



## **Migration-related Challenges, connections, and solutions in times of polycrisis: recommendations for improving academia and migration governance interactions – a thinkpiece**

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### *What is needed now*

The notion of polycrisis - i.e., the entanglement of multiple types of shocks each amplifying the other - has recently entered policy discourses. This concept enables us to grapple with the various facets of societal distortion today. At the same time, it signals an immense task for policymakers and scholars alike and the terms of their interaction with one another. In this context, policy makers are pressed to find responses accounting not only for the various root causes of these (intertwined) crises but also for the often diverging and conflicting interests of different segments of society. What are the implications for the production of policy-relevant knowledge? The case of migration governance fittingly serves to illustrate these tensions inherent in polycrisis. The perceived 'messiness' of the new constellations related to international migration and integration processes (Triandaffylidou 2022) creates a need for formats, tools and strategies that go beyond well-established mechanisms such as institutional exchange and which includes international key-players in various fields more firmly. Specifically, these new constellations have implications for the ways in which policymakers and scholars communicate and position themselves in the field.

New challenges, connections (configurations of actors), and potential solutions are reshaping the boundaries of this conversation between scholars and policy-makers. Accounting for these emerging aspects is crucial to improve the interaction between these actors and ensure timely and effective policy-oriented insights. To avoid spreading fear and misinformation, innovative solutions to wicked problems will need to be designed through the process of structured exchange. Solutions that facilitate integration must be found, ones that balance the interests of states in "controlling" migration with the economic need to replenish ageing workforces in ways that provide equal treatment for migrant workers and citizens. Which chances could eventually develop precisely out of a situation of crisis?

But instead, we are witnessing a growing disconnect between policymaking and scholarship that - with some efforts - could be transformed into complementary action-oriented strategies. Policy-making tends to address one specific issue or crisis at a time (which requires reactive knowledge for decision-making, mostly short-term), but scholars are trained to tease out the root causes, processes, and relationships between different factors and to make them comprehensible and coherent in relation to broader structures and developments and across longer timespans. A purpose common to both policy-making and scholarly research is to identify future questions, problems, and even the potential 'unknown unknowns'. In this think

piece, we identify a number of key challenges, connections, potential solutions and recommendations - as we see them based on our experiences as migration scholars working with civil society and policy/government partners - in the field of migration-related social policies.

In our previous policy briefing notes, we concentrated on specific aspects of the migration governance debate, such as the role of blue infrastructures and migration or immobility. Here, we reflect on what may be needed to overcome the seeming growing tendency of apathy vs. activist thinking – and to avoid the risk of labelling positions or to talk down existing inequalities. Both sectors, academia and policy-making can benefit from one another to improve migration policy making based on ethical principles and concrete approaches.

# 1. Global Migration Challenges

We live in an increasingly complex world characterised by multiple crises that have the potential to produce more diverse forms of (im)mobility. Two recent reports (World population prospect 2022; World Migration Report 2024) highlight the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has generated new, cascading effects of concatenated shocks that affected people's decision to move or to stay put. In the post-pandemic era, migration scholars and policymakers alike are sailing into uncharted waters when it comes to understanding these challenges and finding adequate solutions to address them.

For example, these reports indicate that future demographic patterns will primarily be regulated through migration (see World population prospect 2022). The rate of natural increase in many parts of the world is slowing notably, even in countries and regions with historically high birth rates. In high-income countries, migration from other regions is already the main (sometimes sole) driver of population growth. In middle-/lower-income countries social and economic forces are generating increasing pressure on young people to migrate, which raises concerns about brain drain and the fate of immobile people left behind. Concomitantly, the World Migration Report (IOM 2024) reminds us of the steep increase in numbers and increasingly diversified migration flows between countries (internationally, internally, displacement, or temporary migration, among others), and that they are increasingly influenced by changing patterns of interplay between nation-states and transnational networks. Remittances have reached an all-time high of US\$ 831 billion (World Migration Report 2024: 8), creating new economies and socio-political power structures in states that lack the capacity and financial resources to provide social benefits to citizens. Further, the growing use of social media in/by/ and through transnational diasporic networks is reshaping information flows, changing established configurations of migrant agency.

Deglobalisation, global inequalities, the rise of authoritarianism and populism, armed conflicts, changing demographic patterns (especially ageing populations in industrialised societies), coupled with climate change and new technologies such as AI and will increasingly disrupt existing structures. Countries in both the Global North and Global South experience internal social fragmentation that can further contribute to multifarious forms of migrant flows. Examples of social fragmentation include the rise of societal "bubbles" which are spurred by AI-driven information and decision-making; political polarisation, which is simultaneously fed by and contributing to mis-/dis-information and political propaganda; breakdown of social welfare, health

care, and education systems combined with and aggravated by the increased cost of living, health care, education, and housing crises, aggravated by rising levels of unemployment and insecurity (especially among youth and working class); to the more extreme case of fragile states (e.g., Haiti, Somalia, Venezuela, South Sudan).

