

## The challenge of real-time analysis: making sense of the migration and mobility implications of COVID-19

Marie McAuliffe, Céline Bauloz and Adrian Kitimbo<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Traditional and social media are currently flooded with new information, data and analysis on COVID-19. Most of this new output is understandably focused on the primary concerns of this unprecedented global health crisis, and yet as the pandemic expands and deepens, we are seeing more output on systemic issues, such as its migration and mobility dimensions. In fact, publishers of all types – news outlets, blogs, scientific/academic journals, government authorities, social media platforms, think tanks, UN agencies – are under pressure to remain relevant and contribute knowledge by producing analysis on COVID-19. This is, of course, not new. In 2015, for example, we witnessed an explosion in reports on the so-called mass migration crisis to Europe as writers, analysts, regulatory authorities and readers struggled to make sense of the scale of the movement and the various humanitarian and other responses it sparked.

Unlike the 2015–16 events in Europe, however, COVID-19 is a global crisis affecting almost all countries and territories around the world as well as their entire populations. As at 15 April, there were around 2 million confirmed cases of the disease in 185 countries/territories, that had resulted in over 125,000 confirmed deaths (John Hopkins University, 2020). The combination of high transmission and severity means that this pandemic is forcing all of us – policymakers, practitioners, analysts and the public – into uncharted territory. Despite many clinical, social and economic unknowns, there remains significant pressure to fill the knowledge gap, especially to inform effective responses being developed in real time.

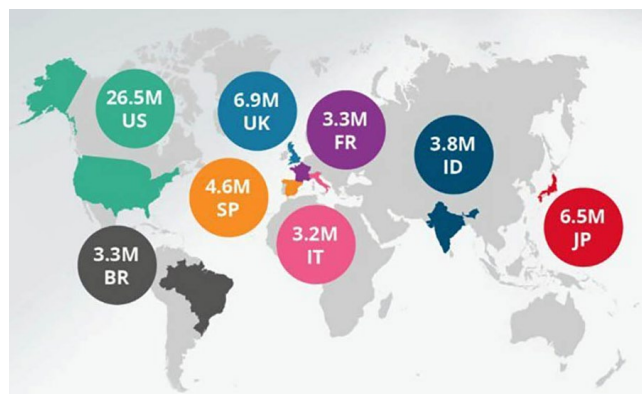
While acknowledging that much of the emerging evidence is on the health impacts of COVID-19, there is increasing analysis on its migration and mobility impacts and implications. This article examines the analytical challenges the pandemic presents,

and examines how we can make sense of these unprecedented changes by drawing on existing knowledge and rigorous analysis to understand new evidence as it emerges. A brief survey of current output is offered along with key initiatives and resources that have quickly emerged for policymakers, practitioners and researchers – all of whom will need to better understand and address COVID-19 for many months to come.

### Anecdote versus analysis

The extent to which COVID-19 has gripped our collective consciousness can be reflected in social media posts, which bring together micro (self)publishing output globally by a wide range of producers, ranging from traditional media outlets, political leaders, prestigious institutions and highly decorated scholars right the way through to vocal celebrities, opinionated individuals, anonymous trolls and an increasing numbers of bots (Ko, 2020; McAuliffe et al., 2019). The current data shows that COVID-19 has not “broken the internet” but it certainly has dominated it. For the week commencing 9 March, Synthesio reported that there had been 39.2 million organic mentions of COVID-19 on social media, while Sprinklr detected 20 million mentions across social media, blogs and news sites in a single 24-hour period (Suciu, 2020).

Figure 1: Social media mentions of COVID-19 by selected countries, week commencing 6 April 2020



Infographic: Synthesio, 2020.

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

<sup>1</sup> Marie McAuliffe is Head, Migration Policy Research Division, IOM. Céline Bauloz is a Senior Research Officer, IOM. Adrian Kitimbo is a research associate, IOM.

