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Uncertainty in Future Migration Flows: Where Does It Come From?

Accessing Experts' Opinions

Evidence needs to be injected into the decision and policy processes related to migration from the outset, as a way to ensure preparedness for future migration trends.

The future of migration trends should ideally be assessed for different types of migration separately. It is crucial to take into account the role played by policies and administrative procedures in shaping migration flows.

More collaboration and dialogue between stakeholders is necessary to improve coordination mechanisms for better migration data provision.

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Introduction

Migration processes, despite being highly uncertain, volatile and complex, very often demand concrete, rapid and targeted policy responses. Migration forecasting tools, from early warnings to long-term scenarios can help bridge the uncertainty gap between the evidence and knowledge base and what policy makers and practitioners require. However, these instruments should be based on solid assumptions to provide effective decision aid. Assumptions underlying empirical models tend to be a complicated part of any forecasting exercise, as they demand the analyst to be aware of a multiplicity of factors that may influence future flows. In the framework of the H2020 Project QuantMig (www.quantmig.eu), Bijak and Czaika (2020) developed a typology to assess uncertain migration futures. This typology is based on a systematic literature review on migration studies with respect to how migration uncertainty and complexity are being defined, measured and analysed.

To test and fine-tune the arguments from this largely conceptual and literature-based study, the QuantMig project organised a high-level expert meeting on 'Migration Forecasting, Policy and Practice: Bridging the Uncertainty Gap', which took place online on 10 November 2020. The meeting with world-leading experts aimed to discuss where most of the uncertainty in the future migration comes from, and what can be done to reduce or manage this uncertainty. Participants included Linda Adhiambo Oucho (African Migration and Development Policy Centre), Zsuzsanna Felkai Janssen, Juan Francisco Galvan Montero, Luca Lixi and Rainer Münz (European Commission), Jason Gagnon (OECD), Björn Gillsäter (UNHCR/World Bank Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement), Diego Iturralde (Statistics South Africa), Marie McAuliffe (International Organisation for Migration), Elsa Oommen (Overseas Development Institute), Ann Singleton (University of Bristol), Ronald Skeldon (Sussex University), Hania Zlotnik (Independent Population Specialist, formerly at the United Nations), Frans Willekens (University of Groningen and Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute), and Teddy Wilkin (European Asylum Support Office). The meeting was hosted by Daniela Vono de Vilhena (Population Europe) and Jakub Bijak (University of Southampton).¹

Shades of Uncertainty and Migration Types

When looking at the future of migration, the meeting par-

ticipants stressed the importance of differentiating flows by type of migration and of identifying the role played by policies and administrative procedures.

A common mistake is looking at migration as a single phenomenon. When looking at regular migration, the drivers affecting the decision to migrate vary for different types of flows – even if these types are just ideals. For example, family migration and family reunion are relatively stable flows and tend to be well registered, largely depending on the size of diasporas and differences in quality of life between origin and destination, and on the related migration policies. Recruitment of third country nationals as workers, in turn, depends mostly on economic cycles. Policies have less power to regulate migration of citizens in the areas of free movement, like in the EU, which makes it less predictable. However, reality has shown that intra-EU migration is highly dependent on wage differences and reflects economic convergence among the Member States.

Forced and irregular migration are the most uncertain and hence the least predictable flows, as agreed by participants. Much has been said on the fact that a large proportion of asylum applications lodged in Europe comes from people who arrived either holding a valid visa or through visa-free channels. However, arrivals by boat, even if less numerous, are much more visible and create more political pressure for decision makers to take concrete actions. Possible double-counting of applications in different systems adds complexity to the estimates and predictions.

Finally, the participants stressed that divisions inside public administrations working with regular and with irregular migration add further complexity to forecasting future migration flows, particularly when it comes to data collection and data management. More collaboration and dialogue between stakeholders is necessary to improve coordination mechanisms for a less fragmented data landscape.

Policy Actions: High Uncertainty Levels Can Be Deliberate

The discussion went further on the role played by migration policies and administrative procedures, as even the smallest change in policies can have a large impact on migration, and through a feedback loop, on migration management. At a comparative level, the participants discussed how countries are sovereign in their migration policies and perceive the uncertainty surrounding migration, as well as its challenges, in different ways. The outcome of this is

that not only national migration policies are very different among European countries: their implementation also varies substantially, and the differences in implementation also generate further uncertainty.

The analytical challenge is then, how to take the policy implementation aspects into account in migration forecasting and scenario-setting. Processing visa applications, for example, is far from being a transparent process in most countries. Rules related to visa extensions and fees are often subject to changes. Even in places with fixed annual quotas (for example in the case of seasonal workers in agriculture), procedures are not straightforward and often encompass administrative delays, slowing processes of application, or increase in denials as an implicit policy strategy. In addition, it has been mentioned the importance of distinguishing changes in regulations and those in administrative practices related to migration governance.

