PERRY WORLD HOUSE
University of Pennsylvania

POST-CONFERENCE REPORT

From Migrant to Mainstay: Safeguarding Human Rights after the Journey

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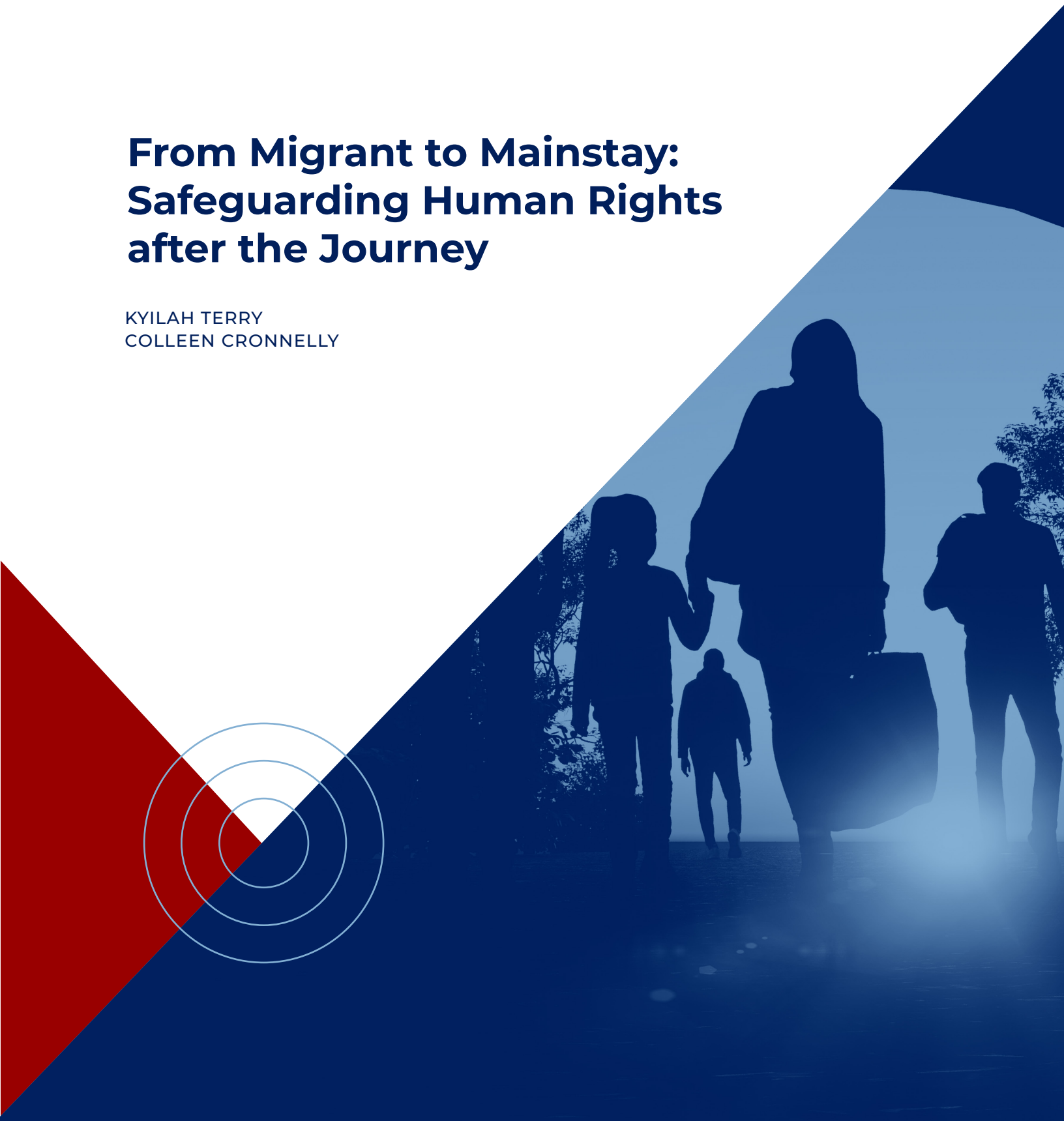

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ABOUT PERRY WORLD HOUSE

Perry World House is a center for scholarly inquiry, teaching, research, international exchange, policy engagement, and public outreach on pressing global issues. Perry World House's mission is to bring the academic knowledge of the University of Pennsylvania to bear on the world's most pressing global policy challenges and to foster international policy engagement within and beyond the Penn community.

