



Policy Paper by
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International Migration: Drivers, Factors and Megatrends

A Geopolitical Outlook

Introduction

Key Points

- **International migration is shaped by a variety of factors, each of which have their own significance but also influence the other factors.**
- **Migration cannot be explained by any single cause, model or theory. There are, however, some main drivers, or “megatrends”, that influence size, direction and patterns of international migration flows more than others.**

The main purpose of the 2019 Vienna Migration Conference (VMC) was to discuss recommendations for the next five years of European migration policy-making. Thus, migration policy is embedded in a broader environment of global migration factors, trends and patterns, which define both the opportunities and limitations of what can or cannot be achieved at the political level. In the framework of the 2019 VMC, a roundtable “geopolitical outlook” gathered a number of European and international experts to discuss the main factors shaping these trends and patterns, the directions in which they might develop, and the implications this development might have for regional and global migration policy-making.

International migration is shaped by a variety of factors, each of which need to be understood individually but also in relation to their role in a complex system of interconnectivity and mutual dependence. The actual impact of these factors and their interplay is not always fully clear. What is understood, however, is that regional migration developments and political responses regularly have knock-on effects for other regions. Policymakers, the media and the public regularly request predictions from migration researchers and experts as to what will happen in the future. Will more or less migrants and refugees be on their way? Where will they come from? Where will they go? How will they move?

Experience shows that such migration prognoses are hard to make, at least concerning what will happen in the immediate future. The complexity of the phenomenon seems to exceed what forecasting can deliver as regards isolated events or short time periods. However, this should not imply that it is impossible to understand which factors impact migration, how they will develop, and how the environment in which migration is embedded might change in the medium- to long-run.

Migration indeed cannot be explained by any single cause, model or theory. However, there are some main drivers, or “megatrends”, that influence size, direction and patterns of international migration flows more than others (IMI 2011). Such factors are: war, civil war and conflict; the globalisation of economies, values and aspirations; changing technologies and means of communication; shifting demographics; increased longevity; increased education levels; urbanisation; and climate change. The following sections outline these drivers and megatrends and their potential impact on the future of international migration.

The Numbers of International Migration

Key Points

- Migration is part of the human condition, but international migrants are still a small minority. Over the last 50 years, their share has never exceeded 3.5 percent of world population.
- Measured as a proportion of its population, Europe produces more emigrants than any other world region. In relative terms, the main countries of origin of international migrants are European.

Mobility is a basic human condition and throughout history a certain share of the population has always migrated. Over the last 50 years, the share of migrants among the world population has been comparatively stable, ranging between 2 percent and 3.5 percent, which is remarkably little. But since the world population has grown significantly over this period, the total number of migrants has also grown, from 81.5 million in 1970 to 272 million in 2019 (UN-DESA 2019). Against the background of expected world population growth, and assuming future migration develops along past and present trends, the total number of international migrants is likely to increase to 330.9 million by 2050. Should the previously observed moderate increase in the share of migrants among the world population continue, this would put the total number of international migrants in 2050 at 379.6 million, representing 3.9 percent of world population.

Migration, however, is not evenly distributed among the world regions. In relative terms, Europe is the most “migratory” region, with 8.4 percent of Europeans living outside their country of birth; followed by Latin America (5.9 percent), Africa (2.9 percent), Oceania (2.6 percent), Asia (2.4 percent) and North America (2.1 percent; UNDESA 2017a: 12). In absolute terms, the most emigrants come from Asia (106 million); followed by Europe (61 million), Latin America (38 million), Africa (36 million), North America (8 million) and Oceania (2 million). The majority of migrants move to or within the Global North (56.6 percent in 2017, compared to 53.9 percent in 1990). It is expected that this global trend will continue in the future, although southern migration will also grow, as a result of advancing socio-economic development. A simple outlook based on previous developments leads one to a basic conclusion: International migration is likely to grow in the future, following patterns quite similar to those observed in the past.

