On the 28 and 29 of March 2017 an array of international delegates attended our conference in London. Over the course of the two days we heard about migration research from a wide-variety of settings, which highlighted the rich diversity of migrant experience and research methods from around the globe. Formal conference papers were interspersed with artistic and multi-media inputs that helped elaborate the key themes under discussion. With migration policy as the conference’s main concern, this summary describes some of the main areas arising from presentations and their policy implications.

**Highlights**

We were delighted to be joined by keynote speakers Julia O’Connell Davidson and Michael Clemens’ who helped shape later discussions at the conference.

Julia’s speech focused on the need to reframe mobility in ways which go beyond binaries. She explained how migration discourse and policy is shaped by the idea that there are certain kinds of people for whom migration is acceptable and unremarkable and others who should stay where they are – drawing on the notion of the ‘incarcerated native’. The tenacity of this binary is surprising given that citizens of modern democracy are considered free, equal, and consenting parties to a social contract that provides them with liberty and this includes the property of their labour, which they can contract out to the market. Yet the movement of people from the global south to the north has been framed as a problem where images of trafficking and modern slavery abound and have gained policy attention. This is underpinned by a conceptual binary, that of smuggling versus trafficking, which is coded in law, and reinforces the idea that migration is either consensual or forced. This reduces the human being to nothing but a body with no agency, will, or voice; the opposite of the liberal subject.
Michael talked of the need to build new kinds of migration policy and organised his speech around three possible approaches: stopping the movement of people; developing countries of origin so that people no longer wish to migrate; and designing new forms of global movement.

The prevention of movement is a popular policy response with the militarisation of the Mediterranean, the creation of a fence around Hungary, and the proposal to build a wall across North America. Many of these efforts make it more difficult and dangerous for people to migrate, but do not actually deter migrants: research demonstrates that those trying to move from Niger to Europe would be willing to accept a 25% risk of death. Currently the possibility of death while crossing the Mediterranean is 1%. This suggests that people will only be stopped if the risk of dying on the way was massively higher.

In terms of economic development, Michael demonstrated that as countries move from low- to middle-income the number of people moving triples rather than reduces. The premise that development slows the pace of migration is unfounded. People have more money to pay smugglers, they have an education and new technologies that expand their horizons. Michael noted that there will be 800 million more working-age African people by 2050 due to the massive success in reducing childhood morbidity across the continent. Many of them will want to move and if our focus is blocking them we are not having a serious discussion. Furthermore, migrants themselves create transformation in their countries of origin through direct foreign investment, the transfer of new technologies, the creation of new norms and institutions, and the encouragement of capital investment, and trade networks. This creates a virtuous circle, which is why migration and development lock together.

Michael argued migration is (the new) normal. To travel takes bravery and energy, and in response to these energies, what we must do is to innovate new institutions which do not yet exist in order to accommodate new forms of global movement. Among the policy and institutional changes that can harness the positive elements of migration are schemes that facilitate international job matching so that migrants can find suitable occupations abroad, such as Talent Beyond Boundaries. Global skills partnerships can support initiatives to build the skills needed for the destination country in the countries of origin. Michael emphasised the need for shared institutions to turn forced migrants into a global resource.
sector were less likely to move than those who did not. International migration was often a strategy used when households didn’t have any other form of support.iv

Gender norms and relations played a part in people’s reasons for leaving home. A paper described how in Bangladesh - where migration has traditionally been considered a male preserve - more women are on the move since 2003 when legal restrictions were relaxed. In 2016, women constituted 16% of all migrants and the government is promoting female migration as part of their development policy by creating Memorandums of Understanding with other countries, primarily for domestic work. Female migration costs between 2-8% of men’s migration. Poor families can’t afford to send their men, but they can afford to send their women. Another paper argued that in Bangladesh young women migrated to take responsibility for their parents and siblings – countering the stereotype of the male breadwinner.v For adolescent girls moving from rural Ethiopia to Addis Ababa limitations on mobility were linked with fears about adolescent girls’ sexuality (that they would become sexually active outside societally sanctioned relationships). Pressure to marry was a key reason to leave home.vi

