

## IMISCOE 2020 - PANEL

### „Bridging the Gap between Migration Research and Policymaking“

1. July 2020 (online)

#### Chair:

- **Julia Lendorfer**  
Head of the Research and Migration Law Unit at the IOM Country Office for Austria

#### Panelists:

- **Marie McAuliffe**  
Head of the Migration Policy Research Division at IOM Headquarters in Geneva
- **Helen Dempster**  
Assistant Director and Senior Associate for Policy Outreach for the Migration, Displacement, and Humanitarian Policy Programme at the Center for Global Development
- **Cillian Nolan**  
Associate Director for Policy at J-PAL Europe, hosted by the Paris School of Economics

## INTRODUCTION

The disconnect between migration policy debates and migration realities has encouraged many people, including policymakers, to advocate more ‘evidence-based’ policymaking (see [Ruhs et al 2019](#)). The need for rapid and evidenced-based decision-making has become increasingly critical, but at the same time, we cannot expect of policymakers to sieve through a wealth of academic literature nor commission studies for every decision or policy relevant outcome.

*How can we bridge the gap between research, policy and public debate? How can we translate research and existing evidence into digestible and practice-oriented information for decision makers and the wider public? Intermediary institutions such as policy think tanks and research centres have attempted to build this bridge. How can we build on their achievements and advance a constructive approximation of research, policy and public debate in the field of migration?*

Leading representatives from academia, policy and related tertiary organizations debated these questions with a specific focus on proposing constructive and innovative solutions at the [2020 Annual IMISCOE Conference](#). The panel "Bridging the Gap between Migration Research and Policymaking" was organized by the Research and Migration Law Unit at the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Country Office for Austria and chaired by [Julia Lendorfer](#).

The panellists provided a unique space for consultation and debate, drawing on their vast professional experience. [Marie McAuliffe \(IOM Geneva\)](#) provided an analysis of why gaps between policy and research exist and presented solutions of approximating research and policymaking. [Helen Dempster \(Center for Global Development\)](#) discussed the question of how policy think tanks are aiming to bridge the gap and the important role of communication in this endeavour. [Cillian Nolan \(J-PAL Europe\)](#) presented how researchers produce and disseminate policy relevant evidence.

## KEY TAKE-AWAYS

### MIGRATION RESEARCH AND POLICY CONTEXT

**(1) Context matters:** The context in which policy and research is being undertaken has dramatically changed and will continue to change. Information overload, a 24/7 media cycle and a rising complexity of issues all constitute new challenges. On the one hand, changes in politics as well as the “datafication” of policy worlds reshape the context in which research is undertaken. On the other hand, the distinction of opinion versus analysis is blurred by factors such as the rise in self-publishing.

**(2) Working methods in practice:** The working methods and value systems of academic research, media and policy making differ greatly. It is often challenging to communicate research findings adequately and disseminate them outside of academia. Policy makers rely on data sets and evidence to support their decisions, yet they often have limited time and resources to extract this information from extensive research papers. If researchers aim to influence the debate, it is essential to understand the policy processes and fora in which they are created. At the same time, public opinion and media discourses shape governments’ priorities. Hence it is important to address these channels as well.

**(3) Divergent objectives and incentive structures:** The policy sphere is embedded in national interests and geopolitical agendas, following the objective of safeguarding the nation. The incentives of academia are inherently different, with objectives such as to analyze data, identify nuances or examine assumptions. In other words, the core of research is to understand and analyse an issue, while the key task of policymakers is to solve it. This divergence can be addressed by rephrasing research questions from “what do we want to know” to “what do we want to solve”.

**(4) Changing the Overton Window:** The [Overton Window of Political Possibility](#) describes how ideas in society change over time and influence politics. The range of politically acceptable policies at a given time is limited and it is challenging for research to expand this range. It is thus essential to aim at slowly shifting the window. Arguing for small, incremental changes can improve existing policies with a greater chance of influencing governance in the long run. However, migration policy is a very complex field and change can take a long time or may not happen at all.

### COMMUNICATION AND DISSEMINATION

**(5) Communicating concepts:** To bridge the gap between migration research and policy making, communication is key. The decision for a certain communication channel depends on the intended outcome. Dialogues and webinars, for example, are particularly important to communicate findings to a broader audience. If researchers aim to influence policymakers, then short pieces like op-eds, blogs or newspaper articles may have more success. In addition, the emphasis on oral traditions in policymaking persist, hence a closed-door event or oral briefing may be more effective than a public event.

**(6) Telling a story:** To influence the policy world, research communication needs to target policymakers, the media and the public with the most compelling arguments for each group. Basically, the best story is most likely to get the most attention. To achieve this, communication must focus on the audience, find tailored stories for dissemination and engage in new communication models.



**(7) Expanding the focus:** To successfully communicate stories, it is important to expand the focus beyond migration. The current Covid-19 pandemic shows that public awareness of the essential contributions that migrant workers make, is increasing. Shifting the focus to different aspects, such as health, the labour market or skills development, may make the discussion more salient and less politicized. The [Center for Global Development](#), for example, started asking: “How can we improve working conditions for all?” and “How can skills gaps be overcome?”.

**(8) Public opinion and the media:** Most people are neither “pro” nor “against” migration, but part of the “moveable middle”. Targeting this group and bringing research findings into the public discourse has the potential to shift opinions. The representation of migrants in the media and the political discussion around migrants can further influence funding opportunities and national governance systems, as exemplified by the current Covid-19 crisis which shapes the general research focus and thematic calls for proposals.

## EXPANDING RESEARCH

**(9) Systemic biases and the role of geography:** The global distribution of international migration and health research publications in peer-reviewed journals shows that 90 per cent of such publications originate from researchers based in high-income countries and only 0.8 per cent from low-income countries (see [IOM World Migration Report 2020:70](#)). Research capacities are concentrated in the Global North. These funding resources are often only available to researchers from this particular region and/or for research in line with national interests. Yet, reviewing downloads of IOM research outputs (IOM WMR 2020:79) shows that a significant share thereof addresses developments in Africa and Asia. Hence, including and supporting the work of researchers from developing countries is essential. Support and capacity building initiatives – such as the [IOM’s Development Fund](#), the [IOM African Capacity Building Centre](#) and the [South-South Migration, Inequality and Development Hub](#) – aim to strengthen developing countries’ migration management capacities, support the development of migration policies and/or provide outreach and dissemination channels.

**(10) Building impact evaluation into the process of designing programmes and policies:** It is crucial to foster the application of evidence before scaling-up a programme or implementing it in a different context. Existing rigorous evaluation of social inclusion programmes in Europe is limited and there is room for innovation and improvement. To overcome this, [J-Pal Europe’s European Social Inclusive Initiative](#) is aiming to pair innovative programmes with academic researchers, define potential research questions and support the implementation of evaluations.

**(11) Safeguard independence and quality standards:** Not all research can and shall be policy driven. Researchers need to demonstrate relevance and ensure that scientific fundamentals are safeguarded. If a research grant asks for policy relevance, consider adding somebody to the team with expertise and training to communicate these findings to policy makers. Also, when signing research-contracts it is essential to safeguard academic independence and publishing rights, particularly when outcomes contrast funders’ expectations.

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