Preparing for Uncertain Migration Futures

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photo: iStockphoto.com/Guenter Guni

The issue

➢ The propensity to make predictions – and to act on the basis of predictions – is inherently human

➢ The **acceleration, proliferation and diversification** of social, economic, technological and political **transformations** and **shocks** make migration-related **risks and uncertainties increasingly unpredictable**.

➢ **Requirements for prediction** consistently **exceed the ability** to predict/forecast.

➢ **Planning** across a range of scenarios is **good practice** but does **not prevent predictive failure**.

Predictive failure ⟷ Governance failure

➢ While some efforts to forecast the future of migration are necessary and predictive methods and techniques can be improved, the design of migration policy and governance should reflect the **likelihood of predictive failure**.

➢ Stakeholders need to **prepare for both: (likely** and **unlikely) trends** and **shocks**

➢ And: Prepare to be unprepared!

Predictive failure – Governance failure
Example: COVID-19

Global Health Security Index
October 2019

Country	Score
United States	83.5
United Kingdom	77.9
Netherlands	75.6
Australia	75.5
Canada	75.3

Source:
Center for Health Security,
John Hopkins University

COVID-19 deaths
(as of 26 September 2020)

Country	Deaths
United States	204.112
Brazil	140.537
India	93.379
Mexico	75.844
United Kingdom	42.060

Source:
Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE),
John Hopkins University

Illusion of preparedness:
"What if?" has become "Now what?"

Migration (governance) crisis

„Constant crisis mode"

➢ **Crisis is a situation of a complex system**, in particular when the system is (temporarily) dysfunctional

➢ **Perception that migration policy and governance do not address and cope with the full ‚complexity of migration'**

    ➢ **‚Superdiversity'**

        ➢ Not only more migrants, but **more diverse** migrant populations

        ➢ **Boundaries** between diverse migrant groups **get blurred**;

    ➢ Distinct groups are **hard to target adequately by specific policies**

    ➢ **Multiple actors** and stakeholders with **competing ideas and interests**

    ➢ **Scientifically underinformed / biased discourses**

➢ What is an „adequate response" to **growing complexity of migration** and the (perceived) **governance crisis**?

Understanding migration complexity
means
understanding the functioning of adaptive migration systems

We need to consider

„migration no longer as a linear, uni-directional, push-and-pull, cause-effect movement but as a circular, interdependent, progressively complex, and self-modifying system in which the effect of changes in one part can be traced through the whole of the system."

Akin Mabogunje, geographer, 1970

Characteristics of complex migration systems
(adapted from Willekens 2012)

- ➢ Multiple actors drive a fluid and hierarchical migration system.

- ➢ Migration is a process and constantly influenced by **internal and external forces**.

- ➢ Agents interact and, as part of the **interaction**, exchange information and resources.

- ➢ Migration operates through **networks**.

- ➢ Continuous **adaptation** of migrant behavior and institutional policies.

- ➢ **Emergence** of migration patterns.

- ➢ A complex migration system is largely **self-organizing**.

- ➢ Complex migration systems respond to **disequilibria**.

- ➢ Migration is affected by epistemic (knowable) and aleatory (unknowable) **uncertainty**.

- ➢ Migration has only **limited predictability**.

