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Reducing Displacement

Dare to embrace complexity!

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Dare to embrace complexity!

Bonn, 19 February 2018. During the ongoing political uncertainty and the painstakingly long government-formation process in Germany, one thing remains clear: the commitment of the potential coalition partners of the SPD and Union parties to tackling the causes of flight and forced displacement remains strong. The coalition agreement negotiated the week before last states that development co-operation in Africa should be focused on creating "local future prospects". This primarily refers to job creation, which is intended to stop people from embarking on the perilous journey through the Sahara and across the Mediterranean in the first place. However, this objective of the new German government indicates once again that the political debate on "causes of flight" still has not fully grasped the complexity of migration and forced displacement.

Mono-causal explanations are popular in public and political discussions on flight and migration. There is one important cause of flight: the constant increase in the global refugee figures - around 65 million people are currently designated refugees or internally displaced - is mainly due to armed conflicts. The intensity of armed conflicts has increased dramatically in the last ten years. This is due not only to the war in Syria, but also conflicts in South Sudan and the Democratic of the Congo, among others.

The popularity of simple or one-dimensional explanations for complex migration causes extends to the climate debate as well. At the end of last year, the scientific journal *Science* published a study illustrating a causal relationship between global warming and the number of asylum seekers in Europe. While the scientific world was largely aghast at this over-simplification of the link between climate change and asylum seeking, numerous media sources reported uncritically, taking the questionable forecasts of future refugee numbers in Europe as gospel.

However, the debate not only centres around refugees from wars or climate change. From a European viewpoint "irregular" migration between Africa and Europe is a critical issue. A large portion of these migrants do not originate from countries affected by wars; their migration can be seen as a response to a range of different - and

mutually reinforcing - conditions. As suggested by the term "mixed migration", migration due to conflict, repression, weak state institutions and terror are combined with classic migration motives such as seeking better economic prospects.

In the context of mixed migration, the coalition agreement focuses on another popular explanation for migration which, like the *Science* study, eschews complex interrelations in favour of a single driver: poverty. It is well known in migration research that poverty hinders migration much more than causing it. The poorest countries in the world, such as Niger, Chad or Burkina Faso, have scarcely any international migrants. It is only when wages and employment increase that rates of outward migration rise. If the economic situation in various African countries improves in the coming years, the number of displaced people may indeed decrease, but there is likely to be an increase in people migrating through formal channels. Assuming that increased economic growth and employment will stem migration is just not supported by facts - migration decisions are influenced by a much wider range of factors than just the existence of local jobs.

To address migration holistically, we need to embrace the complexity of global flight and migration. The desperate migration of thousands of young people from Africa towards the Mediterranean and Europe cannot be explained "solely" by European arms exports, the Western lifestyle, corruption, the failure of local elites, unfair global trade structures or environmental change. Instead, we need to recognise that all of these factors feed into migration patterns, and then shape policy processes to embrace complexity. The Grand Coalition of SPD and Union, through its proposed "Causes of flight" committee in the Bundestag, presents a great political platform to address flight and migration across government.