Located in the heart of campus at 38th Street and Locust Walk, Perry World House draws on the expertise of Penn's 12 schools and numerous globally oriented research centers to educate the Penn community and prepare students to be well-informed, contributing global citizens. At the same time, Perry World House connects Penn with leading policy experts from around the world to develop and advance innovative policy proposals.

Through its rich programming, Perry World House facilitates critical conversations about global policy challenges and fosters interdisciplinary research on these topics. It presents workshops and colloquia, welcomes distinguished visitors, and produces content for global audiences and policy leaders, so that the knowledge developed at Penn can make an immediate impact around the world.

> SECTION 1

Introduction

<< Human mobility is a defining feature of the 21st century. Today, more people are on the move than ever before—crossing borders in pursuit of safety, opportunity, and stability. >>

Human mobility is a defining feature of the 21st century. Today, more people are on the move than ever before—crossing borders in pursuit of safety, opportunity, and stability. Some are fleeing conflict and persecution, others escaping environmental collapse or economic despair. Still others migrate to reunite with family or to contribute their labor and skills in new communities. In all cases, mobility raises urgent questions about how states manage borders, fulfill human rights obligations, and share responsibility for the protection of those in transit. As the number of migrants, refugees, and displaced persons continues to grow, the international community faces mounting pressure to create migration systems that are not only efficient and secure, but fair, humane, and rights-respecting.

The global governance of migration remains deeply fragmented. While there are well-established legal frameworks for the protection of refugees—most notably the 1951 Refugee Convention—comprehensive systems for governing other forms of cross-border mobility are limited in scope and uneven in application. Migrants often fall into legal gray zones, where the protections available to them depend on their country of origin, mode of arrival, and migration classification. As a result, many face precarious legal status, restricted access to services, and heightened exposure to exploitation. This institutional ambiguity is particularly evident in the case of refugees: more than 60 percent now live in protracted displacement situations, often without access to permanent legal status, education, or employment—conditions that threaten both rights fulfillment and long-term stability.

At the same time, global migration debates have become increasingly politicized. Governments are under pressure to demonstrate control over borders, even as demographic and labor market realities create sustained demand for migration. The rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric and restrictive policy reforms in many countries has made it harder to uphold human rights principles, particularly in moments of crisis. And while international agreements like the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration have signaled renewed global commitment to cooperative action, implementation has been inconsistent and often undermined by domestic political constraints.

To better understand these tensions and identify practical pathways forward, Perry World House convened a conference on migration and human rights. Bringing together scholars, policymakers, legal experts, and practitioners from around the world, the event examined how migration systems can be designed to better respect human dignity while addressing real-world constraints. Key questions included: What are the most pressing human rights challenges facing migrants and asylum seekers today? How are states navigating the trade-offs between security, sovereignty, and human rights? And what innovations—legal, institutional, or political—might help build more equitable migration regimes?

Throughout the discussions, participants emphasized the need to center migrants' rights in policy design, especially in contexts where mobility intersects with displacement, labor exploitation, or climate stress. Conversations addressed both long-standing structural issues—such as feasibility and accessibility of durable solutions—and emerging challenges, including border externalization and shrinking availability of legal pathways. Several themes emerged across panels: the erosion of asylum protections in many regions; the risks posed by ad hoc border measures and return policies; and the critical importance of civil society, cities, and international institutions in defending rights and advancing accountability.

This report distills the insights and findings from that conference. It highlights persistent gaps in migration governance, surfaces the ethical and operational dilemmas faced by policymakers, and maps the evolving landscape of rights and responsibilities in an age of intensified mobility. Throughout the discussions, participants underscored the importance of collaboration across sectors—including government, civil society, and academia—to develop migration systems that are both principled and pragmatic. Universities and research institutions play a critical role in generating evidence, shaping discourse, and training future leaders equipped to navigate these complex challenges. As the international community confronts the realities of global displacement, labor mobility, and border management, the contributions of scholars and practitioners alike will be vital to ensuring that human dignity and rights remain central to migration policymaking.

> SECTION 2

Human Rights and Migration: Solutions for a World on the Move

The conference opened with a high-level discussion featuring International Organization for Migration (IOM) Director General Amy Pope and a conversation with former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, who addressed the root causes of displacement and the future of migration governance.

Migration as a Human Imperative and Policy Challenge

Director General Pope opened with a reminder that migration "is the story of human civilization." Yet today, it is increasingly politicized, perilous, and shaped by converging crises: intractable conflicts, intensifying climate shocks, and deepening inequality. These forces are generating record levels of displacement and irregular migration—movement that occurs outside the regulatory norms of origin, transit, or destination countries. In this context, many migrants undertake dangerous journeys, often placing their lives in the hands of smugglers and traffickers.