# Understanding of migration 'driver complexes' rather than searching for 'root causes'
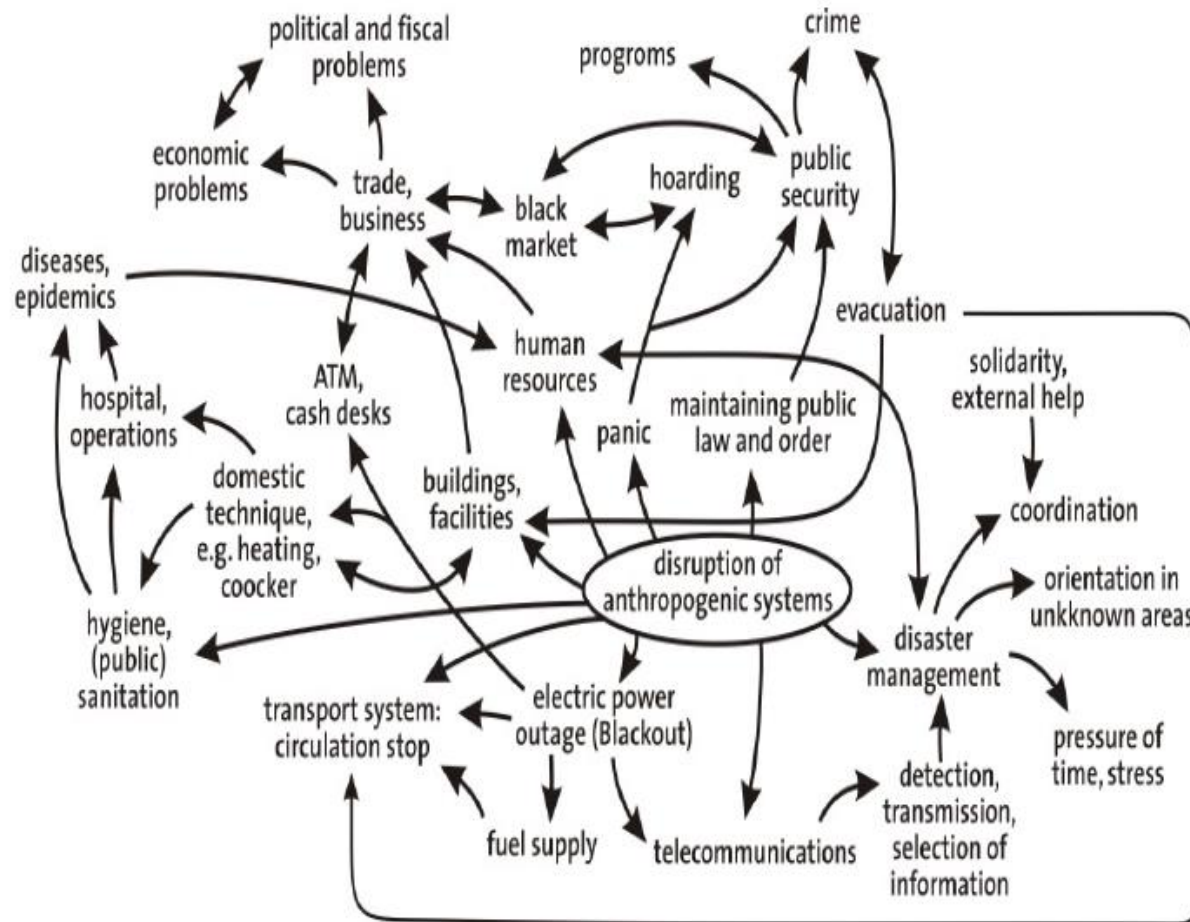
Migration regime changes:
non-linear and equifinal causation

➢ **Sudden and gradual shocks** to systems <u>may</u> **cause uncontrolled feedback, cascading effects**, **extreme events**, and **unwanted side effects** regarding **migration outcomes**.