A series of other related crises are also important to note, starting with the rise of more violent, authoritarian governments that directly or indirectly contribute to motivating or driving migration. Meanwhile, a growing number of potential destination countries are erecting fences and barriers to migrants both physical (e.g. in EU's Frontex, US-Mexico border and institutional (e.g. selective immigration criteria and visa regimes) and increasingly rely on advanced technologies (McLeman, 2019). The use of AI surveillance technologies intends to impede or, limit migration flows and/or oblige them to circumvent such borders. To illustrate, more migrants from Africa and Asia enter Latin American countries such as Brazil, Nicaragua, or Costa Rica, which do not require visitor visas, to then travel North to reach the Mexico-US border.

In many cases, current legal frameworks are becoming increasingly inadequate or obsolete in addressing modern challenges (e.g., environmental policies, urban planning, immigration policies, asylum recognition) - as they were developed in specific contexts (time-and space-relevance) and for specific purposes (one illustrative example is the Geneva Convention of 1951, which was based on post WWII-circumstances), which arguably is not adequate or sufficient to address contemporary forms of forced displacement (e.g. environmental or climate-related) and the types of conflicts and humanitarian crises we experience today. But the process of modifying and updating these frameworks (or establishing new ones can be lengthy, difficult, and problematic, especially when the international community is unable to reach consensus. New agreements that have emerged, such as the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are typically non-binding and are not given adequate financial resources to implement them.

Displacement associated with environmental hazards and climate change provides a good example of this. The key international agreement in this area – the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change – raises concerns about displacement, especially in low-lying coastal areas and small island states, but provides no legal guidance nor financial resources to address it. A tentative agreement was reached in 2023 to establish a Loss and Damage fund that would help vulnerable countries financially prepare for (and recover from) the worst impacts of climate

change, but it will be years before such funds can be expected to flow and, if past experience of UNFCCC adaptation funding is indicative, it will be inadequate. The issue of environmental/climate change in combination with global uneven development and urbanisation (IPCC-report) can be seen as a driver to making migration a critical form of societal adaptation. Especially in slow-onset processes that will impact settlement structures and reshuffle existing livelihoods, the careful and reflective governance of migration is imperative.

A lack of long-term vision and planning capacity for transnational problem constellations – or polycrisis – means that governments' ideas for solutions tend to be incremental, and do not address the root causes of problems. Instead, problems are moved (again literally and/or figuratively), from one location or from one sector and/or stakeholder to another. For example refugee camps created to shelter displaced people may be sited in unsuitable locations that lead to environmental degradation and 'solutions' for labour market needs that hinge on bringing in migrant workers often overlook their housing needs. Too often policy making is based on ad-hoc knowledge and short-term political pressures that lack input from migrants themselves (so called migrant knowledge) as well as from migration scholars, service providers and practitioners. Using international migration knowledge in a comparative represents an excellent starting point to gain insights on complex problems and to develop global solutions. Furthermore, efforts to scaling solutions along a spectrum of best practices on one end and of 'worst case scenarios' in different contexts are gaining momentum as a model in a setting of the above sketched concatenated crises.



## 2. Enhancing connections between migration policy-making and research

The challenges outlined above entail the need to extend, expand, and deepen the interaction between policy-making and academia and to include new actors, including the private sector and migrants themselves. In order to achieve this, existing connections between policy makers and scholars have to be identified, further consolidated and then improved upon by developing new connections. All parts of the private sector, particularly Tech/IT firms, need to be better included in migration-related policy and decision making, in line with public policies and civil societies. We are aware of critical perspectives on “[Technopoly](#)”, but we must also recognise the role and responsibility of the technology sector in employment creation and in the tools we use for migration management processes (e.g., selection of migrants for labour needs, data collection, and processing). It is also essential to recognize the growing significance and role of transnational migrant networks in providing a lifeline to relatives in the communities of origin, supporting migration aspirations, and facilitating integration efforts in host countries. Diasporic formations have become important intermediaries through their extended social networks, and they work as trustable connections between mainstream policies and isolated actors in migration societies.

