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## A complementary Research Agenda: Quo Vadis for the Next 5-10 Years?

### Executive Summary

The following summary of the Research Roundtable at ICMPD's Vienna Migration Conference in November 2019 highlights the main insights from the lively half-day debate between leading migration researchers. At that time, no one could have foreseen the COVID-19 crisis, the global effects of which started to unfold in March 2020 and brought mobility and migration to a near standstill. Despite these seismic changes, the authors have decided to present the content of the discussion in the planned format. After all, once the COVID-19 crisis is over, migration and mobility will continue to shape the world we live in, and the results of the debate in November 2019 will still be valid.

Five years since the arrival of more than one million refugees and asylum seekers sparked a political crisis in Europe, migration policy-making is still operating in crisis mode. The emergence of new global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights the need to move towards a more sustainable and resilient approach for the next five to ten years. This means strengthening international partnership, promoting evidence-based policy-making, increasing capacity to anticipate future challenges, and fostering social cohesion. With this vision in mind, researchers are calling for a paradigm shift on several levels.

In the post-2015 crisis paradigm, research funding focused predominantly on receiving societies. Moving forward, the lens should be turned onto sending and transit countries, so as to better understand their policy frameworks, political dynamics and migration narratives. Including the perspectives of sending and transit countries will help address inherent political asymmetries and strengthen international partnerships. More resources should be invested in research collaboration with non-European partners, in order to amplify those voices from the Global South and diversify the field of migration studies.

In a similar vein, the past five years of migration research and policy-making have focused predominantly on crisis-induced migration. Meanwhile, non-crisis-related migration decision-making remains relatively poorly understood.

#### Key Points

- Since 2015, migration policy in Europe has been operating in crisis mode. The emergence of new global crises, such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, highlights the need for a more sustainable and resilient approach to migration governance.

How do we create the conditions for implementing far-sighted migration policies?

- Build long-term international partnerships;
- Promote evidence-based policy-making;
- Increase anticipatory capacities;
- Foster social cohesion.

**Key Points**

In the next 5-10 years, migration research and funding should refocus from:

- Receiving to sending and transit countries;
- Viewing migration in isolation to embedding it within larger transformative processes;
- Crisis-induced migration to non-crisis-related drivers;
- Integration to social cohesion.

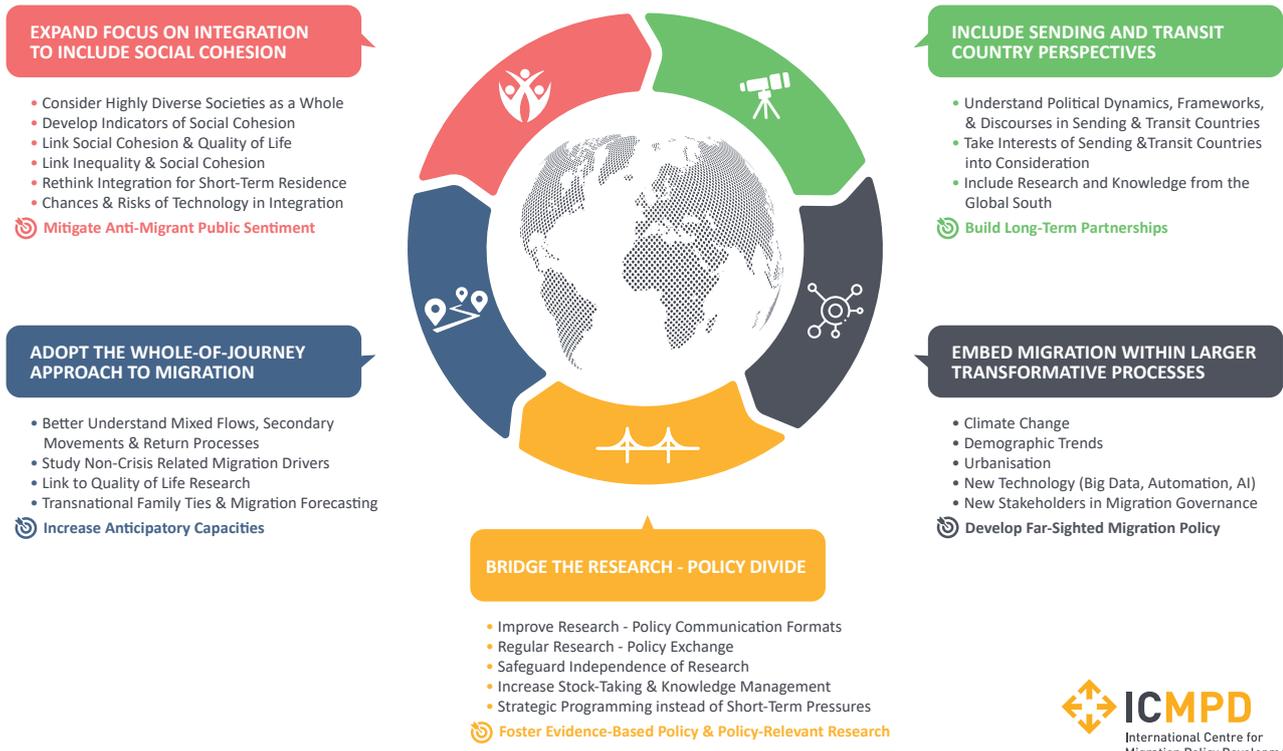
Adopting a ‘whole-of-migration-journey’ approach will address this knowledge gap and improve the capacity of policy-makers to anticipate future migration flows.

