

People on the move



Alessia Passarelli

“The ingenuity and diversity of arguments against immigration and immigrants are impressive. Like the proverbial hydra, no matter how many heads are cut off, the monster instantly grows new ones. It suggests that the arguments do not matter. It is the state of mind producing the arguments which are important – blaming foreigners...If immigrants do not exist, it would be necessary to invent them, to create scapegoats.”¹

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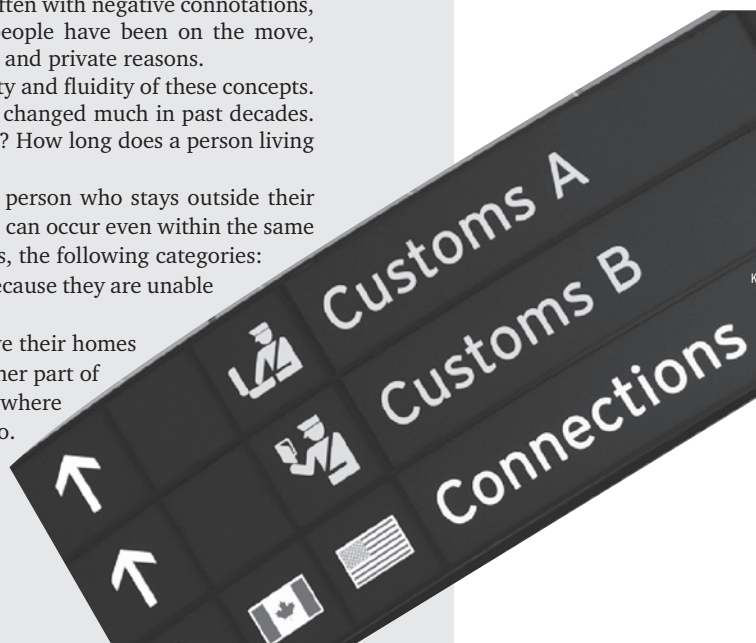
Trying to define migration

Despite the reality that migration seems to have become a burning issue on the political agenda of the European member states, constantly mentioned in the media - often with negative connotations, migration is certainly not a recent phenomenon. For centuries people have been on the move, crossing borders of cities, regions and states for economic, political and private reasons.

Attempts to define migration and the migrant show the complexity and fluidity of these concepts. As we said, migration has always existed; however, its forms have changed much in past decades. The definition must be examined: Who can be defined as a migrant? How long does a person living abroad have to keep this label?

The United Nations (UN) defines an international migrant as a person who stays outside their usual country of residence for at least one year; however, migration can occur even within the same country. Different kinds of migration exist, including, among others, the following categories:

- Refugees: People who have been forced to leave their countries because they are unable to live in their home or they fear they will be harmed.
- Internally displaced people: People who have been forced to leave their homes often for the same reasons as a refugee; however, IDPs find another part of their own country to live in. This is usually in makeshift camps where hundreds of other IDPs live because they have nowhere else to go.





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- Asylum seekers: People who move across borders in search of protection.
- Economic migrants: People who migrate for labour and economic reasons.
- Irregular migrants: The concept of “irregular migrants” covers a wide range of people, principally migrants who enter a country either without documents or with forged documents or migrants who enter legally but then stay after their visa or work permit has expired. Human trafficking and migrant smuggling are specialised aspects of irregular migration.

Forms of migration can be distinguished according to the reasons that cause people to leave their country (economic, family reunion, persecution). People can move voluntarily or they can be forced to leave their homes. Others tend to classify migration according to the legal status of migrants: whether they live in the hosting country legally or not.

Having said that, it is important to recognise that very often it is not obvious nor evident which given category a certain migrant belongs to. It might very well happen that a person has gone through different phases of migration or s/he belongs to more than one category at the same time.

Beyond the definition of migration

Following the UN definition, migration is simply a movement of persons from one place to another. Migrant, per se, is a neutral word. If we look at the European Union, there are two classes of citizens, those who have freedom of movement and those who do not have it. In fact, citizens from 10 out of the 27 EU countries face restrictions when it comes to freedom of movement for employment in most – not all – of the other EU member states. While these restrictions are temporary, they have an impact on people. If a Spanish citizen goes to work in Italy, they are not likely to be referred to as migrants, but they are considered to be Spanish citizens who are staying in Italy for extended periods of time. The same discourse, however, is not valid for a Bulgarian person in a similar situation. A Bulgarian worker in Italy is far more likely to be considered a migrant, no matter how long she or he intends to remain in the country. In reality, both have left a European country of origin and both are migrants according to the UN definition. Even though migration may be value-free, it has a negative connotation in practice. Therefore, it is unfairly used only for certain categories of people because of ignorance or prejudices.



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Some numbers

The UN estimated that in 2005 there were about 200 million migrants worldwide, including approximately 9 million refugees. In other words, only 3 percent of the global population today is an international migrant. The number of international migrants has more than doubled in 25 years. Before 1990 most of the world's international migrants lived in the developing world; today, the majority live in the developed world and their proportion is growing.

