

Multilateralism for Mobility: Interagency Cooperation in a Post-pandemic World¹

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Published as Naujoks, Daniel. 2020. “Multilateralism for Mobility: Interagency Cooperation in a Post-pandemic World.” In: Ibrahim Sirkeci and Jeffrey H. Cohen (eds.), *Human Mobility and Pandemic: Understanding the Pandemic and Human Mobility*. London: Transnational Press, pp 183-193.

The last decade has seen considerable growth in multilateral approaches to human mobility. A host of partnerships among international organizations have come into existence on human mobility, a term that refers to the broad spectrum of movements associated with migration and displacement. Since the landmark first High-level Dialogue on Migration and Development, held at the United Nations General Assembly in 2006, collaborations between multilateral organizations have increased continuously, both in terms of quantity and quality. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its global and wide-reaching impacts on virtually all aspects of life, has affected these modes of cooperation and will continue to do so in the future. To understand future scenarios of interagency cooperation on human mobility, this chapter outlines the structural determinants influencing such partnerships. This includes structures put in place before the beginning of the pandemic, lessons from the immediate response to COVID-19, and a projection of how future features may impact cooperation in the times ahead (Figure 1). Due to constraints in space and scope, this essay limits the exploration to a systemic level of analysis² and to collaborations between international organizations, especially among UN entities.³ The role of international organizations is important. While the real impact of international organizations is being scrutinized, Weiss (2011, Chapter 2) uses the counterfactual of a world without the UN and its ideas to show that multilateral organizations have influenced key norms and outcomes that have changed the world.

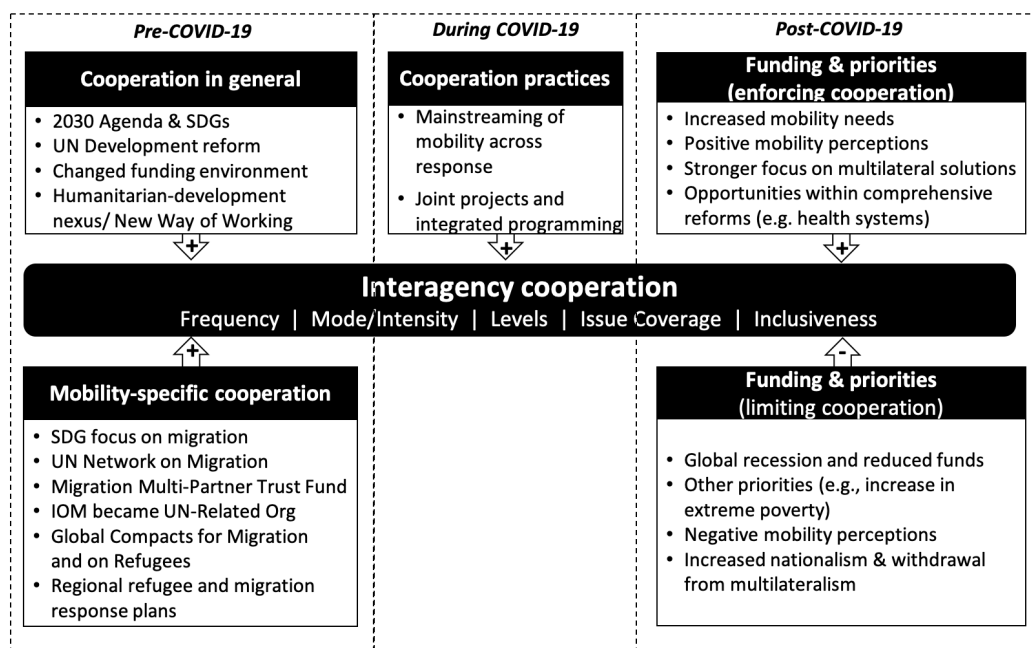
This essay briefly unpacks five key dimensions of interagency cooperation. It then highlights structural factors and trends for interagency cooperation on human mobility and discusses the impact of the pandemic for future partnerships.

¹ I benefitted from insightful comments and suggestions by Jonathan Prentice, Elaine McGregor, Riad Meddeb, Irena Vojáčková-Sollorano, Valentina Mele, Luca Renda, Nigina Khaitova, and Kristin Adina Klein. For excellent research assistance, I thank Luz Gil.