Director General Pope emphasized that irregular migration is not only unsafe and unsustainable, but unjust. It harms migrants above all, while also eroding public support for migration policies. While governments have a right to manage their borders, the perception that migration is uncontrolled or manipulated for political purposes has led to punitive policies: excessive enforcement, family separation, and pushbacks that violate international norms. "No country can build a wall high enough to keep out war, climate disaster, or economic desperation," she stated.

Pope outlined four pillars essential to a more humane and effective migration system:

1. **Link Development and Migration:** Irregular migration rises where development is lacking. Yet when well-managed, migration can be a powerful driver of development. Policymakers must align migration policy with development priorities to support sustainable outcomes.

2. **Leverage Remittances for Growth:** Migrants sent over $650 billion in remittances to low- and middle-income countries in 2023. These flows should be treated not only as private transfers, but should be connected to financial inclusion and community investments.

3. **Align Migration with Labor Market Needs:** Many economies face labor shortages, particularly in healthcare, agriculture, construction, and hospitality. States should create legal pathways that respond to these needs while safeguarding workers' rights and fair wages.

4. **Support Reintegration and Inclusion:** Migration policy must go beyond border management to reintegration of returnees and community resilience, coordinating with local governments, civil society, and the private sector.

Beyond Borders: Rethinking Migration Governance

In conversation with Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, Director General Pope critiques the overemphasis on border enforcement. "It's easy to point to the border and propose solutions there," she noted. While politically attractive, detention, deterrence, and criminalization fail to address the root causes. Instead, Pope advocated for investments in stabilization, legal pathways, and livelihood support as more effective and humane alternatives. Drawing on IOM's work in Gaza and Haiti, she emphasized that migration in these contexts is driven not by choice, but necessity—and that temporary work opportunities can reduce reliance on smugglers and minimize harm.

Al Hussein reinforced this point by highlighting structural reliance on humanitarian assistance when migrants are denied access to jobs, education, or legal status. Pope echoed this, calling for a shift from short-term emergency aid to long-term resilience strategies, including development investment and skills-building. The rights of migrants must be upheld throughout the journey—not just at the border or point of arrival. Fair treatment in transit countries, protection from trafficking, and access to justice are essential components of rights-based migration governance.

<< Today's discourse is often mired in fear-based rhetoric and zero-sum thinking. Yet the evidence is clear: migration contributes to stronger development outcomes, innovation, and economic growth. >>

Both speakers underscored the need to reframe how migration is discussed and understood. Today's discourse is often mired in fear-based rhetoric and zero-sum thinking. Yet the evidence is clear: migration contributes to stronger development outcomes, innovation, and economic growth. In 2022, migrants in the United States paid over $97 billion in federal taxes. Changing the narrative requires engaging not only national policymakers, but also local leaders, private sector actors, and civil society organizations. Cities, often on the frontlines of integration, need more resources and recognition to create inclusive infrastructure, deliver services, and foster social cohesion.

The session closed with a shared sense of urgency. Migration is a permanent feature of the global landscape. The task ahead is not to eliminate it, but to manage it in a way that is orderly, rights-respecting, and development-enhancing. Policymakers must resist reactionary impulses and instead embrace data, innovation, and inclusive governance. Above all, Pope and Al Hussein urged participants to see migration not as a problem to be solved, but as a human reality to be engaged with empathy, pragmatism, and a long-term view.

> SECTION 3

Human Rights Risks as Migrants Approach Increasingly Hardened Borders

The first panel—featuring experts on international law, urban governance, and migration systems—explored the growing human rights risks facing migrants as they approach increasingly securitized and restrictive border environments.

One participant began by framing the discussion within a global context of political polarization and heightened pressure on states to demonstrate control at their borders. They warned that as governments spend increasing resources on border protection, the resulting securitization fuels harmful short-term practices—such as pushbacks, detention, and legal limbo—that frequently clash with human rights norms. Border zones, as it was argued, have become symbolic markers of state capacity and sovereignty. Yet an overreliance on border enforcement not only distorts migration governance but also obscures the more complex structural causes of displacement.

Another expert expanded on this critique by emphasizing the disjuncture between visible and invisible migration governance. While physical borders receive political and media attention, equally consequential decisions happen away from the spotlight—through administrative closures of asylum systems, suspension of legal documentation, and the denial of procedural safeguards. During the COVID19 pandemic, for example, many countries implemented border closures that extended far beyond physical crossings. Legal asylum systems were often the last to reopen, even as borders became porous again to certain categories of travelers. This highlights a critical point: "Whether a border is open or closed depends on who you are."

