Bridging the gap between science and policy on migration and asylum

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Abstract

For almost twenty years, the European Union has struggled to put in place a common policy on migration and asylum. The lack of a joined policy is one of the main reasons for Europe's poor response to the surge in immigrants and asylum seekers arriving since 2014. We argue that bridging the gap between science and policy is important for facilitating the development of a common migration and asylum policy. The relevance of a strong science-policy interface for effective policy development has been demonstrated in other fields, such as the environmental sciences (e.g. the European Commission's "Science for Environment Policy" initiative). How can the interface between migration science and policy be strengthened? We argue that data visualisation has the potential to strengthen the interface and to bridge the gap between migration research, policy and the general public. We demonstrate the value of data visualisation for facilitating a dialogue between science, policy and the public with two examples: our project on "The Global Flow of People" available at www.global-migration.info and our visualisation of global refugee flows available at www.global-refugees.info.

Extended Abstract

The European Union has been able to decide on the ideal shape of cucumbers but has struggled for almost twenty years to agree on a common migration policy. In times of substantial inflows of asylum seekers from the Middle East and increasing labour migration within and into Europe, the development of a common policy is an increasingly pressing issue. Since the Treaty on European Union was signed in Maastricht in 1992, several attempts were made to improve the management of migration and asylum (including the Amsterdam Treaty, the Tampere Programme and the Dublin Regulation), but only the Dublin III Regulation had a noticeable effect. However, the surge in immigrants and asylum seekers in 2015 demonstrated the inadequacy of the Dublin regulation for determining the Member State responsible for processing asylum claims. Moreover, the current trends also highlight the problems that the Schengen agreement on free movement poses for counting asylum seekers and processing their requests.

How the European Union should respond to the rising influx of migrants and asylum seekers and whether to relax or restrict immigration are hotly debated issues. Political rhetoric and populist media tend to dominate over fact-based discussions, causing a rightward shift of policy and voting preferences and growing in concerns about 'uncontrolled mass immigration'. Hence, there is a clear need for a closer dialogue between science and policy to ensure that scientific knowledge influences policymaking in an effective way. Strengthening the interface between science and policy can facilitate the development of a common migration policy. Science can and should play a more active role in shaping perceptions of reality, including facts, opinions and uncertainties about global migration trends, because these perceptions directly influence policy making and public opinion.

Previous work showed that the science-policy interface plays an important role in in the environmental sciences (e.g. the European Commission's "Science for Environment Policy" initiative) and for the development of policies aiming at sustainable resource use. But such an interface requires a dialogue between science and policy, and the effective communication of scientific findings in a way that is accessible to policy makers. The traditional way of communicating research to policy makers has been through policy briefs, which are typically made available for download as PDF documents. However, the

effectiveness of policy briefs for influencing decision making has been questioned. The World Bank recently noted that the vast majority of PDF documents they provide on the Bank's homepage never get downloaded. Hence, there is a clear need for scientists to go beyond publishing research findings in academic publications, which are difficult to access by policy makers, and explore new forms of communication that attract the attention of decision makers.

We argue that data visualisation has the potential to communicate research to a wider audience and to facilitate a closer dialogue at the science-policy interface. To strengthen the interface, both the relevance of the research project to policy making and the format in which the findings are communicated matter. Visualising the complex patterns of global migration is essential for bridging the gap between research and decision making. We demonstrate the value of data visualisation for facilitating a dialogue between science, policy and the public with two examples: our project on "The Global Flow of People" available at www.global-migration.info (Fig. 1) and our visualisation of global refugee flows available at www.global-refugees.info (Fig. 2). Our circular plot shows the relative size and direction of migration streams within the global system of flows (Fig. 1). By focussing on migration between the 50 countries with the largest volume of movement (in excess of 70,000 people), we can highlight where people are migrating to in one visualisation. The data show that most migrants move over short distances within the same region or between neighbouring regions, and relatively few move between continents. North America, Europe and the oil-rich Gulf countries in western Asia are the destinations of flows that come from furthest afield (most of which go through the centre of the circular graphic). The graphic has attracted international attention in academia and beyond, and it has been reprinted in policy documents, including the 2014 Report of the ILO Director-General.

Figure 1: Circular plot of migration flows between 50 countries, 2005-10 (Abel and Sander 2014). The interactive version 'The Global Flow of People' is available at www.global-migration.info

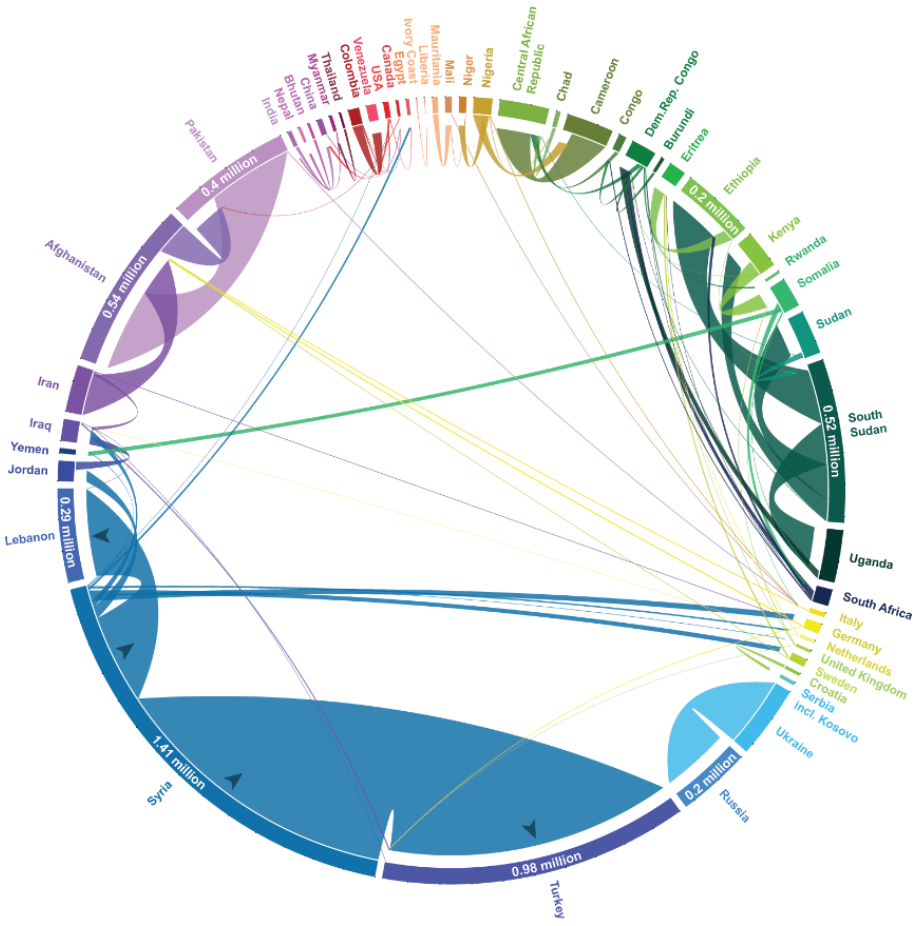

Figure 2: Circular plot of refugee flows in 2014 based on UNHCR data.
The interactive version is available at www.global-refugees.info