

# Thinking Beyond the Border: A Critical Appraisal of Migration Research in North America

LIDC Migration Leadership Team  
Global Migration Conversation  
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*Source: Authors, New York*

## Contents

<b>Introduction: The Global Migration Conversations.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>‘Where Are We?’ Present Priorities and Key Debates in Migration Research in the United States .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Beyond the border.....	4
A multi-scalar approach .....	5
Understanding impact and change.....	6
Language games .....	7
‘Crisis’? .....	9
<b>North America and the Global Migration Conversation.....</b>	<b>9</b>
America First.....	10
Safeguarding international ties .....	11
The circulation of knowledge .....	11
Climate change .....	12
<b>Challenges and Opportunities for Migration Knowledge Production and Dissemination in North America .....</b>	<b>13</b>
The funding gap .....	13
Partnership working and multi-site teams .....	15
Public-private partnerships .....	15
<b>Thematic Priorities Going Forwards .....</b>	<b>16</b>
Quantitative data .....	16
The place of the arts .....	16
Migration knowledge hubs .....	18
Specific topics .....	19
Process of knowledge creation.....	20
<b>Appendix: Programme .....</b>	<b>21</b>

## Introduction: The Global Migration Conversations

*'Facts don't speak for themselves, they can be distorted. But when it comes to migration, often interpretation parades as fact.'*

- NGO worker

The New York workshop, held on 6 June 2019 and co-organised and hosted with the Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility at the New School, was the final event in a series of ten Global Migration Conversations organised by the London International Development Centre Migration Leadership Team (LIDC-MLT) in 2018-2019. The LIDC-MLT was formed to develop a shared strategy for supporting migration and displacement-related research by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

The Zolberg Institute at the New School supports critical and applied scholarship on issues of migration and mobility, and fosters opportunities for meaningful action. The Institute is a preeminent space for leading academics, practitioners and policymakers to reframe discourses around migration and mobility, and the impact these have on human rights, economics, borders, and mobility.<sup>1</sup>

The New York Migration Conversation brought together 30 researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, representatives of migrant and refugee associations and artists and curators working in the field of migration in the North of America to identify: priority areas for migration research; pathways to impact that have been, or are likely to be, promising; and platforms for communication and collaboration that could help to bridge research, policy, practice and public engagement in the future (see Programme in the Appendix to this report). In attendance was also a participant from our Medellín (Colombia)-based, Latin American Migration Conversation<sup>2</sup> to ensure continuity between discussions. The key findings are summarized in this report. The event took place under Chatham House rules. As such, all references are generalized rather than attributed.

The observations provided in this report do not seek to be exhaustive or representative of all perspectives on the study of migration and mobility as a whole, but rather to identify some key themes from the discussion which will feed into a broader global migration research agenda of which this consultation process forms one part. The resulting migration strategy will be published towards the end of 2019. This report does not represent the views of the sponsoring organisations but rather aims to stimulate ongoing discussions among participants and to feed into future Migration Conversations. More information about the research agenda and reports from the other conversations can be found on the LIDC-MLT project website.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://zolberginstitute.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Report available at: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/lidc-mlt/outputs/>

<sup>3</sup> See: [www.soas.ac.uk/lidc-mlt](http://www.soas.ac.uk/lidc-mlt)

## ‘Where Are We?’ Present Priorities and Key Debates in Migration Research in the United States

As a country with a long history of immigration, the US has a strong tradition of migration studies. Some key strengths of the region’s migration scholarship cited at the conversation included the areas of: youth and family studies; history; education; understanding citizenship and democracy; geographies of space and scale; and conceptualizing and understanding ‘the border.’ In many respects – though participants felt not enough – these areas of focus intersect with policymaking. While such categories clearly structure the choices and opportunities that migrants have, participants agreed that beyond structuralism, we need an academic approach to migration which also includes behavioral and conceptual dynamics and which spans the humanities and the social sciences.

### Beyond the border

*‘There is a sense that we are distracted from examples of everyday integration by the obscenities at the border.’*

- NGO representative

A key theme of the New York conversation was the need for migration studies in the Northern American context to expand focus from what has recently been a significant focus on the *border* (by which is usually meant the US-Mexico border, both as a concept and as a site of activity). The focus on the border and of practices of ‘bordering’ (border management and its impacts on people’s everyday lives) is unsurprising in a political context where the border – and especially the proposed construction of a border wall – is central to hotly debated public discussions on migration. Central to current debates on migration among US researchers are physical infrastructures and policing; how criminology intersects with migration studies (‘crimmigration’); and the law.

*‘The resurgence of the interest in transnationalism in the 90s and 00’s has been abandoned as quaint and idealistic...we’ve shifted from exploring dynamics of “opening” in our research, to it being defined by borders and all that is “closing”... I think we have ceded the narrative on migration.’*

- Migration researcher

Meanwhile, participants commented that migration studies had regrettably moved away from more traditional areas of scholarship such as analysis of immigrants in the workplace;

studies of ethnic enclaves and entrepreneurship; analysis of hybridization, integration and transformation of communities, economies, cities, spaces and political possibilities; and transnationalism.

