

'We don't know nearly enough about migration'

May 20 2016



Syrian refugees in the Jordanian refugee camp Zaatari. Credit: Flickr/Dominic Chavez/World Bank

In the current issue of the scientific journal *Science*, which was published today, Frans Willeken, migration expert at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, together with three further experts on migration, summarizes in a review article the current state of knowledge. The

article appears shortly before the first World Humanitarian Summit, which has been organized by the United Nations and will take place May 23–24, 2016 in Istanbul, Turkey. The summary paints a rather sobering picture. On the one hand, it demonstrates that the knowledge base for the management and governance of migration flows is limited because the necessary data are lacking. On the other hand, it makes clear that this lack of data has allowed a false perception of the extent of current migrations to arise.

For example, the general public has the impression that, for quite some time now, large numbers of people have been fleeing from their home countries to the wealthy countries. The empirical evidence leads us to a different assessment, however: in the year 2015 a mere 3.3 percent of the world's population, approximately 240 million people, did not live in the country of their birth. On the whole, [global migration](#) has remained moderate in recent decades. In the words of Willekens: "In the last two years, Europe has experienced a strong influx of refugees and other migrants. However, the number of people coming to Europe remains limited in comparison to world population." This influx does, however, make clear the meaning of globalization and the fact that Germany and Europe desperately need to clarify their strategic position in an increasingly interconnected world, according to Willekens.

In addition, the authors observe that authorities are better at counting people immigrating to a country than those who leave. "This incomplete information leads to a situation where the number of refugees and the size of the immigrant population are generally exaggerated in the public perception," says migration expert Willekens.

Migration alters both the target countries and the countries of origin, according to the authors. In target countries population diversity increases, which calls for diversity policies (including integration policies) and diversity management. The countries of origin will need to

deal with the consequences of large numbers of, above all, better educated people emigrating.

"All in all, we know far too little about migration to be able to draw reliable conclusions. The main problem is the missing data," Willekens says. For this reason, he and his colleagues Douglas Massey (Office of Population Research, Princeton University, USA), James Raymer (School of Demography, Australia National University, Canberra) and Cris Beauchemin (Institute National d'Études Démographiques, Paris, France) call on both the research community and on political institutions to take action. They name four central elements that need to be implemented in their opinion:

1. Statistics bureaus throughout the world need to cooperate with each other more closely. Data must be collected in such a manner that they can be collated and compared, as is stipulated in United Nations' recommendations. In addition, these data should be made freely accessible.
2. A new scientific method has recently been developed that allows for the analysis of [migration flows](#) in Europe. This method, which uses demography and statistics to combine migration data from different sources, can be extended to estimate global migration flows, provided data are available.
3. The authors recommend a World Migration Survey, in which data are collected in countries of origin, target countries and [countries](#) of transit. Comparable programs in which data were gathered globally have been successful in the past, for example in the case of the World Fertility Survey. This program, in which fertility data were collected in the entire world, was introduced in the 1970s in light of the world population explosion and contributed significantly to a knowledge base for population policy.
4. Universities should initiate degree programs in Migration and

Population Diversity. The goal of these courses of study is to equip the young generation with the necessary tools to collect the necessary data and to formulate effective [migration](#) policies.

More information: F. Willekens et al. International migration under the microscope, *Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1126/science.aaf6545](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaf6545)

Provided by Max Planck Society

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