In 2000 there were 60 million migrants in Europe, 44 million in Asia, 41 million in North America, 16 million in Africa, and 6 million both in Latin America and Australia. Movements from the global South to the North have increased, but at the same time it is important not to ignore the movements that still take place within regions.²

Following this line, one of the major mistakes when talking about migration in Europe is the assumption that it is a phenomenon coming from the “outside”, instead of recognising the movements of people within European borders. Migration in Europe is not just immigration from other regions. If we look at Finland's immigrant population, for instance, 36% comes from Sweden, a neighbouring country, and 10% from Estonia. Moreover countries such as Romania, Ukraine, and Poland are facing both emigration and immigration.

Transnational communities...

The world has changed enormously over the past 50 years. The traditional distinction between country of origin, transit and destination for migrants has become increasingly blurred. Today almost every country fulfils all three roles and some migrants are residents in more than one country. Many may travel back and forth and maintain business or personal relations and activities in two or more different countries.

In this framework, a transnational community can be defined as “individuals or groups of people who live and/or work in networks that transcend political borders. These networks allow people to live dual lives. They may be bilingual, trans-cultural, have homes in more than one country, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests in more than one place. This creates networks that view state membership in an instrumental way rather than an emotional way.”³

New communication technologies and increasing access to relatively cheaper and more extensive travel networks have improved the possibilities for individuals and communities to develop transnational relations.

...and transnational SCMs?

The phenomenon of migration has an impact on our daily lives. We do not have to travel to meet/encounter people belonging to other faiths and cultures. The “other” is now our neighbour, our fellow at university, at work, and the landscape of our churches is changing often as well. WSCF has always been enriched through its global fellowship with Christians from around the globe, all united in faith in Jesus Christ. Until recently, however, the regions of the Federations have always been primarily distinguished geographically - Europe, the Middle East,



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Africa, North America, Asia and Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean Regions. Are these distinctions still valid today? It seems that using geographic criteria to determine the identity of the Europe Region is not enough anymore. For instance, we find people from all over the globe living temporarily and permanently in Europe.

To follow up on this topic, here are some questions which can stimulate debates and reflections in your own context:

- Do SCMs reflect the changes happening in society? The impact of migration today cannot be overlooked by SCMs or simply studied as a phenomenon affecting our society but not our SCMs. Can WSCF-E fully represent Europe if it does not reflect the different realities present in the region nowadays?
- Can the concept of transnational communities be applied to SCMs? To a certain extent, the six regions of the Federation are already transnational communities: they maintain contacts both at local and global levels. But within the European Region, this concept has not yet been fully developed.

Towards an Intercultural Education

Over recent years, WSCF-E has started to reflect on the concept of the integration of migrants, understanding integration as the result of a two-sided effort towards the construction of more inclusive societies. Integration as a life learning exercise is challenging to us all. How much are we willing to question our life style when brought into contact with diversity?

The risks behind the diversification of Europe include the possibility that the different ethnic and minority groups, instead of communicating or working together towards the creation of an intercultural society, will reduce contacts with each other because of the fear of losing their traditions/culture/identity and will lock themselves in ghettos.

Fear of loosing one’s identity is based on the idea/concept that identity as well as culture is fixed, given once and for all. On the contrary, both concepts are fluid and multidimensional. Who we are is the result of a mixture of factors, including genetics, culture, environment and the people we have met.

Cultures indeed have always been shaped by encounters with other cultures in a continuum exchange of models and practices. For too long Europe has perceived itself as The Model, The Culture, judging and measuring each other culture from the height of its position of superiority - a concept known as Ethnocentrism⁴. The European citizens are faced with a challenge; they do not have enough tools to deal with diversity. Until now, diversity had to be assimilated within the mainline society: “If people want to come, they have to be/act like us”. Today the recognition of the value of other cultures has brought up the concept of intercultural education. As pointed out already, integration implies that both parties involved - migrants and receiving societies - have to commit themselves in order to build up new and more inclusive societies. But to commit themselves, people have to know other cultures, traditions. Too often fears of diversity are based on prejudices which, in turn, are based on the misperception of a person/culture/tradition. Intercultural learning can be the key to breaking this chain down, pursuing the idea of a society which is not just multicultural, where people share the same territory, but a society which is intercultural, where people know each other and mutually benefit from their differences. Do we commit ourselves to undertake such a difficult but enriching path?

(Endnotes)

- 1 Nigel Harris, *Thinking the Unthinkable: The immigration myth exposed*, I.B. Tauris, 2002, pages 74-5
- 2 Koser K, *International Migration. A very short introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2007.
- 3 *Ibidem*

- 4 Ethnocentrism derives from two Greek words: “ethnos” which means ethnic group and “centrum” which means center. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one’s own culture. In this particular context, we can talk about Eurocentrism as Europe is the cultural model used as a measure for the others.