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**MISREADING MOBILITY?: BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS AND BLINDNESS IN UN MIGRATION  
REPORTS**

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***International Migration Report 2015: Highlights*. New York: UNDESA, 2016.**  
**UNHCR *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2016.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The past year's events acutely illustrate the power of human migration. Movements across and within borders can reshape lives and families. The popular and political responses they engender can also catalyse fundamental political reorderings (see Bremner 2015; Kanter, 2015). Few will deny such power in countries bordering Syria, Iraq and Somalia that face millions of new arrivals who are actively, if unwittingly, reshaping their populations (see Aziz 2016; Yarnell, 2016). Yet across all world regions, people's movements are at the centre of political debate and policy making in ways previously unseen: the Brexit vote; challenges to Angela Merkel's tenure; promises to build 'an impenetrable and beautiful' wall between the United States and Mexico (ITV, 2016a); riots in Singapore; and South Africa's *de facto* withdrawal from its obligations under the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention (Smith, 2016). All reflect reassertions of exclusive nationalism as bulwark against migration's perceived cultural, economic and physical threats. Simultaneous mobilizations for immigrant inclusions and rights reveal hardening battle lines over the future of sovereignty and society (Edwards, 2015; ITV, 2016b).

Two major annual reports from the United Nations could not come at a more propitious time. The first, by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, is intended to provide 'the international community with timely and accessible population data and analysis of population trends and development outcomes for all countries and areas of the world' (UNDESA, 2016). UNDESA's *International Migration Report 2015: Highlights* focuses broadly on movement across international borders irrespective of the motivations or causes of that movement. The second is by the United Nation's Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and focuses on sub-

categories of migrants, namely people displaced by conflict, persecution and natural disasters. The data included in UNHCR's *Global Trends* speaks to some of the most contentious political issues of the past two years.

It is difficult to overstate the reports' significance in light of international migration's explosive valence today. They function as important foundations of fact, on the basis of which a range of actors at the global, national and local levels can and do develop policy and take action. They also serve as vital benchmarks against which these actors and the broader policy world can calibrate understandings of international migration. Although facts and critical consideration cannot alone produce sound or sensible policy on issues so emotionally charged, they can act as bulwarks against myths and cynical mobilizations. They can ease fears and redirect attention to people, places and processes otherwise ignored or misunderstood. They may also reveal migration and displacement's true impacts on the economic, physical and cultural security of migrants, hosts and sending communities.

While welcome and laudable, these reports have serious shortcomings. Some of these are technical or structural. Collecting and aggregating complex and irregularly collected data is a big ask under the best of circumstances. The necessary reliance on member states to produce the data only heightens the challenge. That the same states dictate the agencies' mandate makes things no easier. Yet even within these constraints, these agencies make choices about what to emphasize or omit in their reports. These are conscious, often tactical choices that risk dangerous distortions. The following pages offer a critical review of these two documents that identifies a number of these.

Although we highlight certain figures and findings, our aim is neither to summarize nor engage in demographic analysis. There are others better situated to those tasks. Rather, we qualitatively interrogate the reports' strengths and weaknesses and the potential implications of both in shaping popular and policy responses to human mobility. Our approach is primarily socio-legal and works from a social constructivist position in which political actions, decisions and 'objectivity' flow from cognitive schema shaped in part by the kind of numbers and analysis these reports include. That the people, places and processes described are often beyond the global media and scholarly gaze because they are remote, informal or politically marginal only enhances such reports' potential impact.

Our commentary is structured around two broad points, each discussed more completely in the remaining pages:

- *Categorization and Aggregation:* Unsurprisingly, the two reports organize and characterize people's movements in language shaped by bureaucrat and legal logics. In many instances this leads to over aggregation of people and processes in ways that shroud as much as reveal. This is particularly the case with the UNDESA report which does little to move beyond age and gender. In many ways this also characterizes the UNHCR report, although here the agency disaggregates in ways that raise questions: a parsing of people based solely on legal status that may say little about their vulnerabilities, traits or experiences. Both reports largely overlook migrations that shape and directly impact the people they do discuss. These include, *inter alia*, domestic mobility of various kinds including urbanization and oscillating migration as well as movements linked to climate change and shifting economic opportunities. In ethnically and politically fragmented post-colonial states, domestic moves may be just as significant if not more so than relocating beyond borders. Indeed, this is part of the justification for the UNHCR's emphasis on internally displaced persons.

