

THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION: what we know about the drivers that shape long-term migration trends and require policy responses

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November 2023

PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

Today, Europe experiences perhaps the greatest challenges since the end of the Second World War, in terms of the geopolitical situation and the complexities of flight and migration. Recent events have led commentators to speak of a turning point in world history and the evolvement of a fundamentally changing global geopolitical environment. The war in Ukraine and the Israel-Gaza crisis may be the most recent manifestations of this development, but are only the culmination of a trend that started more than ten years ago. Since then, the world has transitioned from a two-decades-long period of relative stability to increasing volatility and disruption. This change is characterised by a more competitive and less secure global environment,¹ systemic rivalry between the world's great powers,² a multipolar or "poly-nodal" international order,³ weakened multilateralism and multilateral institutions, increasing state fragility, a growing number of violent conflicts, terrorism, hybrid threats, economic crises, weaponization of energy, food insecurity, climate change and pandemics.

1 Lazarou, E. and Pichon, E., Peace and Security in 2023. Overview of EU action and outlook for the future. EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2023, p. 5.

2 Ioannides, I., What European Union in the "Age of Uncertainty"? Weathering the Geopolitical Storms in a World of Perpetual Crises, *Intereconomics*, ISSN 1613-964X, Springer, Heidelberg, Vol. 57, Iss. 6, 2022, pp. 363-367, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-022-1088-8>.

3 European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS), *Global Trends to 2030. Challenges and Choices for Europe*, April 2019, p. 19.

These global shifts also pose new challenges for state migration management systems and international cooperation on migration issues. The simultaneous and mutually reinforcing occurrence of the aforementioned factors has already resulted in new migration realities in Europe that are shaped by increasing levels of human mobility - voluntary and forced, regular and irregular - as well as decreasing predictability of the size, directions, and patterns of international migration flows. It can be assumed that these trends will continue to intensify and that migration in its various forms will increase rather than decrease. Governments and other stakeholders are well advised to plan for such developments, while emphasizing that the future of migration can never be accurately predicted. It is not a matter of certainties but of probabilities and plausible scenarios for which migration policy actors should be prepared. This publication aims at contributing to the debate on preparedness in the area of international migration, to present a number of factors that shape the size and structure of migration flows, and to discuss how these drivers might develop in the coming years.

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AS BOTH A “YOUNG” AND AN “OLD” PHENOMENON

The increase in international migration over the last decades, the occurrence of events perceived as crises, and the associated heightened public and political attention may lead to the conclusion that present migration is fundamentally different from that of earlier periods. This impression is reinforced by the existence of targeted migration policies that treat the subject as a very specific matter, but also by a public debate that views the migration and settlement of non-citizens as a phenomenon deviating from the nation-state prerogative that dominates the current world order. A closer look reveals that recent migration history has certainly seen major novelties, as it also witnessed continuities that go back decades, if not centuries. Migration of the modern age is a new but at the same time quite an old phenomenon. It does not happen in a vacuum but is embedded in a broad range of political, economic, social and cultural contexts. For more than a half-century, migration research and analysis have identified a range of factors influencing migration as individual drivers, but also collectively within intricate sets of interconnectivity and interdependence. Research also revealed that even the best and most detailed understanding of migration patterns and dynamics does not allow for sound forecasts on what might happen in terms of human mobility in the immediate future or in a given geographic area. The many factors that are at play, and sudden and often largely unforeseen events, profoundly affect the size and direction of migration movements or trigger such movements in the first place. What can be understood, however, are the long-term developments and main drivers of migration that form the broad migration environment, in which short-term developments are embedded in. Analysing these factors may be insufficient for precise forecasting but still provides a solid basis for understanding broad and long-term trends, which helps prepare for likely scenarios.

Migration of the modern age is a young but at the same time old phenomenon. It does not happen in a vacuum but is embedded in a broad range of political, economic, social and cultural contexts.

A CHANGING MIGRATION ENVIRONMENT?

