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Conclusions

Khalid Koser and Marie McAuliffe

The purpose of this volume—like the research program from which it emerges—has been to address a gap in evidence of, and knowledge about, irregular migration, in order to inform policymaking, specifically in Australia. This concluding chapter assesses the extent to which this purpose has been achieved, and highlights remaining evidence, research, and policy gaps.

Addressing a gap in evidence and knowledge

On the whole, research on irregular migration has tended to focus on specific case studies or themes, and usually from a particular disciplinary approach. In contrast, this volume has tried to present a global and multidimensional perspective on irregular migration. Specific case studies of Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, both significant countries of origin for maritime asylum seekers to Australia in recent years, combine with wider studies on the causes of irregular migration globally. A chapter on Indonesia provides a more systematic understanding of migrant decision-making in transit. Several chapters adopt a global and comparative perspective on issues such as trends in asylum seeking. The entire migration ‘cycle’ is covered, from the decision to leave, through experiences in transit and applying for asylum in destination countries, to return. The chapters combine qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, and are written by scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds including public health,

psychology, politics, geography, sociology and demography. The topics covered range from environmental drivers for migration, through media coverage of irregular migration, to unaccompanied minors.

Through this diversity, at the same time, a number of key unifying themes emerge. First, the chapters demonstrate how defining irregular migration is far from straightforward. The category covers a wider range of experiences than is often assumed. It includes both people who enter transit and destination countries with authorisation, and those who enter without authorisation. Asylum seekers, economic migrants, and transit migrants may all also be irregular migrants. Irregularity is not a fixed experience—regular migrants may become irregular, irregular migrants may be regularised. The contributions remind us that the concept includes people moving for different and sometimes mixed motivations, and with a wide diversity of profiles. There are often convergences in the manner that regular and irregular migrants move, whether arising from similar decision-making processes, to moving through similar networks and channels. A lack of data and research simply compounds such definitional challenges.

A second related theme is the multifaceted nature of irregular migration. As illustrated here, it involves different routes, modes of transportation, and geographies, even between the same origin and destination country. Motivations may vary between migrants, and even for the same migrant over time. Governments, international organisations, the private sector and non-state actors, some legal and others not, all have a stake in the causes and consequences of, as well as potential responses to, irregular migration. Irregular migration intersects with both state security and human security, and challenges existing legal, normative and institutional frameworks. It should not be a surprise that there is no easy policy solution to this multifaceted challenge.

Third, the chapters demonstrate the importance of context. The decision to migrate is rarely made in isolation from wider family contexts, in particular for unaccompanied minors. Irregular migration often takes place alongside other forms of regular migration. Understanding what drives irregular migration requires understanding the influence of global trends such as disparities in development, democracy and demography, the global jobs crisis, and revolutions in communications and transportation. Similarly, effective policymaking in response to irregular migration necessitates trade-offs with other public policy concerns such as security and economic

growth. Even analysis of media coverage of irregular migration, usually assumed to be one-dimensional and negative, demonstrates how in fact coverage varies in response to wider contextual features such as recession and compassion in response to particular humanitarian disasters.

The contributions also point to remaining evidence and research gaps. More research is required on decision-making by (irregular) migrants, both before they leave home and when they are in transit. Experiences in transit as a whole remain understudied, despite clear indications that the number of migrants in transit worldwide is increasing. There is clearly more research required on media reporting on irregular migration, too. None of this research is easy, and the research represented here has on the one hand often adopted innovative methods in order to overcome some of the challenges; but on the other hand, it leaves the reader in no doubt of their shortcomings and the methodological challenges confronted. Equally, the contributions here reinforce why further research must be undertaken, in order to inform policy.

Informing policymaking

Policymaking obviously is shaped by influences other than just evidence and knowledge, and in certain circumstances may take place in spite of, rather than as a result of, the current body of research. Equally, well-informed policy may be ineffective; it may even result in negative unintended consequences because of changes in, for example, geopolitics or technology. Bridging the research–policy divide to develop effective and sustainable policy remains a perennial challenge in migration as in many other fields of public policy.

Such observations notwithstanding, at the very least it can be proposed that together the contributions to this volume have implications for policy, and more widely than in Australia alone.

One is apparent simply in restating the main messages that have emerged: irregular migration is complex, multifaceted, and deeply contextualised. It would be naïve to suggest that policy can ever be granular or dynamic enough to respond fully to this reality, but there are still implications here for how policy can be better planned, implemented and evaluated.

It should have become clear that irregular migration is a dynamic subset of migration, which is itself a dynamic subset of mobility. Understanding the interlinkages between irregular migration and wider global processes demonstrated by the contributions to this volume leads to the realisation that it cannot be managed in isolation from these processes. The chapters on Afghanistan and Sri Lanka in this volume imply, for example, that migration agencies may not always even be the best equipped to implement policies that seek to influence immigration; for example, in situations where the focus is on the root causes of migration such as climate change, conflict, relative deprivation or violent extremism. The chapters on transit migration suggest that, when it comes to evaluating the impacts of policy, the extent to which the rights of irregular migrants are being respected is just as relevant as reducing numbers. Similarly, the chapter on assisted voluntary return makes clear that the scale of return migration should not necessarily be a proxy for the sustainability of return.