War, Civil War and Conflict

Sudden and large-scale flows of refugees and asylum seekers, but also of irregular migrants, are almost exclusively caused by violent events such as war, civil war or other internal violent conflicts. Since the late 1980s, the number of interstate armed conflicts has consistently decreased. In 2017, of the

Key Points

- Today most conflicts are internal to a state. They cause less casualties than inter-state conflicts, but result in increased displacement.
- Unless the world becomes more peaceful, flight and displacement will continue to constitute a large, or even increasing, share among international migration flows.

world's 49 ongoing armed conflicts, only one was between states; the remaining 48 were internal. The same can be said of the number of battle deaths, which has decreased by roughly 90 percent since the mid-1970s. Today, the predominant form of conflict is internal to a state (PRIO 2018). Nonetheless, approximately 69,000 people were killed in 2017 in armed conflicts between and within states. The most deadly conflicts of that year were the civil wars and internal violent conflicts taking place in Syria, Central African Republic, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, South Sudan and Somalia. These conflicts also led to the largest levels of displacement.

In 2018, some 57 percent of all refugees worldwide came from Syria, Afghanistan or South Sudan. Will this situation improve in the near future? The Global Peace Index 2019, using the three domains of ongoing domestic and international conflict, societal safety and security and militarisation as measures of peacefulness, observed a slight improvement in the global situation. But the Index also concluded that the "state of peace" is either "low" or "very low" in a total 42 countries (GPI 2019: 9). Sadly, the statistical trends as they refer to persons forced to flee their homes due to conflict do not suggest that forced migration is likely to decline. Between 1993 and 2018, the number of globally displaced more than doubled – from 21.4 million to 70.8 million. A look at the sub-categories confirms the impact of the trend towards internal conflict.

The number of refugees, i.e. displaced persons residing outside their home country, increased between 1993 and 2018 by 14.1 percent – from a total 17.8 million to 20.4 million ¹. During the same period, the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) increased by more than nine times, from a total of 4.2 million to 41.3 million (UNHCR 2019). Unless our world becomes significantly more peaceful, any geopolitical outlook will have to assume that flight and displacement will continue to constitute a large, or even increased, share among international migration flows.

Demography and Migration

Key Points

- The world's population is still growing. Even if the share of international migrants remains stable, their absolute number will increase.
- Demographic ageing is not exclusive to the Global North. In all world regions, it creates opportunities, pressures and demands that will drive migration more than in the past.

Up until the 19th century, the world population grew very slowly. The 20th century marked an era of "radical changes in human survival and reproduction" and "revolutionary demographic developments". By 2015, the world's population had reached 7.4 billion. Based on projected fertility levels, the world's population is projected to grow to 9.1 billion by 2050 (UNDESA 2018a). This development is mainly owing to globally decreasing death rates and will take place despite the expectation that annual growth rates will decrease from 80 million to 48 million between 2020 and 2050. Disregarding the inevitable uncertainties in such projections, it is safe to state that all countries across the globe will face major changes in demographic profile. However, demographic developments will vary significantly across the world's regions.

Already now, 95 percent of world population growth is taking place in countries of the Global South, and this trend is set to continue. In contrast, a total of 45 countries are projected to experience declining population between 2009 and 2050, many of them in the European region. This trend has started to result in demographic ageing and decline in many of the countries of the Global North. There is a lively discussion on the impact this will have on labour markets and social security systems, always linked to the question of whether labour markets should be more open towards immigration.

Less discussed is the expectation that demographic aging will affect countries in the Global South as well. Today, 60 percent of all persons aged 60 or above live in countries of the Global South, a share expected to increase to 79 percent in 2050 (UNDESA 2017b: 4). The share of persons aged 60 or above among the total population in these countries will increase from 8 percent to 20 percent over the same period. These projections are particularly important with regard to migration. The need to financially support parents and other economically dependent family members back home is one of the main motives for migrants. In the absence of functioning pension systems, the significantly higher revenues that can be generated in high-income countries are often the only way of securing the well-being of elderly family members. Thus, demographic ageing in both high- and low-income countries will increase the existing demands for emigration and immigration.

