



Gaps between migration realities and policies: Sussex Centre for Migration Research findings

Summary

In the glare of the media spotlight, the European refugee crisis has sparked a number of immediate policy changes that directly impact on the life opportunities of migrants seeking a better life or simply refuge in Europe. Migration research at the University of Sussex indicates that there are clear gaps between migrants' intentions and experiences and the way that policies construct their motivations to migrate, settle, or return. Immigration policies are highly restrictive because they are driven by domestic politics rather than based on understandings from grounded research on why people decide to move or not to wealthier or safer countries. This matters because even well-intentioned policies such as those to resettle Syrian refugees may miss the mark in delivering on their stated objectives.

At the same time the boundaries and logics behind policies addressing related features of the migration process, such as development, integration, human rights and international relations, are often blurred leading to a confusion of aims and outcomes. The short-termism of policies made at the height of media attention may have unexpected impacts that counteract long-term established goals for development, integration or humanitarian refugee provision.

This briefing highlights Sussex research on migrants' experiences in migrating out of poverty, receiving humanitarian assistance to 'integrate' as refugees, and dealing with the consequences of (forced) return. Only by giving a 'voice' to migrants can we understand their lifeworld and start to conceive policies that meet their needs and ours.

Key findings

- Policies driven by domestic politics rather than knowledge will fail to meet the migration needs of sending and receiving countries
- Existing migration policies are based on assumptions about mobility patterns and drivers that are not underpinned by evidence
- Refugee resettlement makes a small but important contribution to international protection, but requires careful planning to be effective
- Migrants deciding whether to return seldom trust the information they receive from government sources; and those who do return often struggle to reintegrate and want to re-migrate



University of Sussex
Global Studies

About this policy briefing

This briefing was produced by members of the Sussex Centre of Migration Research, and showcases a selection of ongoing migration research at Sussex. For more about our work see www.sussex.ac.uk/migration

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The research

The Sussex Centre for Migration Research (SCMR) builds on a longstanding reputation for original theoretically-driven empirical research in the field of migration and ethnic relations. True to the Sussex tradition, our approach to research is genuinely interdisciplinary and draws insights from sociology, human geography, anthropology, development studies, politics, law, psychology, education, economics and demography. Our research covers the experiences of sending and receiving regions, countries and states, and different types of migration and migrant, across the globe. Sussex has an outstanding record for generating research funding from academic funding bodies and government departments to conduct original research that is recognised as path-breaking in shaping the field.

Migrants in poor countries: motivations to move

Three assumptions that seem to underpin the current migration debate are:

- migrants fleeing deteriorating conditions in rural Africa and Asia are headed to Europe
- injecting resources into these economies to develop them will stem the tide of migration and
- staying at home is better than undertaking highly risky journeys with the help of recruiters.

But emerging research findings from a seven-year DFID-funded research consortium on migration and poverty (MOOP) in East, West and Southern Africa as well as South and Southeast Asia show that all these assumptions are a long way from the truth.

In fact, a large proportion of migrants from poor communities and countries move short distances, either to other destinations within the country or to other countries in the region but rarely to Europe. For example, a MOOP household survey undertaken in the major migrant-sending areas of Ghana (the North and central regions) covering nearly 1400 households shows that a majority (66%)

migrate within the country, mainly to Accra. The rest is mainly regional migration to other countries in West Africa. In contrast, the MOOP survey in Zimbabwe shows that regional migration is more prevalent than internal migration— with an approximately 60:40 split and most migrate to countries within Southern Africa including South Africa.

The assumption that more resources will lead to lower rates of migration probably has its roots in development theories of the 1970s which argued that depriving agriculture and rural areas of resources lead to migration. MOOP research shows that some of the most important factors leading to migration are cultural and social and that more development is likely to fuel these processes. Qualitative research in Ghana and Ethiopia showed that girls were leaving to escape early marriage, to live like an urban person, earn money for themselves or to acquire an education because they wanted a future that is different to that of their mothers and peers. For boys, moving to urban lifestyles and out of agriculture is important. MOOP is currently engaged in research to explore the links between youth aspirations and migration.



Finally, some types of migration have been characterised as trafficking and slavery because they involve recruiters, harsh working conditions and low pay. MOOP has conducted research on migrant construction work and domestic work, both of which often involve recruiters and employ more than 200 million people from poor and disadvantaged communities worldwide. Both occupations were found to provide an important route out for those who are trying to put themselves and their families on an upward trajectory. Their earnings help to pay for their own education or the education of their children, housing and healthcare among other things. Research on the recruitment industry in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Ghana shows that most migrants take a calculated risk after weighing up their options and feel that such work offers better prospects for social and economic advancement than staying at home. Although well-meaning, anti-trafficking stances of humanitarian organisations and migration policy makers may be doing more harm than good.

Refugee settlement in the UK: opportunities for a new life?

Refugee resettlement provides an entirely separate route to life in the UK from the asylum system. Asylum seekers must reach UK territory themselves, often at great personal risk, and must wait while their claim to be a refugee is assessed, during which time they are prohibited from working and have restricted rights to health and education. In contrast, resettled refugees have been recognised as refugees before arrival, they have been identified as especially vulnerable by representatives of the Home Office and brought to the UK, often after many years living in refugee camps, with rights equivalent to UK citizens. Resettlement is clearly a much better way to reach a safe country than the uncertainties of the asylum system, but the numbers who can benefit are severely limited. The dramatic transition involved in resettlement, combined with the focus on the most vulnerable, presents additional challenges.