## Diasporas

Private sector organizations and especially social media platforms are among those who are increasingly showing interest in diaspora constituencies in the US and abroad. They are recognizing that their users are migratory and this is being factored in as a key part of the 'user experience.' There is thus a perception that when it comes to being informed and responsive to the needs of diaspora communities, the private sector is often more in-tune than the government. Moreover, social media organizations in particular have more up-to-date information of trends on the ground. Companies such as Facebook and Google have special teams dedicated to migrant and diaspora users. Participants questioned how this information could be shared with researchers to better inform policy, but also discussed the risks of sharing personal data with officials linked to immigration control.

Empowering migrant voices in the diaspora is, one participant commented, a joined-up enterprise – a thriving diaspora community relies not just on the host country but the support of the country of origin – it's a two-way street.

There is, moreover, often such a focus on observing how human movement is *stopped* that we sometimes fail to see how much of it successfully occurs, and, moreover, how often the movement of people, unlike goods, is circular and not linear: 'free movement', in the words of one participant, 'does exist!' Their comments echoed frustrations voiced in the Brussels, Nairobi and Medellín Migration Conversations that not enough attention has been given in recent migration studies to where freedom of movement is working or how it could be evolved across certain regions e.g. the idea of building a North American or Central American community based on the European Union model of free internal movement and integration.

*'Environmental disasters have forced the hands of development officials to recognize that they have migrants in their communities. Communities are often hit on both sides of a border and responding to their needs requires new types of partnership and coordination.'*

- Migration researcher

## A multi-scalar approach

The current US migration policy context is marked by a central dilemma: it has been years since significant federal legislation was passed – which might be interpreted by some as suggesting evidence of policy continuity – and yet in reality the migration policy context

remains highly dynamic and rapidly shifting. This is because of the range of non-legislative routes to changing policy and practice. Policy related to migration and associated issues of housing, education and public health are made at a local, statutory and federal level. Examples include recent changes to the issuing of driving licenses for undocumented migrants in New York and reforms which make it easier for certain migrants to access bank accounts. The need for a multi-scalar approach to understanding migration, and to localizing the issue, is thus key. Discussing the response to Hurricane Harvey (2017), one participant explained that the local government, NGOs and community groups worked well together through the local Office of New Americans to provide aid to migrant groups in need.

Important comparative work is being done across cities in the US and Canada, bringing together mayors to explore practices of welcome. Meanwhile, the Research Platform on Cities, Migration and Membership, which is convened by the Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility at The New School, unites research institutions across five continents.

Other large-scale comparative projects are exploring welcome practices as they play out in a series of ‘Scalabrini casas’<sup>4</sup> in Latin America where migrants in transit are received. These alternative practices of welcome, participants argued, challenge traditional notions of national sovereignty and who welcomes who, and raise new questions about membership and democracy which researchers can and should explore.

As in our European conversation held in Brussels, a trend was noted where individuals, especially in border zones, are policed or criminalized for seeking to welcome outsiders. We need, it was said, to turn to political theory and philosophy to understand such dynamics alongside conducting rigorous empirical studies.

*‘We need to talk about citizenship and membership and how these concepts are shifting in a global age.’*

- Migration researcher

## Understanding impact and change

As at all LIDC-MLT Migration Conversations to date, the dilemma was raised about the difficult balance which migration knowledge brokers must strike between producing meaningful research that speaks to policy on the one hand, and not being constrained by an epistemology and modus operandi which are pre-determined by the status quo and current policy categories on the other.

Participants took different positions in relation to the question of research and impact. Most associated ‘impact’ in the US context with a change in policy or practice, alongside contributing to important scholarly and intellectual developments. Several scholars

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://simn-global.org/services/scalabrini-centers-and-casas-del-migrante-network/>

expressed concern that the policy changes that researchers have helped to shape for the better in the US context in recent years, as with the case for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) support for undocumented migrant youth, are currently being undermined by non-evidence based politicking. In a climate where facts and evidence are perceived to be of depreciating value to policy debates, it was reported that many researchers and civil society organisations are struggling to determine the extent to which their work is having ‘impact.’ ‘How’, as one participant put it, ‘do you know if you’ve moved the needle? There is a lot of product, but how do we know what is impactful?’ There is, it was highlighted, a key difference between output and outcome. Moreover, it was stressed that impact is not just about policy change or academic dissemination but also relates to public engagement and cultural transformation.

These words echoed calls at other Migration Conversations for more nuanced and long-term understanding of how research impacts on social and political change and vice versa; and how such changes happen at various stages of the research and policy cycle: from planning and process to substance, dissemination and impact. We need to re-think our skills, pointed out one participant, in terms of how we advocate [with respect to migration issues] as academics in a democracy.