Historically, a number of tools and strategies have served to generate mutual understanding among stakeholders in the field of migration. For example, since 1996, the International Metropolitan Conferences were designed to bring together elected officials and policy-makers with civil society actors and academics. Then, as the SDGs were introduced in 2015 and the IOM became an acknowledged body of the UN framework, negotiations on the Global Compact for fair and orderly migration took over this function but left out academia (and to some extent civil society as well). In addition, global institutions such as WHO and ILO started to emphasise the need for fair migration and decent labour standards by fostering bilateral exchanges – this is why we see nowadays discourse on fair migration, building upon the ILO-Recommendations 86 of 1949, the decent work agenda since the 1990s, the fair migration agenda since 2014. Bilateral agreements between countries became more popular with the “regular pathways”-claims under the GCM pushed by IOM, and the question of complex migration issues (e.g., environmental/climate-induced migration, refugee resettlement following the 2011 Syrian conflict, and the war in Ukraine) within IOM and UN meetings, when then expressed the need for international tools allowing to cooperate between different stakeholders.

On the academic side, there is a lack of internationally designed research to improve systematic understanding of migration-related challenges and thus to increase knowledge and opportunities to develop adequate solutions.<sup>1</sup>

The NUPS network was established to help fill this gap by conducting collaborative research that can enhance migration policy making and develop novel and innovative visions of what it can be. NUPS recognizes the challenges policy makers face in mobilizing academic research in the decision-making process and is working to meet this challenge. It acknowledges and underscores the ethical dimension of decision-making. Connecting the different actors is pivotal, given a series of concerns or circumstances, as follows:

- The time needed to design and conduct quality research (ethics requirements, data collection, and analysis) and then publish results conflicts with governments' need to make decisions more rapidly and on the basis of best available results at the time when decisions need to be made (i.e. they do not have the luxury of waiting for finalised, fully coherent research results to become available);
- Policy-makers often lack access to research findings relevant to the decision at hand and lack time to read and process lengthy academic studies;
- Academic research can be critical and reveal how policies may have detrimental effects and/or may create new problems, which may leave policymakers with not clearly optimal choices.

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<sup>1</sup> Only recently, a number of large-scale international research partnerships were created to tackle migration-related global issues, including: the [Habitable](#) project in Europe (7 Million €; 2020-2024); the [MEMO](#) Partnership ("Complex migration flows and multiple drivers in comparative perspective"; CAD \$2.5 funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, SSHRC, for 2022-2026), the Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) in migration and integration based at the Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) in Toronto, Canada; [KONEKSI](#) collaborative initiative to support Indonesian and Australian organisations to address socio-economic challenges (including migration); and the UK-funded MIDEQ ([Migration for Development and Equality-South South Migration](#)) on migration corridors on four continents and aiming at reducing inequalities in the region. Since 2020, the European Commission has stepped up with international research opportunities with the aim to represent the state of the art and integrate business strategies such as the attraction of a skilled workforce (GS4S, [Global Strategy for Skills, Migration, and Development](#)). These projects also aim to collect much needed quantitative data, which is valuable for policy-design and policy making. Nevertheless, our main argument is that more needs to be done: transnational thinking and knowledge production that consider the unknown is fairly missing.

- The tendency to use technical language and jargon in academic writing and publications, which may be opaque or unintelligible to policy-makers;
- The potential of mutual suspicion between academic researchers and government officials combined with a lack of familiarity with one another;
- Limited or lack of awareness on the part of academic researchers of the information needs of policymakers;
- Limited or lack of awareness by policymakers of the information and insights available within the academic community.

To a large extent, these circumstances and challenges may be resolved through more structured communication between academic researchers and government officials. Regular channels for formal and informal ongoing communications would enable mutual understanding and respect along with an enhanced appreciation of their respective roles and responsibilities in informational needs, and their capacities to contribute to a shared purpose of effective policy-making in migration and integration.

Although not all researchers aspire to contribute to evidence-based policymaking; for those who do, NUPS offers an interdisciplinary, supportive and collegial forum for this very purpose. A central objective of NUPS is to identify and work on the most pressing migration issues, while disseminating knowledge dissemination in a range of formats (technical reports, policy briefs, webinars, workshops, etc.) accessible to a broad audience. The network was initially created as a new tool through the German Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to make the outcomes of the IMCB22-process more sustainable and is now backed by the SEMI (German-Canadian Structured Exchange on Migration and Integration) - thus the lead is with two important migration societies. Thinking ahead by learning from each other is its main goal, stepwise it invests into a global reach. This process must be organized through a network, a gravity centre, relying on trustable partnerships.

