

**SIXTEENTH COORDINATION MEETING ON  
INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION**

Population Division  
Department of Economic and Social Affairs  
United Nations Secretariat  
New York, 15-16 February 2018

**CONTRIBUTION  
TO THE SIXTEENTH COORDINATION MEETING ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION<sup>1</sup>**

*United Nations World Food Programme (WFP)*

---

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in the paper do not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of the United Nations Secretariat.

# AT THE ROOT OF EXODUS:

Food security,  
conflict and international  
migration

---

Executive Summary



**World Food Programme**

# Executive Summary

There has been a surge in international migration in recent years, reaching a total of 244 million individuals in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Forced displacement has also reached a record high, with 65.3 million individuals displaced worldwide by the end of 2015 – including refugees, IDPs and asylum seekers. Yet while the absolute numbers have increased over the last 15 years, migrants as a percentage of total global population has remained stable at about three percent.

A majority of migrants remain on their own continents – nearly nine out of ten African migrants settle on the African continent, while eight out of ten Asian migrants remain in Asia. Forced displacement is predominantly an issue outside wealthy economies: nine out of ten refugees are hosted by low and middle-income countries.

As an international actor in addressing food insecurity among refugees and other migrants, the World Food Programme (WFP) has undertaken a research study to determine the role that food security plays in cross-border migration. Given the dearth of data on this topic, the WFP study sought to answer some of the following questions: What is it that compels people to leave their homes? What role does food insecurity play in migration? Are these factors common across all international migrants, or do unique root causes spur specific migrant populations to move from their homes?

The study employed quantitative and qualitative research methods. WFP convened focus group discussions with migrants from ten different countries in Greece, Italy, Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. Such discussions provided first-hand accounts regarding the decision-making process to leave, and provided valuable information on the situation in countries of origin, the triggers for migration, routes taken and future intentions. In an effort to validate the data collected from focus group discussions, WFP carried out household phone surveys among refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Participants in the study included migrants from East Africa, West Africa, Asia and the Middle East, with the largest number of respondents originating from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, Syria and The Gambia.

<sup>1</sup> UN 2016

## Definitions

The study uses the International Organization for Migration (IOM) definitions: A migrant is "any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status, (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is." International migration refers to short-term, temporary or permanent outmigration.

According to UN Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone who has fled his/her country because of a well-founded fear of persecution and should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom. Refugees are defined and protected by the international law.

Whenever the term migrant is used in the report, it refers to all migrants, including refugees.



## Key findings and conclusions

Though the initial driver of migration may differ across populations, countries and contexts, migrants tend to seek the same fundamental objective: to provide security and adequate living conditions for their families and themselves. Almost every single Syrian participant in the study, for example, strongly affirmed a desire to return to Syria if the situation stabilized and security prevailed.

The WFP study found that countries with the highest level of food insecurity, coupled with armed conflict, have the highest outward migration of refugees. Additionally, when coupled with poverty, food insecurity increases the likelihood and intensity of armed conflicts; something that has clear implications for refugee outflows. WFP estimates that refugee outflows per 1000 population increase by 0.4 percent for each additional year of conflict, and increase by 1.9 percent for each percentage increase of food insecurity. Food insecurity was also shown as a significant determinant of the incidence and intensity of armed conflict.

Food insecurity was also found to be a critical 'push' factor driving international migration, along with income inequality, population growth and the existence of established networks for migration. Further, the act of migration itself can cause food insecurity, given the lack of income opportunities and adverse travel conditions along the journey, in addition to the potentially crippling costs of transit.

Once a migrant's journey has begun, food and economic security are important factors in a migrant's decision about whether to continue a journey or settle in the first relatively secure location. The onward journey is motivated by a common desire for stability and secure livelihoods. This has clear implications for policymakers who aim to stem the dangerous land and sea journeys many migrants are forced to make.

Roughly, half of Syrians residing in Jordan and Lebanon indicated a preference to move on to another country, citing lack of economic opportunity and low levels of assistance provided.

