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# How Can Europe Better Prepare for Future Migration Movements?

## Understanding and addressing the root causes of displacements

European migration policies should continue to tackle the root causes of displacement in countries of origin. At the same time, they should take into account the changing nature of the multiple predisposing, mediating, enabling and triggering factors that change dynamically over time and over the course of a migration journey.

Simplistic policy answers for tackling complex causes of displacement, such as interdependencies between civil war, violence or economic deprivation in countries of origin, should be avoided. Research has clearly shown that they have a weak evidence base.

In the short-term, governing bodies should develop early warning systems as part of migration policies. In the longer run, future trends based on different scenario simulation techniques are needed. These instruments should be developed in close collaboration with policy makers and stakeholders from civil society organisations and academia.

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## Introduction

In 2020, five years will have passed since the so-called migration crisis of 2015 reached the heart of Europe. During the crisis, policy interventions have faced major shortcomings due to lack of data on the potential number of new arrivals to support evidence-informed responses and to create pathways to integration. Besides attempts to better distribute the new immigrants throughout and within the European Union member states, and to establish better border control management, governing bodies had two major goals for future migration policies. They aimed to gain better advanced oversight on potential migration flows and to prevent migration through policy action in countries of origin. The bad news is that data and knowledge needed for such purposes is not fully available; the good news is that population researchers in Europe are working close together to address the problem.

This policy brief aims to offer an overview of the current state of scientific knowledge on the root causes of migration; review the opportunities and limitations of migration estimates and forecasts regarding future trends; and provide evidence-informed policy recommendations. This brief is based on research conducted in the framework of the Horizon 2020 Project QuantMig: *Quantifying Migration Scenarios for Better Policy* (www.quantmig.eu), and responds to a research interest of the Commission on the Root Causes of Displacement of the German Government.

## Root causes of displacement: What do we know?

There is a recurring and growing academic and political interest in the drivers or so-called 'root causes' of migration and population displacements. Migration drivers may affect people's migration decisions directly but also, sometimes even more importantly, indirectly as part of more complex *migration driver environments*. These are configurations of multiple connected and interacting *migration driver dimensions* including demographic, economic, environmental, human development, politico-institutional, security, socio-

cultural and psychological factors.

In a review of the rapidly growing body of studies investigating migration drivers, Czaika and Reinprecht (2020) identify a strong research focus on the roles of economic, socio-cultural and politico-institutional factors, and the roles these factors may play in shaping migration processes. But researchers are also exploring the roles of environmental and climate-related factors, as well as more psychological factors, such as migration aspirations, experience and decision-making (Figure 1). Other areas such as family ties or the either constraining or facilitating effects of technology have received less attention so far. Overall, Czaika and Reinprecht's review points towards the complexity of studying root causes of migration: it categorises more than 20 distinct factors that may independently and/or jointly influence the intentions and decisions of various societal groups in multiple but distinctive ways.

Some assumptions and discourses on migration drivers are often simplistic or based on weak evidence. In fact, the state of knowledge is often ambiguous regarding the ways in which single factors may shape migration.

What is clear, however, is the finding, for instance, that socio-economic inequalities and feelings of relative deprivation are usually more important than absolute poverty per se, which by contrast constrains people from moving. This explains why economic development – in the form of rising incomes, educational expansion or improved infrastructure – usually increases migration, as it provides the financial, human and social resources for people to move, or to start considering it as an option in the first place.

Similarly, it is often claimed that emigration can be 'tackled' through targeted development aid interventions in places of origin. There is only limited empirical support for this presumption, as it ignores the fact that many people around the world – particularly young people – move internationally out of curiosity or professional aspirations, and not only out of economic deprivation.

Political drivers such as wars and violent conflicts usually nurture people's aspirations to escape such high-risk areas. However, even when facing physical threat, actual migra-



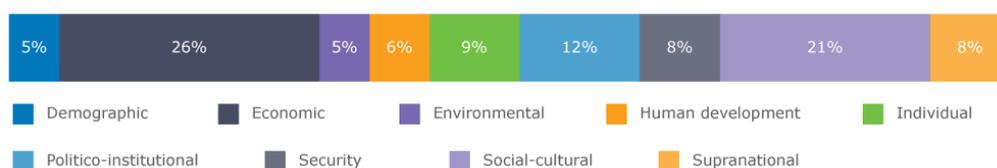| Demographic | Economic | Environmental | Human development | Individual | Politico-institutional | Security | Social-cultural | Supranational |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5% | 26% | 5% | 6% | 9% | 12% | 8% | 21% | 8% |

Figure 1: Research intensity of migration driver dimensions and factors (N=296 studies). Source: Czaika and Reinprecht (2020).

tion decisions are often linked to economic or family-related considerations. For example, many Syrians stayed in their hometowns years into the civil war and only fled to neighbouring countries once their economic basis of subsistence eroded to an extent where staying was no longer a viable option. Conversely, people can be 'trapped' in war zones, e.g. for economic reasons, which is one main reason why conflicts do not deterministically trigger large-scale emigration. The Yemeni conflict is a recent example.

