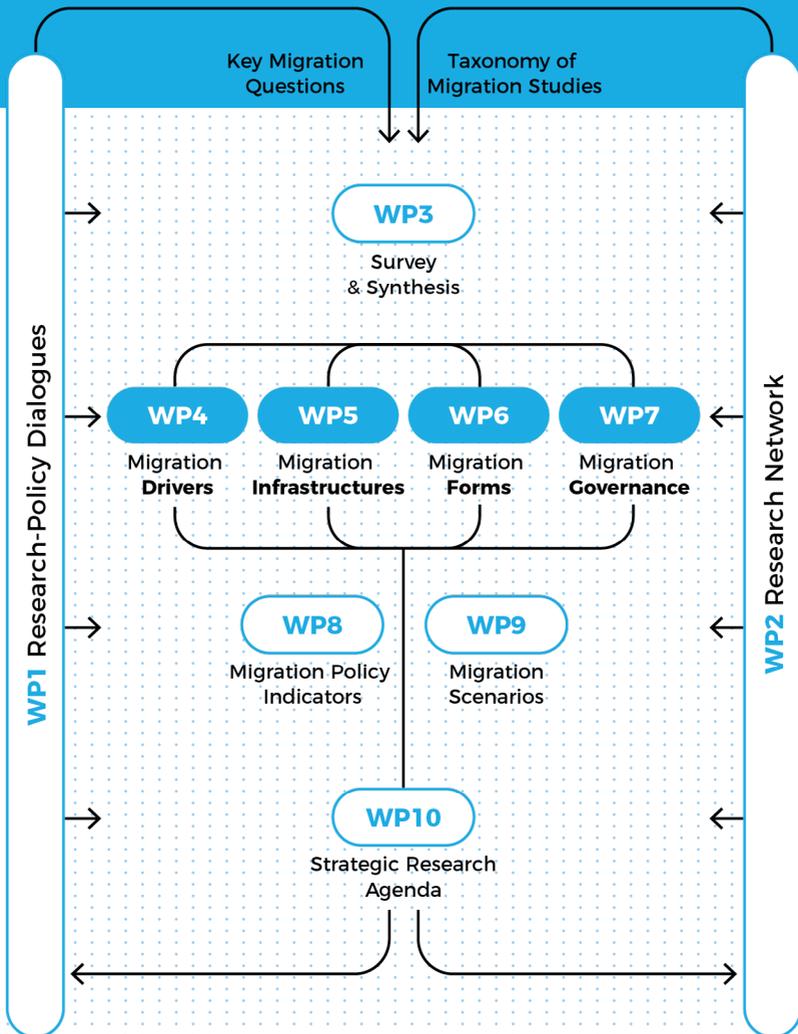


# Policy Brief WP4

## Key Knowledge Questions Migration Drivers



# **Policy Briefs WP4**

## Key Knowledge Questions

### Migration Drivers

by

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# About the project

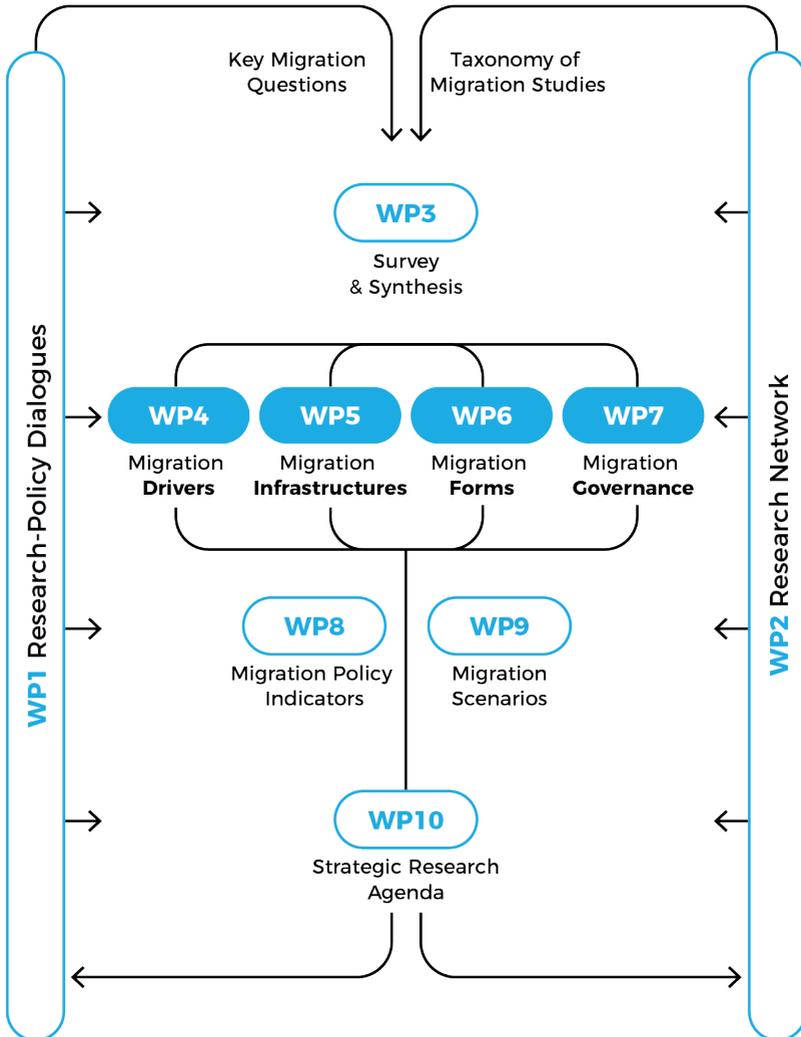
These policy briefs about key knowledge questions on migration are the result of a collaboration between Work Packages 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 of the Horizon 2020 project, CrossMigration. They are intended to introduce new policymakers to what insights existing research can offer for understanding and addressing pressing questions on the topic.

Led by MPI Europe, Work Package 1 set out to define a set of empirical questions that are at the heart of major policy decisions that European policymakers are currently facing and will face in the coming decade. These questions synthesise the key areas of interest based on consultations with over 30 policymakers at EU, national and local level and the CrossMigration research partners. These questions are forward-looking, focusing on what knowledge will be needed to inform policymaking in the field of migration in the next 5 to 10 years.

Work Packages 4-7 bring together leading experts on the themes of Migration Drivers, Migration Infrastructures, Migration Forms, and Migration Governance. They were led by Danube University Krems (DUK), the Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung (DeZIM), the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), the University of Lisbon (IGOT-UL), the Centre of Migration Research Warsaw (CMR), and the Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute (EUI), along with members of the IMISCOE research network:

**Migration drivers** are structural elements that have the potential to facilitate, enable, constrain, or trigger migration. Migration drivers might increase or decrease the salience of migration, the likelihood of certain migration routes, and the desirability of different destinations. The term is more encompassing than 'migration determinants' or 'root causes' of migration, which generally ignore human agency in the decision to migrate and assume a deterministic and causal relationship between one or more structural factors and migration. Migration drivers, however, affect migration directly but also, and most importantly, indirectly and in combination with other migration drivers, in complex migration driver configurations. While the migration driver environment might be the same for two individuals, different migration drivers affect them differently depending on individual characteristics.