At a global scale only about 1% of the world's refugees are ever resettled. This is likely to fall further as resettlement is not increasing as rapidly as the global refugee population. Yet resettlement continues to make an important contribution to the challenge of global refugee protection.

It has a practical value, offering an alternative form of protection for some of the most vulnerable refugees. It also plays an important symbolic role in the provision of international protection. At least 85% of the global refugee population live in poor countries and the bulk of resettlement is offered by the wealthiest states, so it fulfils a role of solidarity. Nevertheless, resettlement is very unevenly distributed even amongst wealthy states. In 2014, the USA took the largest number of resettled refugees, 48,911. This was followed by Canada (7,233) and Australia (6,162). The UK's current annual quota of 750 refugees a year, looks particularly modest, though current plans to resettle a further 4,000 Syrian refugees a year for the next five years will increase this.

This significant expansion of the number of refugees resettled to the UK reinforces the importance of getting resettlement right. The dramatic change that resettlement involves poses a significant challenge for refugees concerned, which needs to be managed sensitively by the organisations responsible for supporting them. Over the past two years the research project 'Optimising Refugee Resettlement to the UK' (funded by the ESRC) has investigated the results of the resettlement process for 300 refugees who were resettled to the UK at least five years ago. This focus is unusual, as most research has considered the impact of resettlement during the first year after arrival. Fewer than 30% of refugees involved in this research are employed, and language barriers are cited as the most significant barrier to gaining employment.

These results highlight the enduring difficulties faced by many refugees in adapting to life in the UK, and demonstrate the need to resolve the most intractable problems of employment and language. Unfortunately, the initial plans for the resettlement of Syrian refugees will do little to address these issues. The proposal to finance the new resettlement largely from the aid budget places severe restrictions on the services that can be provided; language training is not an eligible expenditure, for example. It also restricts the provision of support to the first year, whereas our research highlights that less support for a longer period of time could be much more effective in building self-sufficiency amongst refugees.

Experiences of return migration – a hope or a threat?

A recent collaborative research project between the Peace Research Institute Oslo and the University of Sussex, *The Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration* (PREMIG), looked at the return intentions and experiences of migrants and refugees from Afghanistan, Burundi, Iraqi Kurdistan, Pakistan and Poland, in the UK and Norway.

Exploring attitudes about return migration shows a big gap between the assumptions of non-migrants, the hopes of migrants and the actual experiences of migrants. Many people in the migrant-receiving country assume that migrants intend to stay permanently; conversely, the majority of migrants hope to one day return to their country of origin. The reality is somewhere in between. Many people migrate to the UK and Norway on a temporary basis, eventually returning or moving to a third country; meanwhile, not all of those who say they want to return actually do return.

Whatever people's assumptions and hopes about return migration, changes in priorities (often associated with changes in the life cycle: having children, death of a parent, getting old) lead to inevitable changes in plans. However, for some

migrants, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, whatever their hopes, the decision to return might be out of their control.

Sussex's involvement in the PREMIG project focussed on the experiences of Afghans in the UK and Norway, and included fieldwork in Afghanistan with those who had returned from the UK and Norway. For Afghans, the decision to return was often felt to be out of their control. The majority of Afghan research participants said they wanted to return, one day. However, the current insecurity and fragile economy in Afghanistan made it impractical to consider for all but the very few. At the same time, some – those whose asylum case had been rejected – had to make the decision to either 'voluntarily' return through an assisted return programme, or wait to be 'removed' by the authorities. For these research participants, the prospect of return was a threat hanging over them.

Their concerns and fears about returning to Afghanistan were based on information they trusted, usually from friends and family. They generally did not trust information given to them by those running assisted return programmes, who most felt were focussed on removing them from Europe, rather than protecting their interests.

Fieldwork in Afghanistan, which involved both those who had taken assisted return and those who had been forcibly removed, suggested that they were right to be concerned about returning to Afghanistan. Whilst some – those with particularly strong family support in Afghanistan – were managing to reintegrate back into Afghan society, most of our research participants were struggling, socially, economically, and in terms of being scared for their safety. The majority were planning to try and leave Afghanistan again.

“If I had a choice I would stay here but it’s not happening. No work, no papers. I can’t always ask friends for help. It’s so difficult, very difficult. But they are not going to accept me.”

An asylum seeker in Norway, considering 'voluntary' return

Policy implications

At a time when Western countries view immigration as a 'crisis', our research shows that the long-term underlying factors that shape why people are moving from South to North, how refugees experience resettlement, and the conditions and motivations for migrants' return, are seldom touched by some (even well-meaning) current policies. What we need is policy based on factual and regionally nuanced understandings of the global migration

process, and informed public debates about the humanitarian obligations, immigration needs, and development responsibilities of advanced countries. If politicized rhetoric driven by a fear of globalization processes is allowed to define our migration policies, then the policies lose their capacity to address real world problems in a fair and reasonable way. In short, we lose the benefits of migration, and migrants lose their life chances.

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The final report on the PREMIG project with country case studies is available here:
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