The notion of ‘sustainable migration’ has been floated as a guiding principle for migration policy. Is it a concept we should embrace? On the one hand, it neatly captures the idea that migration should be managed in a way that ensures well-balanced distribution of costs and benefits, today and in the future. On the other hand, ‘sustainable migration’ can serve as a politically charged rhetorical device: it thrives on the liberal and progressive connotations of ‘sustainable’, but implicitly presents migration as an existential threat to society.

**Brief Points**

- The term ‘sustainable migration’ is used increasingly often but has no established definition.
- Sustainable migration should be defined as ‘migration that ensures a well-balanced distribution of costs and benefits for the individuals, societies and states affected, today and in the future’.
- There is potential political bias in the term ‘sustainable migration’ because it fundamentally presents migration as a threat.

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Engaging with ‘Sustainable Migration’

This PRIO Policy Brief is written in response to a request from the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security to discuss and define the concept ‘sustainable migration’. It is accompanied by a longer PRIO Paper that includes case studies and a literature review.¹

Our mandate focused on migration from lower- and middle-income countries in the Global South, to high-income countries in the Global North. This is a specific geographic subsection of international migration that accounts for 35% of the global stock of international migrants. For comparison, South–South migration makes up 38%.

Moreover, migration flows in different parts of the world are often connected—for instance when migration trajectories begin across borders in the Global South and later proceed towards the Global North, or when restrictive immigration policies in high-income countries deflect migration flows to poorer destinations. For these reasons, a discussion of ‘sustainable migration’ must have a global framing.

Building on Established Concepts

The notion of ‘sustainable migration’ has similarities with other, more established concepts that describe what can be called ‘migration with desirable characteristics’. Relating sustainable migration to this broader category makes it possible to examine elements that transcend the specific choice of words. There are four established concepts that are particularly relevant:

1. **Orderly, safe, and responsible migration.** Key concept of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target 10.7.²

2. **Safe, orderly and regular migration.** Key concept of the Global Compact for Migration.³

3. **Humane and orderly migration for the benefit of all.** Key concept in the International Organization for Migration (IOM)’s mission statement.⁴

4. **A win-win-win scenario for migration.** A prominent idea within early thinking on migration management.⁵

The four concepts are phrased in different terms and reflect particular institutional contexts, which we address elsewhere.⁶ As a background to discussing ‘sustainable migration’ however, it is meaningful to concentrate on five valuable, underlying perspectives that these established concepts share:

A diversity of stakeholders. Migration takes place in a landscape with various stakeholders. In the latter two concepts, the diversity of stakeholders is explicit: the ‘win-win-win scenario’ refers to benefit for (1) countries of origin, (2) countries of destination, and (3) migrants themselves; the IOM mission statement’s notion of ‘benefit for all’ embodies similar ideas. This formulation is open but is often related to states and migrants as the two primary stakeholder groups. The adjectives orderly, safe, responsible, regular, and humane that occur in the first three concepts indirectly allude to the distinct perspectives of states and migrants. In each case, the combination of adjectives seeks to imply a balanced approach.

Positive and negative aspects. Migration can have diverse consequences, both adverse and beneficial, for the various stakeholders. The ‘win-win-win scenario’ points very directly to the benefits from migration. The positive aspects are implicit but no less important in the other three concepts. Warnings about the negative aspects are captured by the adjectives used to describe desirable forms of migration. For instance, the mention of ‘safe’ migration alludes to the exploitation, suffering, and fatal risks that many migrants are exposed to. Similarly, the reference to ‘regular’ migration recognizes states’ concern about irregular border-crossing and undocumented residence.

Dispersed impacts. Migration has repercussions across the migration trajectory from societies of origin to societies of destination, and often also including societies of transit. The four concepts all reflect such a holistic approach to migration as a policy issue. They build upon the shift from one-sided ‘immigration control’ to collaborative ‘migration management’ as the dominant policy ethos, and they attempt to connect concerns about migration and development with the management of migration flows.

Potential for sound management. The four concepts connect the disparate potential outcomes of migration with the promise of sound management. The underlying idea is that, with the right policies in place, the positive aspects of migration can be maximized while the negative ones are minimized. This idea is based on a belief that (1) migration processes can be effectively shaped by policy, and (2) the interests of different stakeholders can be reconciled if policies are right.