The statistical organization of the world into clearly bound nation states and readily categorized people — each attached to a single causal factor behind their movement — both reveals and obfuscates. It exposes a bureaucratic mind-set that, as indicated, observes and labels in particular ways. Moreover, it illuminates the agencies' respective efforts to 'own' categories of people and processes. This is particularly the case as the UNHCR has expanded its mandate from 'Convention Refugees' (those qualifying under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention) to innumerable other categories of 'refugee-like' populations. More importantly, the reports' bureaucratized migrant-centrism hides important aspects of the populations not revealed by their migrant classifications: their motivations, needs, potential impacts — to say nothing of their politics and aspirations. By flattening the people and processes being discussed, the reports present mono-causal and often deeply depoliticized and asocial explanations for movement.

- *Geographic Scale, Scope and Politics.* Our concern here is two-fold. By ignoring domestic mobility, the UNDESA report presents a geographically skewed image of movements and

their implications. While OECD countries may receive the greatest number of international migrants, as the report indicates, they are unlikely to be the states most affected by human mobility and migration. Including domestic migration and displacement — which accounts for the majority of the world's movements — shifts the focus elsewhere. The reports similarly ignore those unable to move due to poverty, disability, social obligations or sedenterarization policies and persecution (see Lubkemann, 2008a; 2008b).

Beyond this, while the reports note that the majority of refugees are in 'the global South', the UNHCR locates the most pressing refugee crises elsewhere. For example, despite the dire conditions facing refugees in Syria's neighbouring countries, the UNHCR report spotlights the European dimensions of the Syrian refugee crisis.

The analytical question of borders raises a second concern. Reflecting the UN's state-based composition, the report reproduces what might be called 'methodological nationalism' and the 'national order of things' (Wimmer and Schiller, 2003; also Malkki 1992). Expectedly given their state-based composition, both agencies have issued reports that naturalize nation states as territorial containers somehow punctured or disrupted by movements across its boundaries. This is a long-standing critique (see Agnew, 1999; Paasi, 2009; Reid-Henry 2010) that has done little to reshape the language of state-centred UN bodies. Such a lens means overlooking not only domestic mobility but also many translocal or transnational processes driven by (a) migrants themselves and (b) transnational actors including strategies driven by powerful countries that are imbricated and implicated in the violence, economic precarity and environmental risks behind many movements. The results are some pictures of mobility and responses to it which invisibilize global political and social agency.

The remainder of the report moves through three sections. The first introduces a number of numbers: largely headlines figures and facts intended to illustrate the more analytical points that follow. The second echoes and elaborates the critiques surfaced above. The review ends with reflections on these reports' utility and strengths. We conclude that they ultimately reinforce Eurocentrism and policy interventions that privilege the status quo over comprehensive approaches promoting the interests of refugees or migrants and the communities that send, receive and facilitate their moves.

## **CATEGORIZATION AND AGGREGATION**

These reports are fundamentally about statistics. However, the numbers presented do more than describe: they nominate central policy concerns; motivate actions from governments and civil society; and justify resource expenditure based on their findings. They also reflect, if indirectly, the internal financial and political goals, and structures of the authoring agencies. They also contain perennial tensions in migration accounts, exemplified most generally by the different agencies' stance on the degree to which migration is an exception, crisis or an increasingly inherent — and potentially empowering — part of contemporary human society.

UNDESA firmly demonstrates that international migration is ever more central to contemporary socio-economic and political life. It also aims to allay crisis fears by speaking of the normalcy and global prevalence of cross-border migration. While reporting that the absolute number of international migrants has consistently risen worldwide (173 million in 2000; 191 million in 2005; 222 million in 2010; and 244 million in 2015 (p. 5)), the rate of increase has not. So while the numbers have risen significantly in absolute terms, the growth rate in international migration is not dramatically higher than general population growth rates (p. 21). As in years past, the vast majority of people stay within their countries of nationality. This will remain the norm in the decades to come. That said, the movements of people, 'contributes significantly to population growth in many parts of the world, and reverses negative growth in some countries or areas' (p. 21). If you are in Zimbabwe, Syria or Venezuela, out-migration matters in a big way. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey face almost unprecedented numbers of refugees crossing into their territories. But these are exceptions. Faced with these trends, UNDESA's messages are deliberately measured: migration matters; migration deserves global attention, and migration is largely manageable. Crisis results not from people moving from ignoring those who do, trying to regulate them in ways that belie their needs, motivations and potential impacts.

