



## Human Mobility:

**a local, regional and global call for collective action and evidence-based public discourse**

### Background

#### *The phenomenon of migration*

Migration is to be understood as a **complex, structured and inherent phenomenon**. The phenomenon of migration, or more broadly, the phenomenon of human mobility, insofar as it is coextensive with human life and human flow, cannot be tackled, let alone regulated and contained, with the approach that is currently being used, the emergency approach.

Reducing the phenomenon of migration to a **security or safety issue**, treating it as a problem, an issue that needs to be urgently controlled, by building walls and redrawing boundaries in international waters, means also reducing drastically our capacities, tools and knowledge to **understand this complex phenomenon** and **act** accordingly.

#### *Migration frameworks: recent developments*

The phenomenon of migration is currently facing a **triple watershed moment**, at a global, European and national level, in consideration of the discussion and implementation, respectively, of three different frameworks:

- the [Global Compact for Migration](#) (GCM) promoted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM);
- the [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) (New EU Pact) proposed by the European Commission;
- and the immigration decree [21 October 2020, n. 130](#) recently adopted by the Italian government, which has an immediate impact on sea rescue operations.

Even though the New EU Pact and the GCM can be endorsed by member states and governments, they are **not legally binding**. Laws and regulations, policymaking, decision-making and implementation are currently lying mainly on national governments. Yet this is a **historical moment** because what is at stake is the future of migration and the protection of human lives and people on the move. The GCM and the New EU Pact will contribute to **reshaping the present and future migration-related policymaking landscape** for years to come. Consequently, **further reflections** need to be conducted, collectively and inclusively, notably with scholars and practitioners, to **promote human mobility in practice** on the basis of the principles of solidarity, dignity, and shared responsibility.

#### *Reshaping perceptions on Human Mobility and promoting counternarratives: A roundtable discussion*

This contribution aims at shedding some clarity on the phenomenon of human mobility, and more specifically on the importance of **shaping perceptions on migrations** and **promoting counternarratives of xenophobia and discrimination**<sup>1</sup>. It relies on notions and practices shared during a [Transatlantic Roundtable](#)

<sup>1</sup> [https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/default/files/docs/shape\\_perceptions\\_on\\_migration\\_un\\_migration\\_network\\_blog\\_final.pdf](https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/default/files/docs/shape_perceptions_on_migration_un_migration_network_blog_final.pdf)

[on Human Mobility](#) that took place on May 19 2021, promoted by [Studio Europa Maastricht](#) and [Agora Europe](#), and co-sponsored by the [United Nations Network on Migration](#), Columbia University [Committee on Forced Migration](#), [Alliance Program](#), and [Maison Française](#), [Sciences Po CERJ](#), [Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University](#), [UNIMED-Mediterranean Universities Union](#), [Amref Health Africa – Italia](#) and [United Nations University UNU-MERIT](#), and part of the [“OTHERSIDE // EUROPE” Series](#), launched by Agora Europe in Fall 2019 jointly at KANO Brussels and Columbia University.

The public live event, preceded by a preparatory workshop on May 10, featured two sessions mirroring the modalities resolution on the global reporting on the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) at the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF)<sup>2</sup> : (Session 1) “Saving lives, protecting migrants, and advocacy for humane cross-border mobility” and (Session 2) “Enhancing cooperation on evidence-based migration policymaking and public debate”.

### Context and Challenges

For the sake of the argument, this contribution is structured in three levels: 1) the “telos”, or theoretical principles, of international and intergovernmental organizations (such as the UN and the EU) faced with migration; 2) practice, as well as policy responses; and, 3) reality vis à vis narratives and counternarratives.

#### *Telos*

The first level is the so called **“telos” of the EU**, the myth of *“finalité politique”* to which [Mathieu Segers](#) and [Caterina Di Fazio](#) referred to in [their recent piece for Fondazione Feltrinelli and EU Visions](#). At the EU level, the main pillar, the basis of the institution of the European political space, is **freedom of movement**. At an international level, the equally important telos are **human rights**. In other words, the European and global narrative relies on two main pillars: freedom of movement and human rights.