Undoubtedly, most of the social media mentions are likely to be anecdotal or opinion-based, with platforms tending toward “venting” of emotion rather than conveying information, evidence or analysis (Jalonen, 2014). What the mentions do demonstrate, however, is the scale of engagement as well as its geography. This means that we will be experiencing the ongoing publication of more (mis)information, data, analysis and research on COVID-19 throughout the world for months, if not years, to come. The challenge to filter, digest and understand new material is not a new one for migration policymakers, practitioners and researchers as highlighted in the *World Migration Report 2020* (IOM, 2019, p.125):

The evidence for policymaking that originates from rigorous analysis and research on migration is the prime source and starting point for policymakers...A key challenge for many is how to determine the relevance and quality of an ever-growing body of migration research and analysis. It can often be overwhelming to identify what is important, and what should be afforded weight, when faced with virtual mountains of output.

### Key knowledge of migration: frames of reference for analysis

Existing knowledge, evidence and analyses allow us to place new information on COVID-19 within a frame of reference as it comes to light. Rather than looking only at the here and now, we need to be understanding change in terms of longer-term migration patterns and processes. The significance and implications of COVID-19 can only be sufficiently understood and articulated when contextualized and rooted in current knowledge of migration (see Table 1). For this reason, we have seen organizations and networks working on migration advance COVID-19 analysis through a number of initiatives, including for example:

- Lancet Migration’s [Migration and Covid-19 Forum](#)
- the UN Network on Migration’s [COVID-19 Community of Practice: Voices from the Ground](#)
- COMPAS’s [Coronavirus and Mobility Forum](#)
- ICVA’s [COVID-19 Resources](#)
- IOM’s [COVID-19 Analytical Snapshots](#)

**Table 1: Key selected features of migration and possible impacts of COVID-19**

Key features of migration	Impacts of COVID-19
<p><b>Remittances</b> For many people in developing countries and regions, remittances are a lifeline, and play a critical role in meeting basic needs such as food and shelter.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Millions of migrants are grappling with job losses, lockdowns and the closure of businesses, with many now unable to send money to their families and friends.</li> <li>• For countries that are heavily dependent on remittances, reductions in inflows will have devastating impacts on their economies (Mora and Rutkowski, 2020). The gains that many low and middle-income countries have experienced, such as reductions in poverty, could recede (Raghavan et al., 2020).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Migrant workers</b> There were an estimated 164 million migrant workers globally in 2017. Most of these (68%) resided in high-income countries and regions, such as the Gulf.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on migrant workers, leaving many without jobs, stranded abroad and at greater risk of exposure to the disease.</li> <li>• In some countries, concerns have been raised over their safety, as many live in crowded, unhygienic labour camps, leaving them vulnerable to contracting the disease (McAuliffe and Bauloz, 2020).</li> <li>• Contracting economies and rising unemployment mean that many migrant workers will have to return home over coming months, adding to unemployment in origin countries.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Displaced populations</b> There were an estimated 41.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world in 2018, while the number of refugees stood at nearly 26 million. Most displaced populations, including refugees and IDPs, originate and are hosted in developing regions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many developing countries in which most displaced populations are hosted have health-care systems that are both under-capacitated and overwhelmed. In some cases, health-care infrastructure has been severely weakened by conflict and violence (Kurtzer, 2020).</li> <li>• Many refugees and IDPs live in crowded conditions with poor sanitation and where social isolation is nearly impossible, raising fears that COVID-19 could spread quickly and prove difficult to contain (IOM, 2020d).</li> <li>• COVID-19-related travel restrictions are already having an impact on the delivery of humanitarian assistance, while there is concern that humanitarian funding could be impacted as donors divert funding to COVID-19 response (Parker, 2020).</li> <li>• Some countries have closed borders to asylum seekers, while refugee resettlement programmes have been temporarily suspended due to travel restrictions (IOM, 2020b; IOM, 2020d).</li> </ul>

