

UNU-GCM  
Policy  
Report

02/06

Ambiguities in  
the Categories  
of Migration



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Institute on Globalization,  
Culture and Mobility

Megha Amrith

## *Ambiguities in the Categories of Migration*

This is a report of the United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility. It forms part of the series, *Statelessness and Transcontinental Migration*. It should be cited as:

Amrith, Megha. *Ambiguities in the Categories of Migration*. Policy Report No. 02/06. Barcelona: United Nations University Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility (UNU-GCM), 2013.

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This research programme focuses on a range of issues related to the wellbeing and recognition of people who traverse continents devoid of citizenship. Issues related to refugees remain crucially unanswered in debates and policies surrounding migration. In the wake of acknowledgement within the academy that it is not always possible to isolate refugees from migrants, this programme analyzes a range of contexts where dignity and human rights are compromised through the absence of legal and political recognition. By focusing on situations of extreme vulnerability and on lives lived on the borderline, this research programme seeks to articulate and address urgent needs with regard to the stateless migrants who have entered Europe.

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## Summary

This policy report considers the ambiguities of categories used in understanding and governing migration. It takes into account cases of migrants who might not clearly fall under existing migration-related categories and conventions; for instance, the experience of *de facto* statelessness or cases when one's citizenship or identity in a particular state is not recognized. Examples include migrant workers and trafficked persons whose identity documents are confiscated, internal migrants within nation-states and those who fall ambiguously in-between the definitions for refugees and economic migrants. This report will examine how policy can better address the challenges faced by migrants who find it difficult to access their fundamental rights as a consequence of being 'in limbo'. This will become an issue of increasing relevance as the forms and routes of migration diversify and grow ever more complex in the contemporary age of global interconnection.

## Introduction

The study and governance of human mobility depends on the use of categories. People migrate both within nation-states and across borders for a number of different reasons and categories help in trying to understand

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these different flows and groups. Examples of categories include economic migrants, refugees, stateless persons, asylum seekers, and internal and international migrants. Indeed, United Nations conventions exist to set international norms and to help different categories of migrants access their rights in accordance with the conditions of their mobility.

Legal definitions and international conventions therefore exist to better protect migrants who are mobile for different reasons. However, as the routes and types of migration are constantly diversifying, there is a greater need for a perspective that is open to considering those who might not fit categories (IOM, 2013; IFRC, 2012). Migrants who fall between categories will find accessing rights difficult. In other cases, there is an absence of particular categories which may deny important forms of protection to migrants.

Field-based social sciences and civil society organizations can often provide insights into on-the-ground migrant experiences, which highlight complexities in migrant realities that transcend categorizations. Such complexities have consequences for the way migrants access their rights. Migrants may also face challenges when they find themselves without essential identity documents, which are critical for the recognition of citizenship in the present day. An absence of such documents could make them effectively invisible to authorities. The report will consider diverse cases in which this might occur, from the trafficking of persons as an example of de facto statelessness, to the marginalization of internal migrants and those who may be classified neither as economic migrants nor refugees, yet who require humanitarian protection. As legal scholars Bryant Garth and Austin Sarat (1998: 8) argue, 'particular categories and assumptions, generally taken for granted in the law, may limit the possibilities of those whose lives are shaped by the law'. It is therefore important to question and transform, if necessary, 'seemingly taken-for-granted categories and terms'.