**Figure 1**  
Overview Work Packages

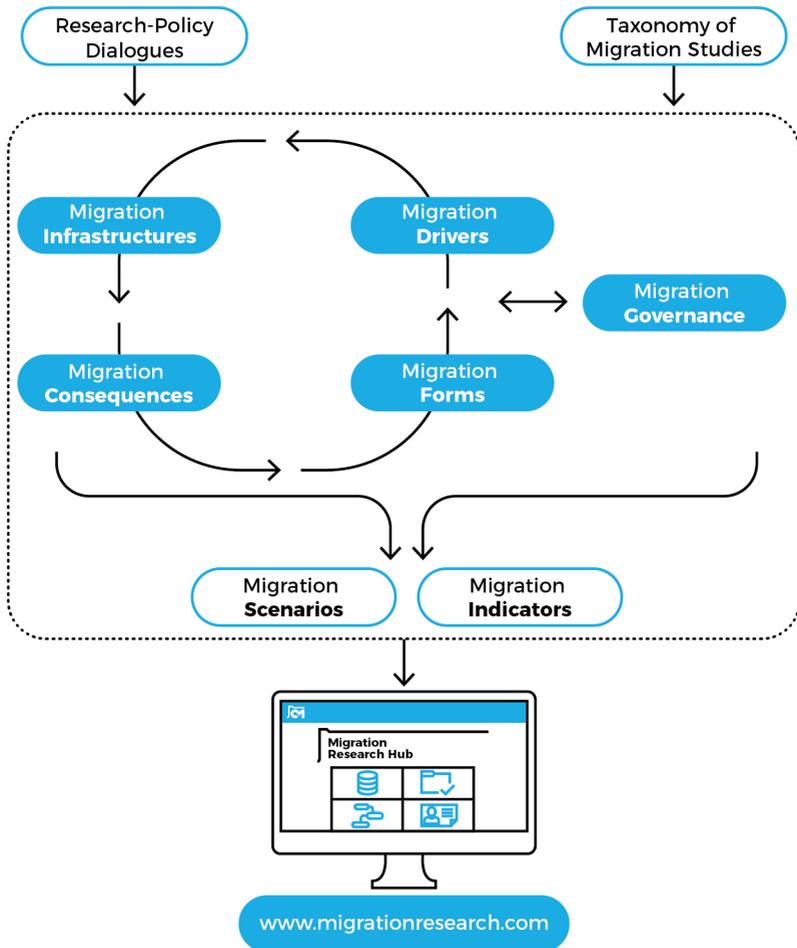


The emerging field of **migration infrastructures** sheds light on the processes that occur between the decision to migrate is made and arrival in the receiving country. It primarily asks the question of how people migrate, taking the perspective of the receiving country in three different angles: First, it focuses on regular and irregular, commercial and non-commercial actors facilitating migration, including visa brokers, work recruitment agencies, marriage migration platforms, human smugglers and humanitarian organisations. Then, it looks at the logistics of migration, exploring the role of routes, transit hubs and means of transportation. Finally, it investigates how digital technologies like the internet and social media shape mobility and influence migratory pathways.

The notion of **migration forms** concerns the question of who migrates. Global migration forms, or flows, include regular and irregular migrants who migrate for a broad array of reasons. Different migration forms are characterized by multiple and dynamic aspects. The differences between migration forms relate to variations in migration drivers, infrastructures, policies and experiences that shape migrants' journeys. The Migration Research Hub encompasses a research on a range of different migration forms – a specific set of migration forms are included in the database as they reflect the existing body of knowledge and focus regarding migration research on forms. While these are differentiated in a categorical manner, migration forms – and motivations – are rarely straightforward. Indeed, migration forms and flows are increasingly highlighted as mixed, as individuals' motivations can be multiple and constantly developing throughout migration processes.

**Migration governance** includes, but is broader than, migration policies. While the latter refers to laws, regulations, decisions or other government directive related to migration, governance encompasses these elements as well as the factors related to decision-making processes and implementation. While the term governance is frequently used in the field of migration studies, it remains ill-defined. Definitions of governance typically focus on the observable outputs of governance processes: i) norms, rules, policies, laws and institutions that can be binding or non-binding norms and frameworks, at the global, national or subnational levels.; ii) actors, institutions and institutional mechanisms; and iii) processes or methods of decision-making and of governing processes (including implementation and monitoring) that can be formal or informal and occur at different levels (local, national, global) and among diverse actors.

**Figure 2**  
Simplified overview of project conceptual framework



We hope that you find these guides useful for navigating these key questions. For more information on the knowledge accumulation work of CrossMigration, please visit the [YouTube channel](#) to watch interviews with the authors. To find an index of knowledge and experts on migration all under one roof, be sure to visit and register at the Migration Research Hub ([migrationresearch.com](http://migrationresearch.com)).