The focus of our long-term research deals with how **changes in migratory routes** affect the ways we **perceive the EU political space**, as well as the **transatlantic space**, and vice versa, and—to adopt the expressions that [Seyla Benhabib](#) and [Ayten Gundogdu](#) used during the May 10 workshop—ways in which **borders are reconfigured** and are becoming increasingly **racialized**.

In this respect, “when the full horror of the human tragedy unfolding on the shores of Europe and at the US-Mexico border becomes visible”, initiatives such as the GCM, although non-binding, can make it easier for activists and advocates, international organizations and NGOs, to boost the pressure of the public to increase **collective accountability** and promote “powerful and effective de-securitization narrative”, claims [Ariane Chebel D’Appolonia](#). Alongside this are, ironically enough, the **shocking images and illustrations**, such as that of Alan Kurdi, the three-year old Syrian boy who drowned attempting to reach the Greek island of Kos, or those of children detained in cages by the Trump administration, that create **public awareness** and outcries for solutions that in turn open up, short and fleeting, but nevertheless, windows of opportunity to **re-humanize people** and **create political change**.

When we turn these divergent notions into practice, on the one hand, we are looking at the **impact of recent immigration laws on migration routes and sea rescue operations** (the Atlantic route was recently reopened due to the policies and agreements implemented by the EU) and humane border-crossing. On the other hand, we can see the **impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable groups**. In terms of action, we are looking, on the one hand, at the potential of the GCM and the New EU Pact to **reshape the migration**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/default/files/docs/imrf.pdf>

**policy landscape**, and on the other, to our ability to reshape perceptions of migration and narratives and counternarratives of xenophobia and discrimination, including **decolonizing narratives, tackling misinformation and committing to evidence-based policymaking and public debate**.

### *Practice*

On the second level we find therefore **practice**, which is often in contrast with level one, the theoretical principles (or telos) on which the EU and the international community are based. Our actions often fail to recognize the principle of **co-dependency** that inextricably links together Europe and its other sides: the East, the West and the Global South.

This can be further clarified by looking at ways in which the EU imported the **Australian model** of offshore detention, as outlined by [Maria Giannacopoulos](#) in her contribution on “White identity and colonial sovereignty and right to asylum”, promoted via the Pacific Solution and Operation Sovereign Borders (better known as the “Stop the Boats” policy) and further adopted in the **Central and Eastern Mediterranean** via the agreements with **Libya and Turkey** and in the Atlantic in the **Canary Islands**, as witnessed during the workshop by the practitioners from [Salvamento Maritimo](#) and [Aita Mari – Salvamento Maritimo Humanitario](#) Manuel Capa and Iñigo Mijangos.

Indeed, in order to protect freedom of movement in the internal space, the Schengen area, Europe **strongly limited freedom of movement across its external borders**. This process is known as the process of **externalization of borders**, as pointed out by [Sara Prestianni](#) and Caterina Di Fazio, or of **detrterritorialization of sovereignty**, a phenomenon which is strictly linked to our colonial and postcolonial heritage. We fail to comply with our **duty to save at sea**, we **forcibly remove people from our territories** (if we ever granted them access) and return them outside the European space, as in the camps in Libya, or in the peripheries of Europe, such as the Canaries, Greece, and Lampedusa. We are not acting according to the **principle of solidarity or international and maritime laws** and are instead **criminalizing sea rescue operations**, as highlighted during the workshop by Giorgia Linardi from [Sea-Watch](#), as well as the work done by NGOs which are operating at sea solely to fill the void created by **institutional inaction** (a related example of *solidarité de fait* is mayor of Palermo Leoluca Orlando’s recent call for the [institution of a European civil service for sea rescue](#)). In relation to sea rescue, Agora Europe and its partners recently promoted the [Joint Statement on Sea Rescue](#) to open a **path of solidarity and cooperation** in the US, Senegal, UK, France and Italy, “in the conviction that the **protection of lives at sea** shall endure in our societies both among the current priorities of European action and as long-standing transnational common value, that forced disappearances shall be visible and avoidable, and deaths avoidable and accountable”.

