



International Metropolis Conference

AGENDA

*More than 700 people gathered at the Sydney International Conference Centre last October for the International Metropolis Conference. The five-day event was organised by Settlement Services International, the Australian Multicultural Foundation and Multicultural NSW. **OLGA YOLDI** reports.*



Global Migration in Turbulent Times was the theme of this conference that attracted participants from many nations, as well as international experts, NGO leaders, human rights activists, researchers, health professionals and politicians.

The presentations, panel discussions and workshops covered a large variety of topics, from global migration movements, displacement and resettlement to migration policy and the findings from the latest research.

With 258 million migrants, 25.4 million refugees and more than 60 million displaced people around the world, migration is one of the key forces shaping the world today – and this was the main message of the conference. Indeed, more people are on the move around the world than ever before. War, civil unrest, poverty and climate change are combining to create massive displacement. But as daunting as it may appear, we were reminded that migration has existed since the dawn of time, long before the creation borders and passports. Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon defined it as “an expression of the human

aspiration for dignity, safety and a better future. It is part of our social fabric and part of our make up as a human family”.

The world as we know it today may not exist without migration. “It is our motivation and ability to migrate that has allowed our ancestors to escape famine, drought, pandemics, wars and other disasters and explore new opportunities to populate the planet,” said keynote speaker Dr Ian Goldin, professor of Globalisation and Development, founding director of the Martin Oxford School, Oxford University, and co-author of the highly acclaimed book *Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future*.

Professor Goldin said migration is beneficial for Western economies. “It has made, and is making, an essential contribution to the economic wellbeing of many Western countries,” he said. “But it is the growing politicisation of migration on a value basis, rather than an economic one, that is making it difficult to properly highlight the economic case for migration.”

Professor Goldin’s research shows that migration has had a substantial impact on recent aggregate economic

growth. “In Germany and the UK, we estimate that if migration had been frozen in 1990 their GDPs would have been around €155 billion and £175 billion lower respectively,” he said. “In the US, too, immigration has made a substantial contribution to recent economic growth, especially since the financial crisis.”

According to Professor Goldin, skilled migrants make a disproportionate contribution to economic innovation because they introduce diversity to the workplace, additional skills, new ideas and entrepreneurship, as migrants and refugees tend to be risk-takers. The McKinsey Global Institute notes that in the US alone, more than 40 percent of global patent applications are led by immigrants.

This finding mirrors UTS Professor Jock Collins’ research on refugees, which shows they have the highest rates of entrepreneurship of all immigrant arrivals – even though they lack capital, credit history, assets, social and business networks, knowledge of Australian regulations and familiarity with the market.

Professor Collins said refugees reported a higher proportion of income from their own businesses, and this income increased sharply after five years of residence: “The agency, resilience of refugees, their determination to make a good life in Australia for their families, stood out in the research.”

Several speakers agreed that migration had also become essential to alleviate urgent demographic needs. Migrants on average are younger than the host countries’ population, while more than half of all countries in the world have fertility rates below population replacement levels. The ageing of global populations will result in a doubling in the number of people over 60, from 962 million to more than 2 billion by 2050. “Migration will help cope with this transition and easing the burden on care and social security systems,” Professor Goldin said.

If migration brings prosperity, innovation and much-needed demographic renewal, it is difficult to explain the rise of anti-immigration sentiment spreading across the Western world. Speakers agreed that the emergence of nationalist, radical right-wing parties in Europe with strong anti-immigration platforms attract voters by promoting the belief that resources – particularly jobs – are limited, and that migrants and refugees are a drain on the welfare state and a threat to national identity.

UTS Professor Andrew Jakubowicz blames the internet for the spread of this thinking, because it has become the primary terrain of ideological contestation. “The internet is an out of control space,” he said. “There are no global constraints and few international

initiatives that are able to combat or constrain the spreading of racism and xenophobia.”

Researcher Franck Düvell from Oxford University also blames the growing social and economic inequality and slow economic growth in Europe, as people become fearful of the future. He noted that the level of inequality in Europe is now at levels last seen in the 1920s and 1930s, which brought about an era of nationalism and populist leaders. This, combined with the changes in elite party politics and the way nationalism has become more central to political party competition, makes it difficult to eradicate these trends.

The conference addressed appropriate governmental responses to such complex and multifaceted issues, with speakers urging governments to exercise good leadership through policy and the creation of a narrative that is positive, instead of adopting restrictive policies and laws. It was agreed that enforcing policies such as detention is not conducive to positive outcomes, simply because policies that repress migration have not only not succeeded, but also continue to cause great suffering.

“Deterrence and detention have more of a political value than a policy value,” said Paul Power, CEO of the Refugee Council of Australia. “They generate political capital for politicians and governments, because putting measures in place that are harmful, tough and punitive generate a lot of appeal. This has caused Brexit and changes in governments in European governments.”