Despite these challenges, experts found some evidence of resilience in the international legal system post COVID19. Research shows that countries party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol were, on average, less likely to enact severe restrictions than non-signatories. However, asylum is not a one-country process. Transit states—those who are rarely the final destination—are bearing disproportionate burdens without sufficient international support, leading to harmful bottlenecks.

One expert brought attention to a related transformation: the urbanization of displacement. As more migrants move into cities rather than camps, cities themselves have become de facto borderlands. Without adequate federal support or legal clarity, local authorities are left managing the frontline consequences of migration policy. To address

this, and drawing from global experience, experts advocated for empowering cities as active agents in migration governance. The Global Cities Fund for Migrants and Refugees, which provides direct financial support to cities to design their own inclusion strategies, was cited as an example of local innovation. Cities are not merely implementers of national policy, but innovators and advocates in their own right.

Another expert underscored the administrative dysfunctions exacerbating rights risks at the U.S. border. While political rhetoric fixates on border "surges," it was noted that only 7,000 arrivals were recorded at the U.S. southern border in March 2025—the lowest since 1967. Meanwhile, over four million unresolved deportation cases are pending in the U.S. interior. Resource imbalances between enforcement agencies and immigration courts were identified as key drivers of dysfunction. Without sufficient asylum officers and immigration judges, due process is undermined and incentives for irregular migration increase.

The experts converged around a shared concern: that current systems are ill-equipped for present-day realities. Many migrants today do not fit the narrow categories defined by the post-World War II protection regime. In the absence of alternative legal pathways, many turn to the asylum system not because they meet the definition, but because it is the only option available to enter and work legally: "We need new pathways not tied to outdated definitions."

Audience members pressed for clarity on how to elevate local innovations into national or international frameworks. Experts pointed to city-led programs, humanitarian parole, and skills-matching initiatives as examples of scalable models. Cities, they argued, are not constrained by legal definitions in the same way that national governments are—they focus instead on service delivery, inclusion, and economic participation. These local governments increasingly act as implementers, innovators, and advocates, designing solutions in the absence of federal action. In some cases, this includes skills-matching programs between migrants and host communities, which can offer targeted and mutually beneficial alternatives to politicized enforcement.

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Several experts emphasized that hardened borders not only increase human rights risks but also create space for smugglers, criminals, and trafficking networks to thrive. As legal avenues narrow, migrants are more likely to turn to illicit actors who exploit their desperation. This is not just a law enforcement issue. Effective responses, they argued, must include improved coordination among localities along migratory routes, increased investment in identification and protection of vulnerable people, and a shift away from viewing trafficking solely through a security lens.

These concerns fed into a broader reflection on whether existing legal tools are sufficient in the face of political incentives that reward restriction and exclusion. Experts acknowledged the rise of extralegal systems—including shadow policies and market-driven enforcement—that undermine accountability and labor protections. The conversation closed with a call to look beyond any single national model and to experiment globally. Those jurisdictions that embrace early, inclusive policy innovations are the ones most likely to thrive in an increasingly mobile world.

Policy Recommendations:

1. **Develop Complementary Legal Pathways** to relieve pressure on the asylum system by enabling migration for work, climate displacement, and family reunification outside the narrow refugee definition.

2. **Strengthen the Role of Cities** by increasing direct funding, legal authority, and policy flexibility for municipal governments to design inclusion strategies tailored to their contexts.

3. **Establish Multilateral Support for Transit States** to recognize the burdens borne by countries along migratory routes and to promote regional responsibility-sharing.

4. **Enhance Border Transparency and Accountability** by ensuring that border policies—including those adopted during emergencies—are subject to human rights review and grounded in legal obligations, not just political expediency.

> SECTION 4

The Relationship Between Migrants and the Cities Where They Are Present

This panel focused on how cities are adapting to the arrival and settlement of migrants, especially as national systems falter or turn restrictive. Experts examined both the structural challenges and the opportunities that emerge when migration becomes a defining feature of urban life. They highlighted the tension between short-term political pressures and the long-term necessity of inclusive planning, offering a compelling vision of what equitable, rights-respecting urban governance can look like.