Key features of migration	Impacts of COVID-19
<p><b>Disaster and conflict events</b> Environmental change and disasters are pronounced in some regions and continue to influence human movement and displacement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The focus on COVID-19 is impacting disaster preparedness, leaving countries ill-equipped to respond when disasters strike.</li> <li>• It is also affecting humanitarian response to other crises, as travel restrictions limit the movement of workers, while inhibiting the transportation of supplies (IOM, 2020e).</li> <li>• Prolonging displacement events such as conflicts, especially in cases where peace processes have been abandoned or where assistance has been withdrawn (ICG, 2020).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Irregular migrants</b> Migration in several regions entails high numbers of irregular migrants, influenced by multiple factors, such as conflict, political instability and socioeconomic factors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irregular migrants are more vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19 due to inability to access health services, risk of (or actual) detention, poor working/housing conditions with greater risk of exposure (IOM, 2020f).</li> <li>• COVID-19-related travel restrictions could increase irregular migration, as legal entry channels are closed. They could also change irregular migration patterns, which would reduce the ability of states to screen all international arrivals for COVID-19 and potentially risk further transmission (Mbiyozo, 2020).</li> </ul>

Note: See *World Migration Report 2020* (IOM, 2019) for discussion of key features of migration and related sources.

Some research centres and think tanks have also either created or used their existing blog platforms to quickly share research and analysis of academic and applied researchers on migration and migrants. These blogs were created by migration research centres and other research institutions with a larger thematic focus that do often feature migration-focused posts (see Table 2 below). An initial analysis of one of the most influential blogs in the world – Agenda, published by the World Economic Forum – shows that the COVID-19 blog section in English included more than 550 posts related to topics as varied as health, well-being, economy, technology, development, sport, arts/culture as well as migration.<sup>2</sup>

Blog posts provide a platform for experts, including academics, to share their research and analysis to a greater audience. Blogs also publish at a much

faster pace that simply cannot be accommodated by academic publications, which incorporate peer review and other quality-related processes. That said, a number of scientific publishers have made existing COVID-19 research free to access online<sup>3</sup> while others are fast-tracking the publication of COVID-19 articles. Much of this remains, of course, on medical research such that some are arguing that much-needed social science research findings are being overlooked when they are central in informing effective responses (Taster, 2020). Others are suggesting there exists a risk of “codivisation” of academic research, including in relation to migration, with accrued focus on securitization and the funnelling of research funding towards pandemic-related topics, attracting experts from other fields to turn to the subject without always having the necessary expertise (Pai, 2020).

**Table 2: Selected blog platforms by research centres and think tanks**

Migration research centres and think tanks	Other research centres and think tanks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), Oxford</li> <li>• Migration for Development and Equality</li> <li>• Migration Policy Centre, EU</li> <li>• Migration Policy Institute</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Africa Centre for Strategic Studies</li> <li>• Centre for Global Development</li> <li>• Centre for Strategic &amp; International Studies</li> <li>• European Centre for Development Policy Management</li> <li>• Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)</li> </ul>

### Misinformation

As any other “newsworthy events [...] likely to breed rumors” (Allport and Postman, 1946), the COVID-19 pandemic has attracted its share of misinformation and fake news, facilitated by today’s digital technology. This “infodemic” has first and foremost concerned incorrect or false medical advices to protect against the coronavirus (Charlton, 2020). While the World Health Organization and other experts have endeavoured to counter the spread of such dangerous misinformation for global health (WHO, 2020), fake news have also extended to theories on the origins and the spread of the pandemic. The current global health crisis has been exploited and manipulated to accommodate diverse political and other interests. Conspiracy theories by far/ultra-right, extremist and hate groups have flourished on social media, attributing, for instance, the origins of the pandemic to the development of a bioweapon, a tool set up to impose military and totalitarian regimes, an endeavour to disrupt the forthcoming U.S. presidential election and the deployment of 5G mobile network in Wuhan (ISD, 2020). As already highly politicized before the pandemic (McAuliffe et al., 2019), migration and migrants have not been spared from fake news and conspiracy theories on the spread of the coronavirus (ISD, 2020; Maniatis and Zard, 2020).