➢ **Systemic risks** evolve because of the inherently dynamic nature of **complex adaptive systems**, in particular, due to **nonlinear interactions** among system components.
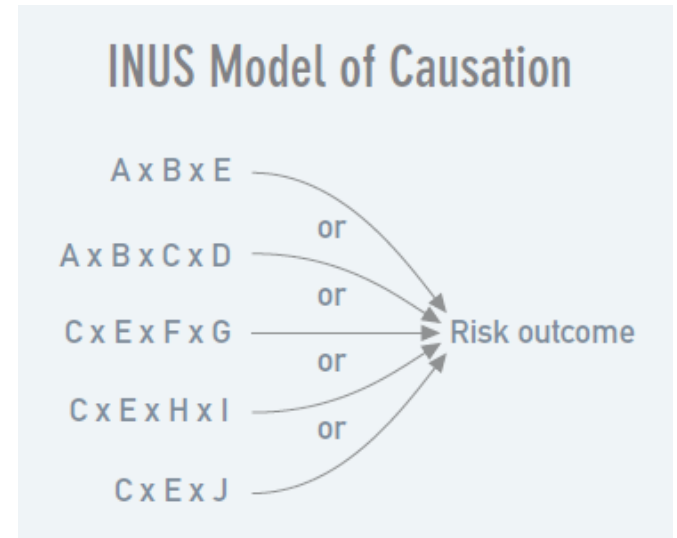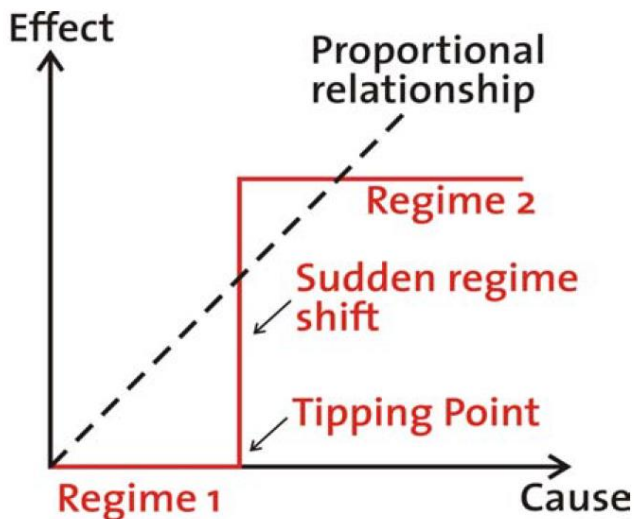