

Urban and social development: the transformation of cities as they go through changes in demography and population



IDHUS
Institute for the Development
of Human Societies

Dossier #2

Urban and social development: the transformation of cities as they go through changes in demography and population





Introduction

In November 2019, in a pre-pandemic context, Barcelona played host to a novel iteration of the Smart City Expo World Congress, operating under the banner "*Cities Made of Dreams*." It is unequivocal that our global geographical and demographic landscape is undergoing a profound metamorphosis, exerting considerable influence on the urban centers where an ever-expanding portion of the global populace congregates.

The urban transformation necessitated by this displacement of population presents formidable challenges to a majority of local authorities, governmental bodies, and representatives of civil society who grapple with the daunting task of accommodating thousands of individuals arriving in cities already burdened by congestion, a situation prevalent across various regions of our planet. These newcomers seek opportunities for enhancing their quality of life and securing a brighter future for their families. According to the United Nations, it is projected that within the span of a decade, a staggering five billion people will reside in urban environments, with an even more remarkable two-thirds or greater proportion of humanity expected to do so by the year 2050.

Recent years have witnessed substantial migratory movements, primarily attributed to armed conflicts in the Middle East, while numerous individuals have endeavored to gain entry into the United States and Europe, settling in advanced nations equipped with social systems capable of affording a basic standard of living and quality of life to those escaping destitution or strife in their places of origin. We continue to observe, on a weekly basis, the valiant efforts of non-governmental organization relief vessels and coastal patrols in Mediterranean nations rescuing migrants who perilously embark on life-endangering journeys aboard inadequately secure vessels, orchestrated by human trafficking networks that profit from their desperation and exhibit minimal regard for their welfare once the price of passage has been paid.

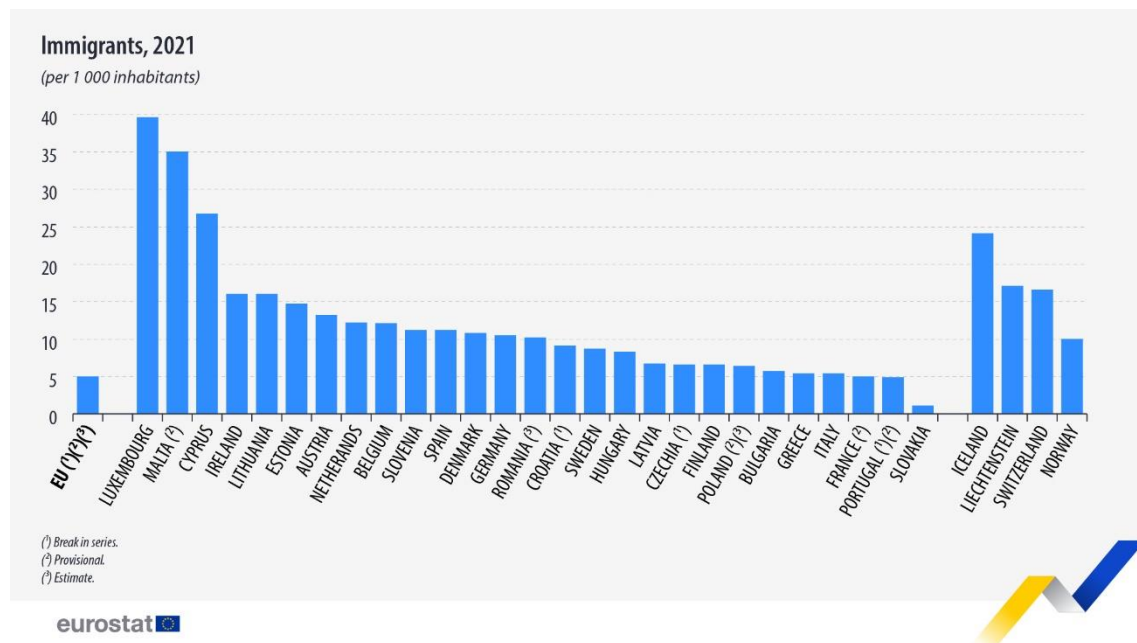


These migratory currents, emanating from sub-Saharan African countries, Central America, and developing nations in Southeast Asia, hinge upon the willingness of third-party nations to embrace or assist these arrivals, a gesture that, as history and contemporary events have shown, transpires sporadically and typically garners attention when it serves the interests of governments for media exposure.

By 2023, it was anticipated that this influx of migrants towards Europe and the United States would persist, with fresh attempts to reach economies perceived abroad as more stable and hospitable to survival, where the potential gains outweighed the perils of the journey, as compared to the poverty, suffering, and dearth of resources they left behind.