It is an often-repeated quote that migration is as old as mankind itself and it was always part of the human condition. Although this is certainly true, it is also true to speak of our time as “the age of migration”. Never in history have so many people moved, lived, worked or studied in a country other than their country of birth or citizenship. Currently, there are 281 million international migrants, representing 3.6 percent of the world’s population. The number of international migrants grew by 84 percent over the last thirty years, from 152 million to 281 million.⁴ 169 million persons are considered migrant workers, bringing invaluable skills and motivation to the economies of the host countries, but also sending almost 800 billion USD of remittances back to their

⁴ McAuliffe, M. and Triandafyllidou, A. (eds.), 2021. World Migration Report 2022. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva, p. 3.

families and home countries every year.⁵ But there is also another side of migration. Today, we speak about 117 million displaced persons, internally and across borders – a figure that surged more than fivefold in the past three decades. According to the IOM, almost 7,000 migrants have lost their lives in 2022 alone while travelling on dangerous routes or when trying to cross deserts or oceans.⁶ Often, they are deceived by migrant smugglers, and many are subject to exploitation and abuse by human traffickers. Most migration is intra-regional; however, cross-regional migration largely flows from low- and middle-income countries to high-income countries. Consequently, about 65 percent of all migrants reside in high-income countries and this trend is likely to continue.

As will be discussed below, the impact of the main drivers determining international migration is very likely to increase in the coming years and decades. This process, however, will not necessarily follow continuous trends that can be precisely predicted and allow governments and other actors to gear their policies and planning to clearly foreseeable developments. Rather, migration futures will be a combination of expected trends and unforeseen events or “black swans”, which are rare, unexpected and impactful, may appear as predictable or even obvious in retrospect, only that before their occurrence hardly anyone saw them coming.⁷ During the last decade, the world of migration has seen a number of “black swans”: the Arab spring, the civil war in Syria, the aggressions against Ukraine, or the global Covid-19 pandemic.

The so-called refugee crisis of 2015/2016 in Europe and the global pandemic demonstrated, albeit in different ways, in how far unexpected events can upend the migration environment. The refugee crisis had its roots in the Syrian government’s crackdown on opposition protests that began in March 2011, which plunged the country into a catastrophic civil war by the summer of 2012 and subsequently resulted in an unprecedented level of displacement of Syrian civilians. Within a few months, the number of IDPs rose from around 500,000 to over 4 million. By 2013, it had increased twentyfold and reached more than 10 million, 6.5 million internally displaced and 3.5 million refugees who had moved to the neighbouring countries.⁸ The time span preceding the arrival of refugee flows in European countries was much shorter than had been observed with earlier waves of refugees. The sheer scale and speed of these arrivals triggered a border and reception crisis unprecedented at that time. As a result, the established administrative analysis and response mechanisms proved inadequate to understand the situation in time and put appropriate responses in place.

The Covid-19 pandemic showed its impact at the other end of the spectrum. The onset of the global health emergency in March 2020 and the immediate introduction of wide-ranging mobility and migration restrictions had an instant and profound impact on international migration. Almost all countries in the world introduced travel restrictions and strict border controls. There was a 65 percent decrease in international travel and cross-border movements in the first half of 2020, not only affecting mobility but also migration. The ILO estimated that more than 160 million migrant workers were subject to mobility restrictions in the first half of 2020. Mid-2020 almost 3 million migrants were stranded outside their place of habitual residence and were unable to return due to containment measures. Closely related, the world’s collective gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 3.4 percent in 2020, disproportionately affecting populations in countries of the global south and curbing the much-needed flows of migrant remittances. Virologists had long expected a worldwide pandemic, but not too many had thought of the effect of containment-related mobility restrictions and their impact on economies, commuters, travellers or migrants.⁹

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5 ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers – Results and Methodology – Third edition International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2021, p. 11

6 IOM Missing Migrants Project, Global Data Overview, January 2022 – December 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/missing-migrants-project-global-data-overview-january-2022-december-2022>

7 Castro Correa, C., Black Swan Theory: We know absolutely nothing & the finding of atypical events optimization-method, 2012, <https://www.actuaries.org/mexico2012old/papers/CastroCorrea.pdf>, p. 2.

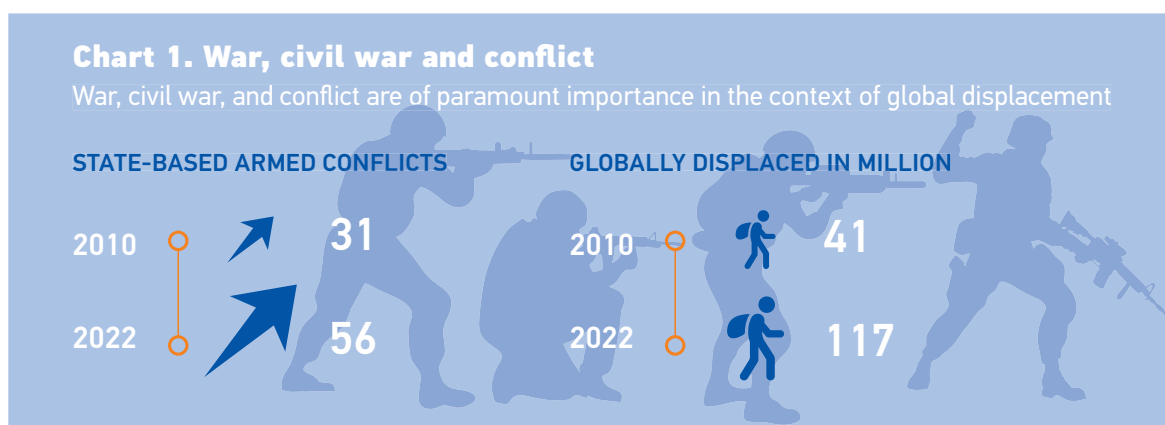
8 International Displacement Monitoring Centre, UNHCR (data accessed June 9, 2016), <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data>.