Conditional endorsement. All four concepts express fundamentally positive attitudes towards migration, with reservations about the circumstances under which migration is a good thing. This perspective can be described, in other words, as ‘conditional endorsement’ of migration.

These five points reflect important developments in migration research and policy and serve as foundations for the concisely formulated concepts. Even if ‘sustainable migration’ as an alternative concept takes a distinct approach, it should have an underpinning which relates to these key ideas.

Concepts for Political Compromise

Migration policy is debated and developed in a field of tension, which, in simple terms, is defined by the clash between fundamentally positive and fundamentally sceptical views on migration. This tension exists at the global level—where many countries of origin would like to see expanded opportunities for migration while countries of destination favour a restrictive policy—and in national politics in countries of destination, where the degree of openness to immigration is a contentious issue.

The way in which concepts are developed, used, and understood cannot be separated from their political context. This holds true for the established concepts listed above as well as for ‘sustainable migration’. In both cases, there are specific reasons why certain concepts thrive within the field of tension over migration politics.

The notion of safe, orderly and regular migration has gained widespread international support.

Migration has repercussions across the trajectory from societies of origin to societies of destination.
across political divides in views on migration. This is partly because the concept itself incorporates a balance between different perspectives. The safety of migrants is an important concern for countries of origin and migrant activists, while the references to ‘orderly and regular’ assuages destination countries’ concern with controlling immigration. Moreover, the idea that ‘safe, orderly and regular migration’ should be promoted is acceptable to diverse groups because it can mean two very different things: (1) that migration should be promoted, and made as safe, orderly and regular as possible, and (2) that migration is only acceptable if it meets the criteria of being safe, orderly and regular.

The use of ‘sustainable’ in connection with migration similarly allows for different interpretations by different audiences.

The Rhetoric of ‘Sustainable Migration’

How does the concept ‘sustainable migration’ work in the current political context? Even without an established definition, the concept is a powerful one. That is not because it necessarily promotes new analytical insights, but because of its rhetorical effects.

‘Sustainable migration’ can be seen as an ingenious rhetorical innovation that serves a restrictive migration agenda. The concept has the hallmarks of successful political communication on a contested issue: it has different effects on groups with different political orientations.

On the one hand, ‘sustainable’ has liberal and progressive connotations. It is associated with ‘sustainable development’ and indirectly also with words such as ‘ecology’ and ‘solidarity’. In the political landscape of most high-income countries of destination, the word ‘sustainable’ will typically appeal to political constituencies that also take a positive view on migration.

On the other hand, ‘sustainable migration’ appeals to immigration sceptics because it implies a stark warning about the consequences of excessive immigration. An effort to make migration sustainable suggests an alternative scenario in which unrestrained migration results in some form of societal collapse. ‘Sustainable migration’ thus seems innocuous to the public at large at the same time as it serves as an expression of support to those who feel that current levels of immigration are intolerable, endanger the survival of societies, and pollute national culture.

In other words, ‘sustainable migration’ has an element of dog-whistle politics: speaking directly to a sub-group of ardent immigration sceptics without alienating the more moderate majority. This effect can be genuine even if ‘sustainable migration’ is used by a broader range of actors, beyond immigration hard-liners.

Making ‘sustainable migration’ a policy objective implies that migration at present is ‘unsustainable’. This characterization sets sustainable migration apart from the more established policy visions referred to above – such as ‘safe, orderly and regular migration’ – which relate to undisputed challenges of global migration today.

Towards a Definition

In order to be analytically useful, ‘Sustainable migration’ must be supported by a definition. The word ‘sustainable’ means ‘capable of being maintained at a steady level’. With this in mind, ‘sustainable migration’ could be understood as migration that does not undermine the ability of societies of origin and destination to support future migration. However, this type of definition has two weaknesses: first, it frames migration as a societal threat without acknowledging the societals benefits; second, it is tied exclusively to the societal level, without recognizing the role of positive and negative consequences for individuals.

Moreover, one could question whether sustaining migration at a particular level is desirable. All societies experience demographic, economic, social and political fluctuations, and these could very well affect what levels and composition of emigration or immigration are desirable. With respect to labour migration in particular, part of the appeal to countries of destination is precisely that the supply of labour can fluctuate greatly over time.