Precarious journeys
The non-linearity of migrant journeys was a recurring theme in the conference. This problematises the idea that policy can be developed which intervenes at a single point of the trip – by building a wall or providing information – and as a result thwart migrants’ deeply held desire for change. One speaker described this as fragmented journeys – whereby people live their lives in certain places, and their notion of whether they can survive in a place changes given changing contexts and

Themes
Leaving home
A variety of sessions explored the reasons that migrants choose to travel. A study of the decision-making process of migrants to the EU from Syria, Eritrea and Senegal found that decisions were made based on perceptions of a viable future. Almost half of the respondents were influenced by employment or education policies in the countries where they wanted to go. Access to work, schooling and decent living conditions were important.vi Another presentation on nomadic pastoralists from Eastern Sudan who moved to urban areas demonstrated that migration was a strategy used to support the education of their children.vii

The trajectories and destinations of migrants’ change depending on experiences and circumstances along the way – who they meet and what new information they receive. This sometimes appears counter-intuitive to outsiders. One paper described how among Nepali migrants who had reported conditions of forced labour in recruitment - with limits on freedom of movement and communication - more than 60% appeared to accept these same conditions when migrating again.

Migration can be shaped by environmental changes and crises – and can help those who are affected to avoid falling into devastating poverty. This is particularly true of people whose livelihoods are dependent on their land. However, the relationship between migration and environmental factors is contingent upon a range of other migration drivers, as well as the characteristics of (would be) migrants. One study of the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua showed that exposure to the hurricane increased the probability of moving only for the sub-sample of agricultural households. Households who had another source of income from the formal
Whilst the relationships between migrants and brokers are subject to power dynamics - which very often disadvantage the would-be migrant - they are not black and white. In one paper from the ASEAN Region there was no clear association between the conditions of regular migration (using a regular channel, having a written contract or obtaining legal documents) and better outcomes, with large variations between countries. For example, a written contract was the critical factor for Myanmar migrants but contributed to worse outcomes for those from Viet Nam and Lao PDR.x

In Ghana, many women preferred informal brokers and sub-agents as they helped them with wage bargaining, facilitated job progression, and supported them in asserting agency with employers, and their families. This was particularly important for women who come straight from the village and may not be aware of payment systems. They also supported employers by shaping a docile workforce of the profile that suited them. In Singapore, the experiences of migrant domestic workers was likened to a game of ‘snakes and ladders’ where there are obstacles that you need to overcome, but there are also risks which you cannot predict. These snakes and ladders are not static. They are continuously shaped and produced by brokers to produce, reinforce and mitigate precarity. Agents could help to avoid the snakes, for example by making a day off mandatory so that staff do not later feel imprisoned and run away. However, they can also act as snakes, making life more difficult.xi These papers suggest that competent and ethical brokers can contribute to successful migration. Most policy guidelines advise against using informal intermediaries – but in the absence of alternatives this leaves a credibility gap.

It is clear from the research that villainising brokers as agents of exploitation will weaken policy decisions. A greater understanding of the multiple roles that brokers inhabit— as creditor, helper, protector, teacher, but also, sometimes simultaneously, as exploiter—is necessary to fine-tune policy outcomes. Brokers are critical in enabling, constraining, shaping, and finessing migration flows; in many cases, they offer the capital and resources necessary for would-be migrants who wish to improve their lives to do so. In cases of transnational migration, it is also important to recognise that prizing state sovereignty and border protectionism serves largely to perpetuate irregular and dangerous migration journeys. Policymakers must be willing to forge transnational agreements to improve cross-border recruitment practices. Additionally, a recognition that informal or unlicensed brokerage practices are not synonymous with exploitation will better position policymakers to work flexibly with the migration industry.
Remittances
Remittances can result in improvements in livelihoods, however the outcome of remittance sending is connected to home and destination context. In a presentation that looked at investment and agrarian transition in China and South Asia we heard that in China remittances are a relatively lower share of income compared to households in Nepal and India, and they are more often used for investment purposes. In the Nepalese and Indian context, households are often rural tenants in a semi-feudal system. This seems to result in high dependence on remittances as larger income share and use of remittances mostly for food consumption and debt servicing.