### 3. Recommendations, areas for future work

Despite of its flaws, the reaction to the pandemic has shown that the convergence of global governance, appropriate funding mechanisms, and technological innovation can minimise the impact of such a globally disrupting event. Knowledge infrastructures powered by digital infrastructures and, increasingly, AI are facilitating the emergence of transnational and transdisciplinary networks of scholars, who are now able to collaborate across national borders and disciplines to devise new approaches to a common threat or to work towards a solution. These spaces of interaction and co-production of knowledge provide unprecedented opportunities not only for timely responding to shocks but also to strengthen systemic resilience and anticipate crises of different natures. It needs dedicated scholars and open-minded politicians.

The landscape we have sketched above entails the need to devise fresh approaches to future known and unknown challenges. We recommend seeking solutions that focus on:

- enhancing international cooperation, and specifically strengthening North-South engagement in migration policy making and governance, and
- adopting and promoting incremental and transdisciplinary approaches of knowledge production that engages new stakeholders in migration policy development and program delivery.

We also suggest greater attention be given to the presently unknown effects of technology, particularly the use of AI and new technologies in migration management. Facing budget constraints, policymakers are increasingly viewing AI as a tool to maximise efficiency and reduce costs. Predictive AI, where historical records are used to train models to produce forecasts and thus strengthen the preparedness of states and humanitarian actors. Generally, the growing influence of AI in the epistemic infrastructure that informs migration policies is not fully recognised by policymakers. Recent years have seen a proliferation of initiatives leveraging big data and data analytics to predict displacement trajectories and migration routes. Projects such as Foresight, implemented by the Danish Refugee Council, UNHCR's Jetson project in Somalia, and ITFLOWS, funded by the EU and developed by a consortium of academic institutions and NGOs, have drawn attention to the potential of predictive AI to shape knowledge and decision-making around migration issues. However, this interest comes with caveats.

Concerns have been raised about the risk of function creep, as migrant data collected for humanitarian purposes could be used for intelligence and surveillance – as the influence of tech

firms in migration management is strong. Not always possible side-effects on the public interest are given enough attention. At present, the datafication of migration seems to work as a forerunner for the development of digital tools and this may raise the above-mentioned ethical concerns.

Knowledge co-production is an important strategy for achieving more comprehensive and transformative solutions. A collaborative process involving actors from a variety of sectors and with diverse expertise in producing context-specific solutions may help ensure the sustainability of future migration management strategies. This process involves extending the current understandings of valuable and/or considered legitimate knowledge to include absent voices and visions, especially from affected communities. Through this approach, dominant perspectives can be decentered, hierarchies in knowledge production and dissemination can be confronted and concepts (such as “development” and what it means), can be broadened to include a wider array of understandings, providing a means of empowerment for previously disenfranchised groups.

Multidisciplinary perspectives might lead to different future pathways across regions, with the potential for solutions that are better tailored to local contexts. To illustrate, some Asian countries such as Indonesia gradually moved to an inclusive and rights-centred migration governance (UN Indonesia, 2024). National capacity building has brought government, civil society, and international partners to shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach, leading to co-produced knowledge. In countries such as Indonesia migration has big implications for social policies, necessitating robust frameworks to protect migrant workers, integrate international migrants, and support vulnerable groups. Strengthening legal protections, expanding social security, and ensuring access to education and healthcare are crucial steps. Emerging actors in the field of migration studies in Indonesia play a vital role in addressing these challenges, encouraging many actors which interdisciplinary fields should be considered. Civil society organizations like Migrant CARE and the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) advocate for migrant rights, while academic institutions conduct essential research. International organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) work on migration management and capacity building. Government agencies, including the Ministry of Manpower and BP2MI (at the national level) also Manpower-Industry Agency (at the local and regional level), oversee labour migration and protection efforts. The private sector, through ethical recruitment agencies and corporate social responsibility initiatives, also contributes to supporting migrant communities. Additionally,

media and journalists work to highlight migration issues, raising public awareness and prompting policy changes. This multifaceted approach ensures comprehensive migration governance that prioritizes the rights and well-being of migrants.

Finally, developing new ways of understanding migration that are accessible to policymakers involves several strategies aimed at effectively communicating findings and fostering collaborative relationships. Moreover, given the severe impact of climate variability on vulnerable populations in both arid and semi-arid areas for example in certain areas in African regions, the use of AI could be mobilized to help predict migration patterns. If countries can identify potential migration dynamics before they occur, preventative measures could be developed, solutions could be prepared or better planned, relevant actors could be mobilized, local knowledge integrated, thus averting potential 'crises' in advance.