The singular focus on migration as seen in public debate and policy-making has been counterproductive. Media coverage and political narratives often discuss migration as an isolated issue, fuelling negative public sentiment. The next five to ten years of research on migration should, therefore, embed migration within larger transformative processes, such as demographic shifts, urbanisation, new technologies, climate change, and the changing dynamics of migration governance. The narrow focus on immigrant integration should be expanded to include social cohesion in highly diverse societies.

If this agenda is to be reflected in policy-making, it is necessary to bridge the policy-research divide. We argue that policy-relevant research and evidence-based policy-making can be fostered through regular exchange between researchers and policy-makers and improved communication formats. Instead of short-term pressures, more strategic thinking in programming and funding is needed, as well as continuous stock-taking and knowledge management of existing research within the field.

**A COMPLEMENTARY MIGRATION RESEARCH AGENDA:  
QUO VADIS FOR THE NEXT 5-10 YEARS?**

from crisis paradigm towards a sustainable migration governance



## Introduction

The newly appointed European Commissioners face a tense post-2015 political landscape, changed by migration as an election-deciding issue across Member States. Political gridlock in the area of migration policy has negatively affected Member State relations and called the entire European project into question. As European solidarity is once again put to the test by the ongoing COVID19 crisis, it is time to take stock of the impacts that 2015 has had on migration research and policy-making – and to chart a path towards more sustainable and resilient migration governance.

### Key Points

- **The Vienna Migration Conference 2019 convened over 500 participants to discuss how to break the current gridlock in migration policy-making.**
- **On the sidelines of the conference, the Research Roundtable brought together a small group of visionaries, whose work bridges migration research and policy, to outline a complementary migration research agenda for the next 5- 10 years and exchange good practices on policy-research.**

Against this background, the Vienna Migration Conference 2019 convened more than 500 high-level participants to reflect upon strategic options and discuss recommendations for the next five years of European migration policy-making. Based on the conviction that migration policy-making needs a sound understanding and substantiated evidence of migration motives, decisions and processes, the roundtable “A Complementary Research Agenda: Quo Vadis for the next 5-10 years?” gathered a group of visionaries whose work bridges migration research and policy. The half-day workshop discussed specific thematic areas on which migration research should focus in the future, as well as ways of ensuring that such research has a positive impact on migration policy-making.