Other papers argued that formalizing the working conditions of migrant workers who are commonly excluded from statutory minimum wage requirements, such as domestic workers, fishers and agricultural workers, is a critical step to ensuring they benefit from their migration experiences.

From Ghana, we heard that initially better off households are more likely to gain from migration while poorer households lose out. Households who are able of make use of very close family contacts at the destination are more likely to gain from migration than the opposite.xii

Gender
A rich seam of discussion at the conference concerned gendered experiences and vulnerabilities within the migration process. A strong argument was made for not seeing all female migrants as victims and that the framing of female migration as inherently vulnerable is counterproductive. It means that the agency of girls and women is overlooked; that we don’t fully understand the reasons for their migration; and that as a result we do not address their individual needs. For example, research from Bangladesh demonstrated that female migrants were not acting in an information deficit. They understood the things that could go wrong and the challenges that would be faced.

Levels and types of women’s agency were also a focus of some presentations. Among women from Eastern Europe and the MENA region in Germany, agency was expressed in very individual ways, as a fluid concept that changed in scope and intensity at different stages of the migrant journey based also on social class, financial situation and religious identity. Refugee women exercised agency both within exiting patriarchal family and cultural structures. The rapidly changing situations they find themselves in when fleeing can open up opportunities to use their agency to ‘break out’ of these structures. Agency is exerted in the decisions to change jobs and occupations, migration destinations, or how best to live their lives.xiii Research on girl garment workers in Bangladesh cited poverty as the biggest push factor in migration. Most of the girls in this study were very young at the age of migration (around 12 years old). When asked why they moved, they stressed that helping their families was a motivation rather than satisfying individual desires. However, girls were not simply sent, they had a say in decision-making and claimed ownership of the decision with pride, demonstrating agency. Once in their destination they talked of personal growth - finding their way around the city geographically and through social relationships.xiv Some speakers on child migration talked of migration as being a pathway to autonomy during a time of psychological and physical transition. This suggests that migration has the potential to open up a larger spectrum of life trajectories, which should be harnessed for gender equity.

A presentation on Ethiopian and Eritrean girls (who had migrated to Sudan for the first time between 13 and 21 years of age) found that a mixture of push and pull factors influenced the choice to leave home. The Eritrean girls and women felt they wanted to leave because of the political situation but also for more personal reasons. For example, their families’ wish that they marry diaspora Men, pressuring them into marriages. They also wanted education and later marriage and to help their families to have a better life. Ethiopian girls and women wanted to leave because of poverty and the lack of jobs that matched their skills. However, some were also escaping violence from family members and husbands. Returning these girls to their place of origin without addressing the political, economic, social and cultural reasons why they left would not improve their situations.
Research on women moving through Mexico into the United States of America highlighted how invisibility – which enables undocumented migrants to be mobile - can also make women more vulnerable on their journeys, especially with respect to the risk of sexual assault. According to one estimate 80% of women and girls face rape while in transit through Mexico. They employed various survival strategies to try and mitigate risk: finding a male companion to travel with for the duration of the journey for protection; passing as a man, or masking their sexual attractiveness through altering their appearance; and using a humanitarian visa (a one-year temporary visa) which women can obtain from Mexico if they have experienced assault.