Participants also discussed how do, could and *should* researchers adapt their work to a climate that is perceived to be hostile to evidence per se? There is a risk, several participants explained, that their work will be dismissed as inaccurate, biased or as ‘fake news.’ Moreover, multiple participants reported incidences where their academic work has been misinterpreted by certain media outlets and used in a way that has run contrary to its original aim in order to justify a particular political agenda. Similar to, but arguably to a greater extent than has been identified in the UK,<sup>5</sup> participants reported a sense that the environment for knowledge production about migration was ‘hostile.’

*‘Scholarship is responsive to policy but policy is much less responsive to scholarship.’*

- Migration researcher

## Language games

How language is used to discuss and shape migratory phenomena, and the ways in which we understand them, was identified as an underexplored area, including as it relates to questions of race and diversity and how people are categorized. As is well documented in the sociological and legal literature, increasingly, migrants are categorized in a number of a

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<sup>5</sup> See podcast from recent MLT-LIDC Queen Mary University London event, ‘A Hostile Environment for Migration Research in the UK? Debates Past and Present’:

<https://soundcloud.com/qmulofficial/a-hostile-environment-for-migration-research-debates-past-and-present>



ways and these labels change over time with important consequences for their wellbeing and livelihoods.

*'Migration studies at its roots is about knowledge created by governments to manage populations through dividing them into policy categories.'*

- Funder

Instead of defining a migrant as someone who has crossed a border, as is often the case, participants discussed other ways of categorizing people on the move, e.g. according to Patrick Manning's historic definition of someone who changes the socio-economic context in which their livelihood is embedded.<sup>6</sup> Other scholars have explored how the migrant category exists and is transformed in relation to social transformations such as capitalism and globalization. There is an important body of work on the history of migration to the US from other parts of the world, especially Europe, but this discussion is often had without thinking about how such dynamics relate to rural-to-urban migration and processes of industrialization. The differences between rural and urban lifestyles and livelihoods remains key to understanding migratory movements, argued one participant, and yet our fixation on international borders often distracts us from this important lens. The rural/urban perspective on migration allows us to make important comparisons between trends that are often semantically divided by scholars, service providers and policy makers alike into the categories of 'internal migration' on the one hand (e.g. IDPs) and international migration (e.g. refugees) on the other. This importance of comparative work on migrant movements within and across nation states was also raised at our Latin American Migration Conversation.

Another area where language is proving to be important, one participant stressed, is in relation to the fact that the US is witnessing a re-racialization of migration and new hierarchies of victimhood (the framing of certain groups as more 'deserving' of support than others) in a way that is strongly related to foreign policy. Comparably, but differently to other Anglophone countries which host a greater proportion of Muslim migrants and refugees, the question of who is 'deserving' of assistance and solidarity interacts in a complex way with a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment. One participant argued that we need to move beyond the concept of 'diversity' and re-interrogate the concept of 'race' in order to understand how xenophobic dynamics play out among different communities.

Related to this, it was proposed that migration studies in the US need to look beyond migrants to consider how mobility affects whole communities, as well as engaging with host populations and disaffected voters – 'some people really seem to like borders', pointed out one participant, 'the question we need to ask is, "why?"' This exercise, they suggested, could involve looking at popular culture and the concept of nostalgia. The question is often looked at from a purely economic perspective rather than hearing and exploring the

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Migration-World-History-Themes/dp/041551679X>



narratives and stories of host populations and engaging with the question of hostility. The Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies<sup>7</sup> was cited as one example of a centre that is engaged in trying to understand this public sentiment.

*‘The problem with migration studies is that it has focused too much on migrants...we need to look at the “anti’s” - anti-urbanism, anti-elitism, anti-Semitism...’*

- Migration researcher

Using the example of ‘family reunification’ and its relabeling in certain media outlets as ‘chain migration’, another researcher demonstrated the power of language for usurping policy and creating new categories of exclusion from categories of inclusion. Multiple participants commented throughout the day that family reunification in many cases had worked well in the US – it should be protected and could be considered as an example of good practice which might inform policies in other countries.

Some concepts, it was pointed out, such as sanctuary and integration, also mean different things in English and Spanish – understanding these differences can broaden our understandings of the phenomena.

### ‘Crisis’?

Another key debate on which participants were divided was whether it is justified or useful to use the language of ‘crisis’ when discussing migration and refugee movements. While some felt that the term could be used to denote a contemporary political crisis, others stressed that it was important not to fuel an alarmist agenda that justified reactive policymaking rather than well-evidenced and thought-through responses to complex phenomena. It was highlighted that population presently on the move from Venezuela, for example, could be termed a crisis because of their sheer numbers and that this language was necessary to mobilize a suitable humanitarian response. However, one participant pointed out that this population movement can get mixed up in public discourse with Mexican migration. So while undocumented labour migration from Mexico to the US since 2008 has gone down, participants commented that we can lose sight of these changes because of the distraction of ‘crisis thinking.’