Urbanisation

Populations do not only change in size, they also change their location within a given country; and international migration can be considered an “urban phenomenon”. Of course, migration statistics refer to concepts of citizenship and country of birth and - in line with the legal definitions of international migration - provide a picture of movement between nation-states. In reality, however, migrants mostly move from one city to another and not between rural areas in different nation-states. International migration has an important internal dimension whereby people who move between states have previously moved internally, or are descendants of rural-urban migrants. Previous experience of mobility and building a new life combined with the universally applicable skills of living in a city environment make it much easier for individuals to accustom themselves to a new urban environment in another country.

Consequently, the degree of urbanisation, i.e. the share of world population living in urban areas, will influence the size of international migration in the future. Simply put, urbanity enhances the likelihood of becoming an international migrant. In the mid-1970s, approximately 38 percent of the world population lived in cities; today this share is about 55 percent - and in 2050, it is expected to be 68 percent. Some 90 percent of this increase will take place in Asia and Africa (UNDESA 2018b). Put in absolute terms, the mid-1970s saw a total of 1.6 billion people living in urban areas, in 2050 this will be 6.6 billion. More people than ever before will have an “internal mobility background” that could be utilised for “external mobility”.

Key Points

- **International migration is an “urban phenomenon”, linking cities across national boundaries.**
- **Growing urbanisation will increase the number of people who have experienced internal mobility and are prepared to move abroad.**

Socio-Economic Development

Key Points

- International migration is caused by socio-economic development rather than poverty. Enhanced socio-economic development can mean more migration.
- Most “new migrations” will be regional, but transcontinental mobility will also grow.

It is commonly acknowledged that it is not poverty which causes migration but economic and social development – and development brings fundamental changes within a society. Before the industrialisation of agriculture, a majority of the population lived in rural areas; many hands were needed to work the land and child mortality was high. Development changes that. Machines replace the many hands, child mortality goes down, and population figures go up, as do education levels and aspirations. During a transitional period, societies and economies find it difficult to create sufficient perspectives for the growing numbers of young people. In order to build their lives, a certain share of the young move to cities within their country or try to move abroad. All countries go through this transitional period until the birth rates go down, population growth stabilises and emigration pressures drop.

Already now birth rates are slowing in many African and Asian countries, while the average GDP per capita continues to rise. At some point, they will also turn from emigration to immigration countries. But that point is still in the distant future. A “low-development” scenario for Africa speaks of a population size of 2.5 billion in 2050, a doubling of the current population - and a corresponding doubling of the annual emigration rate, from 1.4 million to 2.8 million. A “high-development” scenario estimates a lower population of 1.8 billion in that year, but a tripling of the annual African emigration rate, to 3.5 million (JRC 2018: 28). Higher development means lower birth rates, but also better education, higher aspirations and more financial means to move abroad. All evidence points towards the “high-development” scenario.

Taken as a whole, Africa is the second fastest-growing economy in the world, and among the planet’s ten fastest-growing economies are seven African states. Consequently, a migration outlook should expect increased African migration. Most of this will take place within Africa, but emigration to other world regions is also likely to increase. It needs to be stressed, however, that recent research questions a simple causal relationship between development and migration. It suggests rather that over periods of five to ten years, economic growth seems to result in less emigration from a country – regardless of the initial GDP per capita (Benček and Schneiderheinze 2019: 21). Apparently, it is more so economic outlook, the perception of whether there will be better economic opportunities in the future, that motivate people to leave or stay, as opposed to merely economic indicators such as income per capita.

Income Disparities

The impressive economic growth seen in many African and Asian countries over the past three decades has also meant significant increases in the average per capita income in these regions. Between 1990 and 2018, the per capita income of Africans grew by 26 percent – and that of Asians by 108 percent. Notwithstanding this, the average GNI per capita in Africa is still only 41 percent of the global GNI, and in Asia this is 83 percent. The GNI per capita in

Key Points

- **Economies in the Global South are growing at impressive rates. Income disparities at the household level, however, continue to widen between world regions.**
- **The growing need to cater for elderly relatives will pressure more people into migrating to world regions with better earning prospects.**

Europe is almost twice the world average, more than two times higher than the Asian average, and almost five times that of Africa. Indeed, this gap has, albeit moderately, widened since 1990 (WID 2019). Labour migration is largely driven by wage gaps and these trends imply that with regard to relative earning opportunities a move from a number of African, but also Asian, regions to Europe is becoming more attractive. Taking into account increased longevity in the Global South and the resulting need to financially cater for relatives beyond working age, the pressure to migrate to world regions with better earning prospects will likely increase.