Experts emphasized that cities are more than geographic endpoints—they are dynamic institutions that absorb, respond to, and shape migration in real time. One expert shared the results of a pre-pandemic survey of the 100 largest cities in the United States, identifying five core domains of local engagement with migrants: making local government accessible through language and service access; symbolic and rhetorical support through civic events; targeted social services; protection from immigration enforcement; and economic development programming. While some cities had formal sanctuary policies, many others operated under informal "don't ask, don't tell" approaches. However, since 2016, the political and financial landscape has shifted. Local officials face increasing constraints, from limited revenue authority to civil rights challenges, which make proactive inclusion efforts more politically risky.

Urban inclusion was also discussed from the perspective of South-South migration, where migrants often move to regions with fewer resources and more fragile governance structures. Experts noted that in contexts of compounded crisis—such as economic collapse, pandemics, and political unrest—the arrival of displaced populations can exacerbate tensions with host communities. These challenges are often managed through unsustainable and conditional aid systems that foster resentment and perceptions of unfairness. Where international organizations partner predominantly with faith-based groups, certain groups, such as LQBTQ+ migrants, can be left without adequate protection. In the absence of robust and equitable distribution frameworks, community-level solidarity becomes fragile.

Experts also emphasized the importance of listening to host communities without invalidating their concerns. One speaker noted that welcoming narratives must acknowledge the real trade-offs

that local populations face, particularly in housing, education, and healthcare. Ignoring these strains allows opportunistic politicians to weaponize migration and fuel xenophobic narratives. Instead, speakers argued for strategies that focus on minimizing costs and maximizing shared benefits—through better planning, smarter resource deployment, and targeted infrastructure investments.

Innovation at the city level was highlighted as a recurring theme. Cities that created offices of immigrant affairs, offered multilingual services, and coordinated with community and faith-based groups tended to foster stronger inclusion outcomes. Local legal services for migrants, when offered, not only protected individual rights but also increased efficiency and trust across institutions. Experts called for investing in support networks that empower cities to collectively advocate for their needs and build durable constituencies in favor of inclusive migration governance.

During the Q&A, the conversation turned to the larger political context. Several participants noted that hostile immigration environments are not new, but their intensity varies depending on political leadership and media framing. One key takeaway: change is more likely when messaging aligns with the lived realities of communities, and when messengers come from within those communities. The growing number of immigrants in elected office was cited as a sign that public opinion can shift when migrants themselves are visible agents of democratic change.

Experts warned against simplistic solutions, like one-off aid packages, to build support for migration. Rather, lasting progress requires sustained political organizing, tailored communication strategies, and recognition that urban governance plays a pivotal role in national narratives about migration. Cities, they argued, should not be passive recipients of policy; they should be co-authors of it.

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Policy Recommendations:

1. **Invest in Local Inclusion Infrastructure** by supporting municipal offices of immigrant affairs, multilingual service provision, and partnerships with trusted community organizations.

2. **Reframe Migration Narratives** by lifting up both the human and economic contributions of migrants, while acknowledging the legitimate concerns of host communities.

3. **Protect Vulnerable Populations Within Cities** by ensuring that aid and social services are inclusive of LGBTQ+ and other vulnerable migrants and not distributed through exclusive or conditional mechanisms.

4. **Strengthen City-to-City Networks** to allow for shared learning, resource pooling, and collective advocacy in national and international policy spaces.

5. **Empower Migrant Political Participation** by supporting civic education, leadership training, and pathways to public office that amplify the voices of migrant communities in shaping urban futures.

> SECTION 5

Ensuring Rights Protections in Cases of Both Voluntary and Involuntary Return

This panel tackled one of the most contested areas of migration governance: the return of migrants, whether voluntary or involuntary. As durable solutions to displacement—resettlement, local integration, and repatriation—face growing strain, the rights implications of return have become more pressing and more complex. Experts explored the legal, logistical, and moral dimensions of return policies in a global context where protection systems are under stress, migration systems are politicized, and safe return is often more aspirational than achievable.

One expert opened the conversation by outlining the landscape: with more than 43 million people displaced across international borders, return has become the preferred—but most fraught—solution within the international community. Durable solutions frameworks are under significant pressure, with limited political will for resettlement and constrained pathways for local integration. In practice, voluntary refugee repatriation today occurs in three broad scenarios: when conditions improve in countries of origin; when external incentives such as aid or cash schemes encourage return; or when deteriorating host conditions push people to leave. Notably, the last category is the most common, and one of the most troubling. The expert noted that more than 40 percent of returnees go back to countries still in active conflict, and 76 percent face some form of residual violence upon return.