In Turkey, however, where conditions are seen as more favorable, only a quarter of Syrians plan to move. Migrants who spent time in Libya described a particularly bleak experience with poor conditions, forcing many to continue their onward journey.

Among migrants from Bangladesh and East and West Africa, food insecurity and resource constraints are key drivers for outward migration, whereas lack of safety and security were triggers for migration from Afghanistan and Syria. Many Afghans and Syrians reported that sustained conflict had destroyed employment opportunities and access to markets, leading to a depletion of assets. Food insecurity is a consequential factor for migration from Afghanistan and Syria.

The study found that the motivation for migration could impact the size of the family or group that travels. For instance, WFP found that migrants who flee conflict do so typically as a family unit. Upon arriving at a location with relative security, they decide to stay or some dispatch a family member (typically a young male) on an advance route to scout for a final location where reunification can take place and longer-term residence can be sought. Conversely, migrants who depart primarily for economic reasons (again, often young men), typically migrate alone without the intention for other family members to follow.

Importantly, the study found that migrants have access to social media and mobile technology and that the use of such technology has revolutionized information flows. Access provides migrants with real-time, accurate information that empowers them to make better decisions about which routes to pursue and other aspects of their journey.

## Key recommendations

The study found that food security is one of the critical factors impacting international migration. Such findings have far-reaching implications for WFP, its partners and relevant humanitarian actors. In light of this research, the following recommendations are targeted to all stakeholders involved in the preparation and response to international migration and its outcomes.

1. The fundamental request of the refugee communities across the board is to seek international assistance in securing an end to the hostilities so that they can return to their respective countries and start the process of rebuilding their lives and livelihoods. Their foremost concern is to avoid a generational loss as children are growing without basic services including education.
2. Adequate livelihood and social support including food assistance must be provided to people who are internally displaced within their own countries or forced to move to neighbouring countries as refugees in order to escape conflict and war. The study shows that the majority of the refugees prefer to stay closer to their places of origin in culturally and socially familiar environments. They are not inclined towards undertaking long arduous journeys with uncertain endings to unfamiliar places with vast language, cultural, religious and social differences. Providing assistance in safe locations closer to their places of origin is a viable solution that will reduce onward migration flows as a survival strategy, result in more cost-effective humanitarian interventions, and yield greater socioeconomic benefits over the long term. Given the current geo-political climate, the international community should focus its efforts on Africa and the Middle East as regions that may continue to give rise to international migrants often escaping conflict.
3. In areas where a large influx of displaced people reside, support should also be provided to the vulnerable individuals of host communities. Many communities in low and middle income countries have accommodated disproportionately large number of refugees over extended periods of times, which has severely burdened their public infrastructure and services. Lack of assistance to host communities under such circumstances fuels animosity and conflict with refugee communities that only intensifies over time as disruptions to

support services become more severe. Given the paucity of study in this area, it is recommended that the social, political and financial impact of international migration on host communities be further analyzed.

4. To advocate for uniform policies and approaches among all stakeholders involved in response to international migration is critical. Implementation of a cohesive and uniform refugee policy among host and transit countries with consistent refugee processing criteria, benefits, duration of assistance and general treatment principles can help to minimize refugee preferences for certain countries and reduce the trend to 'comparison shop' among migrants selecting an intended destination. The United Nations New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants and European Union initiative for the development of a common strategy for action on migration will require better-informed and evidence-based investments to result in more effective ways for addressing the challenges of outward migration.
5. Additional research on the trends of international migration, furthering the understanding of the interplay between food insecurity, conflict and other factors that compel people to leave their homes should be undertaken. This includes deepening the knowledge on how decision-making processes of the refugee and migrant populations have changed with access to mobile technologies and social media. Enhanced understanding of international migrants' access and use of real-time data can also better inform response to large-scale displacements of people and provide a significant opportunity to communicate with people previously considered hard to reach.