The misinformation surrounding the pandemic is symptomatic of today’s demand and consumption of instantaneous information produced, at times, by non-experts with, more or less intentionally, little consideration for evidence-based, balanced and rigorous analysis. Social media are the archetypical medium through which misinformation and fake news are nowadays convened and propagated due to the difficulty of oversight (Zubiaga et al., 2016). They further constitute one of the prime platforms where individuals access information, especially during COVID-19 lockdowns when media consumption is increasing (Jones, 2020). The UN has recently launched its Communications Response initiative to “flood the Internet with facts and science while countering the growing scourge of misinformation”,<sup>4</sup> however, given the volume of (mis)information and mentions produced daily, the challenge is a daunting one.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the UN Secretary-General’s video statement at [www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/time-science-and-solidarity](http://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/time-science-and-solidarity).

### Longer-term implications

With most countries and territories in the world now affected by COVID-19, global governance systems have been under pressure not seen since World War II. While pressures have been felt most on health, economic and social systems, early analysis is also showing that the pandemic is affecting critical areas of security, with some arguing that the pandemic has arrived as our “frameworks to prevent catastrophic confrontation are crumbling” (Nakamitsu, 2020). On the other hand, analysts are pointing to the ability of actors caught in entrenched conflict to soften their hardened positions based on the new paradigm, such as releasing political opponents from prison, collaborating on COVID-19 response with other nations and internally, and seeking international assistance for health responses (Garrigues, 2020).

Longer-term trends of peace and stability in many regions are at risk of stagnating or reversing because of the pressures COVID-19 is placing on governance systems as the need to prioritize resources toward health, economic and social responses intensifies. In his briefing to the UN Security Council, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, stressed that the pandemic is placing peace and security at grave risk and that COVID-19 is (UN SG, 2020):

**...triggering or exacerbating various human rights challenges. We are seeing stigma, hate speech, and white supremacists and other extremists seeking to exploit the situation. We are witnessing discrimination in accessing health services. Refugees and internally displaced persons are particularly vulnerable. And there are growing manifestations of authoritarianism, including limits on the media, civic space and freedom of expression.**

Beyond the immediate issues of health-care access, rising tensions are tipping the balance in favour of increased discontent, human rights abuses and conflict, including because the ability to engage is face-to-face dialogue and diplomacy has been severely restricted (Munro, 2020). The implications for politicization, disruptions to social order, reduced support for displaced populations as well as geopolitical instability are very significant as the perfect storm of the risks of globalization align in a deadly way (ICG, 2020). There are genuine concerns that the world is heading toward increased displacement resulting from COVID-19-related rises in social disorder, food

insecurity, violent extremism, rising poverty, and inadequate health care. However, with new evidence and analysis emerging on a daily basis, there is no shortage of engagement and no lack of willingness to support and inform effective responses to reduce negative impacts. As always, the challenge remains as to whether evidence-based recommendations and sound advice can gain traction in the ever-increasing “blizzard of data”, tense geopolitics and the increasing social media noise (Goldin, 2014). ■