## North America and the Global Migration Conversation

The US played an important historic role in forming the post-war ‘liberal’ regime on migration. In recent years, however, as is clear from the above, there is a perception that the US has moved away from this world order. The US’ global leadership is now understood by many as a source of problems rather than a solution and this, participants explained, was

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<sup>7</sup> See: <https://crws.berkeley.edu/>

the backdrop to the UN Summit of 2016 and negotiations around the 2018 Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration<sup>8</sup> (which the US refused to sign up to) and the Global Compact on Refugees.<sup>9</sup>

## America First

*'There is a polarization, an unearthing. If you didn't have a view on migration, you have one now!'*

- Migration researcher

There was a widespread concern among participants that the US's abstention from the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration will have an impact on global comparative research, especially since the Compact contains a commitment to certain common data collection requirements. And yet as one participant stressed, it is important to note that, paradoxically, the US remains deeply engaged in international migration policy. The Trump administration not only pulled out of the Global Compact on Migration, but also issued a formal statement urging other countries to do the same. Several countries have also withdrawn from the Migration Compact, including Israel, Hungary and Poland, while 12 others have abstained.

There was a perception among participants that, in its polarized position, US restrictive policy on migration is influencing countries including the UK's handling of the migration aspects of Brexit (on which President Trump has spoken out in favour) and the migration policies of new governments in, for example, Chile and Brazil. This position, which is associated with a rejection of the importance of evidence-informed policy at the national level, was said to be reflected in the US government's international diplomacy on issues of migration. Moreover, as one INGO representative at the New York conversation pointed out, the US has always had an inconsistent relationship with international human rights law. It is the only country that still has not ratified, for example, the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Participants disagreed over when to locate the rise of the current illiberal turn, with some arguing that it began in the 1990s when the Clinton administration allowed the construction of a wall at some parts of the US-Mexico border. They debated whether this political change was a 'shock' or the result of a cumulative process, and were uncertain of how best to understand the shift in public opinion.

Now in the US, it was pointed out, there is lots of talk of 'sides.' Even as researchers with academic independence or as non-partisan NGOs or funders, participants discussed that it felt like you have to 'pick a side' to be speaking and researching from. 'Sometimes, if you

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<sup>8</sup> <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/migration-compact>

<sup>9</sup> <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/refugees-compact>

don't openly give a side, you will be assigned one', lamented one participant, and 'this can impact your possibilities to access funding and progress in your career.'

*'US interventions into foreign policy in relation to migratory matters are largely shaped by a "facts don't matter" atmosphere that the administration fosters, where research and knowledge production are denigrated – they are not acknowledged to be true, let alone carry weight in the policy debate.'*

- INGO representative

## Safeguarding international ties

This nationalist turn, it was pointed out, is occurring against a backdrop against which the US remains the major immigration country in the world, especially for highly skilled migrants (some of whom are researchers). Indeed, the US continues to receive more than half of all highly skilled migrant workers in the world. The Anglosphere receives more than two thirds of highly skilled migration in the world – so this makes the US highly relevant to everyone in terms of migration.

Although the national sovereignty narrative was said to dominate discussions of migration in the US, participants at the New York event seemed largely in agreement that the consequences of this narrative across different global contexts and in relation to different groups were difficult to assess at present. The conversation was defined by a pervasive sense of uncertainty among participants about the future of the migration debate in the US and wider North American region. It was good to see Canada represented at the discussion, one participant stressed, since there is a perception that it is often left out of these conversations.

Much of the day's discussion focused on how US migration research relates to developments in other regions. In its new role as the UN Migration Agency, the IOM was identified as an important bridging actor in the regional and global field, alongside INGOs such as Mercy Corps and the IRC.

## The circulation of knowledge

Migration studies in itself is a field which, it was stressed by several scholars, originated in and remains largely governed by the North-South divide and by the Anglo-centricism of the Westphalia nation state system. In this context, we must be cautious of what has been called 'methodological nationalism.'<sup>10</sup> The dominance of migration journals and scholarship in the global north reifies this dynamic. Moreover, journals can come with strict editorial biases that are hard to challenge. This can take the form of an over-focus on either

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1471-0374.00043>

quantitative or qualitative methodologies at the expense of valuable insights from the other field; a reluctance to publish controversial authors or work that is deemed to take a political stance on the issues explored, even where the evidence is rigorous; a failure to support the work of authors for whom English is not the first language; and a reluctance to engage with conceptual work that is rooted in scholarship from outside of the 'Western' academic canon. This is especially the case where the original texts cited are not yet available in English to be 'cross-checked' by the English-speaking editorial team.