While migration studies stood on the margins of academic interest in the 1990s, it has since become an established research field, accumulating relevant knowledge. It is thus necessary to take a step back and reflect on the current status of migration studies: In what areas and sub-fields has migration research already produced the necessary understanding and knowledge, and which aspects need further research? Which fields and issues yet to be explored are likely to be important in the future? How should researchers and policy-makers organise their interaction so as to be best prepared for the challenges that lay ahead?

## Research Agenda: Quo Vadis for the Next 5-10 Years?

Moving European migration policy from the crisis mode of the past five years to a more sustainable migration governance is dependent on strengthening international partnerships, promoting evidence-based policy-making, increasing the capacity to anticipate future challenges, and fostering social cohesion. These changes call for a paradigm shift in migration research and policy-making on several levels.

The crisis paradigm fosters a focus on receiving countries and crisis-induced migration drivers. However, in order to foster genuine partnership between all countries involved in migration processes, European migration research and policy-making must take the perspectives and interests of sending and transit countries into consideration. In addition, more research on non-crisis related migration drivers will increase the anticipatory capacities of policy-makers. Far-sighted migration policy should consider migration as a cross-

cutting issue embedded within larger transformative processes and connect migration policy to other political domains, such as education, employment, social protection, development, foreign policy, and social cohesion.

## Include Sending and Transit Country Perspectives

The vast majority of migration studies conceive migration as a phenomenon linking human mobility decisions with the opportunity structure allowing or preventing the crossing of borders. It is widely acknowledged that the migration regimes developed in receiving countries reflect both obligations enshrined in international law and the (often-conflicting) interests of policy-makers in this field. Only rarely do sending and transit country perspectives come into play.

The crisis paradigm has further fostered this focus on receiving countries. As the issue of immigration gains salience with voters, policy-makers find themselves pressured to deliver quick solutions rather than engage in long-term partnership-building. However, migration is an international phenomenon requiring international responses which transcend the boundaries of any single nation-state and even the boundaries of migration policy (Hofmann et al. 2020, OECD 2020). In the face of global transformations driving international migration in an increasingly connected world, responses limited exclusively to the nation-state are likely to fail in the long run, because they are addressing symptoms rather than tackling causes (Hofmann et al. 2020).

Sustainable migration management means genuine partnership between sending, transit, and receiving countries, both within and outside of the EU. The partnership approach must also acknowledge the political asymmetries between countries and aim to both understand and accommodate the interests of all sides in a balanced way. Turning the lens by studying migration policy frameworks, political dynamics, and migration discourses in sending countries will greatly enhance our understanding of migration drivers and decision-making, as well as of the role migration plays in international relations.

Understanding migration from the perspective of sending countries means taking a closer look at emigration and its toll on sending municipalities, cities, and regions. Negative impacts of emigration include depopulation, brain drain, and the decline of the share of youth in total population, along with a reduction in the regional quality of life due to these processes. These aspects are largely understudied, often because many migration researchers share a pro-migration outlook and thus shy away from studying the potentially negative impacts of the process.

Migration studies tend to focus on mobile populations, who of course comprise a minority compared to those who choose to stay in their home country. This focus might lead to the misconception that 'sedentary' populations do not intentionally decide to stay. Understanding the motives of those who stay might also foster better understanding of the drivers of

### Key Points

- Sending, transit and receiving countries are linked by migration in an essentially asymmetrical political setting. In order to build genuine partnerships, receiving countries must acknowledge these asymmetries, including sending and transit country perspectives and taking their interests into consideration.
- Research focus should shift from receiving contexts to political dynamics, frameworks, and migration discourses in sending and transit countries – thus enhancing our understanding of migration drivers and decision-making.
- Migration research in the Global North should take knowledge produced in the Global South into consideration and devote more resources to collaboration with non-EU partners.

migration, thus complementing prevailing approaches. In this respect, the availability and quality of population and mobility data needs to be improved, making greater use of Big Data approaches and concepts.