Revolutions in Technology, Communications and Transport

Key Points

- **The digital revolution has decoupled core areas of humanity like work, learning, interaction and communication from their spatial roots.**
- **A young, global elite has the know-how and means to move quickly between world regions and adapt swiftly to new environments.**

Over the past twenty years, the world has witnessed a revolution in technical developments and their social consequences. In 2003 about 10 percent of the world population used the internet, today this share is 57 percent. In that same year, 22 percent of the world population had a mobile phone, in Sub-Saharan Africa this was only 5 percent, in the Middle East and North Africa, 13 percent. Today an average 67 percent of the world population own a mobile phone and in many African, Middle Eastern and European countries ownership is 100 percent or more (Datareportal 2019). The smartphone provides access to almost unlimited information, allowing communication over large distances and the sharing and analysing of information by hundreds of thousands of people at any given moment.

Values, views and aspirations have become truly global in the process and have produced a global community able and willing to move and live wherever opportunities are most promising. This also affects both the areas of migration and migration policy. In 2015, the “long summer of migration” made evident the tremendous impact the digital revolution has had on the size and direction of global refugee flows. Sudden and large flows had been observed before, but what had fundamentally changed were the technical means to access information, communicate in real time at any geographical point, and organise journeys on the move. It is safe to say that without the internet, without the smartphone, without social media, the “refugee crisis” would not have developed the way it did.

But the impact of digitalisation on migration goes much deeper. Core areas of humanity like work, learning, interaction and communication are becoming increasingly decoupled from their spatial roots. Those who master the new technologies and can utilise the opportunities they provide form a novel and distinct group within mankind. “Digital natives” are a new global elite and have much more in common with their peers in other countries than with co-nationals who remain outside the digital world. Thus, they share a virtual but globally accessible place they can be part of no matter where they are situated.

When large parts of a social, professional and cultural persona can be taken from one place to another by means of a laptop, it is hardly surprising that new and historically unprecedented forms of mobility emerge. This new mobility is supported by the ongoing revolution in transport. In 1975, there were 9.2 million international flights, in 2017 some 35.8 million. In that year, international airlines carried 4.1 billion passengers, in 2037 this number is expected to grow to 8.2 billion (IATA 2018). Against this background, it can be expected that the “new breed of digital natives” are even more mobile than elites of previous eras. Again, the advances of our times makes increased international mobility and migration more likely.

Climate Change and Environmental Migration

Key Points

- **Environmental factors and climate change are generally not singular causes of displacement and migration. Their impact comes in conjunction with other drivers such as exclusion, poverty, inequalities, land issues, demographic developments, inter-group tensions and conflict.**
- **Environmental factors drive internal rather than international migration. Increased internal displacement, however, might also increase the potential for cross-border mobility.**

It is widely agreed that in recent years environmental degradation, natural disasters and climate change have gained significance as root causes of migratory flows. Although this type of migration is not a new phenomenon but rather has been a coping response to environmental changes throughout the history of mankind, environmental migration has without doubt increased in urgency and magnitude over the past thirty years – and will take on further significance in the future. Any thorough analysis of the phenomenon comes up against the limitations inherent to both the current debate on terms and definitions and the (un)availability of data.

There is no globally accepted definition of the terms “climate refugees”, “environmental refugees” or “environmental migrants”. Moreover, the different types of “environmental migration” hardly ever have only a single cause. Environmental degradation normally forms only one of the causes, closely linked to other factors such as social and economic exclusion, poverty and inequitable distribution of resources, land issues, demographic developments, institutional constraints, inter-group tensions and conflict. Consequently, related estimates vary widely from 25 million to 1 billion environmental migrants by 2050, moving either within countries or across borders (on a permanent or temporary basis), with 200 million being the most widely cited estimate (Kamal 2017).