9 ICMPD Migration Outlook 2021, <https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/50555/file/ICMPD0Migration0Outlook020210EN.pdf>, p. 4.

Both events not only influenced migration flows in different, yet highly significant, ways, they also challenged the administrative resources of affected states and stretched their capacities to the limit. At the same time, the two events provide good arguments for a discussion and reassessment of what “being prepared” should mean in the context of future migration developments. Preparedness in this context means understanding long-term developments and incorporating them into strategic foresight and planning, but also recognizing that unexpected events can occur at any time and that systems must be designed flexibly to deal with such situations successfully. As far as the long-term environment is concerned, one can develop a reasonably complete picture of what migration governance and management systems should be preparing for, based on the analysis of past trends and expected future developments.

WAR, CIVIL WAR AND CONFLICT

Notwithstanding the complex and multi-faceted nature of migration, war, civil war and violent conflict are of paramount importance in the context of sudden and large-scale cross-border movements. The Stockholm International Peace Institute (SIPRI) 2022 report pointed out that the number of state-based armed conflicts almost doubled between 2010 and 2022 from 31 to 56,¹⁰ resulting in more than a doubling of forcibly displaced people in the world over the same period from 41 to 102 million. Mainly due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, this number increased to an estimated 117 million in 2023.



Source: SIPRI, Environment of Peace 2023; UNHCR Global Trends

Conflict-induced displacement can be the indirect consequence of military operations or the result of deliberate aggression targeting specific populations. Forcible displacement, up to the physical extinction of whole ethnic and minority groups, has been part of many wars and internal conflicts. The large majority of those managing to flee from hostilities stay on the territory of their home country or find protection in countries neighbouring the conflict. Only a smaller share seeks refuge further abroad.

At present, there is little reason to believe that violence-induced migration will diminish. Since 2020 alone, the outbreak of war in Tigray, a series of military coups in African countries, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and the renewed deterioration of the security situation in Syria have caused new highs in the number of globally displaced. At the time of writing, Hamas’ terrorist attack and Israel’s military response have displaced over one million people, almost half the total population of Gaza and this number might increase in the coming weeks and months.¹¹ As long as the world does not become more peaceful, the number

10 Black, R., Busby, J., Dabelko, G.D., de Coning, C., Maalim, H., McAllister, C., Ndiloseh, M., Smith, D., Alvarado, J., Barnhoorn, A., Bell, N., Bell-Moran, D., Broek, E., Eberlein, A., Eklow, K., Faller, J., Gadnert, A., Hegazi, F., Kim, K., Krampe, F., Michel, D., Pattison, C., Ray, C., Remling, E., Salas Alfaro, E., Smith, E. and Staudenmann, J., Environment of Peace: Security in a New Era of Risk (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2022), <<https://doi.org/10.55163/LCLS7037>>, p.12.

11 UN News, Gaza: ‘History is watching’ warns UN relief chief, saying aid access is key priority, 16 October 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142382>

of displaced persons and refugees will increase rather than decrease, making the repeated occurrence of spontaneous and numerically significant refugee and migration flows an almost inevitable future development.