# WP4

## Key Knowledge Questions on Migration Drivers

### Introduction – what's at stake?

Roughly 3.5 percent of the world's population are international migrants, currently about 258 million people. Many more move within their own countries or for short periods of time. What drives human mobility? The answer is anything but simple. Often-cited causes, such as war, poverty or climate change, cannot explain why certain social groups are more likely to migrate than others, or why most of the world's population does not migrate at all despite difficult living conditions and uncertain future prospects. The aim of this guide is to offer a concise introduction into the state-of-the-art research on migration drivers and to outline key questions that European and national policymakers are invited to think through when developing migration policies.

To improve the design and effectiveness of future policy interventions on migration, it is crucial to grasp the migratory process in its entirety. Over the past decades, research has produced solid evidence on the forces that initiate and perpetuate migration. Today, researchers seek to better understand the respective weight and interactions of particular drivers, to find out which driver configurations prevail under what circumstances, and to identify which drivers are the most susceptible to be shaped by policy interventions. In particular, scholars have sought to better understand:

- 1 What are the main structural, macro-level drivers of migration and how do they interact?
- 2 Under what conditions do people develop aspirations to migrate and are able to realize them?
- 3 What is the role of meso-level factors such as migrant networks?
- 4 To what extent and how can policy interventions influence migration drivers?

### Why do insights on migration drivers matter for policymaking?

To better anticipate future changes in global migration and to develop effective policy responses, it is imperative to understand the forces underlying migration. Research has provided key insights on the macro-, meso- and

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micro-level drivers of migration that, when addressed in policy design, allow to avoid counter-productive policy effects.

For instance, understanding why development cooperation will likely not reduce but increase emigration in the short or medium term or why tougher border controls can paradoxically lead to more irregular migration can improve the design and effectiveness of future policies. In a similar way, migration policies that clash with structural migration drivers in origin or destination countries are bound to produce unexpected effects: For example, the reduction of legal immigration channels for low-skilled workers in times of economic growth at the destination will inevitably increase informal employment of migrants.

Furthermore, policy measures do often not take into account how entry regulations affect migrants' propensity to permanently settle or to return; how policy effects vary in the short- and long-term; or how regulations on family and labor migration also affect student and refugee inflows, and vice-versa. Indeed, the legal categories central to European policy frameworks (such as legal/illegal migration, economic/family migrants or refugees) tend to not accurately reflect the reality in which migratory motives overlap and shift over time. Any assessment of policy effectiveness therefore has to take into account the entire migration complex and to consider how different origin and migrant communities might react differently to similar driver configurations or policy interventions.

Ultimately, moving away from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach would allow to better align policy expectations, policy instruments and policy results. The following section presents key research insights and questions on migration drivers that may inform and inspire future thinking and policymaking on migration.

## **Opening the black box of migration drivers**

### **1** Macro-level driver constellations

Simplistic discourses that cast war and poverty as main migration drivers have lost ground. It is now well established that people move for multiple

reasons, with economic, political, social, personal and community-related motives overlapping and potentially reinforcing or cancelling out each other. Over the past decades, research has advanced key insights on the ways in which structural migration drivers shape international migration in complex, yet patterned ways.

A first key finding is that development – in the form of rising incomes, educational expansion, or improved infrastructure – usually leads to more migration: It gives people the financial, human and social resources to move in the first place. Only in the long term might human development and opportunities to realize life aspirations at home decrease migration aspirations. Ultimately, the idea that migration can be reduced through small-scale, short-term development aid interventions is misleading. Instead of absolute poverty, which can often prevent people from moving, local levels of inequality and feelings of relative deprivation are more important migration drivers. People usually develop life aspirations in reference to their peers or to the life standards of the local elite. This explains why areas or countries with high levels of inequality among social groups display on average higher emigration rates than more equal countries. It also helps to understand why for many migrant workers employment that is shunned by the population at the destination for reasons of social status still provides opportunities to climb up the social ladder in their countries of origin.

Second, political drivers such as war and violent conflict, as well as corruption and poor governance usually nurture people's aspirations to leave. However, they mostly lead to actual migration behavior in combination with economic factors. For example, many Syrians stayed in their hometowns years into the civil war and only fled to neighboring countries once their economic basis of subsistence eroded to an extent that staying was not viable anymore. Similarly, the Tunisian revolution and its migratory consequences were triggered by a combination of lacking political freedoms under a dictatorial regime and the systematic corruption within the Tunisian state apparatus that destroyed prospects for decent livelihoods and upward social mobility for the vast majority of the population.

