

Editorial

Definitions matter: migrants, immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees

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Migration, or movement of people, has been referred to as the third wave of globalization, following goods and capital. This phenomenon is growing in scope, complexity and impact. Human migration across borders is now at an all-time high, accounting for more than 258 million people or 3.4% of the population, a number that has doubled since 2000¹ and tripled since the 1970s. Human mobility is not, however, a new phenomenon. Migration has been constant in human history and has long been related to livelihoods, culture and disasters, with some of the earliest recordings demonstrated through petroglyphs in Azerbaijan, some 10 000 years old, depicting humans on the move.²

But if migration is so old, why does the meaning of the term ‘migrant’ vary among groups as divergent from the public, practitioners, to policymakers and experts? More so, if migrants travel different pathways, with different social determinants that are inextricably linked to health, how important is it for health professionals to have a clear definition and understanding of what a migrant is?

While the term refugee is precisely defined in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees³ and the 1967 Protocol,³ migrants are a heterogeneous group with no international consensus. An immigrant is the term used for a person after arriving in the destination country, whereas emigrant is one who migrates away. Migrant is a more neutral term as it disregards the direction of movement and may include migration within or across borders.⁴

Migrants can be defined in legal, administrative, research and statistical perspectives. They can be distinguished as to motives of those concerned such as economic, family reunion, or safety. Migration events can be defined in relation to place of birth, citizenship, place of residence or duration of stay.⁵ Different states refer to legal migration as regular, controlled or free migration.

Generally, ‘migrant’ is a term applied to persons moving within or between countries to improve their economic and social conditions. At its most basic, migration simply means a movement of people, including circumstances where people are forced to move. The International Organization for Migration provides clarity in the definition where a migrant is defined as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from his/her habitual place of

residence, regardless of the person’s legal status, whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary, what the causes for the movement are, or what the length of the stay is⁶; this includes economic migrants as well as those who have been forcibly displaced (e.g. refugees and internally displaced persons). This definition addresses internal—movement within a country, as opposed to external (international)—movement across borders; economic⁷—for enhancement of quality of life (where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of ‘personal convenience’ and without intervention of an external compelling factor), as opposed to forced—from violence, conflict and disasters to gain safety and protection; as well as regular, a legal authority to enter, compared to irregular where the presence does not fit within the country’s legislation. These categories are further described in Table 1.

These technical definitions, concepts and categories of migrants are informed by geographic, legal, political, methodological, temporal and other factors. Moreover, the lack of agreed consensus of other migrant typologies such as short-term, circular, asylum seekers, irregular and transit migrants, as well as trafficked persons, has been highlighted as creating difficulties in the measurement of international migration.⁸ The lack of consensus in definitions means that the public perception of states being flooded with asylum seekers (‘migrants’) in a world where national borders are disappearing, with transnational communities, vested only in economic interests and political populism, means the humanitarian aspects to migration are diluted.

As such, for health workers there is value in defining a migrant. First, it allows us to better understand migrant communities and migration patterns, limiting contradictory or misleading information, allowing comparability of migration statistics among countries and evidence-based programme and policy-making. The great diversity among migrants, from country of birth, migration patterns and reasons for migration as well as cultural, socio-economic status, educational, occupational and language backgrounds, has important underlying health risks and status.

Second, by having a clear understanding of the term migrant and its various categories, we can better address their safety and health. Concerns for migrants’ safety and rights have grown at the international level, demonstrated by the September 2016

Table 1. Some migration terminology, adapted from IOM glossary on Migration and OECD, glossary of statistical terms