² For more on systemic analysis of international regimes, see Keohane (1982).

³ This includes UN agencies, funds, and programs, as well as related organizations.

Figure 1: Systemic factors determining cooperation between international organizations on human mobility



Source: Author.

Note: +/- in the arrows indicate a positive or negative effect on interagency cooperation, respectively.

The pre-pandemic foundations for cooperation

The system of international organizations is characterized by a high degree of fragmentation (Karns, Mingst and Stiles 2015). It includes a multitude of UN entities, Bretton Woods institutions – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) –, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), regional organizations, such as the African Union, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and many more. Several institutions and mechanisms at the global, regional and country level aim at addressing the threat of incoherent approaches, avoiding that different actors work at cross purposes, or increasing synergies between entities and activities.

Interagency cooperation can be measured in five main dimensions. The (1) frequency of cooperation, (2) the mode or intensity of cooperation, (3) the level of cooperation, especially whether cooperation takes place at the headquarters, regional, national or sub-national level, (4) the extent of issues covered by collaborative systems and (5) to what extent a broad variety of agencies partake (inclusiveness). The continuum of cooperation modes starts with basic *coordination*. Coordination aims at avoiding conflict and overlap between the activities of different actors. It is often limited to sharing information in institutional working groups. *Cooperation* or *collaboration* involves a higher intensity partnership that enhances the activities through the buy-in, resources, and expertise of the involved actors. The mode with the highest interaction intensity is based on full-fledged *joint, integrated programming* that creates synergies between the unique strengths of the involved partners.

Truly integrated programmes between international organizations are still an exception and we lack a thorough understanding of the factors that impede or enable more and better collaboration.⁴ Changes in cooperation could take place in any of the dimensions outlined above. And while we might see increases in some dimensions, other might decrease. However, this short analysis is limited to highlighting how the response to the global COVID-19 crisis and expected changes in funding and mobility priorities in its aftermath will influence interagency cooperation. As this essay cannot examine the specific effects on the frequency, modes, levels, issue-coverage, and inclusiveness of interagency cooperation, I will use *cooperation* or *collaboration* as general terms that may include a variety of the above modes and dimensions.

General trends and factors influencing inter-agency cooperation

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic comes on the heels of a number of reform processes that will continue to shape interagency cooperation. These include the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals that require integrated approaches across a broad range of sectors and stakeholders (Monkelbaan 2019). Since the beginning of conceptualizing the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs) and the ‘Delivering as One’ approach, several UN reforms aimed to bring more meaningful cooperation to the fragmented UN country teams (Mele and Cappellaro 2018). The internal guidance on the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework – as the revamped UNDAFs are labelled now – stresses that the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development demands a UN development system that is agile, cohesive and responsive to a country’s priorities and people’s needs” (United Nations 2019, 4). To this end, the Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework is placed at the heart of the latest reform, as the UN Development System’s collective offer to support countries in addressing key SDG priorities and gaps (p.5). The framework is meant to trigger a review of the UN country team configuration to ensure it has the capacities to deliver and comes with new tools for coordination and accountability (ibid.). Thus, it envisions that UN entities “contribute their expertise, tools and platforms in a coherent, integrated and synergistic manner” (para 9). Lastly, while the collaboration across the UN working between country offices was institutionally limited, the reform specifically aims at identifying opportunities for cross-border dialogue and collaboration, which is particularly important for human mobility issues. While there are many reasons why actual collaborations may fall short of these lofty aspirations, the reform illustrates the system’s tendency toward more cooperation between its entities.⁵

In 2016, the UN system renewed its ambition to bridge the so-called ‘humanitarian-development divide’ (Grandi 2016). In fact, the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit established a ‘New Way of Working’ that is supposed to move beyond traditional silos, and work across mandates, sectors and

⁴ While cooperation between states has received considerable attention (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Barrett 2007; Wivel and Paul 2019), the literature on interagency cooperation, especially at the country level, is still nascent. Based on an analysis of the UN framework to ‘deliver as one,’ Mele and Cappellaro (2018) identify two coordinating practices that help overcome limitations of inter-UN-agency cooperation, namely, *systemic thinking* and *jointly mobilizing resources* and consensus.