One participant stressed that while researchers often claim there is a paucity of migration literature from the global south, the reality (and one that has been verified by other MLT-LIDC Migration Conversations) is that the literature exists but that there are several barriers to accessing it for scholars from other regions. These include, firstly, the fact that this research is often talked about in different terms e.g. urbanisation/ industrial growth/ the line between informal and formal employment. Secondly, the categories we use to talk about migration in the global north are not the same as those used in the south (see the previous discussion of urban-to-rural versus internal/international migration and also, for example Alexander Bett's work on the concept of 'survival migration' as a counterpoint to the economic migrant/refugee dichotomy).<sup>11</sup> And thirdly, while language is recognised as an important barrier to accessing scholarship which is not written in the English language, there are not enough resources to translate important work in other languages, e.g. from China. Participants at the US conversation were keen to learn from the different ways that migration and mobility are conceptualized elsewhere. The rich conceptual work around theorizing migration was stressed, for example, as a particular strength of research in our South Asia Migration Conversation. There is a need, it was felt, to promote mobility of ideas across language and place, for example through more translated or dual lingual journals in addition to exchange programmes and fellowships abroad (see previous reports from previous events in Delhi and Nairobi).

## Climate change

*'The migration crisis and the climate crisis are linked. Migration studies talks about waves of migrants – well, if you want to understand waves of water and just look at waves and not currents, then your response to wave surges will be to build barriers, like we do for migrants. But this won't work as it ignores the fundamental problem of global warming – the waves, like the migrants, will go around the walls! If you put sand bag barriers against waves of water, they will go over the top. We need to address root causes, of migration and global warming.'*

- Academic researcher

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<sup>11</sup> See: <http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/?GCOI=80140100851000>

Key to international collaboration, several participants called for migration studies to engage more with questions of climate change and environmental displacement. This echoed discussions from the Latin American and South Asian Migration Conversations, in particular.

*‘Rockefeller, MacArthur...the philanthropy world is currently grappling with the question “where is my place in migration?” Meanwhile, high net worth individuals, many of whom are migrants themselves, are filling the gaps through philanthropy.’*

- Academic researcher

In many ways, participants pointed out, policy responses to changes in the climate and migration trends are comparable, from the crisis language and popular use of maps to communicate information about the phenomena on the one hand, to the securitized responses and fluvial metaphors used to describe both phenomena on the other. Some climate change policies, it was said, are echoes of migration policies, using similar language as well as the same political and institutional structures as part of their response. Several European states have made declarations of ‘national emergency’ in relation to both the ‘refugee crisis’ and ‘climate emergency’ for example. Moreover, military forces have been deployed in response to several environmental disasters that have occurred in the US, in addition being deployed in response the so-called ‘migrant caravan’ arriving at the US-Mexico border. For researchers, working together across disciplines and sectors to critically respond to both climate change and migration simultaneously was considered to be key.

## Challenges and Opportunities for Migration Knowledge Production and Dissemination in North America

Participants discussed at length the current funding landscape for knowledge production with respect to migration and displacement and research opportunities across the arts and social sciences. Yet in both fields there was a perception that while in Europe the door has opened somewhat and funding opportunities have expanded and diversified– as exemplified in the work of the LIDC-MLT – in the US opportunities for securing funding for migration research are shrinking.

### The funding gap

There is a perception that less private funding is available for migration-related research activities in the US than was the case previously and that there has been a shift from funding more in-depth research (on issues further from the border such as integration issues, labour market issues, child protection outside of detention centres, etc) to a focus on individual protection and work that is more crisis- (and border-) based. Examples of recent retrenchment of migration research funds include the US’s substantial withdrawal of funds from the UN Refugee Organization, UNHCR; the MacArthur Foundation’s restructuring and

concentration of grants from the national level to a more localized focus on the city of Chicago; and the Social Science Research Council which stopped its migration programme in 2017<sup>12</sup>. In this context, certain academic disciplines are facing funding shortages more than others. Moreover, there is a perception that new partisan think tanks, such as the conservative Heritage Foundation, are being accorded government grants instead of academic institutions. Meanwhile it was said that think tanks that are more libertarian, like the Cato Institute are not listened to, marking, as with many regimes, a shift in the configuration of Washington think tanks from a more liberal centre of gravity to a more conservative one.

In the unstable US context, several participants spoke of the importance of diversifying funding sources. Sometimes academics are pushed to compete with NGOs for the same pot of private research funding on migration (e.g. Jacobs Foundation, Mary Robinson Foundation), however sometimes they are able to work effectively together and build partnerships. In September 2014, for example, the Robin Hood Foundation, New York Community Trust, and New York City Council announced a \$1.9 million public-private partnership to support legal organizations, working alongside a range of other stakeholders to assist unaccompanied minors in immigration proceedings. Participants stressed that much important partnership work is happening at the city level in New York. However, such projects often involve sister disciplines and not migration studies per se, such as health, education, urban studies and urban planning and development.

*'Funding doesn't exist for basic research on migration, but rather it is more advocacy and protection orientated. Lawyers get much of the private funding – this gap for a few years will have long-term consequences.'*

- Academic researcher

It was highlighted that the weakening of investment in the social sciences is a trend related to populism in other parts of the world - such as in Brazil where sociology and philosophy have recently had their funding cut; as well as in Europe, where, for example, Hungary recently cut funding for gender studies programmes. In our Delhi Migration Conversation too, participants reported that funding related to responding to the experiences of and wellbeing needs of migrants is seen as secondary to a focus on citizens' needs.