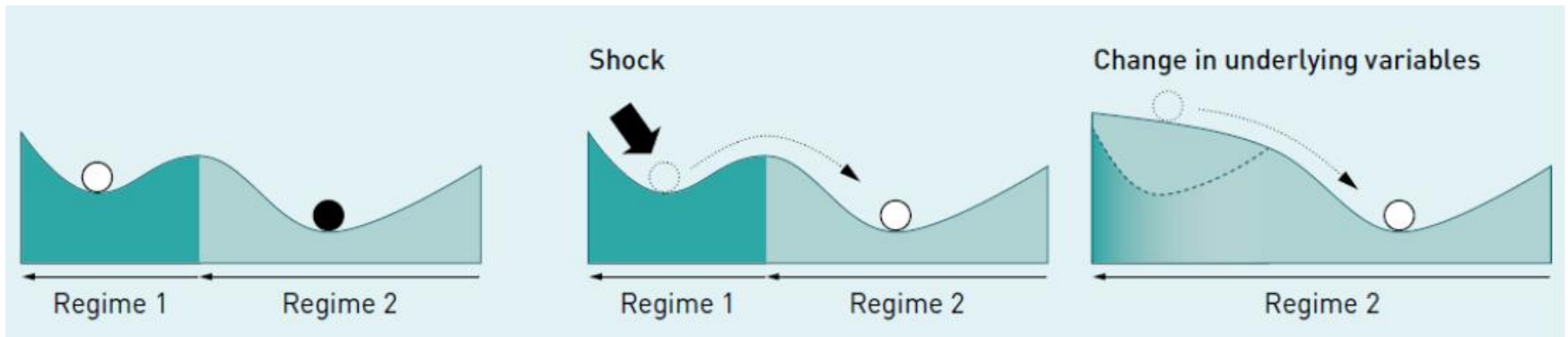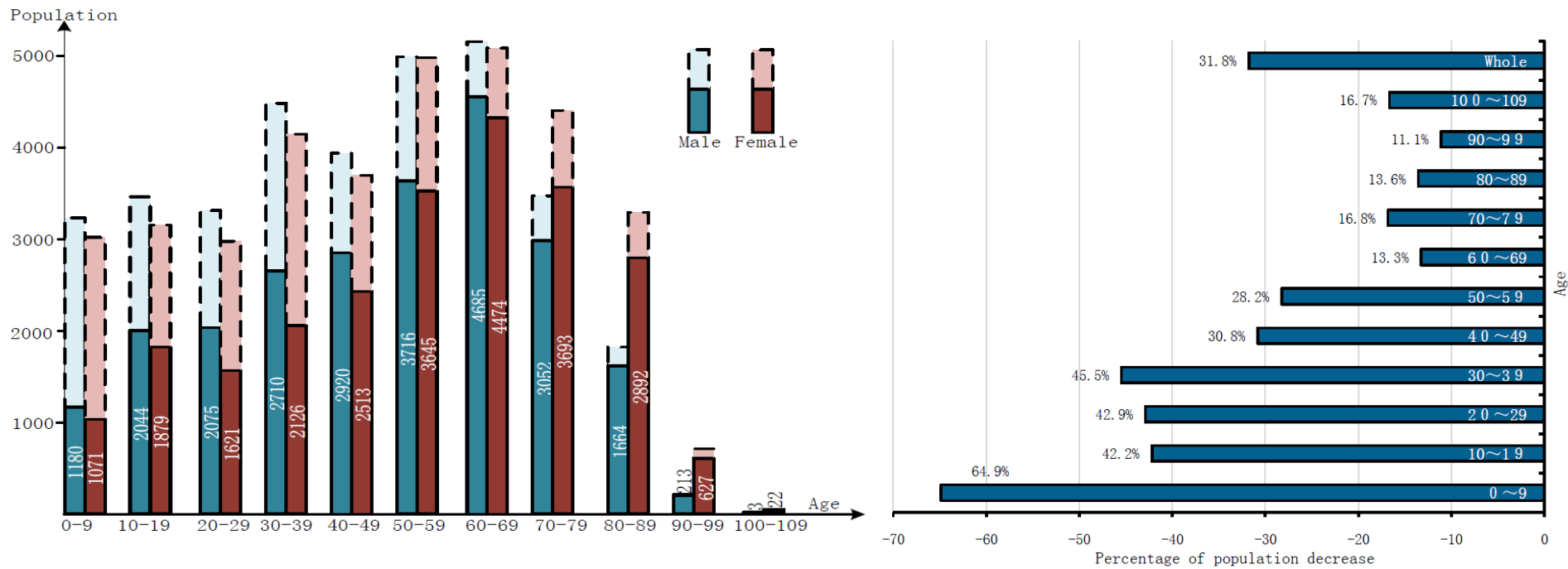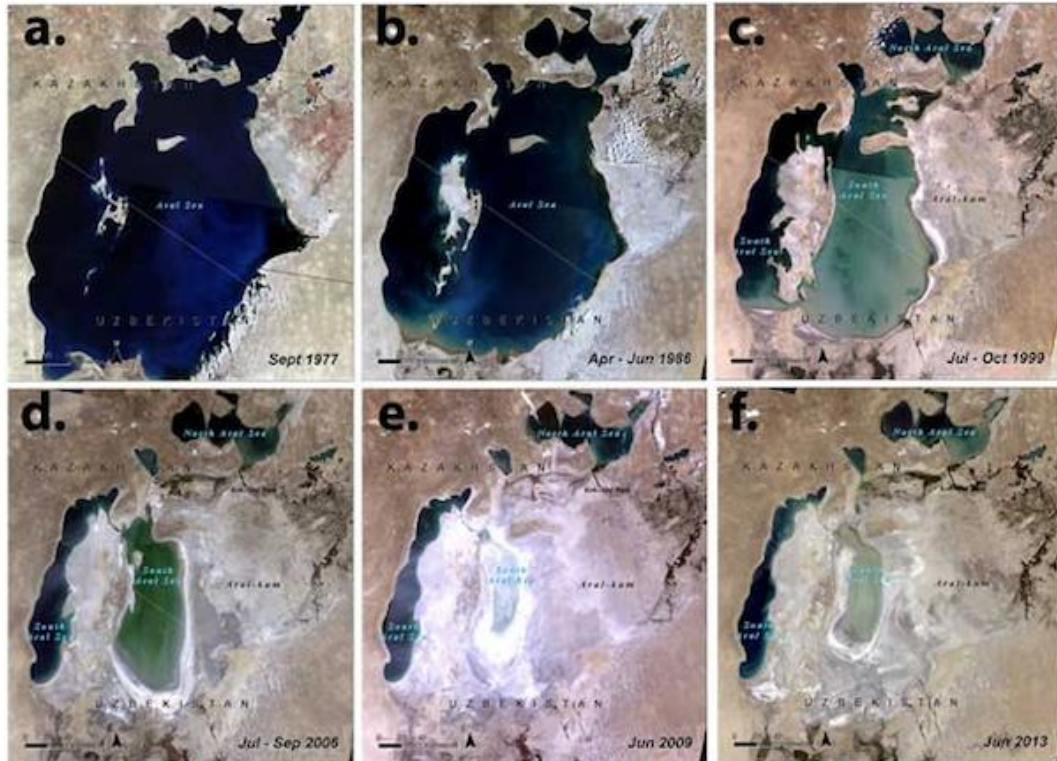
Example
Minamisoma City (Fukushima)
Earthquake, subsequent tsunami, power cut, nuclear accident, evacuation in March 2011
…and partial return