⁵ In addition, fundings structures are key determinants for cooperation. Whereas many donors prefer earmarked fundings and venue shopping, there is tendency to shift away from earmarked fundings and increase competition for funds. The new, more complex funding environment is another key factor in favor of more partnerships.

institutional boundaries to work on the basis of joint problem statements, identify and coordinate collective outcomes, and draw on the comparative advantage of specific actors. Although for the time being, these objectives remain more aspirations than practice, the New Way of Working creates incentive structures for international organizations to cooperate, especially on refugees and other forcibly displaced populations (Hanatani, Gómez and Kawaguchi 2018).⁶

Foundations for mobility-specific cooperation

Echoing the general trend toward more meaningful collaboration, several normative, institutional and operational developments incentivize closer partnerships among international organizations and UN agencies when it comes to human mobility.⁷

First, the SDGs contain a number of explicit references to migration. This includes the necessity to protect migrant workers' labor rights, facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration, reduce the transaction costs of migrant remittances, as well as establish scholarships that can affect student mobility and eliminate trafficking in persons.⁸

Second, the adoption of the UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in 2018 provide strong incentives for closer interagency cooperation. Within its objective 23 to “strengthen international cooperation and global partnerships,” the GCM stresses that “we require concerted efforts at global, regional, national and local levels, including a coherent United Nations system” (para 40). In the lead up to the process that culminated in the adoption of the two Global Compacts, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) officially became an UN-related organization. While the IOM was already part of several UN country teams before, this change further increases the possibilities for cooperating with other UN entities and enables the IOM to officially contribute to UN country teams' approach to migration.⁹

Third, three iterations of a migration-centered cooperation platform have intended to foster stronger inter-UN collaboration. In the preparation of the UN's first High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development in 2006, the informal Geneva Migration Group that was founded three years earlier, transitioned into the Global Migration Group (GMG). The GMG grew considerably over the next 12 years and saw several joint publications, guidance notes and incentives to work at the country level. With the adoption of the UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) in 2018, the GMG became the UN Network on Migration, with the objective to “ensure

⁶ In some cases, progress has been under the New Way of Working, see Center on International Cooperation (2019).

⁷ For the role of international organizations in the global governance of migration, see Newland (2010); Betts (2011) and Geiger and Pécoud (2014).

⁸ For an in-depth discussion of the SDGs' direct migration targets and indicators, see Naujoks (2018) and Foresti and Hagen-Zanker (2017) and Global Migration Group (2017) from the applied UN perspective. Naujoks' (2019) *mobility mandala* shows that human mobility is a key aspect of economic growth and employment, health, education, democratic governance, climate change and other sectors, linking it not only to the explicit migration references but to all 17 SDGs and nearly all of their 169 targets—often in multiple ways.

⁹ In addition, another underlying cause for this development was that the earlier reform of the UN development cooperation system in 2014/2015 tended to exclude the IOM from UNCTs (McGregor, forthcoming), which would have impeded cooperation on mobility issues.

effective and coherent system-wide support to implementation, [...] follow-up and review of the Global Compact” (GCM, para 44-45).¹⁰ Importantly, the Network on Migration has an express mandate from the member states, a clear focus, namely to support the implementation of the GCM, including at the country level and a stronger executive structure with important implications for the promotion of cooperation. Following the GCM’s call for a Start-Up Fund for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, the UN Network for Migration established a Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) as a UN pooled fund. The Migration MPTF is expected to “contribute to ensuring robust, coordinated, inclusive and coherent United Nations system-wide support to Member States in their implementation, follow-up and review of the GCM” (MPTF, 2019, p.5).

Fourth, several regional refugee and migration response plans have led to effective partnerships, most notably the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) in Response to the Syria Crisis that is co-led by UNHCR and UNDP, bringing together over 270 partners in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.¹¹

Interagency Cooperation on Human Mobility in response to COVID-19

In addition to individual agencies’ work on mobility and COVID-19, the system-wide response to the pandemic shows a strong mainstreaming of human mobility and an increase in joint and integrated projects.