High fertility rates and notions of 'population pressure' are often considered a major 'root cause' of mass emigration. Empirical evidence, however, has remained ambiguous on this matter. While large cohorts of young people often demand more and better jobs, education and socio-political situations, the relationship with migration is more complex as governments' economic, social or education policies may mediate the effect of population growth on migration. Similarly, the effects of climate change on migration are highly ambiguous and, as with demographic factors, may be moderated by state interventions and good governance.

Populations' resilience to environmental stress and disasters affects propensities both for permanent emigration and for short-term, short-distance displacement, depending on government protection measures, adaptation mechanisms and the infrastructure in place. For instance, as predicted in the 1970s by American geographer Wilbur Zelinsky, while advances in technology and infrastructure may at first seem to facilitate mobility, they can also render permanent migration unnecessary by creating new possibilities for commuting, teleworking and innovation, allowing people to adapt to environmentally stressful locations. Overall, current research efforts (e.g. Horizon 2020 Project MIGNEX) aim to produce a more systematic understanding of the circumstances under which certain sets of drivers interact to reinforce or rather neutralise each other.

## Towards new migration systems: The role of short and long-term trends

Temporal stability is a key component shaping new migration systems. While international disparities in economic opportunities usually evolve slowly, very specific events and shocks, or targeted state interventions such as recruitment programmes, may trigger population movements and displacements relatively quickly and make predictions of future migration highly uncertain. For instance, while demographic transitions or adaptations of cultural norms

are usually slow-changing and therefore steady structural drivers, natural disasters or coups d'état result in rapidly changing driver environments with often almost unpredictable effects on the number and character of displacements.

What further increases the complexity of migration driver analyses is the fact that drivers not only operate at specific locations as 'push' and 'pull' factors, but also 'in between', i.e. in transit locations or transnational corridors as well as on individual migration journeys. Certain drivers therefore shift in significance over time and space. Migration driver environments are also often perceived very differently during a migration journey or a life cycle. Scholarship on complex driver configurations is still in its infancy, as most driver analyses hardly consider interactions and complex inter-linkages between multiple drivers.

## The future of migration movements: Possibilities and limits of forecasts

With the knowledge available on migration factors and drivers, can we predict future trends? The short answer is no, at least not precisely. Like other social processes, migration is fraught with two types of uncertainty: epistemic, related to the limits of our knowledge; and aleatory, concerned with the intrinsic unpredictability of human and social behaviour. In the case of migration, these aspects of uncertainty are more pronounced than for other demographic processes, making migration so difficult to forecast.

The epistemic uncertainty has roots in ambiguous concepts (who is a migrant?), weaknesses in migration theories (why do people migrate?), and widespread problems with data quality and other aspects of measurement (how many people move?). All of these factors contribute to the limited knowledge about population flows. The aleatory uncertainty is related to the multiplicity of drivers, often interacting with one another and operating at a range of time scales, as well as to the human factor: the agency of people making decisions, also under conditions of uncertainty. This means that migration can be very volatile, rapidly responding to economic or political shocks, as mentioned above.

What can be done in the face of all this uncertainty? Ignoring it can only lead to an 'illusion of control' and may backfire in the face of rapidly changing events. The best way to deal with the epistemic part is to know your data and their many imperfections. What sources are used: surveys, registers or administrative records? What definitions are applied and what populations are covered? How timely

and detailed are the data, and what biases and inaccuracies could be involved in their collection? How much information can be drawn from different groups of migration experts? Knowing answers to these questions and more can help understand the current migration picture better, while also acknowledging that the picture painted by the disparate sources is far from perfect. A promising way forward is to combine information from different sources, even different countries, to arrive at harmonised estimates, the errors of which would explicitly warn data users about the extent of measurement uncertainty. This is one of the key pillars of the QuantMig project.

For the aleatory uncertainty, the answer depends on the horizon of prediction. In the short- to mid-term, a description using the language of probabilities offers a convenient way to acknowledge the limits of forecasting, i.e. how wrong we may be when trying to foresee migration on the immediate horizon. Over longer time horizons, scenarios offer a natural framework and language for describing possible migration futures – as long as they are imaginative enough. Such scenarios, both narrative and using computer-based simulation methods, are also being developed and tested in QuantMig. In either case, the key message that needs to be conveyed is not about how many migrants there *will* be – that is impossible – but how many there *may* be with a certain probability or under different scenario assumptions.

How can policy makers use the information about uncertainty? This knowledge can be directly applied at different levels: from short- and mid-term planning, where the required numerical input can be offered together with the assessment of probabilities in formal models and early warning systems, to long-term strategic decisions aided by scenarios. In either case, all the numbers, probabilities and scenarios offer at least one input for the decision process – the other being explicit policy preferences, for example to prepare for different migration contingencies and hedge against various negative outcomes. To that end, as famously stated by Carveth Read, 'It is better to be vaguely right than exactly wrong.'

## Policy Recommendations

– European migration policies should continue to tackle the root causes of displacement in countries of origin. At the same time, they should take into account the changing nature of the multiple predisposing, mediating, enabling and triggering factors that change dynamically over time and over the course of a migration journey.

– Simplistic policy answers for tackling complex causes of displacement, such as interdependencies between civil war, violence and economic deprivation in countries of origin, should be avoided. Research has clearly shown that they have a weak evidence base.

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