Asylum seeker	A person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than his or her own and awaits a decision on the application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments
Contract migrant workers	Persons working in a country other than their own under contractual arrangements that set limits on the period of employment and on the specific job held by the migrant
Displaced person	A person who flees his or her State or community due to fear or dangers for reasons other than those which would make him or her a refugee
Economic migrant	A person leaving his or her habitual place of residence to settle outside his or her country of origin in order to improve his or her quality of life. This term is often loosely used to distinguish from refugees fleeing persecution and is also similarly used to refer to persons attempting to enter a country without legal permission and/or using asylum procedures without bona fide cause. It may equally be applied to persons leaving their country of origin for the purpose of employment
Foreign migrant workers	Foreigners admitted by the receiving State for the specific purpose of exercising an economic activity remunerated from within the receiving country. Their length of stay is usually restricted as is the type of employment they can hold
Foreign students	Persons admitted by a country other than their own, usually under special permits or visas, for the specific purpose of following a particular course of study in an accredited institution of the receiving country
Foreigners whose status is regularized	Persons whose entry or stay has not been sanctioned by the receiving State or who have violated the terms of their admission but who are nevertheless allowed to regularize their status. Although most persons regularizing their status are already present in the receiving country for some time, their regularization may be taken to represent the time of their official admission as international migrants
Internally displaced persons (IDPs)	Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border
Irregular migrant	A person who, owing to unauthorized entry, breach of a condition of entry or the expiry of his or her visa, lacks legal status in a transit or host country. The definition covers inter alia those persons who have entered a transit or host country lawfully but have stayed for a longer period than authorized or subsequently taken up unauthorized employment (also called clandestine/undocumented migrant or migrant in an irregular situation). The term 'irregular' is preferable to 'illegal' because the latter carries a criminal connotation and is seen as denying migrants' humanity
Itinerant worker	A migrant worker who, having his or her habitual residence in one State, has to travel to another State or States for short periods, owing to the nature of his or her occupation
Long-term migrants	A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (12 months), so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence. From the perspective of the country of departure, the person will be a long-term emigrant, and from that of the country of arrival, the person will be a long-term immigrant
Migrants	According to the United Nations recommendations, migrants consist of four categories: long-term immigrants (or emigrants), short-term immigrants (or emigrants); residents returning after (or leaving for) a period of working abroad; and nomads
Migrants for settlement	Migrants for settlement are foreigners granted the permission to stay for a lengthy or unlimited period, who are subject to virtually no limitations regarding the exercise of an economic activity
Migrant workers	See Foreign migrant workers
Principle migrant	The migrant within a family group is the person who is considered by immigration authorities to be the head of the family and whose admission depends on that of the other members of the family
Refugee	A person who, 'owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country
Returning migrants	Persons returning to their country of citizenship after having been international migrants (whether short-term or long-term) in another country and who are intending to stay in their own country for at least a year
Seasonal migrant workers	Persons employed by a country other than their own for only part of a year because the work they perform depends on seasonal conditions. They are a subcategory of foreign migrant workers
Settlement	See Migrants for settlement
Short-term migrant	A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least three months but less than a year (12 months) except in cases where the movement to that country is for purposes of recreation, holiday, visits to friends or relatives, business, medical treatment or religious pilgrimage

New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants⁹; and the 2018 Global Compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, which focuses on these two issues is an indicator of the heightened concerns regarding *unsafe, disorderly and irregular* migration.

Third, despite the adoption of the World Health Assembly Resolution on the Health of Migrants¹⁰ and the recognition by

the development community that health is central to sustainable development, health ministries have not been central to the debate on migration and development. A multi-sectoral participation in the global migration and development debate is required, including the participation of national ministries of health along with other sectors such as labour, social protection, immigration and law enforcement. The perception that 'health'

should be siloed to health specialists, even though many of the causes and solutions to improve migrants' health are found in other sectors, hampers the overall well-being of migrants

Migration touches all States and people in an era of transnationalism. Migration is intertwined with geopolitics, trade and cultural exchange and provides opportunities for States, businesses and communities to benefit enormously. Migration has helped improve people's lives in both origin and destination countries and has offered opportunities for millions of people worldwide to forge safe and meaningful lives abroad as well as contributing enormously to those societies. At this critical time in history, with increasing global migration, the highest level of forced migration in seven decades, in the context of the escalating divisive and xenophobic political discourse, rather than pursuing the globalization of indifference, as medical professionals we need to advocate and promote evidence-based discussions on migrant health issues. Through clearly understanding the term migrant and the various typologies, we are more likely to shape well-constructed solutions to meet the health and well-being needs of migrant populations, taking into consideration the circumstances and conditions of their journey and the reasons for movement.

Conflict of interest: None declared.

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