The UN’s general statement on addressing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic “Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19” highlights the particular losses for migrant workers and the knock-on effects on economies heavily dependent on remittances (UN 2020b, 8). When urging that “[n]ational solidarity is crucial to leave no one behind,” the UN stresses the need to consider age, gender and migratory status for the “[p]rotection of human rights and efforts to ensure inclusion” (p.16). Moreover, it emphasizes the need to prioritize social cohesion measures, especially where fragility results from protracted conflict, recurrent natural disasters or forced displacement (p.19).¹²

¹⁰ The call for strong interagency partnerships on human mobility is also reflected in agency-specific guidance notes (UNDP 2016, para 58-65). In addition, since 2007, the annual *Global Forum on Migration and Development* (GFMD) and since 2013, the World Bank-led *Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development* (KNOMAD) have induced a range of meaningful partnerships between different international organizations, as well as research and civil society partners.

¹¹ Cooperation on refugee issues has also benefited from the so-called cluster approach that was adopted in 2005 by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to strengthen the effectiveness of humanitarian response through building partnerships. Since 2013, UNHCR has developed its Refugee Coordination Model centered around a Refugee Response Plan (RRP). An RRP is “a UNHCR-led, inter-agency planning and coordination tool for large-scale or complex refugee situations. RRP presents the inter-agency response strategy and the corresponding financial requirements of all partners to ensure the coherence and complementarity of the humanitarian response” (UNHCR, n.d.). For more information, see UNHCR (2019).

¹² In addition, the statement recognizes the specific vulnerabilities of young refugees and migrants who may be affected by “limited movement, fewer employment opportunities, increased xenophobia etc.” (p.18) and the need to ensure that children displaced by COVID-19 have access to education (p.22).

The UN Secretary-General’s policy brief “COVID-19 and People on the Move,” spells out “four basic tenets to advancing safe and inclusive human mobility during and in the aftermath of COVID-19: 1. Exclusion is costly in the long-run whereas inclusion pays off for everyone. 2. The response to COVID-19 and protecting the human rights of people on the move are not mutually exclusive. 3. No-one is safe until everyone is safe. 4. People on the move are part of the solution.” (UN 2020a, 4). In fact, the document emphasizes that “People on the move in vulnerable situations are particularly exposed to the health impact of COVID-19” (p.8).¹³ The UN Network on Migration (2020) also jointly condemned the forced returns of migrants and reminded governments of the commitments to uphold the human rights of all migrants.

The UN’s *Global Humanitarian Response Plan COVID-19* aims to raise \$6.7 billion, of which nearly \$1.5 billion is intended for actions under the Regional Refugee Response Plans or Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plans (OCHA 2020a, 6). The plan explicitly recognizes

“Those who stand out as suffering the most are older persons, [...] *forcibly displaced persons, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants*, and people who have lost their sources of income and fall outside social protection systems.” (OCHA 2020a, 5, emphasis added).

Consequently, it highlights protecting, assisting and advocating for refugees, internally displaced people, migrants and host communities particularly vulnerable to the pandemic as one of the three interrelated strategic priorities (p. 5).¹⁴ To this end, the plan foresees partnerships between specific UN entities¹⁵ to advocate and ensure that refugees, migrants, and IDPs receive COVID-19 assistance; and to prevent, anticipate and address risks of violence, discrimination, marginalization and xenophobia towards refugees, migrants, and IDPs. In addition, specific mobility objectives are included in the other strategic priorities, such as setting up a Migration Health Evidence Portal for COVID-19 to provide access to research and evidence on the intersection between COVID-19 and migration health (p. 49). Also the UN’s summary of the “United Nations Comprehensive Response to COVID-19 spells out specific challenges and needs for actions for refugees and migrants” (UN 2020d, 22-23). The prominent inclusion of human mobility in the UN’s global actions needed to address the fallout from the pandemic signals that human mobility is not a second-tier priority but that it is recognized as an integral part of the required development efforts.

Post-pandemic partnerships on human mobility

¹³ The Regional Risk Communication and Community Engagement Working Group (2020) established guidance on how to include marginalized and vulnerable people, including migrants, in risk communication and community engagement.

¹⁴ The other two priorities are (1) Containing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and decreasing morbidity and mortality; and (2) decreasing the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion and livelihoods.

¹⁵ Groups including 3-4 agencies each with IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA and UNRWA are named as leads for different outcomes. The Annex to the Global Humanitarian Response Plan Covid-19 that spells out the details of the UN’s coordinated appeal (OCHA 2020b, 7-13) specifies that each UN agency involved in the humanitarian response to the pandemic is addressing migrants, refugees or internally displaced in one way or another.