It is important to note that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also assists people who do not fall under the strict legal definition of a refugee. The term 'Persons of Concern' is a term used to describe all people whose protection and assistance needs are of interest to UNHCR. The following table explains who is included in this category:

Table 1: Persons of Concern under the mandate of UNHCR

Persons of Concern	Definition
<b>Refugees</b>	Individuals recognized under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, individuals recognized under the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, those recognized in accordance with the UNHCR Statute, Individuals granted complementary forms of protection, and those enjoying 'temporary protection'. The refugee category also includes individuals in refugee-like situations.
<b>Asylum Seekers</b>	Individuals who have sought international protection and whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined.
<b>Internally displaced persons</b>	Individuals or groups of individuals who have been forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence – in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or man-made disasters – but who have not crossed an international border.
<b>Returned Refugees</b>	Former refugees who have returned to their country of origin, either spontaneously or in an organized fashion, but are yet to be fully integrated.
<b>Returned IDPs</b>	IDPs who were beneficiaries of UNHCR's protection and assistance activities, and who returned to their areas of origin or habitual residence.
<b>Stateless Persons</b>	Defined under international law as those not considered as nationals by any State under the operation of its law. UNHCR statistics refer to persons who fall under the agency's statelessness mandate.
<b>Other groups of persons of concern</b>	Individuals who do not necessarily fall directly into any of these groups but to whom UNHCR has extended its protection and/or assistance services, based on humanitarian or other special grounds.

Source: UNHCR, Mid-Year Trends 2013.

The fact that people may be mobile for very diverse reasons has been recognized in the existence of these categories. However, it is not always so clear how such categories are implemented by the authorities that judge

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migrants' circumstances and motives. The human factor in implementing legal categories can make them arbitrary. This report intends to further consider the different experiences of being 'in limbo', not as exceptions, but as increasingly common experiences that should be addressed in policy and implementation.

The policy report highlights the productive relationship between on-the-ground perspectives with policy-making, to emphasize that such ambiguities must be considered if all migrants are to access their fundamental human rights and to live with dignity. It will draw on specific case studies before making specific policy recommendations.

### Trafficked persons: A case of *de facto* statelessness

Given the primacy of identity documents in the governance of migration, crossing borders and accessing rights, it is important to consider the cases where one may not have such documents. Perhaps the most extreme manifestation of being without documents, citizenship and nationality, is the condition of statelessness. The 1954 Statelessness Convention puts forward the *de jure* definition of statelessness as 'one who is not considered a national by any State under the operation of its law'. Tendayi Bloom (2013) highlights the argument that the *de jure* definition of statelessness is 'too narrow, excluding those who may officially be citizens of some states, but who are unable to make use of this citizenship'. In this light, the '*de facto* aspect of statelessness will also be important to consider'.

*De facto* statelessness, though it does not have a universally agreed-upon definition, refers to persons 'outside the country of their nationality who are unable or, for valid reasons, are unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country' (UNHCR, 2010) or 'persons who without having been deprived of their nationality no longer enjoy the protection and assistance of their national authorities' (Weis, 1979, 164). Some interpretations might also include people within their own countries who do not enjoy citizenship, or people who may have difficulties proving their identity and nationality (Massey 2010; UNHCR, 2010). This report will consider the case of trafficked persons as an example of *de facto* statelessness.

The trafficking of persons, as defined in Article 3 of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, is:

‘the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation’.

Exploitation could include the prostitution of others and forced labour or forms of slavery, and as a non-consensual movement of persons.

Academic researchers and reports produced by nongovernmental agencies on the situation of trafficked persons have highlighted how ‘in the process of migration or forced displacement... identity documents are [often] lost, forfeited or destroyed’ or stolen (Chaudhury, 2012), and that trafficked persons no longer have control or ownership of their own documents (ECPAT and Yea 2010; Banerjee, 2006). Without documents, there are great difficulties in proving one’s identity and citizenship. This is particularly an issue when trafficked persons may attempt to return to their countries or if indeed they are repatriated and neither state accepts them as a citizen. An interview with an NGO that rescues trafficked girls and women in Mumbai highlighted how this can be particularly complex in the South Asian context where the boundaries of the nation-state, linguistic and cultural identities do not always coincide neatly (interview conducted by author in March 2013). For example, in the case of Bangladeshi women trafficked into India, women are sometimes rejected, in the process of repatriation, by both the Indian and Bangladeshi states in the absence of official identity documents. This is a clear case of *de facto* statelessness, which could lead over time to *de jure* statelessness. Trafficked persons are thus extremely vulnerable, ‘unable to access justice or demand rights’ and ‘culturally, linguistically or physically isolated and denied legal identity’ (Chaudhury, 2012; Coomaraswamy, 2000). Radhikha Coomaraswamy (2000) explains that ‘both their movement and their power to change their situation are severely restricted by debt bondage and confiscation of their travel documents or passport’.

