

# Migration policy research in the times of the pandemic

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The COVID pandemic has had a major effect on migration patterns and how we do research related to migration policy. We have been pondering these issues as part of the policy review process of the MIGNEX project. There are multiple concerns related to this, ranging from practical issues such as gaining access to policymakers during a very busy period to making sure that we get an appropriate perspective on policy issues, that is not completely skewed by current concerns.

A big part of the job of many policymakers is to manage short-term emergencies. Often a conversation about policy priorities regarding migration will quickly shift to focus on the challenges and solutions related to the latest crises involving migration in some way. COVID is a worldwide crisis of unparalleled dimension and this context accentuates this dynamic. There is widespread belief that the pandemic requires certain types of short-term adjustment to immigration related policies, such as restricting the entry of a certain group of foreigners to the country as well requiring those entering the country to quarantine or take a COVID test.

However, in MIGNEX we are interested in migration policy dynamics during 'normal' times, not the short-term exceptional policy measures taken during a pandemic. To be clear, these short-term adjustments represent an interesting area of research, but are less pertinent for the study of the drivers of migration.

## **Accounting for short-term crises for long-term policy analysis**

One possible way to avoid the overemphasis on the pandemic context is to ask policymakers to reflect on the situation a couple of years ago, before the onset of COVID crisis. This approach has several limitations such as recollection biases and the rotating nature of policy work. For example, the policymaker might not have been working on migration issues a couple of years ago.

Another major limitation of this approach is that the previous period might no longer represent 'normal' times. That is, the pandemic could have effects on migration policy and overall policy priorities that are not time-bound to the pandemic period, therefore creating a 'new normal'.

## **A 'new normal'?**

These long-term effects can come in two ways. First, it might be possible that the experience of the current pandemic brings to light new information about the need for certain types of immigration policies. Immigration policy systems are not finely tuned machines whose settings can be perfectly calibrated to a rapidly changing external environment.

However, there is scope for setting new long-term priorities during a moment of crises like the COVID pandemic. There could be increased awareness that certain industries and sectors that have strategic value during an emergency need to have a sufficient workforce beforehand so

that they are in a position to provide essential goods and services when an emergency arrives. For example, the COVID crisis has highlighted the importance of having strong healthcare systems with extra capacity. This could lead to the prioritisation of policies that promote the retention of the health workforce in the country. The crisis has also highlighted importance of having a strong domestic food supply. This could lead to the prioritisation of policies related to migrant seasonal agricultural work to ensure food security.

Second, governments have leeway to translate an understanding of the consequences of the pandemic into quite different policies on the ground. The COVID crisis could therefore lead to the use of the current context to justify policies that were already favoured by policymakers. This could be particularly the case for the advancement of more restrictive policies towards migration, such as curtailing access to the asylum system, increasing deportation or cracking down on irregular migration.

### **Adapting research to provide new insights**

In the MIGNEX policy review the focus is on long-term policies. However, Winston Churchill famously said: 'Never let a good crisis go to waste?' Therefore, we have instructed the teams conducting these reviews to evaluate current short-term adjustments and to highlight those aspects that could have longer-term implications. Hopefully, in the future we will be able to provide new insights on the connection of emergencies and long-term changes in migration policy priorities.