Consequently, as these controlled, legal, or uncontrolled, illegal flows converge upon cities, which invariably become their ultimate destination, whether they be global metropolises or smaller communities on the periphery, issues of coexistence and adaptation come to the fore,

perpetuating societal fragmentation. The surge in population, for which these locales lack adequate resources, amplifies the integration challenges they face. Further complicating matters is the resistance of the local populace to allocate resources, which could otherwise be applied to address preexisting community issues, coupled with the exploitation of fear as a means to ostracize or exclude those in desperate pursuit of belonging and security within any haven that might offer them refuge.



Throughout 2023 and beyond, cities, regions, and the nations in which they are situated will grapple with acrimonious internal conflicts among groups, particularly in Europe and North America, that vehemently seek to curtail the influx of individuals into their territories. Concurrently, a political contest will ensue among nations to determine the allocation of quotas for refugees and migrants, often framed as a facet of their public relations efforts but faltering in implementation behind closed doors.


The social repercussions stemming from the substantial influx of individuals migrating from one country to another and, in many cases, from one continent to another, transcend the efficacy of simple measures such as quotas or the establishment of refugee camps in underprivileged areas, where only a limited number of non-governmental organizations are capable of providing essential humanitarian aid in response to the crises

accompanying these displaced populations. It is imperative to address this challenge at its source, i.e., the countries of origin, on a massive scale, even in the absence of motivation or political will within those nations to assume the monumental responsibility of elevating living standards and resolving the systemic issues compelling thousands of individuals to abandon their homelands in pursuit of a more promising life elsewhere. It is important to note that these individuals would opt not to leave their homes if viable alternatives existed, and upon arriving in new territories, they often encounter an absence of the requisite infrastructure for establishing roots and forging a new life.

Presently, there is scant anticipation of a reduction in the migrant population, and the prospects for substantive solutions to aid these migrant groups remain equivocal, reliant primarily on the sporadic and localized support offered by the host communities driven by sentiments of solidarity and assistance. However, this level of support is unlikely to become a universal phenomenon, as historical trends do not suggest a broad shift in this direction. Consequently, the prevailing demographic and social landscape in 2023 will continue to be characterized by these challenges.



Concurrently, it is worth acknowledging that our cities are poised for transformation and modernization, fueled by the relentless dynamics of the



economic and technological ecosystem, which fervently promotes the integration of novel technologies into the framework of urban transportation, services, governance, and sustainability. Persistent urban pollution remains a foremost concern for local authorities, as it jeopardizes the well-being of urban residents and contributes to an alarming number of premature deaths due to atmospheric contamination. In many cities across the globe, the air quality has deteriorated to the extent that it is nearly unbreathable, as evidenced by citizens donning anti-pollution masks even for routine tasks such as taking out the garbage.

Therefore, it is hoped that emerging technologies will succeed in mitigating the environmental impact of road transportation, curtailing the emission of pollutants into the atmosphere, reducing noise and light pollution, and generally enhancing the quality of life. Simultaneously, each city will need to devise solutions to accommodate the influx of new residents, stemming from rural areas, smaller towns, or conflict-ridden zones, all seeking habitation, rest, and integration. A substantial portion of the world's cities is grappling with limited spatial capacity to fulfill this need.

The evident solution is vertical expansion, a transformation that is currently underway and poised to persist in megacities worldwide. However, this expansion comes at the cost of heightened consumption of natural resources, such as water required for sustaining the population and essential construction materials. The repercussions of this growth, regardless of its sustainability, manifest in 2023 as escalating prices for fundamental raw materials, notably construction sand, which is increasingly scarce due to the overexploitation of rivers and deposit sites, as desert sand is ill-suited for construction purposes.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the global construction boom has tripled the demand for sand over the past two decades, requiring a staggering 216,000 tonnes of sand, gravel, and grit for constructing a single kilometer of motorway. If these critical resources, fundamental to urban expansion, become scarce and prices soar, rendering housing unaffordable for an expanding segment of the population, it is

anticipated that communities on the periphery or within economically disadvantaged towns will swell, exacerbating extant insecurities. This scenario is likely to intensify competition among the established and incoming populations for the limited services and resources available within host areas.