However, war and corruption can also 'trap' people in conflict zones. The Yemeni conflict is a case in point, as despite a year-long, brutal conflict, the civilian population has not fled in significant numbers. This is not only because of policy restrictions in destination countries or Yemen's geographical position at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, but also because of the country's low human and economic development levels before the way that now deprive the population of the social networks and economic means

necessary to flee. Comparing the Syrian and the Yemeni conflict might offer new insights into the (economic, geographic, historical) conditions under which war triggers large-scale emigration – or not. Ultimately, conflict, violence, political oppression and dictatorship have ambiguous effects on migration: While they usually increase the aspiration to migrate for specific parts of the population, they also tend to decrease their capabilities to move freely and seek life elsewhere.

Demographic factors such as fertility rates and ‘population pressure’ are also often cited migration drivers. Empirical evidence, however, has remained scant: While large generations of young people indeed create socio-political and labor market demands, the relation with migration is not clear. The effect of demographic growth on mobility is indeed largely mediated by a state’s economic or education policies. From the perspective of an origin country, better access to education is likely to increase internal and international migration, especially if access to higher education and jobs that meet professional aspirations are not available locally. From a destination country perspective, the segmentation of labor markets into high-skilled and low-skilled segments, as well as the high specialization of workers tends to make the local economies structurally dependent on migration to fill labor demand, independent from national unemployment rates. Rigid immigration regulations that do not allow to hire foreign workers depending on employers’ demands and needs are likely to increase the informal economy and irregular labor migration.

Lastly, the effects of climate change on migration are highly ambiguous: Some households may respond to changes in agricultural productivity by migrating, others do not necessarily have the financial capacity and are trapped in this vulnerable situation. Environmental change may thus increase migration aspirations but simultaneously erode financial assets, implying that in some situations environmental change can make migration less likely. As with demographic factors, adaptation to climate change interacts with previous mobility patterns from the same location and is mediated by state interventions: The resilience of populations to rising sea levels or hurricanes, as well as whether environmental disasters lead to permanent migration or short-term, short-distance displacement, importantly depends on public protection mechanisms put in place. In this vein, while advances in technology and infrastructure at first sight seem to facilitate mobility, they can also render permanent migration obsolete by allowing people to adapt to hostile climatic environments – such as heatwaves, floods or earthquakes.

## 2 Realizing migration aspirations

Gallup polls suggest that around 750 million people worldwide aspire to migrate; but most of them never do so. This is partly because many people face legal and financial barriers to mobility, such as visa regulations and limited legal channels for migrating, as well as a lack of financial resources and social networks. More importantly, however, human agency explains why the desire to move does not always equate actual movement and why individual migration decisions are not predictable based on combinations of structural factors alone.

Migrants might decide to take risks that seem irrational, driven by hope, love or a sense of adventure. Some people move as a measure of last resort, when they have reached a perceived bottom-line in the face of environmental degradation or political insecurity. Others move when things go well and they can access resources, as an investment into the future or a strategy to diversify risks. In the debate about migration, it is indeed often forgotten that many young people around the world move out of curiosity and not only out of need, as the high emigration rates of rich democracies attest. To understand how migration aspirations are turned into migratory behavior, it is important to conceive migration aspirations as embedded into a person's broader life aspirations and as part of livelihood strategies of an entire family or community. In turn, this allows to better assess how individuals and origin communities react differently to the same driver constellation.

Generally speaking, migration aspirations are more likely to be turned into migration behavior when a future life elsewhere is expected to bring improvements. However, such perceptions of livelihood improvements are relative: People might migrate not for their individual betterment, but within a family-wide strategy to mitigate vulnerabilities. And what may look like misery from a middle-class European perspective might still be empowering and considered a social upgrade when assessed from a origin community viewpoint. For instance, migration to the Gulf is perceived by many young Ethiopian women as a way to achieve independence from their families and pre-set life trajectories. This clashes with widespread discourses that cast this migration as human trafficking and call for victim protection.