There was a unanimous consensus among speakers that addressing the root causes of political conflicts that lead to war and displacement should be the focus of all governments. “Over two-thirds of the 25.4 million refugees come from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Somalia and Myanmar,” Mr Power said. “Addressing the root causes of those conflicts is where the focus needs to be. Regional solutions, rather than a global one, are what is needed. We should think about what can be done to build peace in Myanmar, for instance. We should also include the voices of displaced people in our national debates.”

Paris Aristotle, CEO of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, said increasing funding for aid, development and education was also crucial: “Educating people all over the world has the potential for those countries to be far more productive, stable and democratic. One of the things our government could do is to triple Australia’s aid funding.”

While the aid budget has decreased over the past few years, so has the number of resettlement places achieved by the UNHCR, dropping by 54 percent between 2016 and 2017. “This has a negative impact



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on the wellbeing of refugees,” said UNSW researcher Dr Belinda Biddle. Of the 25.4 million of refugees displaced worldwide, only 1 percent is permanently resettled. “The vast majority of refugees are living in sustained displacement and uncertainty about their future,” Dr Biddle said. “This has long-term impact on prolonged insecurity for their mental health, adaptation and settlement outcomes.”

Lately, Syrian refugees have been a very visible by-product of regional power struggles. On the other side of the world, however, mass displacement is changing societies. Professor Brenda Yeoh of the National University of Singapore spoke of the “permanent transience” of Asian irregular labour, where migrants are allowed in for work but not to stay – a type of migration that breaks the family unit when parents leave children and the elderly behind, and where professionals are lost to jobs in the West, leaving those countries without the skills and expertise they need.

“Migrant workers are treated as disposable labour governed through revolving door policies, rather than socio-political subjects with rights to integration,”



Professor Yeoh said. In 2017, 110 million of the world's estimated 258 million international migrants originated from Asia, while 80 million international migrants also live in Asia. So Asia produces the largest share of international migrants on the move and the place of sojourn for the largest share of migrants.

The need for a global governance of migration was first brought up by then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2004, when he was charged with bringing the issue of migration to the forefront of the global agenda: Since the 1990s, migration had been called the missing regime. While the World Trade Organisation regulates the movement of goods and trade, no organisation regulates the movement of people.

Fortunately, new instruments called the Global Compact for Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe Orderly and Regular Migration have now been adopted by 120 countries. They form an intergovernmental framework under the auspices of the UN to manage migration at the local, national, regional and global levels and it is aimed at reducing the risks and protecting the basic human rights of migrants and refugees.

They are based on the principle that migration should be well-managed and safe, not irregular and dangerous, and that national policies will have a greater chance of success with international co-operation. No distinction is made between illegal, legal and economic migrants or refugees, but they do distinguish between regular and irregular migrants. The Compact also commits signatories to preventing irregular migration, but does not mention non-refoulement.

The Global Compact was described by most speakers at the conference as a much-needed progressive framework. There are 23 objectives listed, such as collecting data to develop evidence-based migration policy, ensuring all migrants have proof of identity, enhancing the availability and flexibility of regular migration, encouraging co-operation for tracking missing migrants and saving lives, and ensuring migrants can

access basic services as well as full inclusiveness for migrants to promote social cohesion.

The Global Compact is gender-responsive, with a focus on safeguarding children's rights, a commitment to ending child detention, protecting migrants in vulnerable situations and promoting workers' rights. It also covers the needs of refugees fleeing the effects of climate change and the natural disasters that will continue to create displacement and mass movements. This is a significant step, as currently international law does not grant such people the right to enter and remain in another country.

The Compact is non-binding and is described as "a set of political commitments that carry moral rather than legal authority". As UN General Assembly President, María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés said: "No state, no matter how powerful, can solve by its own means the challenges of international migration."

The adoption of the Global Compact last December in Marrakesh was hailed as a victory, defying the fear-mongering tactics of extreme right movements in the US, Europe and other parts of the world.

It will be interesting to see to what extent it will be implemented by the states. The UN has committed to helping to build mechanisms for states to contribute technical, financial and human resources and the UN Network on Migration will assist states in the implementation process. The US and Australia are not signatories to the Global Compact, although some 120

nations are. "The Global Compact will be as good as its implementation," said Carolina Gottardo, of the Jesuit Refugee Service in Australia. "Then we will be able to see the real effects on the ground." So in other words, the real work to right the wrongs starts now.

By the end of the conference it became clear that in the era of globalisation, criminalising migration and closing our borders means not only keeping out those we need to protect, but also as Professor Goldin said: "We keep out not only the brains that will help us build a better future, but also we close ourselves off from the ideas and understanding that we require to manage in an increasingly interdependent and complex world." R

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