In addition, sea rescue—which remains a duty—and the **phenomenon of migration and human flows** should be treated separately. Without the implementation of legal pathways for migration, we will continue to lose lives both in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. History will sooner or later require an **assumption of responsibility**. Agora Europe’s co-founder [Etienne Balibar](#), for years has been calling what is happening in our waters a “**genocide**”, and also noted, during the roundtable, that the “European policy of borders can’t be discriminatory and has to be designed inclusively, with the otherside”. On a policy level, **the lack of legal pathways** for migration is also a burden for the asylum system. People are being rejected without states even considering their asylum requests. Yet, migrants have no other option than applying for asylum, whether or not they fit the “criteria”, since this is the sole tool that we made available. As a consequence, people in need for protection are left alone and remain with **no international protection**. And, on the other hand, as the COVID-19 pandemic showed, Member States have **no resources to secure food supply** (as in Germany in the agricultural sector) and sustain our “**European way of life**” without migrants.

This will represent a “real” crisis, if we look at the trends of the **demographic change**. As [Kalypso Nicolaidis](#) said during the workshop “forget charity, forget principles”, reality is out there: “we need them”.

Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis replaced this same dynamic across our internal borders, such as the Basque border between **Hendaye**—Agora Europe’s seat—and Irun, and in different regions of the world including **Africa**, as mentioned by Roberta Rughetti from [Amref Health Africa](#), stating that the “right to mobility is not the same for all”. The **unsettling case of the Basque border**<sup>3</sup> is of extreme relevance since it shows that the same dynamics produced by externalization policies are now invading the Schengen area and the European political space itself. Following the closure of the Schengen border—a paradox *par excellence*—between France and Spain and the subsequent suspension of the Schengen Agreement (which shall be limited in time and not be arbitrary) due to the COVID-19 emergency, several individuals attempted to swim across the Bidasoa river to reach France. One was rescued, one died: **Yaya Karamoko**, 28, born in Mankono, Ivory Coast, drowned in European borderline waters.

### *Reality and the narratives*

The last level which this contribution aims to address is the situation that migrants are faced with where the current dominant narratives have overcome reality. It is very likely that turning back to reality will bring us closer to level one, the EU and international telos. According to Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, in watershed moments in history such as the current one, we need to reaffirm the **non-evidence of reality**, that is, the way in which reality is currently perceived, including xenophobia, discrimination and the **creation of an enemy**, alongside our capacity for collective action, societal impact and transformation of reality.

There are several examples in which reality has been reversed and overturned by the dominant narratives. For instance, **NGO ships are currently being blocked** because they are not “safe enough” to rescue people, while hundreds are dying at sea. If law itself is a site of “forced disappearance,” as Ayten Gundogudu suggests, then we cannot simply appeal to it to address the problem of migrant deaths and disappearances. Beyond laws, [Anna Triandafyllidou](#) also insisted, during the roundtable, on the importance of **governing human mobility** rather than preventing or cleaning the current “messy approach”, characterized by “simplified narratives and singular solutions”. Moreover, and as mentioned by [Souleymane Bachir Diagne](#), it is essential to have a **Global South perspective** on the narratives and counternarratives, in relation with migrations, promoting humanity also through innovative channels such as **culture**.

Reshaping narratives and counternarratives of migration based on **data analysis** is key to understand the phenomenon of human mobility and act accordingly, in the conviction that **evidence-based public discourse** will also mean a **restoration of human rights and freedom of movement**.