In summary, in the US as elsewhere, new borders are being erected from within the academy. The UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) is one example of a fund that promotes cross-border working and allows academics based in the region to apply for funding as project leads. The Fund has identified six Challenge Areas prioritized for research, of which Security, Protracted Conflict, Refugees and Forced Displacement is one (and the LIDC-MLT Team Leader Laura Hammond is a Challenge Leader for that theme). They currently have a programme with DFID to fund research related to humanitarian protection (and migration/displacement), for example. Another example of international funding is a

<sup>12</sup> See: <https://www.ssrc.org/programs/view/migration-program/>

fellowship programme with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, although this is not specifically related to migration.

## Partnership working and multi-site teams

As in other parts of the world, there is a trend for migration research projects in the US to become larger in scale than previously was the case and to involve more stakeholders and multiple teams of researchers. There are advantages and disadvantages to this model of working including the benefits of cross-disciplinary expertise, for example, but also the challenges of project management across different sites. Where there is a big initiative with various moving parts, how, asked participants, do we evaluate each part and how they work together?

## Public-private partnerships

*'There is a sense among some academics and INGOs that if you talk about "profit" you're doing something wrong, but we have the choice to lean in to opportunities provided by the private sector. They have the resources and data we don't have and need.'*

- INGO representative

Another important debate emerging from the conversation concerns the relative merits of private-public partnerships in responding to migration and displacement phenomena. These partnerships are often 'challenge-focused' and can be effective at bringing short-term gains e.g. the IKEA Foundation responding to the shelter needs of camp refugees. Social media companies are also following in the footsteps of previous US administrations and local leaders by increasingly showing interest in migrant and diaspora stakeholder communities. However, it was suggested by some participants that much research generated by these companies stays 'in house' and remains inaccessible to the academic community.

Several participants were keen to stress that partnerships across the academic-private and public-private divide can be very mutually beneficial, bringing benefits including the pooling of data, expertise and resources. Costs associated with corporate funding and partnerships were nevertheless also identified. These included risks to academic independence, competing research ethics, possible reputational risks, privacy and ownership of data.

One participant commented that they were concerned that the private sector had been reticent in the US to speak out in the public debate on migration, even among those industries which are dependent on highly skilled migration such as information technology, healthcare etc. How, they questioned, does this compare to the outspoken response of many businesses to Brexit in the UK and how can we understand this difference? One proposal is that the issue of migration in the US has become too controversial. One participant used the example of the consumer boycott of Bank of America after it said that it would apply less rigorous document checks for the opening of bank accounts. There is a



powerful anti-migrant movement with grassroots connections informing the political environment that is (as discussed above) as yet little understood.

Some businesses, it was pointed out, are leaning in to support migrants as public funds retract. Microsoft has a programme in Seattle, for example, working to integrate and promote the wellbeing of migrant communities. Meanwhile, Amazon has channeled some money into scholarships for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients. But, one participant lamented, while private funds make certain changes possible, much of this private investment is seed funding for small-scale programmes and individuals, which may limit the extent to which this funding actually has any impact.

Another key question, also raised at previous Migration Conversations, concerns migrant voice – how do we ensure that affected communities are engaged and empowered (to the extent that this is possible) throughout the research process?<sup>13</sup>

## Thematic Priorities Going Forwards

A number of specific topics were identified by participants as priority areas for research that require additional or fresh attention in the coming years.

### Quantitative data

A key priority was improving the quantitative data available on migration and also seeking to harmonise data sets for greater comparability across the Americas. A worrying trend identified by one participant was the recent move in Brazil to remove questions about migration from the national census, for example: how, it was asked, can we work to ensure that these kind of changes are not replicated elsewhere (e.g. in the US's 2020 census, where the Trump Administration is seeking to have questions about the respondent's citizenship status included in the census) and find alternative means to ensure that this information is collected outside of the government census in Brazil?

### The place of the arts

*'Maps are an insinuation of agency in search of new life' - Curator*

More recently, a welcome complementary focus in the social sciences has been on migrants' lived experiences, and how borders affect life cycles and relationships of those who move and those who don't – migrants and citizens and mixed status families. A rich body of evidence has long existed in this area in the arts. Indeed, as has been stressed at previous Migration Conversations, the arts can help us think differently about labels and

<sup>13</sup> See discussion of this in the report from our London Migration Conversation (from page 9) <https://www.soas.ac.uk/lidc-mlt/outputs/file136798.pdf>

categories. The arts are increasingly engaging with social sciences material and big data from a range of sources. One example given was of various ways artists around the world are mapping migratory data, as was explored in a recent exhibition at the Sculpture Centre in New York.