## References

- Allport, G.W. and L. Postman  
1946 An analysis of rumor, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 10(4):501–517.
- Charlton, E.  
2020 How experts are fighting the coronavirus “infodemic”, *Agenda*, 5 March 2020, World Economic Forum: Geneva.
- Garrigues, J.  
2020 [Conflict and peace scenarios in times of COVID-19](#), CIDOB opinion, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs.
- Goldin, I.  
2014 Princeton University Press Author Q&A with Ian Goldin on *The Butterfly Defect: How Globalization Creates Systemic Risks, and What to Do about It*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey: United States of America.
- Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)  
2020 [Covid-19 disinformation briefing no. 1](#), briefing paper, 27 March 2020.
- International Crisis Group (ICG)  
2020 [COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch](#), Special Briefing 4 / Covid-19 Pandemic and Deadly Conflict, 24 March 2020. International Crisis Group: Brussels.
- International Organization for Migration (IOM)  
2019 [World Migration Report 2020](#), IOM: Geneva.  
2020a [COVID-19 analytical snapshot #1: Tools and resources](#), 31 March 2020, IOM: Geneva.  
2020b [COVID-19 analytical snapshot #3: Travel restrictions and mobility](#), 30 March 2020, IOM: Geneva.
- 2020c [COVID-19 analytical snapshot #5: Migration research and analysis](#), 2 April 2020, IOM: Geneva.  
2020d [COVID-19 analytical snapshot #7: Displaced population impacts](#), 3 April 2020, IOM: Geneva.  
2020e [COVID-19 analytical snapshot #8: Displacement events](#), 7 April 2020, IOM: Geneva.
- Jalonen, H.  
2014 [Social Media – An Arena for Venting Negative Emotions](#), Conference paper presented at the International Conference on Communication, Media, Technology and Design, 24–26 April 2014, Istanbul, Turkey.
- John Hopkins University  
2020 [Coronavirus Resource Centre](#).
- Jones, K.  
2020 [This is how COVID-19 has changed media habits in each generation](#), *Agenda*, 9 April 2020, World Economic Forum: Geneva.
- Ko, R.  
2020 [Social Media Is Full of Bots Spreading COVID-19 Anxiety. Don't Fall For It](#), *The Conversation*, 2 April 2020.
- Kurtzer, J.  
2020 [The Impact of COVID-19 on Humanitarian Crises](#). Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Maniatis, G.A. and M. Zard  
2020 [The COVID-19 blame game threatens us all](#), Project Syndicate, 6 March 2020.
- McAuliffe, M. and C. Bauloz  
2020 The coronavirus pandemic could be devastating for the world's migrants, *Agenda*, 6 April 2020, World Economic Forum: Geneva.
- McAuliffe, M., A. Kitimbo and B. Khadria  
2019 [Reflections on migrants' contributions in an era of increasing disruption and disinformation](#), in IOM's *World Migration Report 2020*. IOM: Geneva.

- Mbiyozo, A.  
2020 [COVID-19 responses in Africa must include migrants and refugee](#). Institute for Security Studies.
- Mora, A.G. and M. Rutkowski  
2020 [Remittances in times of the coronavirus – keep them flowing](#). World Bank.
- Munro, E.  
2020 [Anticipating the International Security Implications of COVID-19](#), Global Centre for Security Policy, 19 March 2020.
- Nakamitsu, I.  
2020 [Covid-19 & its Impact on the Work of Disarmament](#), *Inter Press Service*, 9 April 2020.
- Pai, M.  
2020 [“Codivisation” of academic research: Opportunities and risk](#), Nature Research Microbiology Community, 10 April 2020.
- Parker, B.  
2020 [Coronavirus emergency aid funding](#). The New Humanitarian.
- Raghavan, S., M. Bearak and K. Sieff  
2020 [As coronavirus layoffs surge in richer countries, poorer ones lose vital remittance payments](#). *The Washington Post*.
- Sandvik, K. and A. Garnier  
2020 [How Will the COVID-19 pandemic re-shape refugee and migration governance?](#) *PRIO Blog*, 27 March 2020, Peace Research Institute Oslo: Oslo.
- Suciu, P.  
2020 [Can social media fill the void for spring celebrations during COVID-19 outbreak?](#) *Forbes*, 17 March 2020.
- Synthesio  
2020 [Coronavirus: social media conversation tracking](#).
- Taster, M.  
2020 [Social science in a time of social distancing](#), *LSE Impact Blog*, 23 March 2020.
- United Nations Secretary-General  
2020 [Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council on the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), 9 April 2020.
- World Health Organization (WHO)  
2020 [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) advice to the public: Myth busters](#). WHO webpage.
- Zubiaga, A., M. Liakata, R. Procter, G. Wong Sak Hoi, and P. Tolmie  
2016 [Analysing how people orient to and spread rumours in social media by looking at conversational threads](#), *PLoS One*, 11(3):e0150989.