Power asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South are reflected in the production of knowledge. The voices of researchers from sending countries rarely reach decision-makers in receiving countries. Including migration research and perspectives from sending countries is therefore an essential component of this paradigm shift. More energy and resources should be devoted to the strengthening of collaboration with non-EU partners in the next 5-10 years. The geographical focus of migration research should shift from the EU to Asia and the Gulf States (in terms of the growing demand for labour) and Africa (linking migration to demography and development).

The field of migration and development would particularly benefit from expanding the vantage point to include that knowledge emanating from sending countries. Many studies in this field display conceptual divergences in the understanding of migration and development, including the effects of migration. For example, while European demographers may see the youth bulge in many African countries as mainly a challenge and a threat to development, it is evident that most African researchers conceive it as the necessary base for economic growth. Similar divergences can be found in evaluating the role of remittances. In European integration research, remittances tend to be viewed critically, as reducing the resources available for integration, while migration research from the South tends to understand them as an important element in fighting poverty and spurring both local and regional development.

#### Key Points

- **Increase policy-maker capacity to anticipate migration flows by shifting the research focus from the initial migration decision to the whole-of-migration journey and from crisis-induced migration to non-crisis-related migration drivers.**
- **Further research is needed on the role of perceived differences in the quality of life and institutions in migration decision-making, particularly with respect to mixed flows, secondary movements and return processes.**
- **Transnational family ties are a highly relevant, yet understudied factor for explaining migration trends and forecasting future migration flows.**

### Adopt the Whole-of-Migration-Journey Approach

The crisis paradigm of the past five years is thematically reflected in the prevailing focus on crisis-induced migration, including civil wars, economic crises, poverty, and the effects of climate crisis. A sizeable body of research has been produced in this area. Therefore, while forced migration is likely to remain on the European research and policy-making agenda, the next 5-10 years should expand the existing knowledge base by studying non-crisis-related drivers of migration. Further increase in the (already well-understood) role of income differentials, perceived differences in quality of life and public institutions across world regions, or the image of transnational companies, regions or cities, may act as triggers for migration and choice of destination.

Current migration trends and dynamics in Europe are largely characterised by mixed flows and secondary movements, which are an understudied area – both worldwide and within the European Union. Most studies on migration decision-making focus on the initial migration decision and do not take into account the whole migration trajectory or those factors influencing decision-making on secondary movements. In this context, the influence of transnational family ties and existing migration networks on migration decisions and choice

of destination is a highly relevant, yet understudied, factor for explaining migration trends and trajectories – and for forecasting future migration flows. In terms of methodology, migration studies should learn from the rigorous methodology developed in the field of network studies in order to improve reliability.

A long-term perspective focusing on the ‘whole-of-migration-journey’ approach should be preferred above the prevailing snapshot studies. In this context, migration decision-making on secondary movements and return, as well as the linkages between migrants and family members in countries of origin should receive further attention.

### Embed Migration within Larger Transformative Processes

As migration trends and dynamics are embedded in the broader economic, social, environmental and geopolitical changes and transformations, they cannot be understood without due reference to these developments. Factors such as climate change, demographic shifts, technological advancements, and geopolitical instability and conflict are widely recognised as the main determining factors for any future migration scenario; although no one can predict with certainty to what extent and in what ways these trends will affect migration flows (OECD 2020, Hofmann et al. 2020).

On the one hand, climate crisis is one of the main external drivers, whose effects on migration need to be better understood. On the other hand, any population growth in the Global North induced by migration negatively affects climate change, as the carbon footprint of the North is much higher than that of the Global South. Migration and mobility studies will have to study these linkages closer.

Another aspect in need of increased attention is digitalisation, and the use of Artificial Intelligence and automation, which are causing fundamental changes in labour markets worldwide. A major element of these changes concerns breaking the link between locality and work, with potentially massive impacts for labour mobility. Migration studies do not yet fully understand the effects of these disruptive changes on their research area and thus should improve their involvement in this research field.