Anne Gallagher (2010) highlights how a situation of *de facto* statelessness can be ‘imposed on foreign victims of trafficking who, without formal papers, languish in detention centers and shelters for long periods of time’. Indeed, the relationship between statelessness and trafficking is complex and could overlap in important ways. Statelessness has been identified as both a potential cause and result of trafficking, entangled in a ‘self-perpetuating relationship’ (Gallagher, 2010).

According to UNHCR (2007), a victim of human trafficking may also have a

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legitimate claim to international protection and become a person of concern. Their claims may also fit within the definition of who might be granted refugee status. As persons in limbo, without documents and who experience severe exploitation, it is important to consider the ways in which multiple categories overlap. In this case, trafficked persons are relevant to categories and conventions relating to trafficking, statelessness, refugees and persons of concern. This case highlights that migration categories are interrelated and there is a need to think about certain conditions which transcend definitional boundaries and which leave people in limbo.

One could also consider the case of domestic workers whose identity documents are confiscated and who, as a result, may find it difficult to access their rights or escape from situations of hardship (Human Rights Watch, 2007; Vlieger 2011; Constable, 2007). Though domestic workers in distress may receive embassy protection (and are therefore not perceived to be *de facto* stateless), the confiscation of documents could severely reduce their freedom of movement, making it difficult to access this protection. Article 9 of the Domestic Workers Convention of 2011 states that 'each Member shall take measures to ensure that domestic workers are entitled to keep in their possession their travel and identity documents'. While other forms of activism might exist for domestic workers seeking to access their rights without documents (see e.g. Pande, 2012), it cannot be denied that the right to hold one's identity document to access other rights, is paramount.

## Internal migrants

While the distinction between internal and international migration is made in the academic literature and in policy debates, the challenges faced by internal migrants have been marginalized in recent studies of migration and mobility. This distinction, moreover, is not always so clear-cut and internal, international and cross-border migrants flows may at times be blurred. Additionally, the condition of being a migrant, whether one moves within a country or crosses a border, presents similar challenges in relation to finding employment, housing, accessing one's basic rights and encountering cultural prejudice. In 2009, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated approximately 740 million internal migrants<sup>1</sup>.

For the two most populous countries of the world, China and India, internal migration is an important social and economic phenomenon that requires

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<sup>1</sup> Defining internal migrants as those who have moved away from their places of birth, and within national borders.

policy attention. In these so-called emerging economies, internal migrants are often referred to as 'floating populations', as they move between cities and their places of origin. However, in these moves to cities, their citizenship rights are often not portable or mobile.

A recent UNESCO report (2013) on the 'Social Inclusion of Internal Migrants in India', estimates an internal migrant population of 326 million. The report calls internal migration 'a neglected priority world-wide', and for the millions of migrants moving into cities, access to employment, housing, health and financial services is precarious and challenging (UNESCO, 2013). One of the primary factors hindering internal migrants' access to basic rights and services relates to the difficulties in proving their identity and demonstrating their citizenship or nationality. In this context, internal migrants are not stateless. However, in the absence of identity documents or the lack of recognition of documents from their hometowns in other regions, their citizenship is essentially ineffective. In the eyes of the state, they are not regarded as rights-bearing citizens. 'In the absence of proofs of identity and residence, internal migrants are 'excluded from the economic, cultural, social and political life of society' (UNESCO 2013: iii). Another recent article on internal migrants in the Indian context highlights that the problem of identity proof 'can persist for years or even decades'. This is significant because 'identity documentation that is authenticated by the state is indispensable for ensuring that a person has a secure citizenship status and can benefit from the rights and protections that the state provides' (Abbas and Varma, 2014).