How is the way we use and understand maps changing with the rise of new technologies? Maps can be pathways to freedom e.g. refugees using smartphones to navigate border crossing points, but also relate to aspects of control e.g. immigration control thermal mapping to identify bodies in lorries. Another key and historic question raised by a curator was, who gets to make the map and 'officialise' certain geographies and journeys? Who, by the same logic, gets to mark you somewhere and say that you are present? From statistics to photos, the way we understand data and communicate it is rapidly changing. It emerged from the discussion that for many people, the visual can be emancipatory on the one hand, and an oppressive method of labelling on par with bureaucratic labels on the other. It is important not to fetishize the visual and the arts and to speak across disciplines.

There was a keen interest in continuing to foster dialogue between the arts and social sciences and to bring in humanities that have been less represented to date including music and popular culture. Yet culture, it was stressed, is central to understanding and experiencing migration.

*'We've been thinking about migration in political and policy terms and economic terms when often we live our lives in terms of stories we tell ourselves. We should spend more time looking at popular culture and music rather than public opinion polls...these are the spaces where new ideas take shape and form.'*

- Migration researcher and musician

What is the link between music and health in the context of migration, asked one participant, and moreover, how can we use music as a form of participatory communication? As researchers, we can learn from migrant and diaspora groups who have long used music as a means of communicating about migration. One example of fusing analysis of music with the social sciences that was cited is a recent special edition of the *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies* which focused on popular music, migration and the city.<sup>14</sup>

Participants stressed their wish for the Social Science Research Council to renew its migration-specific funding, meanwhile, artists needed to have their own investment as partners but also as independent sources of new knowledge creation that can help us to think in different ways. The arts and visual methodologies in particular

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<sup>14</sup> See *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6, 857-864.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2019.1567930>

can help us to understand the role of social media and narrative in migration and mobility as well as speak to the public – and each other – in new ways.

Artists need funding not just for the process of creation but to secure spaces to exhibit their work: the question of creating spaces in which art can be both created and *seen* is fundamentally linked to the question of freedom of expression. The idea of exhibition is plural: from street art to museums; online archives to transient performances. Multiple participants lamented that traditional and well-regarded academic journals often did not allow for the publication of images or other forms of artistic output beyond writing. But, as stressed at previous LIDC-MLT Migration Conversations, participants acknowledged that art is a research practice in itself and a way of creating as well as communicating knowledge.

Refugee artists, meanwhile, need special support not just to be protected but to thrive. A range of rights related to culture are protected in Objective 16 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and this, like the other objectives, requires monitoring and evaluation as a key component of the Compact's operation. Organizations such as PEN America are working to protect the freedom of expression of displaced artists in America which, as identified above, is not a signatory to the Global Compact. Other artistic freedoms are nevertheless protected through being included in the US Constitution.

Finally, cultural exchange between countries remains a priority area, and one that was identified as at risk under the current US administration. One example given was the ban on visitors from certain Muslim countries and the ban on cultural group trips to Cuba from the US.

*'However many notes you take, the process of trying to configure in a visual form something you are engaged with is a different type of social interaction. Art is a way of thinking which has a different mimetic relation to the world; it's not just creation and effect. It helps us, especially with knotty problems*

- Migration researcher

## Migration knowledge hubs

As incubators for cross-disciplinary working, including between the humanities and social sciences, there is a growing trend in the US to establish migration study centres or institutes (e.g. the Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM) at the University of Georgetown, and soon to be launched Harvard Immigration Project) and the establishment of scholarly modules on migration echoes developments in Europe, especially in the UK, and in some parts of Africa. This move was largely welcomed by participants in the conversation and it was stressed that using the centres as meeting points for the arts and social sciences

and for public engagement – as with the Zolberg Institute – could be especially fruitful for all parties.

The Zolberg Institute is one of several bodies involved in quarterly migration research meetings in New York and they also host a popular podcast, ‘Tempest Tossed’,<sup>15</sup> which is widely listened to by practitioners, for example. Podcasts are an increasingly popular way of disseminating academic work to wider audiences and engaging in public debates without fearing misinterpretation of work by the mainstream media (see above). Artists-in-residence programmes and scholarships available to artists at risk, such as run by PEN International, were identified as important for the circulation of ideas across these new hubs. The multi-sited United Nations University is also committed to sharing and promoting ideas around the topic of migration.

### Specific topics

Other key topical priorities in migration research and knowledge production identified (some of which are discussed in more detail above) include the following:

- youth migration
- social realities and family dynamics- how the border penetrates family dynamics
- rural to urban migration
- the causes of migration
- climate change and environmental migration
- migration and work
- the positive impacts of migration on economy, community, culture and society
- moving from a focus on the north to the global south and south-to-south migration
- public opinion – why do so many people like borders?
- citizenship, membership and democracy and how they adapt to people on the move
- time and temporalities of migration
- age and demography
- social media and new technologies
- multi-scalar perspectives on migration
- cultural narratives, arts and storytelling as they relate to migration. How narratives play out situationally with different consequences
- popular culture and migration
- business and private corporations and their relationship to migrant and diaspora communities including though e.g. funding, data collection, service provision and user engagement
- localized impacts of migration and mobility
- diaspora and political mobilization
- race
- historical perspectives on race, anti-Semitism etc
- language discourse, linguistics – how language shapes the way we think and act around migration