### Recommendations

Based on the migration context, as well as the current challenges and frameworks discussed during the workshop and roundtable organized by Studio Europa Maastricht and Agora Europe with their co-sponsors, it clearly appears that **human mobility should be a right and an opportunity rather than a problem to be regulated and contained**. In order to promote this approach and to change the narratives, hence bringing a contribution to counter discrimination and xenophobia, several recommendations were shared during the above-mentioned workshop and roundtable by the invited speakers<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2021-002929\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2021-002929_EN.html)

<sup>4</sup> The list of the speakers is available on the Agora Europe website: [www.agoraeurope.eu](http://www.agoraeurope.eu)

In relation to policy, in concrete, we shall call for the development of **legal pathways for migration and safe passage**. This can be done solely by taking into account the human capital and market needs of both countries of origin and transit and countries of destination. The set of recommendations we hereby propose aims at contributing to a **solution-oriented approach**, considering migrants primarily as workers and human mobility as an opportunity and a key factor to both maintain peace and foster sustainable development. **We urge scholars, practitioners and policy makers**, as well as **governments**, to consider and promote the following:

*Human mobility, legal frameworks and borders' governance*

- Embracing human mobility as a fundamental part of our societies and refute the hierarchies of 'good' and 'bad' migrations.
- Questioning how law becomes complicit in the racialized governance of borders and putting forward a radical critique.
- Re-thinking and re-articulating legal concepts and categories, in relation with borders and migrations, instead of evading or displacing.
- Recognizing the politics of securing borders as part of controlling and managing migration and migrants as objects of these practices and also the agency of migrants.

*Labor, private sector and education*

- Shifting the ways in which funding are used and considering market needs in Europe and its other sides, that is, countries of origin and transit, with the involvement of the private sector and the promotion of vocational trainings, rather than dedicating a substantial amount of the financing efforts towards border management and returns.
- Ensuring workers' rights and protection for migrant workers.
- Holding companies and actors, in the private sector, accountable for making profits from the criminalization of migration.
- Involving teachers, universities and education's actors in the promotion of global counternarratives from early stages in education.

*Access to information and promotion of counternarratives*

- Easing access to reliable, accurate and updated information, targeting various segments of the populations, including migrants and host communities, and producing and distributing it through cooperation of governments, civil society organizations, and the media.
- Developing positive counternarratives that aim to protect migrants and ensure that governments refrain from responding to far-right propaganda, as research has shown that by using slurs and negative narratives, even with the intention to discredit them, those become more prominent and create an increased negative impact on migrants.
- Criminalizing the use of technology violating migrant's human dignity.

*Practitioners, researchers and affected communities: collaborative and multi-stakeholder approach*

- Recognizing the role of NGOs as promoters of the migrants' voices.
- Acknowledging the need to make visible the situation migrants find themselves in and to support the work of NGOs while defending the right of migrants and exploring social networks.

- Strengthening the links between researchers, public policy makers, the media and other contributors to public debates so that these actors understand and appreciate each other's primary constraints and aims, hence making a step towards genuine cooperation among the key stakeholders.
- Ensuring that politicians are asking precise questions to the research community, including questions regarding the effects and trade-offs of specific policy interventions under consideration and are using research and researchers to engage in a 360-degrees approach, thereby taking into account the many interdependencies between migration and other issue areas, and the longer-term consequences of migration and integration processes and policies.
- Ensuring that researchers and research are more accessible, easy to find, available in easy language, short and to the point, and tailoring communication with policymakers and the media.

*Right to health and development*

- Ensuring that governments and policy makers are increasing investments in health and research, benefiting all communities, including migrants, in the Global South, including Africa.
- Promoting a global call for solidarity with the Global South, notably when it comes to the right to health, and urging the availability of vaccines to low- and middle-income countries, without discrimination among populations, including exiled, and considering waivers or subsidies of Intellectual Property protections for COVID-19 related technologies.