The difficulty lies in that such identity documentation authenticated by the state varies according to regions in India. Some may have birth certificates, others may not. Ration cards, issued by state governments for people to buy basic subsistence items, are often considered the 'de facto necessary proof of identity that is essential for access to public services such as hospital care or education'. However, in practice, it is difficult to make such ration cards transferable from one state to another. Another form of identification, voter identity cards, can only be provided in the new state if proof of address over a continuous period of time is given, which is not something all migrants can provide. As Abbas and Varma (2014) conclude:

'discrimination in the provision of rights and entitlements combined with internal migrants' identity as outsiders in the receiving society often perpetuate the economic and political exclusion of many groups, and suggest that there are deeply exclusionary trends in India's democracy'.

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Making citizenship effective through identity documents has been a focus for many NGOs working in this area. A new universal biometric identification system – Aadhar – is an ambitious project of the state could offer a solution, as migrants who voluntarily register would get a nation-wide identity (UNESCO, 2013: 14). Others, however, have suggested that this would make it easier to criminalize irregular cross-border migrants (Roy, 2007).

In China, there is a long-standing system – the *hukou* household registration system - that discriminates against rural migrant workers in the city. According to KW Chan (forthcoming: 2) ‘crossing city, town and township boundaries are strictly regulated’. While ‘rural migrants are allowed to move to and work in cities (under the ‘temporary residents’ category)... they cannot have a *hukou* in the destination where they stay. Therefore, these migrants are ineligible for many local benefits and rights, which ordinary local urban residents qualify for automatically’. Xuefei Ren (2012) has called this institutionalized ‘unequal citizenship regime’ one in which migrants live in cities without citizenship. According to Ren, ‘the lack of rights for migrant workers in cities still can be primarily traced to this system’ (2012, p102). There is an increasing number of NGOs working to help migrant workers access basic rights and services in cities, though their influence to change the structure of the system is limited (Ren, 2012).

Internal migration is a form of mobility that is important to a large proportion of the world’s population. These case studies demonstrate the need for greater consideration of internal migration as a policy category and an approach that acknowledges the mobility of people within borders. This would involve moving away from policies which ‘fix’ people to their residences, and to ensure that citizenship is effective and recognized. In the absence of effective citizenship, this could also be considered a case of *de facto* statelessness.

## Refugees and economic migrants

States often make a legal distinction between economic migrants and refugees in order to determine whom they would offer protection to, in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. This legal distinction, however, is one that has a particular moral underpinning and this section will highlight cases that demonstrate how this distinction is arbitrary.

As refugee is one who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, or fear of persecution, war, or violence. They cannot return home or are afraid to do so. It is believed that 'economic migrants' choose to move for better opportunities and to improve their socio-economic conditions, and indeed many do. However, there are many others who fall in the middle of this spectrum between forced and voluntary migration. For instance, little choice exists for people who must move as a result of extreme poverty, everyday hardship or suffering. They may be forced to move but may not receive protection if they do not fall under the legal definition of a refugee. As the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants states, 'many migrants also have protection needs, and cannot simply be dismissed as merely "economic migrants": they may be forced to migrate to escape from poverty, widespread violence, armed conflict, or the effects of climate change' (2013). As UNHCR (2007) remarks, some movements of people from one country to another are mixed, particularly when 'a country of origin is simultaneously affected by human rights violations, economic decline and an absence of livelihoods opportunities'. The flows of migrants and the motives for migration are increasingly diverse and complex, and challenging to disentangle.

