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National Center of Competence in Research –
The Migration-Mobility Nexus

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**Migratory Trajectories of Foreign
Nationals in Switzerland:
A State of Constant Mobility?**

in a nutshell #8, January 2018



SWISS NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR)
are a research instrument of the Swiss National Science Foundation

Messages for Decision-Makers

While the number of foreign nationals who have migrated to and settled permanently in Switzerland has grown in recent years, this is still not the most common migration trajectory. Most migrants leave the country after a few years.

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Hypermobility trajectories are not common in Switzerland and occur chiefly among migrants who are required to return to their home country and for whom reentry is authorized, as was the case for seasonal workers before the signing of the AFMP.

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The trajectories of migrants who have recently arrived is characterized more and more by internal movement within Switzerland.

What is meant by ...

... permanent resident population

The permanent resident population includes all Swiss nationals who are resident in Switzerland and foreign nationals who hold a residence permit for a minimum duration of 12 months or who have resided in Switzerland for 12 months.

... internal migration

Internal migration is defined here as a change of residence based on the 106 areas of employment defined in Switzerland by the SFSO.

According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO), 245,000 foreign nationals arrived in Switzerland in 2015. The original longitudinal studies, which track mobility trajectories, show that many of the migrants arriving in Switzerland do not stay there and leave the country again after a short time. What are the migratory trajectories of these people? What were their movements within Switzerland or internationally? And how have these trajectories changed in recent years?

For a long time, migration was considered to be a one-off, permanent shift from one country to another: it was thought that migrants who had just arrived in Switzerland would stay there for good and not move around. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the federal administration has developed policies aimed at limiting the number of foreign nationals based on this understanding of migration. The Federal Council first evoked the fear of an “overpopulation of foreigners” in a message to the Federal Assembly in June 1924, announcing that there “is [...] no objection to the influx of foreign nationals, but only on condition that they do not intend to settle here” (in Piguet 2013).

The migration of seasonal workers started at the end of the Second World War, with the support of the authorities, as a means to fill a gap in the workforce, while at the same time ensuring that this same workforce did not settle permanently in the country. Yet it is a mistake to think about migration as a permanent phenomenon, as there is huge variation in the trajectories taken by migrants. Analysis.

A Recent Growth in Arrivals and Departures, and in Net Migration

Switzerland is a land of immigrants; 29% of the current population was born outside of the country. An official distinction is made between the population of long-term residents and that of temporary residents. Figures of the SFSO generally provide information on individuals authorized to reside in Switzerland for at least twelve months (referred to as the permanent resident population – see definition). The terminology used emphasizes the idea of permanence, and thus makes an explicit assumption with regard to a migrant’s length of stay in Switzerland.

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“It is a mistake to think about migration as a permanent phenomenon, as there is huge variation in the trajectories taken by migrants.”

Looking at the changes in migration flow, there is a significant growth of arrivals, affecting both permanent and non-permanent resident populations. The permanent resident population has grown 125% over the last fifteen years or so (from 70,000 individuals in 1998 to 160,000 in 2015). When all arrivals are taken into account (including those for the non-permanent population), growth is more modest (75%), but flows are higher (an increase from 140,000 to 245,000 arrivals between 1998 and 2015).

However, this focus on arrivals fails to acknowledge the significant number of migrants returning to their country of origin. In the early 2000s, the number of annual departures among the foreign permanent resident population was around 60,000, but this had grown to 86,000 by 2015. Switzerland is going through a period characterized by a growth not only in arrivals and departures, but also in net migration, i.e. foreign nationals who stay in Switzerland.

The Reality Behind These Arrival and Departure Figures Is Much More Complex

The permanent resident population is more mobile than its name would suggest, while some members of the non-permanent population may end up settling permanently. What are the links between arrivals, settlement strategies in Switzerland and subsequent movements? It is not easy to answer this question based on official statistics, due to the cross-sectional nature of the data: the published figures reflect the situation

at a particular point in time, so it is not possible to follow the trajectory of a given individual over time.

However, the recent inclusion of personal identification numbers in population registers makes it possible to track the international and national movements of the population and analyze migratory trajectories. This prompted us to undertake a detailed analysis of the trajectories of foreign nationals in Switzerland over a period of five years, focusing on all migrants who arrived in Switzerland for the first time in 1998, 2003 or 2008, a total of around 317,000 individuals. Our study includes people with a seasonal permit (A permit), a short-term permit (L permit, up to twelve months), a temporary residence permit (B permit, renewable annually), or a permanent residence permit (C permit, after five or ten years of residence). It excludes holders of an F or N permit (people in the asylum procedure).

Migrants Are Highly Mobile

The first observation is that migration is both temporary and ongoing. After five years, more than half of the migrants are no longer in Switzerland. After a single period of residence in Switzerland, usually of short duration, 42% of migrants left: among them, two thirds stayed for less than a year and 80% stayed for less than two years. These migration pathways are generally associated with work or training, for example students, interns or professionals seeking work experience in Switzerland. In addition, 13% left Switzerland after following a

more complex trajectory (moving within the country or between countries before their departure).

— **“Migration is both temporary and ongoing. After five years, more than half of the migrants are no longer in Switzerland.”** —

But mobility covers a much wider range of situations. Taking into account all the possible internal or international movements, more than seven out of ten migrants experienced some form of mobility in the five years following their arrival. Of these, 63% left the country, 12% moved to another location in Switzerland, while 21% completed at least one round trip between Switzerland and another country and 4% moved around both in Switzerland and internationally. In other words the act of migration does not mean that a person will settle permanently in the new country; in the majority of cases, migration should be viewed as a state of permanent mobility.