THE IMPACT OF GROWING GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

The war in Ukraine symbolises the end of the post-Cold War era and marks at the same time a turning point in the global order. Some scholars trace this development back to the economic shocks in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008/2009, which led to social unrest, fuelled existing conflicts and undermined political stability in many regions of the world. New economic and military powers arose while traditional powers entered a phase of growing geopolitical competition, which has not contributed to fostering stability in fragile states but rather resulted in lowering government standards, flaring of violence and large-scale displacement. Power struggles also affect regions geographically far removed from the conflict as such. The global supply crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine severely affected African countries, particularly those heavily dependent on wheat imports. Recent disruptions have caused deep concerns about shortages in the supply of energy, fertilizers, and grains. Overall, the available evidence points towards a link between food supply, displacement and migration. The protests leading up to the Arab Spring in 2011 and subsequent migration movements were amongst others triggered by soaring wheat prices. Food insecurity caused by an El Niño drought is seen as the main reason for an increase in irregular migration movements towards the US in 2014.¹²

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The instrumentalisation of migration for non-migration-related political purposes is perhaps one of the most visible expressions of a new era in which human mobility and geopolitics are closely intertwined.¹³ The phenomenon as such is not new.¹⁴ What is a novelty, however, is the systematic integration of migration into hybrid warfare strategies; and in the event of an actual war, the equally systematic attempt to force third parties to make concessions by means of forced migration. During recent events, government authorities stimulated interest among migrants, organised travel, entry, accommodation and transport, and established standing cooperation with people smuggling networks operating in countries of origin and along migratory routes. Unlike earlier examples, instrumentalisation today is no longer limited to exerting pressure and improving negotiating positions. It has become part of the hybrid aggression toolbox and aims directly at undermining the stability and security of countries considered to be adversaries.¹⁵

DEMOGRAPHY AND MIGRATION

Based on projected fertility levels, the world's population is expected to reach 9.1 billion by 2050. This development is mainly owed to globally decreasing death rates and will take place despite the fact that the annual growth rates are expected to shrink from 80 million to 48 million between 2020 and 2050. Within this period, all countries across the globe will face major changes in their demographic profiles, however, developments will vary significantly between the world's regions. In Africa, the total population is projected to grow by more than 75 percent by 2050, from 1.4 billion to 2.5 billion; in Asia by 12 percent from 4.7 billion to 5.3 billion. The total population in Europe is projected to decrease by almost 6 percent until 2050, from 744 million to 704 million.¹⁶

12 United Nations World Food Programme, Food Security and Emigration. Why people flee and the impact on family members left behind in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, Research Report, September 2017, file:///C:/Users/hofmannm/Downloads/FOODpercent20SECURITYpercent20ANDpercent20EMIGRATION.pdf

13 ICMPD Migration Outlook 2023, p. 22, https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/58952/file/ICMPD_Migration_Outlook_2023.pdf

14 Greenhill, K.M., Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy. 1st ed. Cornell University Press, 2010.

15 Kochis, D., Russia's Weaponization of Migrants Hasn't Gone Away, Commentary Global Politics, The Heritage Foundation, Nov 18, 2002, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/russias-weaponization-migrants-hasnt-gone-away>.

16 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition.

Already now, 95 percent of the world population growth is taking place in countries of the global south and this trend will continue in the future. By contrast, 41 countries of the global north, many of them in Europe, already experience population decline. Their number is projected to increase to 88 by 2050.¹⁷ There are growing concerns over the impact of this trend on labour supply and welfare systems, always linked to the question of whether labour markets of ageing countries should be more open towards immigration. There is less awareness that demographic ageing 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 2050.¹⁸ 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 for the discourse on migration. The need to financially support ageing parents and other dependents is one of the main motives for migrants to find work abroad. In the absence of fully-fledged welfare and pension systems, the incomes that can be generated in high-income countries are often the only option for securing the livelihoods of elderly family members. Thus, demographic ageing both in high- and low-income countries is likely to result in growing demands for emigration- and immigration.

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SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

It is not poverty that causes migration but economic and social development, which brings about fundamental changes within a society. The transition from agrarian to industrial or post-industrial societies accompanied by lower infant mortality, higher life expectancy, higher levels of education, but also by a drastic decrease in the demand for manual labour in agriculture. During the transitional period, however, developing economies struggle to create sufficient perspectives for the growing number of young people. To build a better future for themselves, a part of these populations leaves their homes and moves to the economic centres in their own countries or migrates abroad.

Throughout history, all countries went through this transition until birth rates fell, population growth stabilised, and emigration pressures started to ease. Today, the countries of the global south start to see slowing birth rates and rising GDP rates. Consequently, they are likely to turn from emigration to immigration countries at some point. This transition will, however, take many more years to complete. Recent research suggests that this process will not only depend on objective indicators like GDP per capita but also on more subjective perceptions of a country's future prospects. An overall positive outlook on the future and prospects for a better life in economic, social, political and cultural terms influence migration decisions more than merely economic indicators.¹⁹

17 Bloom, D.E. and M. Zucker, L.M., Population aging is the top global demographic trend; the pandemic can teach us how to prepare for it, Finance & Development, June 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/Series/Analytical-Series/aging-is-the-real-population-bomb-bloom-zucker>, p. 59.