Experts emphasized that return—particularly so-called voluntary return—rarely occurs under truly voluntary conditions. The costs and risks of returning home do not necessarily decrease; rather, it is often the increasing costs and risks of remaining in exile that compel people to leave. In some cases, restrictive conditions in host countries—including limited access to work, education, or protection—are deliberately used to pressure migrants to accept return. Cash assistance programs are often nominal and unreliable, doing little to offset debt or rebuild livelihoods. Experts noted that many migrants are unaware of the limitations of these programs until after they return, revealing an asymmetry of information that undermines consent.

The implementation of international agreements around return is often inconsistent and obstructed by political and bureaucratic realities. Despite formal strategies such as the EU's common system for return, national and subnational governments

remain the primary actors—and their capacity and political will vary widely. Experts warned that funds intended for reintegration are frequently diverted to border control or deterrence, contributing to a dynamic in which rights-respecting return becomes secondary to migration management.

Legal frameworks such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) establish protections against refoulement and collective expulsion. However, these norms are subject to political backlash and reinterpretation. Experts noted that legal interpretations around third-country agreements, such as the UK-Rwanda plan, have been contested in court—but their long-term implications remain uncertain. Even where laws exist to protect migrant rights, implementation on the ground often falls short.

The panel also emphasized that reintegration is not simply a matter of returning to a physical location. Many returnees face structural barriers, including lack of documentation, unresolved debts, and separation from family members who are unwilling or unable to return. Uncertainty about conditions in countries of origin is compounded by incomplete or outdated information, and migrants frequently rely on informal sources that may not reflect the actual risks involved. A more grounded understanding of return, experts suggested, must include these social and psychological dynamics.

The conversation then turned to broader questions about lawful alternatives to return. One expert emphasized that the deportation process itself is often violent, producing lasting harm and anxiety. The threat of deportability—living with the constant risk of removal—can inhibit full participation in society even for those who remain. There was consensus that current immigration systems need substantial revision to include lawful pathways to stay, fair adjudication procedures, and greater respect for migrant agency. Examples from Latin America and Africa were presented as promising alternatives. Transnational mobility regimes in these regions provide for movement across borders for work, education, and residence—without forcing people into the binary of protection versus deportation. Such models represent an investment in long-term, rights-respecting mobility rather than short-term enforcement.

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Participants echoed these concerns, asking about the voluntariness of return, the role of information asymmetries, and how to improve outcomes for deportees. Experts responded that return frameworks must include guardrails for consent, opportunities to change one's mind, and support for reintegration. They also noted the need for better data—not just on incentives for voluntary return, but on the lived experiences and risks faced by those who are forcibly removed. Civil society organizations are stepping in to fill some of these gaps, but require greater support and coordination to scale their efforts.

Another line of questioning focused on the role of national policy in determining where people return to—rural places of origin versus urban centers where opportunities might be greater. The panel acknowledged that current return strategies often ignore migrant preferences and fail to account for the economic and social structures awaiting returnees. Moreover, in many contexts, families must decide whether to stay together or split up based on conflicting pressures and legal uncertainties.

Finally, several participants asked how to reduce public demand for punitive return measures, which

are often stoked by populist rhetoric. Experts emphasized the need to shift narratives from fear and control to shared opportunity and collective responsibility. The conversation concluded with a call to look beyond any one country's approach and toward regional and international frameworks that respect mobility, foster reintegration, and uphold dignity.

Policy Recommendations:

1. **Recenter Consent in Return Policies** by developing safeguards that ensure returns are truly voluntary, based on complete and accurate information, and allow individuals to reassess their decisions as circumstances evolve.

2. **Invest in Reintegration Infrastructure** in countries of origin, including access to livelihoods, healthcare, education, and psychosocial support, to reduce the coercive pressures that drive return.

3. **Ensure Due Process in Deportation Cases** through legal representation, transparent procedures, and independent oversight to uphold rights and minimize harm.

4. **Support Civil Society Organizations** that assist returnees, particularly in urban areas, by providing flexible funding and capacity-building resources to scale locally grounded interventions.

5. **Advance Regional Mobility Frameworks** that facilitate cross-border movement with access to legal status, work, and social services, reducing reliance on narrow or exclusionary asylum pathways.

> SECTION 6

Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Academia

The final panel of the conference focused on a core challenge for rights-based migration governance: how to build stronger, more sustainable collaborations between academic researchers and policymakers. Experts examined how data and evidence can be used to design more responsive and equitable policies—and how both sectors can align their goals to protect migrants more effectively.