A more promising approach is to pick up on the notion of migration potentially affecting diverse stakeholders in positive or negative ways, and extending the principle into the future. In other words, sustainable migration is not just about migration being safe or orderly today, but also about its longer-term repercussions.

The future-oriented perspective means shifting the focus from considering only the characteristics of migration to including also its longer-term consequences more explicitly. Since migration can entail both costs and benefits to individuals and societies, we should focus on the distribution of those costs and benefits, now and in the future. A possible definition of sustainable migration would be migration that ensures a well-balanced distribution of costs and benefits for the individuals, societies and states affected, today and in the future.

Costs and benefits should be understood in a broad sense, beyond purely financial ones. For instance, migration involves extreme cost in the form of loss of life and severe traumatization of migrants. Benefits include the opportunities for individuals to escape persecution or poverty, as well as the contribution of migration to economic growth. Some consequences of migration may be judged differently by different people; for instance, increased cultural diversity will be seen as a benefit by some and a cost by others.

The word ‘well-balanced’ is open to different interpretations. However, this openness is not a weakness of the definition since it is impossible to offer a universal and impartial prescription for how the costs and benefits should be distributed.

Combining Facts and Norms

The definition of sustainable migration implicitly points to the two necessary pillars for policy-making: (1) a sound understanding of the mechanisms that produce costs and benefits, and (2) a normative foundation for balancing potentially conflicting interests.

This combination applies to diverse forms of migration management. For instance, the
practice of not returning foreign nationals who could face persecution in their country of citizenship is based on (1) a thorough assessment of the likelihood consequences for the individuals, and (2) a commitment to the principle of non-refoulement. In this case, the normative pillar is a legally binding one that renders other concerns (such as the financial costs to the countries) irrelevant.

In other cases, there is a political dilemma of balancing different concerns. For instance, large-scale immigration of skilled manual workers can relieve labour market bottlenecks and stimulate economic activity, but at the same time erode hard-won labour standards and undermine recruitment to the trades in question.

There is no unbiased solution to such a dilemma. Again, the response rests on two pillars. On the one hand, we need insights into the likely distribution of costs and benefits under different migration scenarios, and about the scope for policy interventions that minimize the undesirable consequences and maximize the desirable ones. On the other hand, policy-makers need normative guidance on balancing conflicting concerns. Even with a vision of migration for the benefit of all, and with the best-possible policy tools at hand, there will be choices that are essentially normative. What is the value of preserving national craftsmanship, for instance? And can the eradication of one profession be justified by gains to many others?

The proposed definition of sustainable migration draws attention to the need for considering the diverse outcomes of migration, understanding the processes at work, and thereby delimiting the normative issues that should be addressed through informed, democratic processes.

**Taking ‘Sustainable Migration’ Forward**

‘Sustainable migration’ presents analysts, practitioners, and other actors in the migration policy field with a dilemma: should the concept be embraced or rejected?

With the definition that we propose, ‘sustainable migration’ can serve as a guiding vision for realistic and constructive policy that balances conflicting interest in a defensible way. It seems utopian to aim for a migration regime that pleases everyone. Therefore, it is all the more important to aim for policy processes that combine facts and norms to tackle the genuine dilemmas of migration management. We need the facts and analyses that lay out causes, effects and possible courses of actions. And we need the normative foundations that enable us to make choices.

The outcome we should aim for is migration that ensures a well-balanced distribution of costs and benefits for the individuals, societies and states affected, today and in the future—in other words, ‘sustainable migration’ as we define it.

Unfortunately, the potential political toxicity of ‘sustainable migration’ looms above its constructive use in policy making.

It is good that restrictive and liberal views on migration are promoted alongside each other in an informed public debate. But it is a problem if the concepts we use define the issue in a politically biased way at the outset. ‘Sustainable migration’ could convey specific assumptions about migration, implicitly presenting it as a threat that is out of control. Such a starting point is not conducive to an open debate based on well-founded facts and explicitly stated norms.

The value of ‘sustainable migration’ will be determined over the coming years, depending on how it is used, by whom, and for what purpose. If its usage reflects a commitment to well-balanced distribution of costs and benefits of migration, ‘sustainable migration’ can prove itself as a concept that provides guidance in a challenging field of global policy.

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**Notes**


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**THE PROJECT**

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**PRIO**

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.