The above analysis shows that strong factors are moving international organizations, and specifically those in the UN family, to increasingly meaningful partnerships. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has further heightened the role of close cooperation. While these structural determinants will continue to push for collective actions, future developments will equally depend on changes in available funding and shifting development priorities.

While the bulk of factors described thus far tend to have cooperation-reinforcing impacts, future factors may have positive or negative effects. Although migration flows are projected to fall in the short-term, migration stocks may not (Ratha et al. 2020). In terms of ground-realities, the aftermath of the pandemic is likely to further increase vulnerabilities for migrants and displaced populations. As human mobility is a quintessential adaptation strategy (Naujoks 2019), the economic consequences may increase mobility pressures and needs, which in turn, may lead to more funding and strategic priorities on the issues. However, a global recession may also lead to decreased budget allocations to international organizations, as well as to shifts to other priorities, such as the need to address that due to the pandemic, “tens of millions of people are being pushed back into extreme poverty and hunger” (United Nations 2020c, 2). On the other hand, calls to mount “the most robust and cooperative health response the world has ever seen” (UN 2020a, 1) or similar reforms, bring opportunities to engage mobility-aspects.

It is too early to predict to what extent the closure of borders, increases in nationalism, economic protectionism, withdrawal from multilateralism, such as the US exiting the WHO, and a crisis of trust in forms of global governance will prevail (Krisch 2020) or whether narrow nationalism will emerge triumphant from the crisis (Torres 2020). While these tendencies were present during the pandemic, there are countertendencies that use the crisis to fortify multilateral action. The UN Secretary-General urges states to provide the “strongest support [...] to the multilateral effort to suppress transmission and stop the pandemic, [...] to cushion the knock-on effects on millions of people’s lives, their livelihoods and the real economy” and “to learn from this crisis and build back better” (UN 2020b, 1-2). He emphasizes the need for a “large-scale, coordinated and comprehensive multilateral response amounting to at least 10 percent of global GDP” (p.1) and encourages the global community to “seize the opportunity of this crisis to strengthen our commitment to implement the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals” (p.2). Thus, addressing the UN Economic and Social Council, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2020) emphasized, “let us pledge to reform the global multilateral system. To enhance its relevance, to improve its effectiveness, and to make it the basis of a new type of human-centric globalisation. [...] the fury of the pandemic provides the context for [the UN’s] rebirth and reform. While major crisis provide a window of opportunity to pursue policy change not every crisis leads to significant and positive changes. Analyses from policy change at the national level suggests that specific characteristics of the policy regime will affect whether and to what extent change occurs (Rinscheid 2015). As several countries are in the process of drafting national voluntary reviews of the GCM implementation, the heightened levels of interagency collaboration during the pandemic might influence the future planning of its implementation.

Lastly, the pandemic led to two competing perceptions of mobile populations. While some viewed immigrants and refugees as suspicious ‘bringers of disease,’ the pandemic seems to have simultaneously boosted migrants’ perception in many parts of the world. Not only did immigrant doctors, medical staff and researchers provide key health services. Immigrant workers in professions that were previously not labeled ‘essential,’ such as food delivery, grocery stores, or agricultural workers were often applauded for their important contributions. To some extent this even led to discussions to overcome the ‘skilled/low-skilled’ classification of work towards recognizing the work that is essential. Lastly, the UN’s (2020a, 4) reminder that “No-one is safe until everyone is safe” reflects longstanding arguments about why excluding irregular and other migrant groups from effective access to public health is likely to backfire.

Conclusion

Combined with the strong foundations for interagency cooperation and the trends towards better partnerships on human mobility, the above snapshots of key factors indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has broken down additional barriers and reinforced collaborative systems. The above analysis has outlined key factors as they result from the letter of official strategies and documents. Of course, the reality of cooperation is often not as rosy and we need to know to what degree funding structures, donor preferences, differences in mandates and entities shielding their areas of work by mandate arguments, the role of policy-entrepreneurs and brokers, as well as politics affect the dimensions of cooperation and, importantly, their outcomes. While the new UN Network on Migration provides a stronger foundation for cooperation, it needs to address how to overcome its explicit focus on the GCM and also tackle issues that lie at the intersection with the Global Compact on Refugees and other mobility questions. However, the strengthening of interagency mechanisms in light of the COVID-19 pandemic gives hope that multilateral approaches to human mobility will increase in quantity and quality.

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