On the other hand, UNHCR's data and visual representations trumpets crisis, presumably a calculated move to catalyse sorely needed international action and humanitarian and other funding. In 2015 there were 65.3 million people displaced worldwide, which is 12.4 million more than the

year before. This figure includes Palestinian refugees and other groups whose status as refugees and asylum seekers has persisted for long periods. Of these 65.3 million, 21.3 million were refugees and another 40.8 million were internally displaced. To top it off, there were 3.2 million asylum seekers, or individuals whose claims to refugee status were pending determination. In 2015, 24 people were displaced from their homes per minute. This compares to 30 per minute in 2014 and 6 per minute in 2005. Given the levels of vulnerability and displacement, calls to action are warranted but the cry's tone is problematic.

Although these are staggering figures, it is important to recognize that variations globally may be as much a result of data collection as empirics. As methods of estimating populations have improved, the number of people counted has climbed. Yet another reason cautioning against treating these figures as firm data points — acknowledged even by UNHCR (Crisp, 1999) — is the incentives that domestic and international actors have to inflate or manipulate refugee numbers for political purposes. The UNHCR has reason to inflate numbers to elicit humanitarian aid; politicians often exaggerate figures to mobilize against the invading other. Notwithstanding these caveats, UNHCR conveys an unambiguous message: displacement demands immediate action to protect the millions forced to move.

## **GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE AND SCALE**

The statistics within the two reports present a remarkably different image of migration in terms of geographic scope and distribution. If UNDESA reflects a vision of the developing world slowly tipping its population towards the somewhat unreceptive yet wealthy North, UNHCR's statistics clearly illustrate that displacement is, at least in numerical terms, largely a concern of 'Southern' cities, countries and communities.

According to UNHCR, the 'developing world' hosts 86 per cent of the world's refugees compared with 70 per cent 20 years ago (p. 18). The least developed countries (again using United Nations categorizations) provide asylum to 26 per cent of the global total. Sub-Saharan African continues to host the largest number of refugees with 4.4 million. The Asia-Pacific region had 3.8 million (a slight decline from the previous year) while the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) hosted 2.7 million. Within the Middle East the proportion of certain national populations that comprise refugees is notably high: 18.3 per cent of Lebanon's population is now refugees; and 8.7 per cent of Jordan's. The Americas (North, South and Central) hosted only 746,800 (p.14). By the end of 2015, the 30 countries with the largest numbers of refugees per GDP (PPP) per capita were all in developing regions with the exception of Russia which squeaked in at 30<sup>th</sup> place (p.18). The Democratic Republic of Congo, a country at war with itself and its neighbours since the mid-1990s, tops the table. Ethiopia and Pakistan are next. Given these displacement numbers, the UNHCR offers a dissonant message: while the refugee statistics point to sobering challenges in the South, the report focus attention on Northern concerns, a point elaborated below.

UNDESA's statistics, on the other hand, at least partially justify centring analysis of Northerly migration by noting the preponderance of international migrants within OECD countries. In their words, '[while] the majority of international migrants worldwide live in high-income countries, most migrants [as opposed to refugees] originate from middle-income countries' (p. 14). If nothing else, this report belies claims of 'job-stealing (and potentially murderous) hordes' flooding wealthy countries from distant lands, conjured regularly by xenophobic politicians and fear mongers. Moreover, 'in many parts of the globe, migration occurs primarily between countries that are located within the same major area of the world' (p. 16). This form of regionally contained migration

appears to be on the rise (pp. 16–7) with (once again), Asia at the centre of growth. All the same, relatively wealthy countries are at the centre of many international migration systems.

Significantly, UNDESA's statistical findings must themselves be considered an artefact of the geographic scale privileged in the data collected and assessed by UN member states. UNDESA's report largely excludes domestic migration, and even among the different forms of international migration it privileges typically more expensive forms which allow people to move from South to North. Since many migrants in the global South cannot afford such moves, their mobility is either regional or domestic. Even when crossing borders within regions where data collection is poor, they remain invisible. This selection bias means we are presented with a picture of wealthier migrants moving into wealthier countries. This is a data gap UNDESA should acknowledge but does not.