In addition, migration studies need to link in with research on multilevel and multi-layered governance processes and structures. In all countries dealing with emigration or immigration, migration policies are not only framed at the state level, but also at the regional and municipal levels, and are influenced by a broad variety of policy actors at the sub-state level. Even where decision-making on migration policies is confined to the state level, sub-state entities influence migration policies indirectly, through their powers in different policy fields, e.g. housing, health or education.

Policy inconsistencies between the different levels of government will

#### Key Points

- Far-sighted migration policy must understand migration as one aspect of larger transformative processes.

Relevant global trends for the next 5-10 years include:

- Climate change;
- Demographic shifts;
- Urbanisation;
- New technology;
- New stakeholders in migration governance.

naturally influence the regulatory framework for migration and settlement, and thus need to be reflected in migration policy analyses. As urbanisation continues at an unprecedented rate, cities are set to gain power in migration and integration policy-making. Transnational companies headquartered in highly diverse cities might also assume a key role in migration trends, using their ever-increasing power to obtain mobility rights for employees and drive migration in the global competition for talent.

## From Integration to Social Cohesion

Migration is substantially linked to integration. A whole-of-migration-journey approach should also include the settlement process and discuss the conditions for inclusion within society. In this respect, there is a need for improved linking of migration and mobility to studies on migrant integration and social cohesion in general. In this field, migration studies have contributed strongly to a better understanding of the local and regional factors influencing migrant integration in recent years, and a variety of integration indicators which allow the monitoring and fine-tuning of integration programmes and measures have been developed at both the national and city level. Yet, comparable indicators for social cohesion are rare. This is where migration studies could benefit from stronger linking with research on quality of life.

### Key Points

- **Research and policy-making in receiving countries should expand its focus on migrant integration to include social cohesion in highly diverse societies as a whole.**
- **The concept and indicators of social cohesion should be further developed and linked to research on quality of life and inequality.**
- **As short-term migration gains relevance in highly diverse societies, the conditions of integration should be revised to include short-term residence.**
- **Further research is needed on the opportunities and risks presented by the use of technology in integration.**

Furthermore, integration indicators could not only be used for evaluation, but also as tools for enhancing integration processes. Technological developments might help to solve a major challenge in migration and integration – the acquisition of the language spoken in the country of residence. While English is taught as a foreign language in schools worldwide, other European languages might only be taught in certain regions, or as an optional subject. Thus, English-speaking countries have an advantage in recruiting qualified migrants, whereas non-English-speaking countries must invest in supporting language acquisition among migrants, which might act as a deterrent for qualified migrants. Chinese companies are already working on an AI-based real-time translation device, which would allow communicating in one's first language with speakers of another language. This has the potential to reduce the relevance of language acquisition for integration in the coming years.

Finally, integration studies will have to address the growing diversity of migration patterns and the development of superdiverse cities. Current approaches often follow a majority-minority frame. In this logic, migrants integrate into a society with a linguistic majority, focusing on long-term settlement and inclusion in that society. However, a growing number of cities are currently becoming superdiverse, with the majority of the population belonging to various minorities. In the same vein, short-term migratory movements and the number of migrants uninterested in long-term settlement are increasing. There is therefore a need to reframe the concept of integration to reflect a stronger focus on inclusion in highly diverse societies. Nevertheless, migrants will also in the future need support that enables better participation in society, but this support must take into account the potential temporary nature of their stay.

## Research - Policy Nexus

While until the end of the last century policy decisions were legitimated mainly through the political opinions of governing parties, the demand for evidence-based policy-making has gained ground in the last 20-30 years.

The white paper *Modernising Government*, published by the British government in 1997, is widely regarded as the first paradigmatic document for evidence-based policy-making. Noting that “government must produce policies that really deal with problems; that are forward looking and shaped by the evidence rather than a response to short-term pressures; that tackle causes not symptoms”, the paper defined evidence-based policy-making, based on scientific research and regular evaluation, as the core feature of “good governance” (The Stationary Office 1999, p. 3).

