

People flow: taking stock of the first round

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The innovative 'thought experiment' about how best to manage 21st century European migration has provoked a rich, diverse debate in openDemocracy. Here, People Flow author Theo Veenkamp reviews the debate so far, and reaffirms the core principles of pragmatism, firmness and imagination which animate the report's ideas.

The primary purpose of *People Flow* – the report I wrote together with Tom Bentley and Alessandra Buonfino – was to produce the opening statement for a new debate on migration, particularly migration to Europe. The variety, richness and depth of the initial reactions on [openDemocracy](#) suggest we have struck a strongly resonating chord.

Now, as the first round of the debate on [openDemocracy](#) comes to a close, it is time to take stock. First, I want to clarify some misunderstandings about our approach that appear in several contributions. Second, to enrich our main arguments with some of the input made by participants in the debate so far. Third, we must identify key issues and further questions that deserve additional exploration in the second round of the *People Flow* debate.

The secondary purpose of our report was to make a specific contribution to the continuing search for a more workable approach to the managing of migration, in two particular regards. On an *operational* level, we have begun designing an initial and very tentative

prototype of a set of mechanisms for 'multiple flow management'.

In addition, on a more *systemic* level, we have tried to identify the first and even more provisional contours of attendant new systems of governance, wealth creation and social welfare that might be a necessary support to such an approach. It has not hitherto been possible to give close attention to these more specific elements of the *People Flow* report. But I would like to conclude this 'stock-taking' by singling out the most crucial of these elements for further scrutiny, through the [openDemocracy](#) debate.

But first, lessons to be learned so far.

People Flow: clarifications and learnings

On the pages of [openDemocracy](#) the concept of *People Flow* has triggered the full spectrum of emotions usually evoked by the issue of migration. That in itself is a clear sign that the concept is relevant to the current debate. But what perhaps needs additional clarification is that its chief function is to place that entire debate in

a different perspective, through the energetic promulgation of two crucial messages.

The first message we wish to convey is that, for all sorts of reasons, the movement of people from one place to another and their resettlement, is an intrinsic feature of the human species.

The second message we want to put across, in an unassuming and practical way, is that much can be learnt about managing people movement from the way *other* flows, such as waterflows, have been managed to date. Of course, the better we understand the specific characteristics of a flow, the better able we are to optimise its opportunities and minimise its risks, without ever assuming that we could be fully in control of it.

We were well aware that our core emphasis on *People Flow* would run the risk of people jumping to the conclusion that we simply proposed to let go and move with the (people) flow. This is certainly not the case. We are neither for nor against (im) migration: but, in the best pragmatic manner, we accept the reality of continued migration, and strive to be equally honest and realistic about risks and opportunities.

In the final analysis, we want to design innovative ways to deal with migration that optimise opportunities and minimise risks for all concerned. At the same time, we admit that we are quite outspoken in our conviction that in this case above all, control is a dangerous illusion and fear a counterproductive adviser.

However, that does not prevent us from taking seriously the fear of immigration which is smouldering among the electorate in many European countries as a collective intuition that something is going terribly wrong. We do therefore not succumb to the easy way out of simply dismissing such intuition as inadmissible xenophobia and racism. Our primary concern is the strategy the public bodies responsible need to adopt in order to react appropriately to this fear.

The *People Flow* report, therefore, is essentially an attempt to identify partially new elements for such a strategy, building less on fear and more on hope, relying less on migration control and more on flow management: a strategy which is at the same time less crisis-driven and more sustainable in the long term.

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An endless dynamic of settlement and movement

To devise such a strategy, it is crucial properly to grasp the dynamics that feed and shape migration. In this respect, some of the contributions of participants in the *openDemocracy* debate have been quite helpful, not so much in fundamentally changing our argument, but certainly in readjusting emphasis and terminology to create a more balanced and lucid picture of all the factors involved.

If we are going to view migration as part of people flow, it helps to single out for identification two of its all-time drivers, and three specifically modern factors influencing the size and patterning of modern people flow.

The two all-time drivers are:

- the need to have a home (stable, settled, rooted, clearly distinguished from other homes, embedded in a larger group to which one belongs)
- the need to move (curiosity-driven, prospect-driven or disaster-driven).

Indeed, as Anthony Browne and Tomas Hammar argue, most people in most societies past and present have never needed to migrate to find a home. In fact it is a crucial part of our argument that the small minorities (usually) who resettle, past and present, have nevertheless often made and are making a big difference. Add to this the fact that from time to time large multitudes were and are driven from home by disaster – sometimes making a significant impact, sometimes just fading away – and you have a certain perspective on human history. Viewed from this angle, what we see is an endless interaction between changing patterns of both settlement and movement, often triggered by relatively small groups of migrants.