That UNDESA's report largely excludes domestic migration not only sustains a myopic focus on the kinds of international migration facing wealthy countries, but also obscures the sub-national migration and other processes shaping responses to international migrants. As an increasing body of work demonstrates, we live in a world in which the most important responses to international migrants are not from states per se but are shaped in the specific neighbourhoods or zones where migrants reside (see, among others, Landau, 2014; Saunders, 2011; Vertovec, 2007). In many cases, these sites are destinations for significant numbers of domestic migrants and marginalized citizens. While there are undoubtedly high levels of vulnerability among displaced populations, there are often equally high levels of vulnerability among host populations and other migrant populations (Landau and Duponchel, 2011; Myroniuk and Vearey, 2014). Analytically distancing international migrants from these sub-national dynamics significantly limits the ability to develop effective, ethical and politically palatable policy responses.

The scalar focus of UNDESA and UNHCR cannot be divorced from the international law at the foundation of the global regime to which both belong. States are the traditional subjects of the international legal system anchored in the United Nations framework, and this state-centricity privileges national action, national borders and national interests. The effects of this are perhaps most vivid in UNHCR's report: it acknowledges that the number of internally displaced persons is double that of refugees, but nonetheless devotes far more analytical and policy attention to the latter. International law, which while establishing international legal obligations for states to protect

refugees, establishes no analogous obligations for IDPs. UNHCR can make a legal case for international attention to the plight of refugees in a way it cannot for IDPs.

From the perspective of geographic scope and scale, and of data aggregation and categorization, certain choices reflected in these reports are increasingly at odds with the kind reterritorialization of socio-political and economic processes. As such, they do little to elucidate the nature of migration or migrants but do hide many things. These include the growth of diasporic communities; the ‘multiple elsewhere’ (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004; also Levitt, 2001) that drive refugee and migrant imaginations, and other socio-economic and political processes that drive movements and shape responses to them.

That neither report consistently disaggregates data by more than age and sex is similarly blinding. Although important, there is a need to move beyond these characteristics which may not be the most salient determinants of the migration experience. Race, religion, ethnicity and class, for example, are just as important for making sense of migration and the socio-political processes associated with it. Such data are not typically collected and shared by states — and hence do not appear in the report — but their problematic absence is nonetheless worth noting.

## **POLITICS AND GEOPOLITICS**

A striking feature of both reports is the depoliticized pictures they paint, and the geopolitics they nonetheless reflect and advance. If the disparate treatment of North and South in the UNDESA report rests in controvertible decisions about what scale of migration warrants global attention, the same cannot be said of UNHCR’s *Global Trends*. The latter more vividly reflects the geopolitics that fundamentally structure global responses to displacement and that implicitly shape the construction of crisis in that report. Consider that despite the overwhelming density of Syrian Refugees within Syria’s vicinity, UNHCR’s *Global Trends* accords special treatment (beginning on p. 32) to what it terms the ‘European Refugee Crisis 2015’. There is no question that the situation in Europe is serious. In 2015 alone the European Union had 1,015,078 arrivals by sea (asylum seekers and others), compared to only about 220,000 the year before (there were only about 75,000 in the first half of 2014 (UNHCR, 2005: 6). Another 3,771 people were reported dead or missing in the waters

separating Europe from Asia and Africa. However, the decision to devote a special section to the European dimensions of a refugee crisis that is to a great extent regionally contained in the Middle East<sup>1</sup> and to spotlight *no* other regional refugee crisis speaks volumes as to the people and places that the global system — or at least UNHCR’s corner of it — prioritizes.

As presented, the report naturalizes the sense of panic and concern helping to reshape not only Europe’s response to migrants, but to the idea of Europe generally. Yet the crisis in Europe arguably has more to do with regional and national political projects, priorities and structures than any objective capacity to extend humane treatment to refugee and migrant arrivals. After all, Brexit was fundamentally about domestic interests politically mobilizing perceptions of uncontrolled immigration. The UNHCR report abets such fears by representing refugees arriving in Europe largely as wards in need of protection and assistance, and rarely as agents capable of self-sustenance. This belies the fact that for many European countries facing declining populations, admitting and regularizing refugees’ stay can provide much needed labour while meeting humanitarian obligations (Achiame, 2017). The irony is that the relatively skilled and semi-skilled refugees and migrants from countries such as Syria and Iraq are among the most vilified in national and regional discourses of exclusion in Europe. As the previous paragraph indicates, far poorer countries — DRC, Lebanon, Ethiopia — have far higher percentages of refugees per capita and are facing potentially destabilizing crises as a result. Yet the UNHCR looks past them.