18 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). World Population Ageing 2017 - Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/397), p. 4.

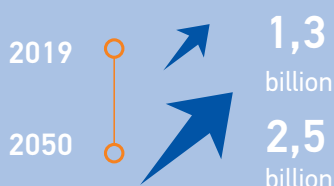
19 Benček, D and Schneiderheinze, C., More Development, Less Immigration to OECD Countries – Identifying Inconsistencies Between Cross-sectional and Time-series Estimates of the Migration Hump, Kiel Working Paper Nr. 2145 December 2019, Kiel Institute for the World Economy. https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/Claas_Schneiderheinze/KWP_2145.pdf

Chart 2. Socio-Economic Development and Migration

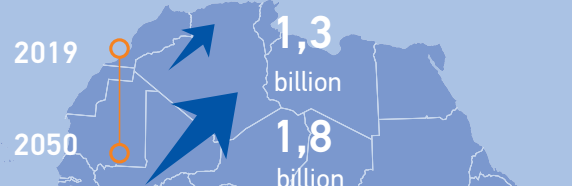
High-development leads to lower population growth but temporarily to more migration.
Scenarios for Africa

Population Growth

LOW-DEVELOPMENT SCENARIO

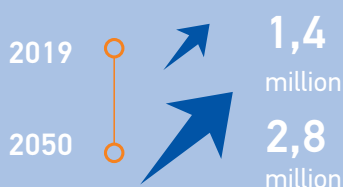


HIGH-DEVELOPMENT SCENARIO

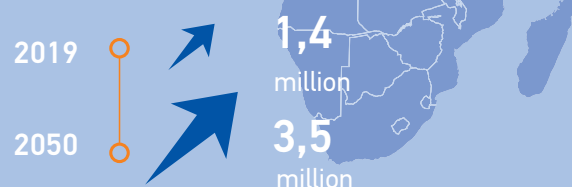


Annual emigration rate

LOW-DEVELOPMENT SCENARIO



HIGH-DEVELOPMENT SCENARIO



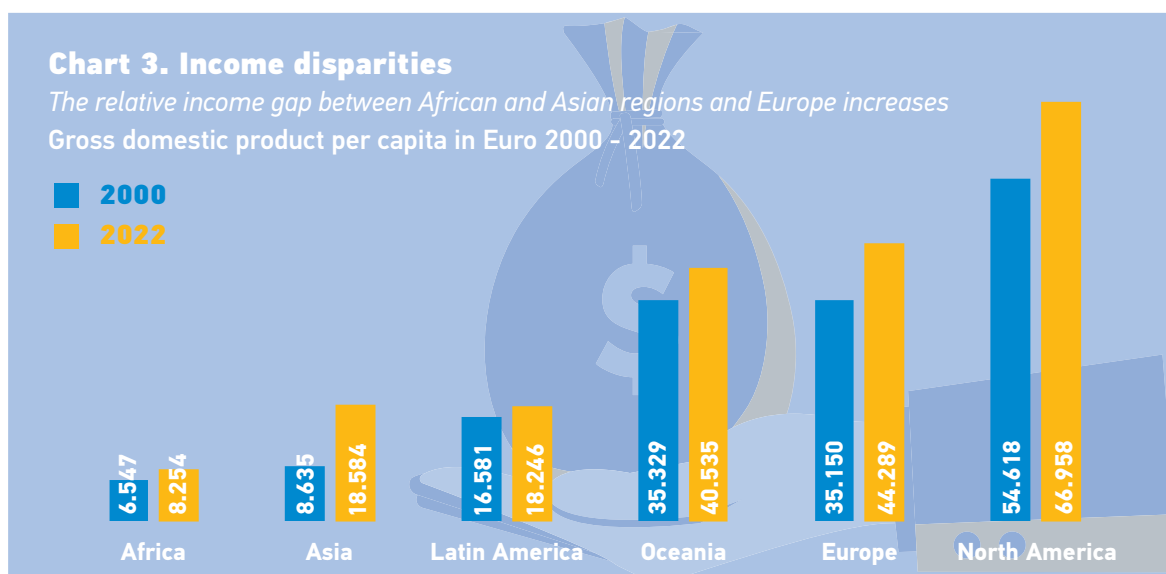
Source: European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Many more to come? Migration from and within Africa, 2018