Education
Education is an issue that emerged as important within the conference. We heard of child migrants who struggle to access education after migrating for work – even when getting an education was one of their reasons for leaving home. One paper described how in Accra, a flexible school system allowed working children to continue their education. Once people have migrated, ensuring that they have access to educational opportunities and vocational training - at flexible times that suit their working arrangements – is key. For example, the Indonesian state has provided satellite campuses of Indonesia Open University in popular destination countries.

Another presentation described how in Lima, girl domestic workers enrolled in evening classes but had little time and energy to do their homework. They have a lack of free time; experience isolation and loneliness, and have one rest day per week during which they have to run personal errands. Evening classes allow working (migrant) youth to continue school education and vocational training, but school education is often substandard barring them from advancing. Young migrant women may find work in the formal sector, for example in call centres, but return to domestic work to keep their cost of living down in order to study.

Education for migrants in their destination settings is important. For example, a study from Indonesia demonstrated how access to business-related training at destination improved prospects for returnees in terms of setting up their own initiatives.

Education is also a concern for the children of migrants. The social value attached to different types of education and the jobs they lead to is key to understanding young men’s educational choices and employment preferences. The logic of educational and occupational choices may be very different for young women. Separate programming is needed to address their concerns. In Bangladesh, we heard that having a relative working overseas changes young people’s aspirations. Young women aspire to education and a good marriage, not to labour migration, even when their mother has been a migrant. Young men aspire to education and white-collar, government jobs, if this is not found in Bangladesh they turn to overseas migration.

Health
From a number of countries, a picture emerged where migrants continue to experience challenges in accessing care and health insurance. We heard that in Lebanon undocumented female domestic workers cannot access existing systems and instead fall back on informal support networks – such as NGOs. Whilst employers are legally required to provide health care insurance for their employees there are lots of exclusions in the system – to the point where women call it the ‘laughing insurance’ because all it gives you is a good laugh. Faced with a lack of formal health care women use informal providers, such as pharmacists, self-medicate with holy water and prayers, and use WhatsApp to check with the community about how to deal with minor illnesses. Other barriers to access include racism - as Ethiopian women are refused treatment – and depend on strangers with papers to help them register at hospitals to go through the system quickly.

We heard that in Singapore a study found that 24% of migrant female domestic workers had mental ill-health for reasons such as insufficient sleep, lack of private space, verbal and other abuse from their employers, and a reluctance and difficulties in seeking care. The paper argued that cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for Filipina female domestic workers through peer-based mental health programmes may form a useful first-line mode of treatment and a means to improve accessibility to mental health care. However there are challenges to scale up. It was argued that in the SADC region an increasingly restrictive response to immigration is fuelling already prevalent xenophobic and anti-foreigner sentiments amongst healthcare providers and policy makers. In South Africa, there have been calls to prevent the movement of people to prevent HIV, which are out of step with epidemiological evidence and the expansion of HIV treatment as a preventative measure. The presenter suggested that better mapping of HIV and migration was needed, that health policy should focus on the process of migration rather than individual migrants, and that there is a need to engage with the urban, intra-urban disparities, inequalities and inequities.
return to a home country could be influenced by a range of economic factors such as the strength of the home country currency. Family commitments and socio-cultural expectations can also pull people home.

Some presentations focused on returning home with aspirations unfulfilled – ‘bitter return’ or ‘failed migration’. From Zimbabwe, a paper described a ‘return to poverty’ – where life is expensive, purchasing power is lower, salaries are generally lower, and higher-skilled return migrants don’t necessarily earn more than higher-skilled locals. This type of return was prompted by: a lack of labour permits in the host country (due to poor planning or desperation); racist and xenophobic exclusion; exclusion by Zimbabwean compatriots based on education and class; and expectations not being met in the host country. Some university-educated migrants returned to avoid wasting their most productive years chasing elusive dreams. Upon return, there was a danger of alienation, failure to integrate, and loneliness.