Experts emphasized that migration policymaking increasingly relies on robust, real-time data, yet the infrastructure to collect and interpret that data is under strain. One speaker noted that humanitarian needs assessments typically collect basic demographic information like age, sex, and nationality, but there is potential to go further. With twenty years of comparative migration data already available, academics can help develop standardized methods and push into emerging areas of concern, such as smuggling, trafficking, and the spatial effects of climate change.

Collaborative partnerships between academics and institutions like the IOM, World Bank, and UN agencies have proven fruitful in areas such as randomized loan programs, impact evaluations, and labor market analysis. These partnerships benefit from the methodological rigor and independence that academic researchers bring, while giving agencies access to localized knowledge that helps tailor programming. Speakers emphasized that local academic communities are especially effective messengers in domestic political contexts, often influencing policy in ways that global agencies cannot.

Experts agreed that the collaboration process must be made more systematic. Currently, much of the engagement depends on personal networks or individual initiative. To improve this, institutions could build structured channels for engagement, including internships, secondments, and graduate student placements. Listening to the questions being asked by member states is also key: when practitioners identify a question they cannot answer, academics can help produce relevant, actionable evidence.

When asked which research questions could best support policy design, experts highlighted several priorities. These included better understanding the spatial and temporal patterns of mobility, especially under climate stress; evaluating cost-effective interventions in humanitarian settings; assessing how to support large-scale job creation and reduce gender-based violence; and generating data that can shift public narratives around migration. Evidence on the economic contributions of migrants—including tax revenues, consumer spending, and labor market participation—can complement

rights-based advocacy to broaden support for more inclusive policies.

The panel also acknowledged the difficult political terrain in which data is often received. Aid cutbacks and funding shortages have forced downsizing in many organizations, creating what one speaker called a "data drought." At the same time, data can be weaponized. Audience members raised concerns about the pernicious use of data by politicians to mislead the public, such as conflating encounters at borders with arrivals or misrepresenting the economic impact of migration. Experts warned that political actors often selectively deploy statistics to incite fear or justify exclusion. Academic voices can play a crucial role in correcting these distortions and helping to inform the public discourse.

Legal and ethical considerations also surfaced as key themes. The right to remain, and the legal identification that underpins it, has cascading effects on access to housing, employment, and education. Without legal clarity and protection, individuals remain vulnerable across generations. Experts noted that spatial and temporal mapping techniques—while powerful—must be safeguarded to prevent misuse, such as targeting migrants or reinforcing exclusion.

One of the more reflective discussions during the session concerned the use of evidence that yields null or politically unpopular results. Sometimes academic research finds little to no economic impact from specific migration programs, which can make institutions hesitant to share or fund further studies. However, experts emphasized that this is precisely where ethical collaboration becomes most important. Evidence must be valued for what it reveals, not only for what policymakers want to hear. Universities should continue to prioritize learning and discovery, even in politically difficult contexts, and frame research not only around economics but also around rights and dignity.

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Policy Recommendations:

1. **Institutionalize Academic-Policy Partnerships** by creating formal mechanisms for collaboration, such as shared data platforms, research fellowships, and responsive funding for rapid policy-relevant studies.

2. **Prioritize Local Academic Engagement** to ensure programming is grounded in context-specific knowledge and to strengthen the policy impact of research in domestic political spaces.

3. **Support Research on Understudied Topics** such as the effectiveness of voluntary return programs, long-term reintegration outcomes, and rights-based alternatives to deportation and deterrence.

4. **Balance Economic and Rights-Based Narratives** by promoting evidence that highlights both the contributions of migrants and the fundamental rights that should guide migration policy design.

> SECTION 7

Research In Action

The final day flipped the Conference's script: academic researchers presented their policy-relevant research for a broad audience.

Border Enforcement and Human Rights

The first panel examined the rights implications of intensified border enforcement. Elizabeth Chacko of George Washington University analyzed how U.S. deterrence practices along the southern border interact with evolving legal standards and asylum eligibility to constitute highly "elastic" borders. Her research underscores a need for consistent and rights-focused immigration policy within the United States, arguing that the current instability of asylum processes threatens migrant safety and legal clarity.

Gino Pauselli (University of Illinois) presented a co-authored study with Beth Simmons (University of Pennsylvania), examining the relationship between border hardening and reported cases of torture by enforcement officials. Their research, part of the Borders and Boundaries Project at Perry World House, shows that border walls construction signals a growing tolerance for human rights abuse. This work highlights how securitized migration policies can generate rights violations by the signals they send to officials on the ground. Their study critiques border control that deters entry through threatening bodily harm and advocates for more accountability and better training for border and immigration officials worldwide.