Thus far, disasters and environmental degradation seem to be driving internal rather than international migration. According to the most accurate estimate provided by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, there were 24.2 million new displacements caused by disasters in 2016 alone (IDMC 2019). The populations of low- and middle-income countries were most affected, and South and East Asia recorded the highest numbers of environmentally induced displacement. Notwithstanding the considerable degree of conceptual and statistical uncertainties, one conclusion can be drawn: Over the coming decades, environmental changes will force millions of people to leave their homes and migrate elsewhere, either within the territory of their home countries or abroad.

Migrant Decisions and Global Opportunity Structures

Key Points

- Migrant decisions are not determined by a set of scientific laws but rather are taken in the framework of complex individual, social and political processes.
- The decision to leave a country is based on mixed motivations and drivers of individual migrations are cumulative, complex and intertwined.
- Migrant decisions are embedded in a set of global opportunity structures, which work in conjunction with the other drivers, impact decisions, and influence individual migration projects.
- Global opportunity structures are comprised of: geographical proximity or distance; migration policies and control; legal migration channels; job opportunities; family and social networks; admission, asylum and protection systems; and the capacities of migrant smuggling networks.

The increasing impact of the drivers and megatrends outlined above suggests that one should expect exponential growth in international migration to be accompanied by an ever-decreasing ability among states and other political actors to steer migration processes. Such a notion, however, contradicts empirical evidence. When looking at the actual numbers, a basic question arises: Why is there so little migration? At least in relation to the share of international migrants among world population – more than 96 percent of the people living on our planet have not migrated. Obviously, migration is not a physical phenomenon, driven and determined by a set of scientific laws. Rather it is a human phenomenon caused by individual or collective decision-making, embedded in social contexts that can be influenced by political intervention.

There is already a rich body of literature on the subject, analysing how migrants decide whether to migrate, when to migrate, and where to migrate to. Closely linked to the various migration theories that have developed, migrant decisions are seen in conjunction with economic factors, political and security factors, cultural factors, social factors and network factors – or a combination thereof. Most scholars agree that any decision to migrate cannot be pinned down to a single cause and that “the causation of migration is cumulative” (Massey et al 1993: 461). Decisions are taken, in descending order, at the intrapersonal, intimate partners and extended family level (Tabor et al 2015: 5). They are influenced by considerations regarding safety at home and in the desired destination, presumed opportunities to build a better future, cultural and linguistic similarity, and a migrant-friendly climate in the new home country.

When they are in a position to choose a safe haven themselves, the consideration of refugees and asylum seekers seem to be quite similar. Both Thielemann and Neumayer have conducted quantitative analyses on the issue and conclude that the most powerful factors for choosing an asylum destination are, again in descending order, the existence of migrant networks, presumed employment opportunities, the prospects for receiving a legal status, historical, cultural and linguistic ties, and the image of a country as prosperous and “liberal” towards immigrants and asylum seekers (Thielemann 2006: 5; Neumayer 2005: 21).

These findings were also confirmed in the latest Mixed Migration Review from 2019 (MMR 2019). The MMR 2019 contains a section on regional mixed migration updates, as well as data analysis and individual stories based on a sample of approximately 10,000 interviews carried out along several mixed migration routes in Africa, Europe and Asia by the 4Mi, the MMC data collection initiative. The Review also includes a thematic section focused on future migration scenarios, looking at mixed migration through the lens of big topics such as climate change, artificial intelligence, economics, securitisation, demography, politics and multilateralism.

ugees and migrants in West and North Africa, economic drivers were central in their decision-making. For East Africans in East, South and North Africa, economic reasons were also central, but violence, insecurity and a lack of rights also played an important role. In the case of Afghans in South East Asia and Europe, there was a prevalence of violence and lack of rights. These findings confirm the view that the decision to leave a country is based on mixed motivations and that the drivers of migratory movements are indeed cumulative, complex and intertwined. Livelihood concerns are indeed at the core of most decision-making, hence their predominance in migration decisions. However, even in those cases where economic reasons formed a central element, in the 4Mi survey they were almost always reported in combination with other concerns (MMR 2019: 84).