It is always difficult to read the signs of one's own time properly. But we can safely assume that in this timeless and endless interaction between ever-changing patterns of settlement and movement, three typically modern factors are intervening in a dramatic fashion.

They are: the enormous acceleration of the technological development of relatively cheap means of communication and travel; the unprecedented spread of wealth, some sort of rule of law and social security; and the equally unprecedented proximity of the many 'haves' to the still many more 'have-nots', coupled with

the growing potential of the 'have-nots' to seriously destabilise the world of the haves, directly or indirectly.

The related pull, push and friction factors are probably just as strong as when people moved from rural to urban areas in the 19th century. The resulting people flow dynamics are far too complex for effective control. But it is perfectly possible to identify powerful levers for influencing the flow dynamics in partially self-propelling and constructive directions, thereby creating more favourable conditions for minimising risk and maximising opportunity. In our initial 'thought experiment', we identified four such levers:

- facilitating self-reliant mobility (including voluntary migration) within clear conditions (the EU mobility service points (EMSPs))
- the creation of individual opportunities for the displaced within a constructive wider context (the International Transit Centres (ITCs))
- swift protection of Geneva Convention refugees on the basis of their human rights
- promotion of peaceful coexistence between new arrivals and the receiving population in neighbourhoods, schools and nations in a pragmatic, firm and innovative manner.

In the concise summary published on [openDemocracy](#) (and of course more extensively in the original report) one can read in more detail about these four levers as we imagined them in their first and tentative version. For a proper overall understanding it is important, in addition, to understand in what way these levers differ from prevailing practices and views. In short, how are they innovative?

The challenge of friction management

The European Mobility Service Points are meant as a first practical proposal for enshrining a new division of responsibilities between those governments, individuals and organisations directly involved in the international flow (increasingly back and forth) of people. The dominant idea behind EMSPs is to rely primarily on self-regulating networks between the potential 'movers' and their natural counterparts in the country of destination: employers, universities, hotels, sponsored residents.

Receiving governments are entrusted with the responsibility for establishing the overall conditions, and supervising the functioning of these self-regulating

networks, scrutinising on a regular basis the resulting data for security and health risks.

If the EMSPs are functioning properly they could gradually evolve into 21st century 'smart borders', maintained by the joint commitment of all governments concerned, including the sending countries. In addition, it is possible to imagine a gradual extension of the services rendered via EMSPs, especially ones that reinforce and multiply the economic and other benefits of an ever-expanding, self-reliant international human mobility, until these become mechanisms for facilitating and shaping the gradual integration of Europe in the evolving world labour market (Nigel Harris).

The key innovation we have incorporated into our International Transit Centres is to give new meaning to the concept of 'transit'. ITCs are not meant for the self-reliant, but for those who are displaced and robbed of a personal perspective to which they can commit themselves.

The main purpose of the ITCs is to provide shelter, and then to try to use such provision to evolve a new personal perspective, taking into account the specific possibilities and limitations of the persons involved, preferably in their region of origin. It is therefore an attempt on a grassroots level to link humanitarian and development ambitions, making optimal use of the locked-up potential and energy of displaced persons.

Clearly, ITCs are doomed to failure if they cannot become connected to wider systems of economic development, humanitarian intervention, disaster management and international cooperation (Victor Youndji). If well-designed, ITCs could even function as welcome catalysts of local development in vulnerable regions, rather than as unwelcome 'dumping grounds' of the desperate.

The third lever of the multiple flow management approach as sketched in the report is swift protection of Geneva Convention refugees on the basis of their human rights.

The innovation that will enable us to make this ambition a more realistic goal is again on the one hand to restrict all specific refugee-related activities to 'just' providing protection as intended in the Geneva Convention; while on the other hand ensuring the same package of treatment and facilities to all displaced persons, regardless of whether they are refugee-claimants or not, thus reducing the special incentives connected to the refugee-claimant status as

much as possible. Hopefully this would lead both to a substantial reduction of the number of displaced persons claiming Geneva Convention refugee status who would at least as effectively be helped by ITC-support, and to a substantial improvement in the chances for refugees who are in real need of the type of protection that the Geneva Convention affords (Gil Loescher, Tomas Hammar).

