existing documents to the fear to be persecuted because of their origin or fear of being repatriated. Also, very often the same human traffickers and smugglers leave those who are crossing the borders without their documentation. As long as undocumented migrants are regarded as criminals, violence and a general negative feeling against migrants perpetuate.

Empowering language has the potential to create social change. As also noted by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his opening remarks to the Supporting Syria and the Region conference, held in London, on 4th February 2016, “Today, let us change the narrative. Let us, by and with our solidarity and generosity and compassionate leadership, bring true hope to the people of Syria and the region”. Policymakers, the media and academics alike must have a heightened sensibility to the consequences of language: because language has the power to shape understanding, we need new and more careful ways of talking about migration.

Theme 1: International Migration and Human Security

Due to changes in the international system since the end of the Cold War, migration has increasingly become a security concern. The role of security professionals and private actors in the

migration sector has expanded, and securitizing migration increases the perception of migrants as threats in host societies. Important cuts in the welfare systems of some European countries in areas such as public education and public healthcare have increased a sense of vulnerability. Combined with the increased migratory presence, this sense of vulnerability leads to blame migrants for the worsening of basic services and, definitely, leads to heightened prejudice against migrants. Migration cannot only be “managed” when crises occur, but must be “governed” over the long term. Key priorities include allowing safe access for migrants, fostering intercultural dialogue and stopping the dismantling of welfare policies.

Mobility partnerships are one strategy that has been adopted by the European Union with the goal of better managing migration. Such frameworks set targets but are not legal obligations. These partnerships must be harmonized with other policies, because incoherence renders them ineffective. However, this is not to say that a standard approach should be adopted for all partnerships, because that ignores country specificities. There needs to be a common EU migration policy, including a revision of the Dublin rules that projects a unified European strategy.

In situations of displacement, whether due to conflict or disaster, few interventions cater specifically to the needs of the elderly. One reason this population remains overlooked is the lack of age-disaggregated data, which is necessary to better target humanitarian initiatives. Once displaced, the elderly tend to stay longer in temporary housing and struggle to adapt to new way of life and regain economic stability. This leads to a decline in their economic welfare, which often corresponds to a loss of sense of self-worth and worsening health outcomes. Due to such disruptive impacts of displacement, the elderly often cannot wait for a genuinely durable solutions, but require transitional but workable solutions. Designing age-sensitive solutions necessitates including the elderly as a resource rather than a burden.

Diasporas have been recognized as partners in development cooperation and in conflict resolution through economic and social remittances. Diasporas are heterogeneous social groups, and therefore subgroups within a diaspora differ in their approaches, interests and objectives regarding their country of origin. During conflicts, diasporas can help with provision of humanitarian assistance, and after conflict they contribute to infrastructure development, education and employment. However, because diasporas are not necessarily unified or impartial actors, there are risks of potential biases and fragmentation within the diaspora. In order to best engage with diasporas to contribute to conflict resolution, policymakers must assess the conflict and know how the diaspora relates. In parallel, mapping diaspora groups and activities will allow policymakers to leverage on the diversity of the diaspora and their context-specific knowledge.

Theme 2: Gender Perspectives in Migration

Considering the impacts of gender on migration experiences is essential for formulating policies that better serve male and female migrants specifically. Particularly with the feminization of migration, it is essential to adopt gender perspectives in the study of migration and in migration policy. Migrant feminists themselves constitute active agents of social change whose insights are crucial to understand the complexities and diversities involved in many migrant women’s realities. This can provide new information to improve and develop evidence-based policies on migrant women more broadly.

In the global labour market, many female migrants are employed in economies of care and intimacy. Labour in this sector continues to be stigmatised, poorly valued and exploited, but women themselves have different understandings of such labour. By engaging in this labour, women ensure the well-being of individuals and families worldwide while also pursuing their own goals for economic and social empowerment.

Intimate labour, particularly sex work, is often conflated with human trafficking. International human rights law on sex trafficking embraces specific moral and humanitarian narratives that reproduce power hierarchies, which are clearly gendered, racialized, sexualised and classed.

Immigrants in Europe, particularly women, have established a multitude of associations that enable them to exercise their civil rights in the public sphere even though they are often not granted the same political rights as citizens. Enlarging what is recognized as political participation to include associational participation is one way to acknowledge female immigrants' agency and valorise their contributions.

However, we cannot simplistically group the experiences of female migrants together by virtue of them being women. Attention must also be paid to other factors that influence their experiences, such as race, social class, level of education, sexuality, in order to work on an intersectional approach to the policies addressing migrant women.

Theme 3: International Migration and Sustainable Development

Although the issues of migration and corruption are not often linked in the debate on migration and development, they are highly linked. We know that there is a negative correlation between corruption and development so better understanding the linkages between migration and corruption can help us to better mitigate areas where migration can contribute to corruption and to enhance the areas where migration can help to reduce corruption, for instance, through the transfer of norms and values from one country to another. An example of where migration can have a negative impact on corruption is if there is a 'morality drain' from the country, meaning that those who have a problem with corruption leave the country leaving only those who perpetuate the status quo. On the other hand, if those same people transfer new norms and values around anticorruption back to the country of origin, this can play a role in the reduction of corruption.

There is a common consensus that mobility must be factored into sustainable development. Policy coherence in the area of migration requires an examination of different policy areas (such as health and education) that may influence and be influenced by migrants and migration. In achieving this, attention should be paid to institutional structures and arrangements that encourage or discourage coherent policy development.

The current migration situation in Europe illustrates the breakdown of the distinction between refugees and economic migrants. In a survey conducted among migrants in transit in Turkey and Greece, those who would be classified as refugees and those who would be called economic migrants both indicated their desire for better socioeconomic living conditions as well as a safe country in which to reside. The same survey found previous failed migration attempts from these transit countries did not deter onwards migration. Living conditions and employment are the most significant factors for migrants deciding to stay in a country of transit rather than move on.

Reintegration of returnees is experienced subjectively based on personal position in the household, living conditions, and the ability to contribute to the community. Based on a case study in Ethiopia, returnees who felt integrated abroad have more positive reintegration experience. Forced returnees are significantly more likely to have negative reintegration experiences. In reintegration policies, there is a need for targeted support for more vulnerable groups.

Conclusion

The diversity of contexts and case studies highlighted at the conference confirm the importance of using different methodologies when studying current migration challenges. An interdisciplinary analysis of migration concerns, incorporating qualitative and quantitative methods, is essential in revealing the realities of the current migration landscape in order to formulate policies that best protect migrants.