At the same time, because migration aspirations are part of a person's life aspirations, they are likely to change when growing up, entering the labor market or starting a family. Migration might fit into a someone's life aspirations at one moment in time, but not anymore once migration could actually be realized. Vice-versa, people who never had the aspiration to move might find themselves abroad as a result of unexpected opportunities and changes in

circumstances. As research has shown, education levels are a relatively good indicator of whether migration aspirations translate into migration behavior, as people with tertiary education are most likely to eventually realize their migration aspirations. In contrast, migration aspirations are often not a reliable indicator for future migration in politically volatile or economically constrained contexts. Ultimately, migration aspirations are not set in stone – the circumstances and experience of migration itself will inevitably modify initial plans for on-migration or return. This is what makes actual migratory behavior so difficult to predict.

### 3 The role of meso-level networks

Once migration is set in motion between two countries or areas, often kick-started through state interventions such as recruitment programs, war, colonization or trade, it can become self-perpetuating. Migrant communities, transnational networks and diasporas play an important role in facilitating migration. On the one hand, they act as key informants by providing information on legal migration opportunities and the situation on the labor market. They are also essential in allowing migrants to find job, housing and to navigate public services at the destination. On the other hand, diasporas contribute to the development of their origin communities through investing in local projects, sending remittances home and herewith securing the livelihood of their (extended) families. However, as long as the structural migration drivers persist - such as perceived inequality and corruption, ideas of the good life that cannot be fulfilled at home or limited educational opportunities -, these actions are unlikely to significantly reduce migration.

Migrant communities can also increase migration aspirations through widening the mental world map of origin communities. As research has shown, migrants develop migration aspirations in relation to a particular place - their imaginations of possible destinations never comprise all countries in the world, but a specific set of countries based on countries' political, human, cultural and economic ties. This suggests that migration patterns are strongly path-dependent. However, they are not set in stone: Given the economic rise of countries such as Saudi Arabia or China, it is safe to assume that Europe will not necessarily remain the world's prime migration destination in the future.

The fact that global migration has over time concentrated in an increasingly smaller number of bilateral corridors also suggests that not all migrant networks lead to more migration. Migrants can not only function as 'bridgeheads', but also as 'gatekeepers', restricting access to information, jobs and social capital and hereby impede migration. However, it remains

unclear when migrant communities act as facilitator or obstacle for future migrants, given certain opportunities at the destination or composition of the diaspora. Similarly, while we know well how migrant communities emerge and establish themselves, we know little about why certain migration corridors wane and migration stops. Better understanding this dynamic is, however, an important area of future research.

To develop targeted and effective policy, it is important to realize that migrants are embedded in particular networks that shape not only migration aspirations but also the ability to realize them. Migration decisions do not follow rational cost-benefit calculations with access to perfect information; migration is a patterned phenomenon and migrant networks are important mediators through which information and imaginations are transmitted. Thus, a same policy intervention might affect migrant communities in very different ways, depending, among others, on the nationality of origin; class, ethnic group, gender and political positioning; or the characteristics of the diaspora network in the destination country. This explains why migration restrictions are likely more effective for origin countries that already have a large or cohesive diaspora at the destination, and why short-term policy interventions such as 'information campaigns' in origin regions tend to be largely ineffective in deterring future migration, as migrants are usually already well informed about the risks involved in migrating.

#### 4 The limited margin of maneuver of policy interventions

The EU and its member states have developed policy tools to 'address the root causes of migration' and to shape migration patterns, seeking to attract migrants with particular skills and deter unwanted refugee and irregular arrivals. While public and media attention focuses largely on irregular migrants and asylum seekers, the vast majority of the roughly 2.4 million migrants who come to Europe every year does so regularly. With the exception of 2015, around 90 percent of migration over the past decade has occurred within the policy frameworks developed by the EU and member states. Research points at three key dynamics that are often overlooked in policy debates but that could further improve migration policy effectiveness.