INCOME DISPARITIES

Income disparities between the world's regions are seen as another key driver of international migration. The impressive economic growth seen in many countries of the global south over the past three decades has also meant significant increases in the average per capita income in these regions. Between 1990 and 2022, the average GDP per capita in Africa grew by 24.3 percent, and that in Asia by 106.5 percent. Notwithstanding this, the average GDP per capita in Africa is still only 38.0 percent of the global GDP. Europe's GDP per capita is twice the world average and almost five times that of Africa. Despite the economic growth in many African countries, the income gap compared to Europe widened in absolute terms over the last thirty years. In 2022, the GDP per capita in Europe stood at 44,289 Euros and was 9,139 Euros higher than in 2000. The GDP per capita in Africa was 8,254 Euros and 1,707 Euros higher than in 2000.

Labour migration is largely driven by wage differentials and the above figures imply that with regard to relative earning opportunities a move from the majority of African, but also Asian, countries to Europe is becoming more and not less attractive. In view of the aforementioned growing need to care for the elderly in countries of the global south, the stronger increases in income and purchasing power in Europe can be seen as a major structural factor in migration decisions that is likely to gain in significance, despite economic growth in countries of the global south.²⁰

²⁰ World Inequality Database. Gross domestic product. Downloaded from wid.world on 20-10-2023 at 10:30:29



Source: World Inequality Database. Gross domestic product. Downloaded from wid.world

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRATION

There is extensive discussion on whether climate change will have a major impact on international migration flows, and if so, what those impacts would be. For a long time, there were relatively few hard facts that would have allowed for a sound assessment of these effects or projections of how related trends might develop in the future. Any analysis of the phenomenon had to account for both the lack of unanimously accepted terms and definitions and the (un)availability of key data for the observation of flows. Meanwhile, there is broad consensus that climate change has indeed started to affect human mobility and will continue to do so at a growing speed and with an increasing number of populations concerned. There is less consensus on the expected size, direction, and dynamics of climate-change-induced migration.

First of all, it needs to be stressed that most analysts agree that climate-related factors will represent one of many aspects of individual migration decisions: “Migration is multicausal, while climate change will affect mobility choices, so too will many other factors”.²¹ Observed instances of “environmental migration” hardly ever have a single cause. Environmental aspects are 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.²² Secondly, the estimates of future climate-change-induced migration vary significantly. In their 2023 Omnibus Overview on “Climate Change and Migration”, Huckstep and Clemens quote several predictions of climate-affected mobility, ranging between 50 million and 1.4 billion persons globally until 2050.²³ The wide bandwidth of estimates results from the use of different concepts and definitions of mobility but also on different assumptions

Environmental changes are likely to force millions of people to leave their homes and migrate elsewhere over the coming decades, either within the territory of their home countries or abroad. Governments must prepare sound policy responses, within their territories and in terms of international cooperation, to make sure that adaptation to climate change can be managed without spikes in spontaneous and disorderly migration flows.

21 Huckstep, S. and Clemens, M., 2023. “Climate Change and Migration: An Omnibus Overview for Policymakers and Development Practitioners.” CGD Policy Paper 292. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/climate-change-and-migration-omnibus-overviewpolicymakers-and-development>, p. 10.

22 Hofmann, M., Jolivel, A., Huss, D. and Ambiaux, C., International Migration: Drivers, Factors and Megatrends. A Geopolitical Outlook, ICMPD Policy Paper, March 2020, <https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/51472/file/Policypercent2520Paperpercent2520-percent2520Geopoliticalpercent2520Outlookpercent2520percent2520Internationalpercent2520Migration.pdf>, p. 7.

23 Huckstep, S. and Clemens, M., 2023. “Climate Change and Migration.”, p. 46.

of whether flows will be predominantly internal or also cross-border to a large extent. In any case, available indicators suggest that the extent of environmentally-induced displacement will be considerable. According to the most accurate estimate provided by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, there were 32.6 million new displacements caused by disasters – mainly flood, storm and drought - in 2022 alone.²⁴ Notwithstanding conceptual and quantitative uncertainties, two conclusions can be drawn. First, environmental changes are likely to force millions of people to leave their homes and migrate elsewhere over the coming decades, either within the territory of their home countries or abroad. Second, governments will have to prepare sound policy responses, within their territories and in terms of international cooperation, to make sure that adaptation to climate change can be managed without spikes in spontaneous and disorderly migration flows.