There are good reasons why many states still attempt to manage migration (and in particular irregular migration) on a largely unilateral basis, given its intersection with sovereign issues of economic growth, citizenship, identity and security. But a second implication for policy that emerges from this volume is a recognition of the limits of bilateral or unilateral responses to multilateral challenges. It has been suggested here that policy interventions in origin and transit countries may be just as important as those in destination countries in reducing irregular migration (as well as respecting the right of migrants). As has been explained, irregular migration is in any case driven by global forces that necessitate at least regional and often global approaches. The implication of the chapter on environmental migration is that while adapting national laws and policies may be the most expedient response, ultimately it may be time to revisit the international protection regime.

This observation on the importance of a multilateral approach may also be extended to emphasising the importance of a multistakeholder approach, as illustrated here. Individual migrants rarely make the decision to move alone; thus, reaching families and communities is important for information campaigns. There is a range of intermediaries involved in migrant smuggling and human trafficking; thus, targeting just one operative will rarely disrupt the business. The media can influence public perceptions of migration and of the extent to which governments are able to manage borders and migration. Sustainable return depends on reintegration within local communities. Although not adequately reflected

in the contributions to this volume, there is growing recognition of the pivotal role the private sector could play in contributing to more effective migration management.

A third implication arising from the various contributions is to guard against policy responses that view irregular migration exclusively as a security challenge. As has been acknowledged here and by several contributors, irregular migration can certainly pose challenges to state security by, for example, undermining the exercise of state sovereignty and disrupting managed migration programs and asylum systems. But as has also been made clear, development interventions, good governance in origin and transit countries, and promoting respect for rights may be just as effective as border management and restriction in undermining irregular migration. The risk of 'securitising' irregular migration is that it legitimises extraordinary responses, which themselves may often be counterproductive. Fitting environmental migration into existing frameworks for regular migration will be an important priority for the future.

That the contributions here have policy relevance should not be surprising as they emerge from papers commissioned by a research program with close links to policy and operational areas across government. Importantly, the findings in these papers were able to be combined with other knowledge and evidence, such as analysis of administrative data and classified material, to directly inform policy and operational deliberations. At the same time, some more conceptual implications also emerge, albeit not usually explicitly. For example, the sharp distinctions between traditional migration categories of 'regular' and 'irregular' or 'economic' and 'political' have been shown to be empirically blurred. Legal, normative and institutional arrangements are largely still based on these traditional categories, and need to adapt to new realities.

Beyond Australia

As stated, this volume arises from a research program explicitly established to inform Australian policy. To an extent, this has determined the papers commissioned by the program and by extension the chapters in this volume. Thus, they have focused on cases and themes of direct relevance to Australian policymaking on irregular migration. But that is not to say that these cases and themes are not also relevant elsewhere. There has,

for example, been a significant increase in the number of Afghan asylum seekers in Europe during the last year; it is well known that Europe has faced a surge in maritime arrivals; and significant policy focus in Europe is on transit migration and decision-making in Greece and Turkey. Likewise, the events of May 2015, involving thousands of irregular migrants stranded in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, pointed to significant policy challenges facing South East Asia. The key messages and policy implications elucidated above also clearly apply to irregular migration, and policy responses, beyond Australia alone.

In at least three ways the genesis of this volume also has lessons beyond Australia. First, it is laudable both that the report of the Expert Panel identified a need for research as a priority (among only 22) for Australian policy, and the government responded by investing in the Irregular Migration Research Program. As this volume has amply demonstrated, there is a real dearth of evidence on and understanding of irregular migration patterns and processes, particularly in the Australian context, and further research is required. Some of the priorities have been identified here, and the Australian and other governments should continue to support research efforts.

Second, it is striking that the research program included international experts both as advisers and contributors. This approach risked international opprobrium at a time when Australia's asylum policies were quite controversial. But it also demonstrated a willingness to learn from the experiences of other countries and regions that have been confronted by far larger numbers of irregular migrants than Australia. The fact that international experts were willing to engage is a timely reminder in the face of Europe's migration crisis that proximity does not define responsibility. It also highlights the global nature of irregular migration, which is underscored by the increasing global mobility of irregular migrants—the rescue of migrants from Myanmar off the coast of Turkey in early 2016 is a case in point, and such examples are becoming less rare.

Third, the research program explicitly provided an opportunity for 'horizon-scanning' and 'blue-sky thinking'. The inclusion of chapters towards the end of this volume on media representations of irregular migration and the future challenges of environmental migration are illustrative. All too often migration policymaking is short-term and reactive. This is particularly problematic when recognising that, on the whole, migration presents challenges in the short term, and only realises dividends in the longer term.

It would be remiss not to conclude a section entitled ‘Beyond Australia’, and a volume focusing on ‘irregular migration’, without finally reflecting on the migration crisis in Europe, against which backdrop this volume will be published. The potential relevance of this volume certainly should not be overestimated—it has largely focused on a different set of challenges than those currently confronted in Europe and of course in a different context. But some of the research will be relevant to European policymakers, such as the work concerning decision-making by migrants in transit. The three key messages distilled here—complexity, multidimensionality and context—also resonate in Europe today. And the lessons posted here for policy, in particular the importance of guarding against viewing migration as a security issue unless justified, should also guide decisions currently being made by European politicians and policymakers.

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