Source: Zhang et al (2014)

Example Aral Sea region: Depletion and emigration

Sep 1977 – June 2013

August, 2018

Prevention, adaptation and mitigation of systemic risk

➤ **'Migration control crisis' is system-immanent**

  ➤ Adaptation and systemic change (=migration crisis) is an intrinsic part of interconnected systems

➤ Adaptation and limited control capacity are key features of **complex migration governance**

➤ Policymakers (and other stakeholders) need to think about how to **avoid, mitigate or prevent the manifestation of systemic risks**, which may affect a migration system's functioning.

➤ Actors must either **adapt** or **transform the governance of a migration regime** to cope with systemic risks, that come with **transitions**.

How to prepare for uncertain migration futures (I)
Know the factors causing systemic risk

➢ **Scientific unknowns** (i.e. lack of knowledge about how natural or human systems work)

➢ **Vicious cycles** (i.e. feedback effects and reinforcing negative loops)

➢ **Varying vulnerabilities** (e.g. group- and context-specific)

➢ **Conflicting interests and values.**

➢ **Social dynamics.**

➢ **Technological advances.**

➢ **Time-lags between shock and effect.**

➢ **Inadequate communication** (e.g. late, incomplete, misleading or absent)

➢ **Information asymmetries.**

➢ **Counterproductive incentives** (e.g. incentives triggering risk taking behavior)

How to prepare for uncertain migration futures (II)
Know the reasons causing policy failure

➢ Limited effectiveness of migration policy: discursive, implementation, and efficacy gaps

➢ Counterproductive / unintended policy effects

➢ Inadequate policy designs

  ➢ Unidimensional (group specificities remain potentielly unaddressed)

  ➢ Targeting (area-, need-, group-specific)

  ➢ Policy receptivity of diverse (and vulnerable) populations

  ➢ Policy timing (addressing diverse migration trajectories, ‚sudden shocks')

  ➢ ‚one size fits all' policies

➢ Limited policy coordination (actors, mechanisms, conflict identification & resolution, public/political support)

➢ Policy incoherences (migration policy measures in conflict with other public policies)

➢ Policy feedback loops (self-fulfilling prophecies, cf. Lucas critique)

How to prepare for uncertain migration futures (III)

- **Increase the capacity for acurate forecasting**
  - Enhancing the capabilities for surveillance, data collection, knowledge development, scenario planning and migration uncertainty analysis and diagnosis
  - Improve understanding of human behaviour and acknowledging that common sense and traditional rationality are not the sole basis for human decision-making
  - Improve understanding of systemic interconnections

- **Enhance smart governance and migration 'mainstreaming'**
  - Accelerate decisions – and delay some decisions
  - Increase adaptability of migration and integration infrastructure
  - Prepare for the short term.
  - Regularly and systematically reviewing decision-making and communication processes;
  - Increase flexibility of migration governance through coordination, adaptation and innovation in response to changing situations and new indications of emerging risks;
  - **"Mainstreaming" migration**
    - Governance (coordination of multi-actor networks)
    - Policies (enhance policy coherence across multiple policy areas)
    - Discourses (nurture evidence-based discourse)

Thank you very much!

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