This is only possible when all refugee-claimants who have been admitted to the assessment procedure would stay temporarily in the nearest ITC. As Gregor Noll, Gil Loescher and James Milner have pointed out in their comments on the UK version of ITC (much more modest in its ambition than the concept proposed by us) that would create unacceptable risks arising out of the bad human rights environment in which ITC's would be located in most cases. I think they have a valid point. In our thought exercise, such vulnerability could be greatly reduced by making it a requirement, if necessary, that ITC's have extra-territorial status comparable to the legal position of embassies. Such status would create better prospects for implementing the key functions of an ITC anyway.

The fourth lever in our multiple flow management approach is of an altogether different nature. It concerns not so much direct flow management but rather friction management, directed at dealing with the frictions that accompany people flow as we can expect it in the coming decades.

Three guidelines: pragmatism, firmness, imagination

Such friction management has great indirect impact on the smooth functioning of and support for the three levers identified above. If the inevitable frictions are not properly addressed, fear and mutual antagonism will in the end create a political climate that does not permit such innovations as those underpinning flow-oriented levers. It is crucial to get this friction management right.

We propose to try to move away from the present emotional and politically polarised migration context, by gradually developing a new mix of pragmatism, firmness and imagination for dealing with the ongoing frictions of all sorts which will continue to beset

international people flow for the foreseeable future.

The first element, pragmatism, is probably the hardest to achieve. It implies accepting that which you cannot change, adjusting your ambitions and terminology accordingly, but always seeking the most appropriate way for minimising risks and maximising opportunities.

The single most challenging type of people flow friction in many European countries seems to be the enormous difference in strategies (Tariq Modood, Belinda Brown) and time-frames for participation in the new environment not only between but also within different nationalities. In this regard, the dominant political reflex seems to consist in prescribing one strategy in preference to another, especially certain patterns of housing and schooling, whose enforcement sometimes results in new, worse frictions than those originally addressed.

In view of the ever-increasing diversity of the influx of temporary and permanent new arrivals, we propose one principle as a departure-point for policy that deals with the ensuing frictions: namely, that of unequal but equivalent strategies for participation in the new environment, coupled with evidence-based analysis of risks and opportunities and a toolbox to deal with these in a tailor-made manner.

A classroom with fifteen nationalities is in itself not more or less superior than a classroom with a large majority of those sharing the same descent, either indigenous or foreign. It is up to the teacher to identify the way to provide education and personal development that best fits the specific characteristics of his or her class. Our key point is that he or she should have both the tools that are needed and the freedom to choose the most appropriate mix. The other side of this principle is clear and uniform standards of overall educational quality, equally applicable to all situations.

Several participants in the [openDemocracy](#) debate have stressed the importance of (even-handed application of) human rights to newcomers in this respect. Indeed, this is an aspect we did not cover substantially in our report. But they are right that it

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forms a crucial element in the set of standards, guidelines and rules that both restrict and protect the space for manoeuvre when it comes to a pragmatic approach to people flow friction management. They are an essential part – and this is the second element of the mix – of the firmness we advocate when we write that as diversity increases, so should our strict adherence to a common set of rules embodying democracy, the rule of law and freedom for all (Cem Özdemir; Delia Grigore, Martin Kovats, Julian Kramer and Florin Botonogu translate this principle for the position of the age-old ‘newcomers’ of the Roma).

The third element we advocate is more imagination applied to best practice, for instance in stimulating open competition between different schools and neighbourhoods over their score on a ‘social isolation index’. We further recommend finding new strategies to connect with countries of origin in ways that turn patterns of multiple belonging and loyalty from threats into opportunities.

Finally, language is a key aspect of constructive friction management. We propose a shift in vocabulary, that

distances us equally from the type of multiculturalism that underestimates the real risks, and from assimilation policies that underestimate the real opportunities, replacing them with the pragmatic goal of peaceful co-existence.

We should be absolutely honest about the sense of real loss experienced when so much that is dear to us seems irretrievably gone forever, for new arrivals just as much as for the receiving population. In a way, whether we like it or not, 21st century people flow forces us to relearn the art of peaceful co-existence.

If we succeed, that could lay the basis for much more positive, complex and fruitful forms of shared identity and mutual understanding to emerge between different communities and social groups over time. As we stressed in our report we think that the arts (Jenny Rae Stanton and Diana Fabrizi), media, universities and religions (see also Tariq Modood, Usman Sheikh and Abdal-Hakim Murad for different ways to involve Islam in this) can and should accept co-responsibility for working towards this additional, more inspiring goal.

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