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<sup>15</sup> See: <https://zolberginstitute.org/new-podcast-alert-tempest-tossed-conversations-on-migration-and-mobility/>

- migration and development – the impact of northern states e.g. US and European states pushing borders south on the industrial makeup and social organization in developing countries
- migration, health and nutrition/food
- remittances
- mixed, multi-linear flows
- scrutiny of public—private partnerships as relate to migration

*‘People are dying and families are being torn apart at the border so we do need focus on the border but it has led us to lose sight of larger social questions such as integration and what it means to have societies that are increasingly ethnically diverse. We’re missing a lot of the big stories.’*

- Academic researcher

## Process of knowledge creation

Finally, and by way of conclusion, as identified above, participants called for more attention to and interrogation of the *process* of knowledge creation around migration and how it interacts with policy and other forms of public engagement, including through more of these kinds of reflective events. This question of understanding the knowledge making process around migration has been a key gap identified at previous events. The LIDC-MLT strategy, to be published in the autumn of 2019, will seek to address this question, among a range of other thematic areas of global interest.

## Appendix: Programme

**ZOLBERG INSTITUTE ON  
MIGRATION AND MOBILITY**

## PROGRAMME

### Global Migration Conversation

#### New York

Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> June 2019

The New School, Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility  
Wolf Conference Room, 11<sup>th</sup> floor, 6 East 16<sup>th</sup> St.

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#### **9.00-9.45: Introduction: Introducing the Global Migration Conversations and the Aims and Objectives of the Day**

This introductory session will set the scene and explain the aims and purpose of the Global Migration Conversations and how they fit together.

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#### **9.45-11.15: Panel 1: 'Where Are We?' Present Priorities and Key Debates in Migration Research in the US**

In this opening panel, speakers will consider current priorities in relation to knowledge being produced about migration in the USA and internationally through academic research and the arts, and what impact this knowledge is having.

Participants will reflect on the following questions:

1. What different types of knowledge about migration are being collected and considered by academic and non-academic sectors (including the arts) and why?
2. What are the gaps in knowledge about migration?
3. What are the specific challenges and opportunities of creating and disseminating knowledge about migration in the current context to different audiences in the US (e.g. policy makers, the public, businesses etc.) and how do these differ across local, state and national levels?

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### **11.15 – 11.45: Coffee Break**

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### **11.45-12.45: Salon 1: Challenges and Opportunities for Migration Knowledge Production and Dissemination**

In break-out groups, participants will discuss in more depth the challenges and opportunities for conducting research and producing and disseminating other forms of knowledge about migration before coming back together to discuss their findings with the larger group. Facilitated by a member of the LIDC-MLT, group discussions will touch on questions including the following:

1. How has the migration research and knowledge landscape evolved in recent years across the city, state and national levels and how does this impact your work?
2. What is the funding landscape like for migration knowledge production in the US? Are certain types of work or topics more or less likely to be funded? Who is funding it and why?
3. What do we know most about, and what are the main knowledge gaps?

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### **12.45-13.45: Lunch**

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### **13.45-14.30: Salon 2: Working Collaboratively Domestically and Internationally**

In break-out groups, participants will discuss opportunities for collaborative working on migration before coming back together to discuss their findings as a whole group. Facilitated by a member of the LIDC-MLT, the discussion will touch on questions including the following:

1. How are you, your organization and other people you know working collaboratively with different actors locally, domestically and/or internationally?
  2. What are the challenges and opportunities for collaborative working, including at the transnational/international level? (including e.g. forming and maintaining partnerships, securing funding)
  3. What new research and knowledge or artistic production would you like to see funded across disciplinary and geographical borders and how could this be facilitated?
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### **14.30 – 15.00: Coffee**

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### **15.00 – 16.30: Showcasing the Art of Migration**

In this session, artists and curators will discuss their work and how it relates to producing, exchanging and challenging knowledge about migration. They will each present for 10 minutes followed by a Q&A discussion. Possible questions for discussion may include how art can change public perceptions; the challenges and opportunities of collaboration between social sciences research and the arts; and the relationship between art and mobility.

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### **16.30 – 17.45: The US and the Global Migration Conversation**

While the opening panel focused on the national context, here speakers will be invited to consider the place of US research, arts, and policy in relation to global knowledge and understanding of migration.

Participants will be asked to reflect on the following questions:

- (i) How is US-based research and knowledge about migration speaking to international migration debates across disciplines, including in relation to business and the private sector?
  - (ii) What is the significance of the US government's engagement (or lack of engagement) with international policy on migration (e.g. the Global Compacts) and how does this shape the research and knowledge production context?
  - (iii) In what ways might US-based and non-US-based researchers, artists and policy actors collaborate more effectively with each other? What types and forms of collaboration are likely to have the greatest impact?
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### **17.45-18.00 Closing Reflections**

Brief closing remarks and comments on synergies with previous Migration Conversations.