Although the term ‘evidence-based policies’ has become part of the everyday parlance of policy-makers the world over, the reality is still quite removed. As the Overseas Development Institute has put it: “The good news is that evidence can matter. The bad news is that it often does not” (Sutcliffe & Court 2005, p. 7). There are those in the political world who highly value research as a base for policy-making, and those, who perpetually view research “as the opposite of action rather than the opposite of ignorance” (ibid., p. 8).

It would be superficial to understand this palpable tension between research and policy-making as reflecting the attitudes of researchers and policy-makers. Policy-making and research are two different subsystems of society, which necessarily follow different rules of action. They use different languages, have different priorities, agendas, timescales, reward systems. Consequently, a communication gap exists. These opposing world-views are not a nuisance, but rather prerequisites for the functioning of the respective systems. Nor do these differences prohibit cooperation. However, good cooperation does necessitate awareness of such differences and finding ways to handle them in a productive manner.

Overcoming the structural communication gap between research and policy-makers requires the development of bridging formats that translate the needs of policy-makers to researchers and vice-versa, while safeguarding independence of research. These formats must be based on regular exchange between researchers and policy-makers at eye level, whereby both parties accept their different roles and the need for separation between the two spheres as a precondition for successful cooperation.

This observation holds true for all different areas of research and their relation to politics. For migration research, there are a number of further particularities which need to be understood:

- ▶ Different interests of sending and receiving states and their asymmetric relationship in the international system,
- ▶ High relevance of research commissioned by state actors focused on a

### Key Points

- Policy-making and research are two different subsystems of society, which necessarily follow different rules of action. These opposing world-views are not a nuisance, but rather prerequisites for the functioning of the respective systems.
- Good cooperation depends on being aware of the differences and finding ways to handle them in a productive manner.

single state, region or target group,

- ▶ Dominance of research focusing on short-term issues.

In international migration, the interests of sending, transit and receiving states differ markedly. Countries in the Global South aim at fostering migration of their citizens, while most countries in the Global North look to limit migration of low-skilled migrants, while at the same time attracting those migrants considered desirable (e.g. highly skilled). Most research commissioned in the Global North thus focuses on migration and integration management from the perspective of receiving countries. Research rarely involves either the sending country perspective or researchers/research institutes from the Global South. Thus, the perspective of receiving countries is not complemented with research results from sending countries, which may lead to biased policy recommendations.

In addition, applied migration studies commissioned by those authorities responsible for migration management often focus on acute challenges and remain focused on one state, region or target group. The pressure for innovation sidelines the less appealing, but equally necessary, task of stock-taking. As there is only limited international stock-taking of what has been achieved so far, the results of studies already implemented in other countries are often not taken into account. So as to avoid overlap and enable identification of under-researched areas, more professional knowledge management based on continuous and coordinated stock-taking is needed. This will allow easy retrieval of existing knowledge and a more continuous and structured exchange between researchers and policy-makers in all countries dealing with emigration and immigration.

Furthermore, research often responds to short-term pressures instead of following long-term strategies, and regularly lacks international comparability. Funding and programming should, therefore, prioritise strategic thinking, covering the whole migration trajectory and reflect the perspectives of all actors in the migration process.

Such lack of coordination not only concerns research, but also projects and networks. There are, for example, a number of city networks in the field of migration and integration, funded by various donors, which lack coordination. Mayors thus often do not know which network best suits their needs and refrain from joining altogether. Improved coordination will enable a more efficient use of scarce resources, with intensified international exchange and cooperation leading to stronger evidence-based migration governance.

#### Key Points

**Bridging the research-policy divide requires that both sides:**

- **Improve communication formats;**
- **Engage in regular exchange;**
- **Safeguard independence of research;**
- **Increase stock-taking and knowledge management;**
- **Prioritise strategic programming over short-term pressures.**

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