## 4. Aligning antagonists: How to insert research into the policy-making process

The tools and informational resources most suitable used by policymakers are often not in the same style, format, or depth of analysis as those preferred in scholarly circles - and vice-versa. These respective professional constraints are somewhat antagonistic: Policymakers often require research outputs to be produced much faster than is customary in scholarly research, whereas the latter emphasize careful methodological design, data collection and analysis to ensure the replicability of results. Policymakers want products that summarise key findings succinctly and need only to be assured that the methods used were appropriate. They also like to see specific examples of solutions that have worked, how and why they worked, and how they may be adapted to provide a satisfactory solution to the problem at hand. Scholars, meanwhile, demonstrating their ability to produce detailed, methodologically innovative research that contributes to wider theoretical discussions and withstands lengthy peer-review processes in an untransparent academic setting. Civil society organizations that are responsible for delivering services and programs to migrants also require research, but in targeted, actionable formats, along with financial resources to implement it.

Many scholars have not worked in government or program delivery and so may have only a loose understanding of how policy decisions are made and implemented and the needs of policymakers and civil society actors. They may fail to identify conflicting interests among policymakers within governments (and between different levels of government where decision-making responsibilities are often siloed in different departments (e.g. Labour and social affairs, Interior, Development and Finance) often pursue different objectives. The “blackbox” institutional structures present to the research who wants to contribute to policymaking, can be overcome through concerted efforts to create ongoing opportunities for policymakers, academics, and civil society organisations that provide services to migrants and refugees to work collaboratively in the co-production of research that serves the interests of all – preferably from the very early stages of a project. Figure 1 below shows a simplified, idealized version of the necessary steps to achieving such collaborative approaches, and is one the NUPS-network is advancing through, for example, the SEMI-initiative.

The first step is to co-convene virtual, hybrid, and/or in-person meetings in which policymakers and/or civil society actors describe to academic participants the challenge at hand in times of polycrisis (e.g. how to facilitate labour market entry for newly arrived asylum claimants with technical skills), the key questions they want/need to be answered, the format in which they want to receive outputs and the timeline for deliverables. This process is initiated with a webinar, inviting pitches of scholars, policy-makers and practitioners in the field of knowledge production/mobilization. The deliverables then can (and should) include products desired by each of the groups - for example, policy-makers may want concise reports with 1-2 page executive summaries that can be easily included in ministerial briefing books; civil society organizations may want information presented as webinars, podcasts, videos and other formats that are easily distributable; and, scholars will want the ability to publish the end-or-project findings in scholarly journals. The three groups then determine the best way to conduct the necessary research, with the government agency providing the necessary financial resources (high-quality research is not free). Once the research is completed, the government must then provide civil society organizations funds to implement the key findings - otherwise, they will be reluctant to participate in the future.

As the figure suggests, the process should be seen as circular, not linear. As these cooperative relationships are built and prove themselves capable of generating policy-oriented and actionable research, the groups can turn their attention to other key challenges and identify solutions and/or pathways. The process is steered by the NUPS-network, based at TU Berlin and is realised in close collaboration with the SEMI-setting.

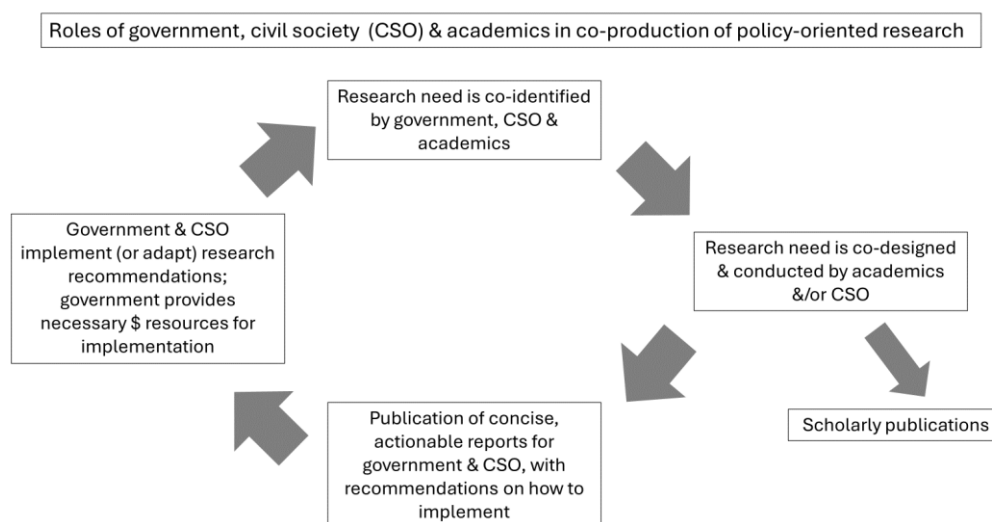


Figure 1: The circularity of knowledge production in migration research



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