REVOLUTIONS IN TECHNOLOGY, COMMUNICATIONS AND TRANSPORT

Over the last thirty years, the world has witnessed a revolution in terms of technical developments and their social consequences. In 2003, about 10 percent of the world's population used the internet; today it is 65 percent (or 5.3 billion people in total).²⁵ In 2003, 22 percent of the world's population had a mobile phone: in Sub-Saharan Africa it was only 5 percent, in the Middle East and North Africa 13 percent. Today an average 70 percent of the world's population owns a mobile phone and in many African, Middle Eastern and European countries mobile phone coverage is at 100 percent, at least in statistical terms. The smartphone provides access to almost unlimited information for its owners, allows for communication over large distances, and facilitates the sharing and analysing of information between hundreds of thousands of people at any given moment in time.

Core areas of humanity like work, learning and communication decouple from "location" in a specific geographic space. Those who master the new technologies can take large parts of their social, professional and cultural persona from one place to another without disrupting income or losing contacts to families or communities.

Along the way, the communications revolution also globalised values, views and aspirations towards a "good" and "rewarding" life. A growing number of people dispose of what is needed in terms of human capital and also have the will to move and live wherever opportunities appear most promising. Unhindered access to information and communication tools provides completely new possibilities for organising individual migration projects, not only in the area of legal migration but also when it comes to flight and irregular migration. But the impact of digitalisation on migration goes much deeper. Core areas of human life like work, learning and communication decouple from "location" in a specific geographic space. Those who master the new technologies can take large parts of their social, professional and cultural persona from one place to

another without disrupting income or losing contacts with families or communities. This new era of mobility is facilitated by the continuing revolution in transport. In 1975, there were 9.2 million international flights, for 2023 it is estimated that the number will rise to 32.4 million flights.²⁶ Between 2016 and 2035, and despite all commitments to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, the total number of air travels is expected to almost double from 3.8 billion to 7.2 billion. This development facilitates actual migration projects, but also makes it easier to decide on them in the first place. The availability of affordable long-distance travel options allows people to maintain ties with their home communities after moving abroad. Migration decisions are taken more easily when they appear less final and far-reaching.

²⁴ International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Global Internal Displacement Database, (data accessed 24 September 2024), <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data>.

²⁵ Shewale, R., Internet User Statistics in 2023 (Global Demographics), August 21, 2023 [https://www.demandsage.com/internet-user-statistics/#:~:text=Internet%20User%20Statistics%202023%20\(A%20has%20access%20to%20the%20internet](https://www.demandsage.com/internet-user-statistics/#:~:text=Internet%20User%20Statistics%202023%20(A%20has%20access%20to%20the%20internet).

²⁶ Statista, Number of flights performed by the global airline industry from 2004 to 2021, with forecasts until 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/564769/airline-industry-number-of-flights/>.

MIGRANT DECISIONS AND GLOBAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

Considering the long list of migration drivers described above, their growing importance and their mutually reinforcing effects, one might come to a basic conclusion: The size of international migration is bound to increase rapidly and will reach unprecedented levels in the future. But before considering this as an inevitable development, a phenomenon should be considered that has characterised international migration since it became a subject of research and analysis. Simply put, the so-called “immobility paradox” implies that, given the multiplicity of drivers and the existence of major economic, political, demographic, and social imbalances in the world, many more people should migrate than actually do so. But when looking at the actual numbers, a fundamental question arises: Why is there so little migration, at least in relation to the share of international migrants among the world’s population? In fact, more than 96 percent of the people living on our planet are considered non-migrants, e.g., people who have never intentionally crossed international borders to settle abroad.

Obviously, migration does not follow mechanical processes of “push” and “pull”, which occur without human intervention and on the basis of physical laws. Rather than that, migration is a deeply human phenomenon, which is based on individual or collective decision-making and embedded in complex social, political, and regulatory environments. Migrant decisions are taken in conjunction with economic factors, political and security factors, as well as cultural, social and network factors – or a combination thereof. They are taken, in descending order, at the individual, intrapersonal, intimate partners and extended family level.²⁷ They are influenced by considerations regarding safety and stability at the old and the new home, presumed prospects for building a better future abroad, cultural and linguistic proximity, and a welcoming climate in the aspired new destination. Migration decisions are fraught with many uncertainties and not taken lightly. They are embedded in another set of factors that could be summarised as the “global opportunity structures”, which interact with other structural migration drivers, impact individual or group decisions, and influence concrete migration projects. Such opportunity structures include amongst others: geographical proximity or distance; opportunities for legal and labour migration offered by legislative frameworks and migration regimes; the density and capacity of migration control; 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. Migration policies do have an impact on opportunity structures and subsequent migration flows, and this impact is bigger than polarised public discourses and one-sided media portrayals would suggest.