First, although migration policies inevitably trigger unexpected consequences to a certain extent, certain well-studied dynamics could be avoided by taking on board lessons from the past. In particular, research on African migration to Europe and Mexican migration to the US has shown that entry restrictions tend to increase irregular migration and migrants' propensity to settle down permanently at the destination. Although official entry numbers might decrease in response to restrictions, ultimately the number of immigrants

settled at the destination increases over time as a result of declining returns. Similarly, the mere announcement of future restrictions can have the counter-productive effect of triggering a 'now-or-never' migration, i.e. immigration spikes just before migration restrictions are introduced. In contrast, migration levels between non-restricted migration corridors (such as within the EU or other free mobility areas) are generally low and fluctuate according to the economic situation. Also, migrants with permanent residency or dual citizenship are usually among the most mobile and prone to return home.

Second, migration policy effectiveness could be increased by better aligning migration policy goals with the objectives of other policy areas, in particular development, trade, labor market, education or foreign policy. Migration policy interventions that fundamentally go against goals pursued by EU and member states' in other policy areas are bound to fail. This explains why labor migration restrictions are usually effective in times of economic recession, while they tend to spur irregular migration and employment in a context of economic growth or when nationals are not willing or able to fill the jobs at the bottom of the labor market. Similarly, tighter border controls tend to push migrants to adopt riskier, costlier, and deadlier routes from which smugglers and other intermediaries profit, with potentially minimal effects on reducing actual irregular entries. And the other way around, a policy to attract high-skilled migrants will be most effective if national education systems provide attractive options for their children and if the labor market offers opportunities for spouses. Similarly, policies attracting international students will be most successful if they allow students to transition into the labor market upon graduation. In the international race for talent, these considerations will increasingly play a role.

Third, migration always involves at least two - and often many - states. Research indicates that when elaborating policy interventions that seek to shape migration, the driver environment in origin countries as well as the migration-related interests of origin countries are not always taken into account. For example, in the case of migration partnerships, the interests of partner countries tend to be integrated too late in the policymaking process. The same goes for negotiations on return and readmission. Furthermore, policies should take into account the driver environment in origin countries, as migration policies. Ultimately, migration policies that go against structural migration drivers in origin and destination countries are unlikely to affect absolute migration volumes. However, they can importantly shape the features of international migration - who migrates when, how and where to. This could maximize migration benefits for destination and origin countries, as well as migrants themselves.

## Ten key lessons

To conclude, here are ten key research insights that might inspire future reflections when developing, implementing or evaluating policies seeking to shape migration drivers:

- Migration policies are largely effective when shifting the political gaze away from irregular migration and considering the entire migration system;
- War and poverty cannot explain global migration patterns, as migration is a response to particular driver configurations, such as the match between educational and occupational opportunities or the interplay between economic inequality and environmental degradation;
- Migration corridors wax and wane, as people constantly update the mental 'world maps' that guide their migration decisions, suggesting that current migration dynamics and corridors are not set in stone but will adapt to future developments around the globe;
- Migration aspirations are not a reliable indicator for future migration, particularly in contexts of political volatility and high economic constraints;
- Policy interventions affect different migrant groups very differently, inviting policymakers to move away from one-size-fits-all approaches and tailor policies to the targeted migrant groups;
- Migration restrictions tend to decrease circularity between origin and destination and to push migrants into permanent settlement, while free mobility regimes allow migration patterns to rapidly adjust to changes in structural driver constellations or individual circumstances;
- When designing and evaluating migration policies, it is imperative to consider the entire migratory process (including arrival and return, short- and long-term consequences);
- Migration policy interventions will more be more effective in shaping immigration patterns when their goals are aligned with those of other policy fields, particularly trade, foreign or labor market policies;
- Integrating origin countries' interests on migration into reflections on immigration policy is vital for successful international migration cooperation;
- Rather than affecting absolute migration volumes, migration policies allow to actively shape the characteristics of and conditions under which migration occurs, i.e. who migrates when, how and where to.

## Main EU policy frameworks on migration drivers

- Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (2014-2020)
- European Agenda on Migration (May 2015)
- Joint Valetta Action Plan (November 2015)

- Partnership Framework on Migration (June 2016)
- New European Consensus on Development (2017)

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\* Top 3 key readings

The Migration Research Hub, developed in the CrossMigration project, supports the systematic accumulation of knowledge in migration studies. It aims to be the go-to resource for finding knowledge on migration, from the latest literature to the most appropriate topical experts.

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