

Opening Lecture: The Future of Migration


Doctor Alexander Betts was given the daunting task, not only of giving the opening lecture at 2013's ED4BG, but also of addressing the pivotal and dense topic of "The Future of Migration." Betts, an associate professor at Oxford University's Refugee Studies Centre and its new Humanitarian Innovation Project, attempted to paint "the big, broad picture" of migration on a global level, at the same time challenging the audience with a number of questions and ideas while avoiding the workaday tasks of border guarding.

He said the significant amount of anxiety and concern that surrounds European debate about migration meant, "there is an increasing demand for prediction [as] prediction is a way of controlling, knowing where the next crisis is going to come from, knowing where flows of people are going to come from, whether provoked by violence, instability, or changing socio-economic patterns."

Drawing on the work of colleagues at Oxford and the International Migration Institute's cutting-edge Global Migration Futures Project, Betts admitted the issue was clouded by uncertainty, and so, dividing his lecture into five parts, began by talking about migration and what it means to European nation states.

A modern, democratic European nation state, accountable to the electorate, is limited in what it can do, and faces trade-offs in decision-making about rights, security and the economy, though he underlined that "difficult choices [are still] choices."

While yearly migration, which he said was presented as a problem in the public sphere by the media, has increased in raw numbers, from some 70 million in 1960 to over 200 million now, the statistics clearly show that migration as a proportion of the world's population has remained flat since the 60s.





Predictions in this area are notoriously perilous in that there is a tendency to over-predict and overstate, such as with the movement of people in the recent Libyan crisis described at the time as potentially being of “biblical proportions” when in reality only a tiny proportion migrated. However the reverse is also true, i.e. underestimation. Betts cited British Home Office studies of the anticipated influx of people from Eastern Europe upon EU accession which concluded a high-end number of around 12,500, and asked how they could have been “so wildly wrong” when actually over 600,000 moved. The answer, he said, was that migration theory was poorly understood and had evolved “surprisingly little” over the years.

Moving onto the myths that may sometimes skew predictions and affect policy-making, Betts noted several problematic notions such as the idea of there being an “infinite labour force” available when the demographic realities of aging populations coupled with declining fertility were that, in the UK’s case, demand for labour was increasing while the supply from other countries was actually dwindling.

Another common misapprehension with particular bearing in the case of Africa is that development is a substitute for migration. Betts stressed that, in fact, increased wealth often increases the desire, and ability, to move.

The third myth caught the audience off-guard, when Betts asserted it was erroneous to believe “migration policies actually make a significant difference to migration decision-making.”

“What we, in fact, see is that patterns of immigration strongly follow economic trends rather than migration policy-making decisions,” he said. “That there’s a huge, significant correlation between economic growth and immigration patterns. It’s the economy that determines who comes and under what conditions rather than necessarily what happens on the border.”

Megatrends, although occasionally dismissed as a buzzword, are nevertheless going to have a huge impact on migration in the future, he continued.

“Technology today is changing the world of migration. [It] reduces informal barriers to mobility.” Another important trend he identified was, “Climate change-induced displacement, or even climate change refugees.” On the megatrend of urbanisation, Betts said “rural movements” were a



thing of the past as since 2008 more than 50% of the world's population have resided in cities in conditions of "super-diversity".

Addressing the key uncertainties for Europe and how policy-making will be affected, Betts ran through the leading trends and forces at work. Economic growth "will shape who comes to Europe." EU fragmentation may raise "questions about the political future of the European Union" and thus affect migration patterns. Labour markets, patterns of xenophobia, racism and identity politics will also have a significant impact.

There is, he said, growing complexity; conventional ideas about migration are inadequate and traditional classifications are losing relevance. Many people are now in a "neither/nor situation" with regard to how we define traditional asylum seekers and economic migrants. The transnational character of the movement of people and human development, including 'brain drain' also contribute to the current flux.

In the future, migration governance is going to be increasingly changed by privatisation and new forms of inter-governmental consultation, regional and otherwise, will in turn influence the nature of protection. "There is a need for a debate on a global scale about the relationship between migration, human rights and governance," he asserted, because it is becoming more and more challenging to know who to protect and how to protect them.

For the future, Dr Betts recommended responses that he believes will be effective: Firstly, rethinking our assumptions. The data available, he said, challenges some of the ways we are used to thinking about migration. Then technologically innovative products and processes for the work of border guarding will require private sector involvement and professional training and implementation, but, happily for academics such as himself, further research as well.

Finally, he believes that it is crucial for representatives of universities, governments and even the private sector to use knowledge and information to lead, rather than follow, public opinion.