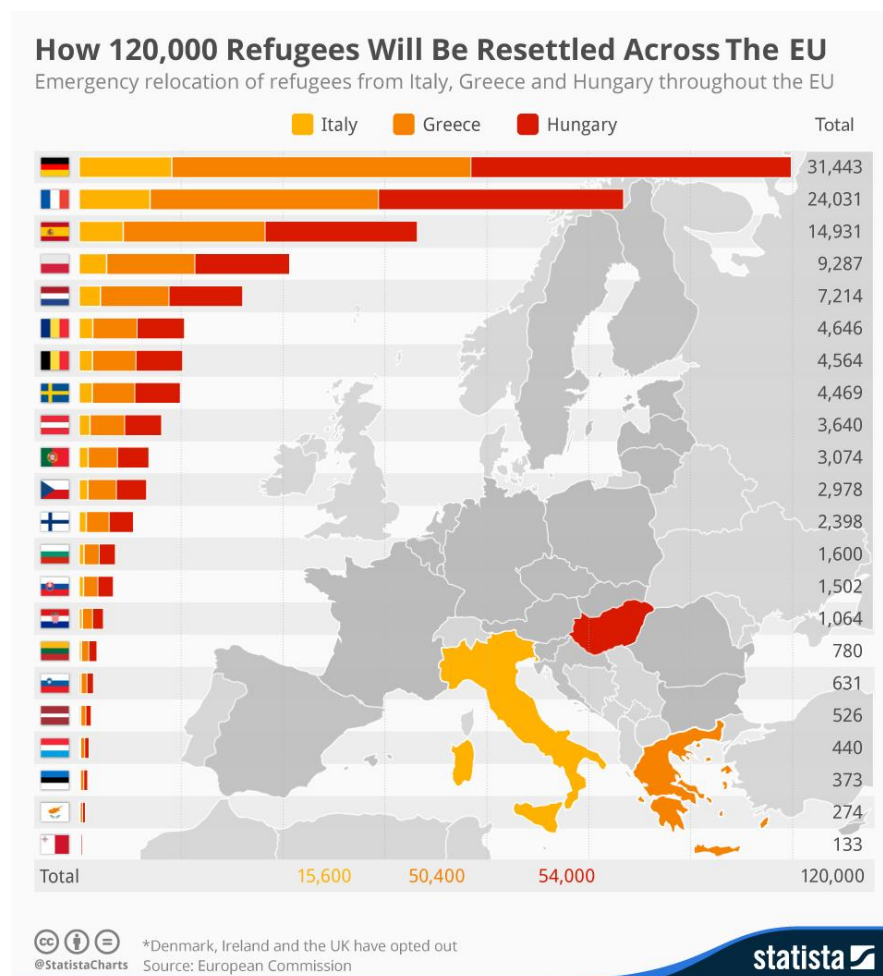
The ensuing cycle amplifies the sense of insecurity within local communities and redirects blame toward those seeking an improved life. Such tensions may lead to social conflicts and protests due to resource scarcity among populations residing in economically disadvantaged areas, and may instigate disturbances within regions affected by minor conflicts, such as Mexico and the United States, Turkey and Syria, Greece, Cyprus, and countries proximate to the Middle East conflict zone (which serves as a conduit to Europe). Similarly, North African nations, where migrant groups tend to concentrate en route to the old continent, along with various economic zones in the northern hemisphere, are expected to experience a surge in migration driven by individuals with limited or negligible resources, who perceive these regions as destinations offering improved prospects and at least minimal opportunities for advancement.




As these localized conflicts persist, they have the potential to expand their influence on national policies related to immigration control, border reinforcement, and the imposition of bureaucratic impediments to entry

into these countries. Such policies compel criminal organizations, including mafias and human trafficking networks, to seek new, albeit perilous, routes that are less rigorously guarded. This shift in migration routes is likely to result in an increased number of fatalities among those striving to secure a better life. When news of these situations emerges and resonates within various sectors of civil society, alongside humanitarian organizations, certain governments may find themselves compelled to partially open their borders. They do so not only to avert larger humanitarian disasters but also to safeguard their image as "welcoming nations" in the eyes of the international community, irrespective of their internal reservations about assuming this responsibility.

This interplay of events underscores the interconnected nature of the migratory dynamics observed in recent years, particularly along the most well-established routes leading to both the United States and Europe.






In our perspective, a solution—or one of the viable approaches—necessitates a multidisciplinary strategy. This strategy involves permitting humanitarian entry into less densely populated regions of host countries, while ensuring that those who arrive have reasonable prospects for self-sufficiency and can contribute to the long-term prosperity of these areas. Simultaneously, comprehensive assistance programs should be instituted in the countries of origin to mitigate or eliminate the need for individuals to rely on human trafficking organizations as their only means of escape from increasingly untenable circumstances in their homelands. A deliberate redirection of a portion of these migration flows toward regions where demographic imbalances, due to an aging population, cannot be rectified by the natural incorporation of new generations into the local workforce is imperative.