If there is a region that can afford and accommodate refugees, Europe is it. While it may cost materially and politically in the short term, Europe’s refugee crisis is not rooted in legitimate concerns regarding the long-term economic impact of refugees and other displaced. Missing from UNHCR’s report, perhaps inevitably, is the rise and gradual mainstreaming of far-right political parties and how this and other European socio-political dynamics are fuelling exclusion and bolstered the crisis framing of Europe’s refugee situation. Indeed, together with the Brexit vote, the refugee crisis in Europe is best understood not as a short-term humanitarian emergency but in terms of what it is doing to the nature of Europe, Europe’s relations with the world (particularly Turkey and North Africa), and Europe’s voice — already compromised — on behalf of humane global humanitarianism.

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<sup>1</sup> See Achiame (2015a); Arar et al. (2016); Caryl (2016).

The elevation of European concerns, notwithstanding the material and political circumstances facing Southern countries accompanies a broader if different political erasure. Through a combination of its European focus and methodological nationalism, the report text implicitly and sometimes explicitly locates the source of displacement and migration almost exclusively within source countries. Without denying the sometimes disastrous policy decisions, incompetence and authoritarianism in such sites, we ought not to overlook the transnational impacts of international and foreign militaries and foreign policy. Internationalized and proxy conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Libya and Somalia, for example — all countries from which refugees and others are fleeing — involve many of the same countries in the North that remain reluctant to admit those displaced by these conflicts (Achiume, 2017; Bird, 2011; Krug, 2016).

This leads to a more general point: both the UNHCR and UNDESA report — and many others like them — are remarkably devoid of politics. One could read them in their entirety without an understanding that the crises are largely political and that Europe, the US and Russia are not only receiving or rejecting migrants, but are the authors and abettors of policies that sustain poverty and promote displacement. European conditions should be part of these reports, but the decontextualized, depoliticized emphasis on Europe reinforces the primacy of European migration concerns — the most extreme of which are firmly rooted in illiberal ideology — over those of other regions whose hosting capacity concerns have material bases. It also aids the normalization of deeply problematic innovations such as the migrant swap negotiated between EU and Turkey (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2016).

If politics and geopolitics are missing from UNHCR's report, so too is the role of law. Returning once more to *Global Trends'* European refugee crisis coverage, there is no mention of inadequacies within the international and regional frameworks in place to govern refugee flows. Yet the governing legal and policy regimes do little to ease the chaos and crisis in international displacement (Achiume, 2015b; Ramji-Nogales, 2017). Within the global refugee regime, it is relevant to note the absence of robust frameworks for ensuring that the largely Southern countries proximate to active conflicts can rely on the assistance of more geographically remote countries in the North. Deteriorating conditions for the displaced in Syria's neighbors, for example, are among the reasons people are embarking on deadly journeys to more distant countries (Banulescu-Bogdan and Fratzke, 2015).

Stronger frameworks demanding wealthy countries do more to support refugee hosting Southern states might mitigate the suffering the UNHCR report captures (Achiame, 2015b). Europe's own regional asylum policies similarly incentivize refugee repellent policies for both frontier and interior countries. These include its first safe country asylum policy permitting EU countries to send refugees back to the first safe country reached within the EU. This encourages countries to tighten their borders to keep refugees as far away as possible at the expense of countries at the European frontier including Greece and Italy.

The narrow point is that international law and policy should form part of understanding certain features of international migration and displacement. That said, what determines the experience of many migrants and refugees is not global regimes but domestic practices, policies and networks.

## **INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS AND BUREAUCRATIC TRAPPINGS**

The previous sections note the two reports' political, geopolitical, and legal silences. We also highlight institutional choices in the categorization and aggregation of data. To be fair, neither UNDESA nor the UNHCR present their reports as scholarly compendia. It is arguably neither agency's responsibility to critically engage with scholarship on the nature of rights, community or the meaning of belonging beyond the nation state.

The question is whether it is realistic to ask organizations like UNDESA and the UNHCR to contest institutionally embedded wisdom and categories. If anything, their mandates are to do precisely what they have done: to report and analyse state-generated figures in ways that reinforce the geo-political status quo. Beyond funding, institutional funding matters in maintaining this implicit conservatism. UNHCR relies on voluntary donations, most of which come from a remarkably small proportion of the world's states, largely from the global North. The European humanitarian body, ECHO, and the United States Population, Refugee, and Migration Bureau are its two largest donors. Given this funding structure, it is unsurprising that its report omits the politics and geopolitics that might expose biases built into international regimes governing migration (Loescher, 2001). Moreover, transgressing categories risks undermining the division of labour within the United Nation system which has produced and maintains the language and categories both reports employ. Indeed, such organizations may have few reasons to challenge the paradigms in which they work. Given their