Migration, Labor Exploitation, and International Human Rights Law

The second panel, a roundtable of international human rights lawyers, focused on the structural vulnerabilities facing migrant workers. Sarah Paoletti (University of Pennsylvania) described the United States's temporary labor migration program, emphasizing how visa regimes that tie immigration status to their place of employment facilitates exploitative conditions. Jennifer Lee (Temple University) built on Paoletti's conversation by discussing local worker movements with irregular migrant workers. Her work is centered on a unifying vision of dignity at work, including combatting the dignitary harms of exploitation, domination, and exclusion. Paoletti called for reforms that delink work authorization from employers and expanded humanitarian protections for exploited workers, while Lee concluded that worker dignity should be furthered through legislative advocacy and worker solidarity.

Kirsty Hughes (University of Cambridge) shifted attention to labor and sex trafficking survivors, noting how legal frameworks in Europe and elsewhere often fail to protect the rights of traf-

ficked persons to remain or return safely. All three discussants identified legal gaps that have allowed for weak migrant worker protections and called for more robust legal protections against the erosion of these groups' basic human rights.

Data and the Problem of Measuring the Rights of Migrants

The third panel addressed the challenges of quantifying key aspects of the migrant experience – particularly forced return and asylum restrictions. Perisa Davutoglu (University of Pittsburgh) introduced new tools to measure forced repatriation, using baseline regression models to identify "outliers"—or cases when returns may violate non-refoulement obligations, helping to clarify when international law is failing in practice.

Lama Mourad (Carleton University) shared findings from the COVID Asylum Restrictiveness Index (CARI), which she developed with Stephanie Schwartz (London School of Economics). Their index of restrictions on asylum demonstrates, among other findings, that asylum policies remained restrictive even as freedom of movement across physical borders more generally was loosened. This novel metric can be used to assess the lingering impact of "emergency" politics on asylum systems.

These scholar papers and comments provide basic knowledge essential for policy development. Whether identifying new or little acknowledged practices (torture, border elasticity), legal gaps (arising from precarity and forced return), or new ways to measure the nature and extent of policies themselves, these studies show it is essential to bring research insights to policy discussions.

Launching a New DevLab@Penn and IOM Policy Project

The day culminated in the launch of a groundbreaking partnership between the University of Pennsylvania's Development Research Initiative and the International Organization for Migration. This collaboration seeks to harness advanced technologies—including artificial intelligence and machine learning—to better understand migration dynamics and inform more effective, ethical, and anticipatory policy responses. With a commitment to methodological rigor and the protection of migrant rights, the initiative exemplifies the conference's overarching vision: that migration governance must be rooted not only in political will, but in robust data, inclusive dialogue, and long-term thinking.

Looking ahead, the panels and partnerships signal a new chapter in how migration challenges are addressed—one that embraces innovation without losing sight of justice, agency, and dignity. As the global landscape continues to evolve, the topics discussed at this conference will help ensure that policy responses are not only reactive, but grounded in the realities of those most affected. The conversations, collaborations, and commitments forged over the course of this conference offer a strong foundation for advancing more humane, resilient, and inclusive migration governance.

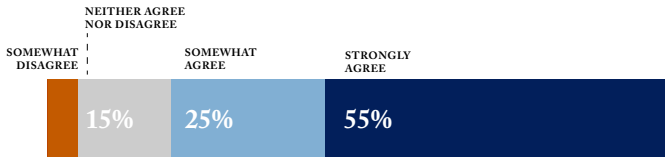
> SECTION 8

Appendix

In advance of the conference, we conducted a survey among participants to gather their perspectives and priorities regarding the thematic areas under discussion. The objective was to inform and enrich the dialogue and debate throughout the conference. Below are the results from 20 respondents.

Q:

Global migration policies are likely to become increasingly restrictive in the next five years.



Q:

Existing international agreements and frameworks are sufficient to address current key migration challenges.

Q:

Low- and middle-income countries that host large numbers of migrants and refugees receive adequate international support to manage these populations effectively.

Q:

Cities in high income countries have the resources they need to meet migrants' needs.

Q:

Public opinion influences migration policy more than evidence-based research.

Q:

National governments are the most influential in shaping global migration policies.

Q:

Temporary labor migration schemes and complementary pathways are effective tools for safeguarding the rights and well-being of migrants.

Q:

Prioritizing human rights protections in national border enforcement should be a core principle of migration governance.

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