The decision to migrate is not taken lightly. It is embedded in another set of factors that could be summarised as the “global opportunity structures”, which work in conjunction with the other drivers, impact decisions, and influence individual migration projects. Such opportunity structures are comprised of: geographical proximity or distance; the density and capacity of migration control; entry and residence regulations; the existence and capacities of migrant smuggling networks; the characteristics of asylum and protection systems; job opportunities on formal and informal labour markets; the existence of family and social networks in countries of destination and en route; and the willingness of states along the routes to cooperate on migration control, return and legal migration.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Key Points

- **Solutions to global migration challenges have to be found outside the realm of migration policies, in foreign policy, international conflict resolution, economic and trade policy, and development cooperation.**
- **Cooperation on migration works when it avoids a focus purely on domestic measures, engages in regional and international cooperation based on mutual acknowledgment of challenges and interests, and follows the principles of partnership.**

Should previous trends continue and new developments materialise as expected, the world of migration of tomorrow could look like this: The share of international migrants among world population increases moderately but stays quite small. Due to world population growth, however, the absolute number of international migrants increases more significantly. Violent conflicts are overwhelmingly internal and cause ever-growing numbers of internally displaced. This trend is aggravated by the increasing effects of climate change and environmental degradation. The majority of internal migration flows continue to move to and within the Global North, but migration in the Global South gains in importance. The latter is driven by accelerating socio-economic development in low- and middle-income countries, higher education levels, longevity, and increased urbanisation. Demographic ageing affects high-, middle- and low-income societies and increases the demand for emigration and immigration alike. Income disparities between world regions persist and even widen, with the prospect of migrating between region becoming more attractive.

Last but not least, the revolutions in technology, communications and transport mean core areas of humanity like work, learning, interaction or communication are no longer bound to their spatial roots. A new global elite of “digi-

tal natives” have the capacity to live their lives regardless of where they are situated, and the new means of communication and transport support them in doing so. The actual impact of these drivers is determined by complex individual and collective decision-making processes and embedded in global opportunity structures, within which concrete decisions are taken and individual migration projects are put into practice.

Amidst all of this it is often assumed that migration policies fail to meet the existing challenges or produce the desired outcomes. This notion is driven by problem-centred media coverage and a public debate which regularly links migration to crisis. The crisis paradigm hides the fact that in reality most migration policies are quite effective when, and this is an important qualification, one accepts their scope and limitations. Migration cannot be fully controlled or steered, especially when it is linked to forced displacement – where those affected have no other option than to flee their home or place of residence. Notwithstanding these limitations, the vast majority of migrants enter and reside in their host countries legally, immigration follows the ups and downs of the economic cycle, and the corresponding levels are both demand and supply driven (De Haas 2017).

Thus, it is a truism that migration is an international phenomenon which requires international responses. When considering the magnitude and growing impact of the drivers presented above, one can only conclude that attempts to steer migration solely at the national level are likely to fail. In a globalised world, no single nation-state, no matter how big or powerful, has the means or resources to successfully respond on its own to dynamics that transcend national boundaries and are global in nature. Conversely, functioning global or regional migration regimes are still absent and the structural difficulty in balancing the interests of the nation-state with the need to find compromises at the regional and international level will not become any easier.

In order to have an impact and change migration realities for the better, migration policy will have to transcend its own boundaries, as also highlighted in the ICMPD Recommendations for the next five years of EU policy making (ICMPD 2019). The importance of migration policies must not be neglected, but in a narrower sense they have little effect on the main drivers of migration, such as flight and displacement, demographic developments, income differentials and socio-economic transformation. The real changes have to be made outside the realm of migration policy: In foreign policy, international conflict resolution, economic and trade policy, and development cooperation. In this, the international community has yet to learn how to acknowledge each other's interests and priorities, invest in policies, which are based on the common good rather than individual interests, or develop a joint vision on migration that would balance the benefits for sending and receiving states and migrants alike. There are, however, no real alternatives to such an approach.

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