training and institutional incentives — funding perhaps foremost among them — it may be that those within such organizations may struggle to conceive of appropriate alternatives (DiMaggio et al., 1991: 11). The prevalence of lawyers and social workers within UNHCR reinforces particular narratives of both rights and vulnerability while limiting engagement with politics and the implications of statistics. Rather than draw on ‘radical’ analyses to question the principles underlying policy (or the ways they make decisions), these agencies are far more likely to ‘muddle through’; to make minor adjustments in the face of failed policy in ways that leave structures and imperatives intact (see Argyris, 1982; Feldman and March, 1981; Haas, 1990).

## **CONCLUSIONS: DIRECTIONS IN DATA COLLECTION AND DISSEMINATION**

The concerns raised and developed in the remaining pages have scholarly and policy dimensions. Although demographers and other migration scholars reading these reports are likely to treat them with scepticism tempered by awareness of their purpose and place, these reports have far broader and more influential audiences.. Both UNDESA and UNHCR are charged with providing the foundation for policy making and interventions undertaken by themselves, by their UN siblings, by their implementing partners and (presumably) by regional bodies, states and non-state actors. The question is, do these reports succeed in doing so? Our answer is, in part.

UNDESA provides a global overview, but at a level too aggregated to provide for much in the way of concrete intervention. Perhaps the reports — particularly that of the UNHCR — are most successful in reinforcing the organizations’ long standing messages in ways that, despite talk of crisis, do little to discomfit bureaucrats and politicians alike. In doing so, the reports reinforce a colonial/imperial geography where the Greenwich meridian — Britain and its European cousins — is the world’s political centre. Whether it is migration towards the OECD or refugees at the gate, the emphasis shifts attention away from where most people and most migrants live.

Reports of these kinds could do more to recognize the ways in which they are reinforcing the kind of cognitive biases and frameworks that reinforce anti-migrant attitudes and make it difficult to address human mobility in dispassionate ways. The UNDESA report shies away from crisis helping to normalize responses to migration, albeit while overlooking the issues facing poorer countries in

managing domestic and international migration or displacement. UNDESA's almost exclusive focus on those who move internationally also subtly separates migrants from the geo-economics and politics that shapes human mobility (see Castles et al., 2013). The UNHCR report also reinforces a perception of migration, but one which links displacement with acute crisis. This is problematic in that it fails to recognize that in a world of Syrias and Somalias, of Afghanistans and Iraqs, being displaced is anything but temporary and displacement is in many ways 'the new normal'. Rather than encouraging crisis-driven policy responses, the UNHCR and its allied agencies would ideally be working to build long-term systems to regulate and improve resilience rather than offering an image that can so easily encourage exclusionary and fear-filled responses.

While we should celebrate the assemblage of data presented here and continually call for improvements in its collection and collation, this is not enough. Missing from both these reports is a politics of numbers: the reports premised on a kind of enlightenment naivety about the relationship between evidence and action. Policy makers and operational agencies often justifiably complain that the lack of sound information on the populations they are trying to assist compromises their decisions. The scarcity of data is problematic, but even when data are available, values and political priorities are often equal determinants of policy outcomes. Value systems are, after all, the keys to present problems that need to be 'solved' and that provide many of the criteria for evaluating possible solutions. The greater the symbolic currency at stake, the more likely such factors will determine an outcome although such criteria may be hidden by *post hoc* justifications couched solely in technical terms. Given the political and cultural sensitivities around migrants, the potential for politics to trump numbers is always high. This is not an irrational political response, but it may result in outcomes with priorities different from those held by international agencies and donors.

Despite the former UN secretary general's call for a global campaign against xenophobia (Wulfhurst 2016), few expect United Nations agencies to shift global political attitudes towards migration and displacement. However, reinforcing forms of methodological nationalism and invisibilizing places and processes may well make things worse for migrants. If nothing else, the approach shaping these two reports inadvertently heightens the sense of threat international migration poses while hiding the economics and politics behind movements and responses to them.

Even as the United Nations looks to ‘solve’ the migration crisis, these reports help disguise many of the causes of conflict and reinforce the national basis of political organization. Under such circumstances, exclusionary social responses to newcomers claiming space and resources may degrade established legal protections as people almost ‘code’ and label those from outside their communities/countries as threats to prosperity, security or sovereignty.

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