Migration decisions are fraught with many uncertainties and not taken lightly. They are embedded in “global opportunity structures”, which interact with other structural migration drivers, impact individual or group decisions, and influence concrete migration projects.

CONCLUSIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

In line with the drivers and megatrends described above, and taking into account how they might develop in the coming years, a **plausible scenario for the future of international migration** can be outlined as follows:

- The share of international migrants remains comparatively low in relation to the total world population. Due to the projected population growth until 2050, the absolute number of international migrants increases more significantly.
- Intra-regional migration gains in importance, also in the global south, but most flows continue to occur within and to destinations in the global north.

27 Tabor A.S., Milfont, T.L., Ward, C., International Migration Decision-Making and Destination Selection Among Skilled Migrants, Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology, May 2015, p. 5

- Legal and labour migration grow along steady trends. Future numbers related to flight, displacement and irregular migration are a great unknown. Based on past experience, it must be assumed that conflict and instability stay highly relevant as drivers of forced migration, resulting in ever-growing populations of displaced within national territories and across international borders.
- Conflicts frequently cause sudden and large-scale arrivals in countries neighbouring a conflict but also in regions further abroad. The trend towards growing displacement is aggravated by the increasing effects of climate change and environmental degradation.
- Migration remains a central component of geopolitics. On the one hand, a rise in geopolitically motivated conflicts leads to an exponential increase in the number of displaced persons. On the other hand, the deliberate creation of irregular migratory movements remains a means of hybrid aggression that is regularly used against political adversaries in the event of conflict.
- Demographic change affects high-, middle- and low-income societies, albeit in different ways, and increases the demand for both emigration and immigration.
- Income disparities between world regions persist and even widen, and the prospect of migrating between regions becomes more attractive.
- Labour shortages affect an increasing number of economic sectors in ageing societies. Technological progress does not fully compensate for labour force losses. Competition for skilled and essential labour among high-income countries with ageing populations becomes fierce. Economies that fall behind in the fight for global talent experience tangible economic losses and growing pressures on their welfare systems.
- New tools and better access to technology, communications and transport support individual migration projects but also facilitate “transnational living” by decoupling core areas of human existence and development like work, learning, interaction, or communication from their spatial roots.
- This notwithstanding, decision-making and execution of individual migration projects is still determined by complex individual and collective decision-making processes and remains embedded in social contexts and existing opportunity structures.
- Politics matters, also in future, but governments and migration management systems must deal with situations that develop faster, have higher impact and are interlocked with a broad variety of other factors and challenges, directly and indirectly affecting mobility and migration.

For governments, this scenario implies an increased need for capacity, cooperation and preparedness. Short-term events, like displacement crises, unfold faster and with more complexity than in the past. Long-term developments, such as the increasing demand for skilled and essential migrant workers, require strategic foresight, the development of new capacities and perseverance over a long period of time. No country can meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of future migration on its own. Better migration solutions depend on close and trustful cooperation between all states connected by migration flows, based on standing dialogue, common goals and joint agendas. Future migration policies must strike a better balance between control and the expansion of legal migration channels and align both spheres more closely. To make functioning labour migration a reality, destination and origin countries should work on common vocational education and training standards that ensure smooth transition of workers between labour markets. Return policies should be made more intelligent by linking them to job creation and development cooperation. Countries should also work on a further alignment of protection and reception standards and faster yet legally sound procedures. The tackling of migrant-smuggling and human trafficking

Future migration scenarios imply the need for enhanced capacity, cooperation and preparedness. Short-term events, like displacement crises, unfold faster and with more complexity than in the past. Long-term developments, such as the increasing demand for skilled and essential migrant workers, require strategic foresight, the development of new capacities and perseverance over a long period of time.

networks requires enhanced cooperation and capacities as well. Attention and resources allocated to this issue are still insufficient in view of the critical role these networks play in irregular migration processes. Ultimately, enhanced preparedness also implies that all members of the international community continue and strengthen their joint efforts in three major areas towards a more positive and less risk-prone migration environment: the evolution of a functioning, fair and global protection regime; the reduction of the number of violent conflicts that are the main driver of flight and irregular migration; and the development of a fair global economic order that provides opportunities for all the world's citizens and limits the need for disorderly and irregular migration.²⁸

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This publication was produced in the framework of the Prague Process, funded by the European Union via the Migration Partnership Facility

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Funded by the European Union

