MIGRATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

Introduction and problem analysis

It is self-evident that large-scale migration of people has consequences for the communities they arrive into. We live in a world that is experiencing growing populations (often with expanding numbers of middle class people who are more likely to move) and that is increasingly interconnected. Most analyses therefore indicate that the majority of countries in the world face increasing people movement, often people moving for short durations and for a range of reasons. Governments will thus increasingly be expected to grapple with the consequences of migration for communities on the ground.

There is a lot of academic evidence on the impacts on communities of migration. How can such research help inform the choices made by policy makers and governments to respond more effectively to the challenges?

Research offers answers but it is worth being clear upfront that the research offers many answers because the literature is vast: literature reviews that use search terms for "migration" and "social cohesion" (even when additional terms are included that are related, such as "integration") cover upwards of ten thousand papers. Even if it were possible to sift and organize such a literature, drawing out a clear answer is unlikely to succeed as every major academic review of migration, integration and social cohesion underlines the fact that the terms and definitions are contested. Just as importantly, research definitions of migration are not widely shared. An "immigrant" in the UN definition — widely accepted by governments — is a person borne outside of a country that moves to another country with the intention of staying 12 months or more. However, this definition does not equate to most people's notions of migrants or foreigners. As a result, no one agrees on what an integrated or socially cohesive society that incorporates immigrants looks like.

In previous work for the UK's Migration Advisory Committee, we took an inductive rather than a deductive approach to the question of how migration impacts social cohesion, looking at the different clusters of research work that have been undertaken on the subject (especially quantitative studies). Acknowledging an inevitable degree of authorial curation, we outlined three areas that researchers have concentrated on. These three areas map to three foundational questions:

1. Who are we? Social cohesion and integration is often seen as important to the (national or federal) identity of the country. In part, integration policies and measures may be deployed to respond to the perceived dilution of distinctive national identities. This crisis has been both fueled by and reflected in the rise of far-right, anti-immigrant political movements that are principally concerned with perceived cultural threats. The national or federal level matters a lot, even if it is only in the sense of imagined social cohesion.
2. Are they like us and can they become us? Much research refers to the outcomes of immigrants themselves — whether particular ethnic groups have jobs, what level of education they attain, whether they commit crime at certain levels and so on. Typically the debates are related to empirical measures that reflect how well immigrants (or the children of immigrants) are doing compared to the societal average.
3. Can we live together? This is perhaps best understood as communities that are safe and where residents coexist harmoniously and demonstrate respect for one another. Most quantitative studies are based on data that ask variants of the question of how people "get along" with their neighbours. Qualitative work — often long-term ethnographic work —provides further, rich insights into how communities interact. At heart though, social cohesion is about place and specifically local communities and neighbourhoods.

It is important to note that these three clusters are not mutually exclusive. A socially cohesive community (as reported by local residents) may be affected by changing national identity or whether new or established migrant groups are doing well or badly in the labour market for example. Naturally this has policy implications too. A shared sense of national identity, emphasised in government strategy towards integration and cohesion, can draw on, or repel, immigrant national or ethnic identity and their ability to be included in different spheres of life.

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Defining success

The most important decision for governments, in our view, is to clearly articulate the goals of policy in respect

of migration and social cohesion and what might constitute success.

This is far from straightforward because of at least three complexities.

The first complexity is that integration and social cohesion is both a means and an end. To decide the ideal endpoint, which governments need to do, may require trade offs — for instance the goal might be to see immigrants integrated on the basis of a basket of objective indicators or the goal might be local cohesive communities on the basis of enduring good relationships between neighbours. To set goals in priority order when in the middle of a dynamic, shifting process is hard but necessary if governments are to make and assess progress towards an endpoint.

Second, immigrant groups may have very different outcomes and trajectories depending on what sphere of human life one is discussing. Different immigrants and immigrant groups have significantly different voting patterns, settlement patterns, types of social and cultural interactions, employment and wage rates, civic participation rates, and so on. Incisive analysis of immigrant integration needs to disaggregate migrants according to factors which may influence their integration outcomes — in particular their origin country, length of residency and skill levels. Analysis should also not lump together different forms of migration – the pattern of integration outcomes is likely to be very different for refugees than labour migrants arriving in a country for work for example. Ultimately, the key to understanding whether or not governments are making progress is whether the trend is towards a narrowing (success) or widening (failure) with the majority population.

Last, as many studies show, much of the integration gap or social cohesion problems are down to the majority society (through laws, customs, attitudes) that are responsible in part for the under achievement. The literature is clear that the attitudes and behaviours (typically through institutions) of the existing population have an important bearing on integration outcomes (in employment, housing, marriage etc.) for immigrants.

Management of social cohesion

Research offers different answers to the questions of living together that point in different directions. For instance, researchers - such as Robert Puttnam - have indicated that there is a trade off between diversity and cohesion (i.e. the increase in diversity that is a consequence of migration weakens community cohesion). Other research, including our work, suggests there is no evidence for this, at least in Europe, and social cohesion in communities is driven by poverty levels and public service delivery, and not by immigrants themselves. However, this does not mean that a sudden influx of immigration will not cause local issues and negatively affect social cohesion. Immigrants may, for example, affect community stability or be perceived to drain public resources. A rapid influx of newcomers usually entails lower per-person funding of public services, and for major influxes there is inevitably going to be significant and difficult adjustment. However, in the longer term there is no evidence that immigrants or the diversity they produce negatively affect neighborhood cohesion.

There are important insights here for the management of immigration. For instance, where opinion regarding immigrants in local communities is particularly sensitive, it is useful to know how far this is connected to the scale or proportion of immigrant settlement. It may be that the crucial destabilizer is not absolute numbers but rather the rate of settlement across relatively short time periods.

Overall though, the explanations for different research findings are likely to be found in differences in historical and institutional contexts. Country context matters for social cohesion, far more than it does for other areas of public policy. For example, projections of national identity typically draw on heritage and tradition; immigrant group outcomes depend on levels of institutional discrimination and openness of labour markets or education systems; and how communities think of their new neighbours depends on the pre-existing state of their neighbourhood, and so on.

In the final analysis, social cohesion and immigrant outcomes are more affected by broad currents of public

policy: active labour-market policy interventions, the state of the economy, regional economic drivers, public spending on deprived areas, and education policies for example. Providing targeted resources (especially to deal with short-term influxes) and ensuring leadership encourages opportunities for all (starting with inclusive rhetoric) within a system that manages diversity and has strong non-discrimination norms offers the best chance of increasing social cohesion in the face of migration.

Bibliography

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