While this critique of the discourse on 'refugees' and 'economic migrants' is not new, it is worth reiterating that making this distinction and evaluating motives as either forced or voluntary is not always so straightforward. One example of how it is not always clear to evaluate forced migration movement is the recent migration of Haitian nationals to Brazil after an earthquake in 2010 devastated much of Haiti. This particular flow of migrants caught the attention not only of government authorities, but also the Brazilian and international media. Many Haitians entered Brazil via its Amazonian border after paying human smugglers ('coyotes') to undertake long journeys crossing a number of states. Upon arriving in Brazil without documents, many Haitians requested refugee status. The Brazilian government found that their case did not fall under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, nor could they be thought to be 'typical' economic migrants after the devastation that was caused in Haiti by the earthquake. The National Immigration Council of Brazil therefore labelled this case as one requiring humanitarian attention due to the unsustainability of livelihoods in Haiti and the unsafe journeys of migrants. They created a policy to grant humanitarian visas in 2012 to Haitian nationals to Brazil that would allow permanent residence (Paulo de Almeida, 2012). The response of the Brazilian government demonstrated a humanitarian commitment to migrants, and the flexible response to a new migration stream from a country which has suffered a humanitarian crisis. Having said that, some have critiqued the way the government handled this

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as they imposed quotas to restrict the numbers and long delays in the processing of visas (Conectas, 2013). The measures have now been discontinued, making it only a temporary, and ad-hoc response. These are debates that are not new, nor specific to Brazil, yet Brazil makes for an interesting case study given that it is in the process of formulating migration policies and dealing with new inflows of diverse migrants.

It also highlights the challenges for policy makers and those governing international migration in judging the criteria for international protection and humanitarian responses. In the coming years, there will certainly be greater discussion surrounding the complex relationship between environmental change and migration. While there is no agreed upon definition of environmental migrants, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2007) has provided a working definition as: 'persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad'. Such questions are likely to become more important and will require policy attention that is open to dealing with new kinds of migrants, new conditions and motives, some of which may not be congruent with existing categories and international conventions.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

This report has outlined diverse case studies, each encompassing complex and specific causes and consequences. Though seemingly disparate, this report brings such cases together in an analytical perspective that reflects on the ambiguities of migration categories. While indeed such categories are crucial for understanding different migration flows and for the governance of migration, their fixity conceals a more complex reality. More could be done to consider the cases of migrants who may not fit within these categories, as well as those who find themselves without the documents to prove their citizenship and entitlement to rights.

Beyond what is documented in this report, are numerous other cases of migrants who fall in between the boundaries of regular and irregular migration, migrants who are stranded in the midst of humanitarian crises, asylum seekers whose requests for refugee status are denied and those whose documents are destroyed during challenging border crossings (at sea, for instance) (UNODC, 2011). Agnieszka Kubal (2013) writes that such cases 'demonstrate how empirical practice escapes binary categories and points to

an area of semi-legality to which many migrants are confined’.

This report recommends that global and national policy-makers give greater attention to the nuances surrounding the categories of migration to better address the challenges experienced by a wide range of migrants. Specifically, this report recommends:

- Greater dialogue between on-the-ground researchers and practitioners with policy-makers to generate an awareness of the diverse and complex situations of migrants in limbo and the overlap of categories of migration.
- Care and reflection in the uses of categories, allowing for flexibility when relevant and a willingness to respond quickly with coherent humanitarian alternatives to ensure that migrants can access basic services and receive protection, particularly in times of crisis.
- Greater attention to neglected categories of migrants such as internal migrants, and situations which may be increasingly relevant in the future, such as migration as a consequence of environmental change.
- The ratification of the 2011 Domestic Workers Convention, implementation of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, and accession to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

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## **Abbreviations**

IFRC: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

IOM: International Organization for Migration

UNGA: United Nations General Assembly

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.







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Sant Manuel Pavilion,  
Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site  
C/ Sant Antoni Maria Claret, 167  
08025 Barcelona, Spain  
info.gcm@unu.edu  
<http://www.gcm.unu.edu>