Integration into the local culture necessitates the allocation of resources for language and cultural training for migrants. Moreover, it requires heightened awareness within host communities regarding the genuine motivations of the thousands of desperate individuals annually arriving at their borders. These newcomers do not aim to dispossess the local population; rather, they seek to carve out a future for themselves that can be harmoniously shared with those already present, thereby contributing to the economic growth of the region. Achieving this balance between the apprehensions perpetuated by certain political entities and organizations, and the imperative of maintaining a cohesive and functional society, is contingent upon swiftly integrating all incoming individuals without compromising the distinctive cultural and social fabric that defines each city across our planet.

The evolution of the topic of global migration in the coming years is likely to be shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including political, economic, environmental, and social dynamics. While it is challenging to make precise predictions, several trends and scenarios can be anticipated:

Continued Migration Flows: Global migration is expected to persist as a prominent phenomenon. Factors such as conflicts, economic



disparities, climate change, and political instability will continue to drive people to seek refuge and opportunities in other countries.

Policy Responses: Different countries will adopt diverse policy responses to manage immigration. Some nations may maintain or even tighten border controls, while others may opt for more open and inclusive immigration policies. The balance between humanitarian concerns and national interests will remain a central point of contention.


Shifts in Migration Routes: As policies change and borders become more or less permeable, migration routes are likely to shift. New pathways may emerge as migrants seek alternative, less guarded routes to their destinations.

Humanitarian Crises: Humanitarian crises associated with migration, such as overcrowded refugee camps and tragic incidents during perilous journeys, may persist or escalate, prompting international efforts to address these crises.

Development and Aid: Increasing recognition of the importance of addressing root causes of migration will lead to more substantial investments in economic and social development in regions prone to migration. Aid programs aimed at reducing the reliance on human trafficking networks will likely expand.

Urbanization Challenges: Cities around the world will continue to grapple with the integration of newcomers. Challenges related to housing, infrastructure, employment, and social cohesion will persist, necessitating innovative urban planning and community engagement.

Cultural and Social Integration: Integration of migrants into host societies will remain a focal point. Language and cultural programs, as well as public awareness campaigns, will play an important role in fostering understanding and cooperation.



Resource Scarcity: The growing demand for resources, particularly in expanding urban areas, may lead to increased competition and potential resource conflicts. The depletion of essential resources, such as clean water and construction materials, could pose additional challenges.

Environmental Migration: Climate change-induced displacement is expected to rise as environmental conditions deteriorate. Climate refugees may become a more prominent category of migrants, putting pressure on adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Global Cooperation: Addressing migration effectively will require international cooperation and coordination. Multilateral agreements and partnerships will continue to evolve to manage the global movement of people.

Public Opinion: Changing attitudes and perceptions about migration will influence political decisions. Public discourse, driven by media coverage and public narratives, will play a role in shaping policies and societal responses.

In the coming years, the dynamics of global migration will remain complex and multifaceted. As the world continues to grapple with these challenges, finding sustainable, equitable, and compassionate solutions to migration will remain a critical global imperative. Adaptable policies, increased international collaboration, and a deeper understanding of the root causes of migration will be essential components of any comprehensive strategy for managing this complex phenomenon in the future.



In conclusion, the multifaceted challenges posed by the global movement of people across borders and into cities demand a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach. The intricate web of social, economic, and environmental factors driving migration cannot be adequately addressed by quotas, barriers, or humanitarian efforts alone. While crises persist in regions of origin, migration will endure, along with the associated complexities.

The interplay between conflicts, national policies, and shifting migration routes underscores the dynamic nature of this issue. As these challenges persist, it becomes increasingly evident that addressing them necessitates a proactive stance. Rather than merely reacting to crises as they unfold, governments and humanitarian organizations must proactively engage in prevention by investing in the economic and social development of regions from which people are compelled to flee.

This approach should include opening access to less densely populated areas of host countries, while ensuring that newcomers have the means and opportunities to establish themselves and contribute to the prosperity of their adopted homes. Simultaneously, efforts must be directed towards addressing the root causes of migration through assistance programs in countries of origin, thereby diminishing reliance on human trafficking networks.

Language and cultural integration, alongside public awareness initiatives, are pivotal components of this strategy. Encouraging host communities to recognize the shared aspirations of migrants—namely, the pursuit of a better life—can foster a sense of unity and cooperation.

In this era of unprecedented global movement, achieving a harmonious balance between the urgent needs of migrants and the concerns of host communities is paramount. While it presents a formidable challenge, it is also an opportunity for societies worldwide to demonstrate resilience, adaptability, and compassion in the face of complex demographic and social transformations. Ultimately, the successful management of this global challenge hinges on our collective commitment to fostering inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable societies for all.