A speaker from the UK problematised the notion of ‘voluntary return’ as it relates to trafficking, as often the method of departure may be ‘voluntary’ rather than the choice of whether or not to depart. Furthermore, different people interpret voluntary return differently. The paper described how there is a low take-up of return schemes. When offered choice between financial incentives and return to their country of origin, or a life without support in the UK, many trafficked people choose to remain in destitution in Britain. Street homelessness in the UK is seen as ‘better than’ street homelessness in their country of origin.

Overall there is need for health systems to become more migration aware – particularly where there are great disparities in access and quality within regions – and for donors to factor this into their aid allocations to support health as a human right. Whilst the Sustainable Development Goals pledge that all countries will achieve universal health coverage, migrants are a population that struggle to access services. Policy makers must ensure that health services are affordable, accessible, and appropriate for migrants. This may require cross-border collaboration and a separation of immigration control and social services.

**Return**

Discussions on migrant return focussed on the push and pull factors that influence decision-making. For example, we heard from presenters that the decision to
The session on migration crises highlighted how policies in the West have contributed to the movement of people. For example, Bangladeshi migrants who have been living in countries like Libya and Syria for decades have been forced to move by recent political challenges. This has placed their lives at risk, destroyed their workplaces, forced them to join militia groups, and left them vulnerable to extortion and subsequent loss of savings.

We also heard that migratory journeys are not linear and that people re-route their migration in response to personal aspirations and the external environment.

Moving forward: Future migration policy

“There is a gap between what research is telling us and the way migration is represented in policy. Often it is far from reality and not nuanced. Instead it is shaped by moral panics about poorer people’s movement and their hypervisibility. This is accompanied by the securitisation of borders and a narrative that frames them as villains or victims.”

Priya Deshingkar

The summary above offers some routes to better policy that we hope readers of this report will consider and apply in their work. Whilst conference participants pointed to the need to value and use data in decision making, they also highlight some challenges and weaknesses in the evidence to policy process which governments and donors should address. Many presenters touched upon popularism and how migration decisions are being swayed by public narratives and campaigns. Papers highlighted that the forces that induce policy change to ease migrant conditions are often framed as an economic ‘necessity’. Often these are underpinned by concerns about a country’s international reputation and simultaneous pressure from NGOs and civil society. They also outlined popular framings of migration – such as migration as trafficking, migration as an enabler for development, migration as development challenge, development as a driver of migration, migrants as a vulnerable population group, and displacement as a development challenge – none of which do justice to the complexity of the migration process and migrant experience.

We heard that most research on how policy is made is from North America or Europe and focuses on international and global nuances while ignoring the inner workings of policy-making particularly in post-colonial and low-income contexts. Policymaking doesn’t happen in separation from global discussions however the relationships between states and intergovernmental organisations are-bidirectional and shaped by moral authority (such as NGO lobbying, and human rights discourses) and expert authority (such as organisations like the IOM).

There is a need for early engagement and ongoing dialogue between policy makers and their counterparts in academia. However, relationships alone may be insufficient where policy makers have their favoured researchers and use evidence selectively ignoring evidence that does not fit with their political narrative, which was evidenced in a paper on anti-trafficking legislation in South Africa. In this paper, the race of the researcher appeared important, with white researchers holding less sway and being seen with greater suspicion. In the research uptake process, brokers, such as advocacy organisations play an important role and more work is needed to understand who has the skills and authority to bridge this researcher-policy maker gap.

Sometimes this selective uptake is very overt and leans towards the sensationalisation of migration. At other times this selective uptake can be reflective of mistrust between researchers and policy makers. There is a need to understand the extent to which policy is being used and what this suggests about current policies and politics. Furthermore, there needs to be more scrutiny of the ways in which bureaucracies enforce and enact laws and policies in order to understand their impact on the ground.
Further reading

i. You can view a video of Michael’s speech on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OC2BUEgxRD4&feature=youtu.be


vii. Heaven Crawley in her role as discussant.