Participants believed that these dynamics are considerably under-researched and in that regard, two main endeavours should be pursued. First, it is necessary to better understand the process of policy formulation and implementation. Second, there is a need for quantifying the functioning of administrative agencies in processing visa and residence applications, so that it can be properly assessed in the forecasting exercises. What to do? Participants agreed that the first step is to strengthen the dialogue on this topic between data experts, academia, policy makers while also including migrants and their views.

Old and New Concerns on the Links Between Migration and Development

According to the participants, more attention should be given to the role that an individual's resources and access to technology have in shaping migration decisions. Information on migration intentions and how they interact with the population composition might also help understand the future migration flows. On a more critical note, participants indicated that many times, the broader idea of development policies might actually influence the decision to leave the countries of origin. They also pointed towards the under-studied role that resources available in neighboring countries (for example political stability and economic development) play on migration flows towards Europe.

Enabling factors and non-state actors have also been mentioned as becoming highly influential over time. Particular concerns have been raised with respect to the impact of

technology on decision-making processes: how individuals determine the feasibility of their decision to migrate, and how they access smugglers or other intermediaries is currently heavily mediated by the access to information, which is facilitated by mobile technology. Recruitment agents, manpower managing agencies, lawyers, enterprises, universities and training institutions are also key players and their role is so far under-studied.

Acknowledging Heterogeneity in Data Gaps

It is widely known that migration data are far from being sufficient to understand and predict migration flows, even partially. However, data needs depend on the aims of the forecasting exercise. During the meeting, the participants highlighted, on the one hand, the need for more efforts in strengthening data collection capacity and in collecting information on pull factors in the Global South. On the other hand, they stressed the importance of improving coordination efforts among different agencies collecting and organising migration data in Europe, particularly with regard to irregular border crossing. As a prerequisite, this also demands working on common definitions, standards, and data sharing procedures. A step in this direction is the recently launched feasibility study by the European Commission, which is based on an integrated European forecasting and early warning tool for migration based on A.I. technology. This study called for better cooperation on migration data sharing to reduce data fragmentation, improve the quality of data sources, fill gaps in the data reporting time frames and data registration.

In addition, migration data collection is becoming a significant policy issue across Africa. Capturing population movements is relatively new, and most countries rely only on census data for that purpose. Overall, the situation is evolving, but there still need to strengthen data collection and to support national statistical offices to strengthen their capacity. Participants in our meeting pointed that the World Migration Survey, to be piloted soon in many African countries, may be a significant positive step in this direction.

Talking Two Different Languages?

Lastly, the participants also raised awareness of the fact that in policy circles, uncertainty is not always perceived as such. Cognitive biases often play an important role in

creating shortcuts for explanations for reality and for what needs to be done around a specific policy challenge. While policy makers tend to work based on risk and seek to actively reduce uncertainty through regulatory tools and migration diplomacy, researchers seek to better understand causes of uncertainty so policy actors can better prepare their policy responses and not just react to events as they happen. Time frames are also vastly different, with policy and practice working on much shorter time frames with much narrower 'fields of view' (or scope) than research.

To overcome generalisations and anticipated reactions, participants suggested that scholars need to better identify the decision-making contexts in which migration decisions are made. A clear example is the – established but not evidence-informed – policy assumption that more returns from Europe would contribute to a decrease in future migration flows from the specific region. Participants stressed the importance of promoting science-policy dialogue before policy agendas are settled, and to bring evidence to the forefront of conversations. It is also important that once policies are in place, their implementation is properly monitored and their impact is measured.

Policy Recommendations

– Migration policies should move from a reaction mode towards prevention, preparedness, readiness and anticipation.² Proactive responses can help achieve greater resilience.

– More and clearer legal migration pathways should be promoted to reduce uncertainty. At the national level, criteria for granting visas and migrant admissions should be transparent.

– Evidence needs to be injected into the decision and policy processes from the outset, in a continuing dialogue on the uncertainty and trade-offs between different options.

– Coordination among data providers needs improving to reduce data fragmentation. There is high demand for integrated, multi-purpose data collection systems, both by enhancing existing data collection tools (administrative or surveys) and by combining data from different sources through record linkage or other methods of data fusion, subject to ethical and privacy safeguards.

– An actor-based approach more than focusing on drivers of migration should be promoted as a methodological

choice in forecasts, as determinants of flows are likely to be different for different groups of migrants. ■

Footnote

1 The meeting was held under the Chatham House rule, so with no attribution of specific views to individual participants.

2 In line with the principles set out in the European Commission's recommendation on an EU mechanism for Preparedness and Management of Crises related to Migration (Migration Preparedness and Crisis Blueprint), adopted on 23 September 2020 as part of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.

References

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