Settling Permanently Is Not the Norm, but Is Becoming More Common

While only a few migrants end up settling permanently in the region in which they arrived, there has been a strong growth in this type of trajectory: only 22% of migrants who arrived in 1998 settled permanently, compared with 34% of those who arrived in 2008. In the context of the

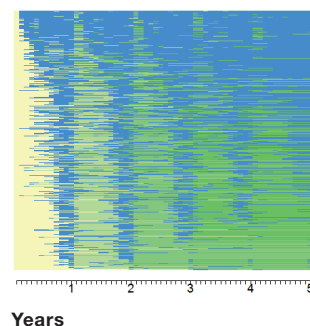
globalization of population movement, migratory flows are increasing but, paradoxically, there is also an increase in the number of migrants settling permanently.

Obviously, the type of permit a migrant is granted on their arrival has a significant influence on their ability to settle long term in a particular region: 85% of migrants who settled permanently in their region of arrival held a B or C permit on their arrival in Switzerland. It should of course be noted that a permanent residence permit in no way represents a guaranty of permanent residence, since half of those who were granted a temporary residence permit (B) or permanent residence permit (C) did not stay permanently in Switzerland.

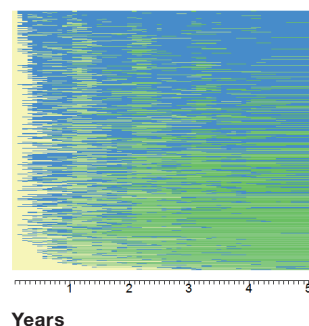
Circular Migration – an Outdated Model

When Switzerland and the European Union signed the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) in 2002, there was some expectation that there would be an increase in circular migration, in other words the number of migrants (highly qualified individuals, in particular) traveling back and forth between Switzerland and their country of origin. This did not eventuate, however, as circular mobility was in fact a product of the seasonal workers' scheme and all but ended when the scheme was abolished, also in 2002. Figure 1 illustrates these mobility trajectories and shows the drop in regular (seasonal) circular mobility after 2002, and a significant decline in what was once strong international

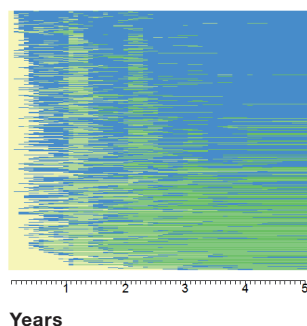
Graph 1:
International mobility
1998 (15,471 individuals)



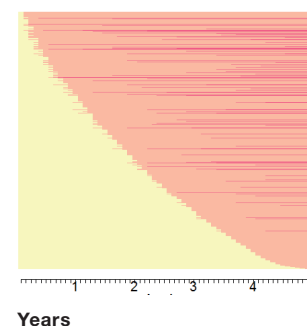
2003 (3,996 individuals)



2008 (2,403 individuals)



Graph 2:
Internal migration(s)
2003 (27,331 individuals)



Understanding These Graphs

The graphs represent the migratory trajectories of a selection of individuals from the time of their arrival in Switzerland and every month thereafter for the next five years. The trajectories of all individuals who arrived in 1998,

2003 and 2008 have been compiled and different colors are used to show the migratory movement, both internally and internationally. To indicate multiple movements, each subsequent internal movement is shown in a darker shade of red.

- Arrival in Switzerland
- Departure from Switzerland
- Internal movement
- Return to Switzerland

movement – 16,000 circular migrants in 1998 down to 2,000 circular migrants in 2008.

“The abolishment of the seasonal workers’ scheme in 2002 all but ended circular mobility.”

With seasonal migration all but ending after 2002, it is clear that these trajectories were restricted by a migration policy which forced workers to leave Switzerland after nine months, but allowed them to return the following year. Workers arriving from Italy and Portugal – the two main countries of origin for seasonal workers – now fall under another migration scheme. Under the AFMP, European migrants are granted an annual permit

when they arrive in the country, which encourages them to settle permanently. This scheme gives them the option of enjoying a one-off stay (migration followed by a return to their country of origin) or a longer term stay (settling in the country permanently).

Internal Migration as an Extension of International Migration

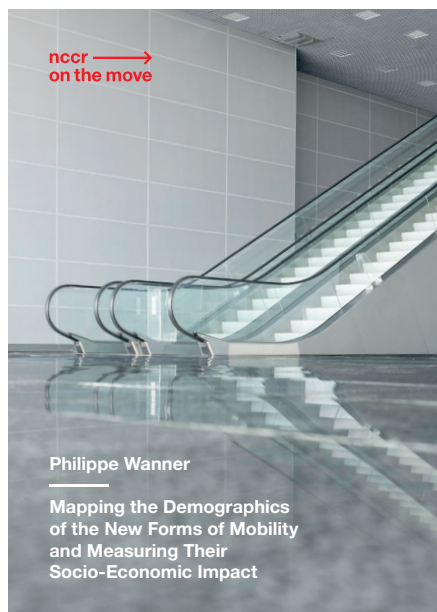
While there has been a decline in international movement among migrants in our cohorts, other types of mobility, such as internal migration, are gaining prominence (see Figure 2). Over the last few years, there has been a significant increase in the internal relocation of foreign nationals. This is particularly true of German nationals, who are increasingly following a stepwise migration pattern, initially migrating to larger centers or areas near the border, where it is easier to

land a first job and find accommodation. Then, as their knowledge of Switzerland improves and more opportunities present themselves, these migrants move internally to regions better adapted to their professional, individual or family aspirations.

Further reading

Piguet, Etienne. 2013. *L’immigration en Suisse: soixante ans d’entrouverture*. Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes.

Wanner, Philippe, éd. 2012. *La démographie des étrangers en Suisse*. Zurich: Seismo.



Mapping the demographics of the new forms of mobility and measuring their socioeconomic impact

A project of “nccr – on the move” Philippe Wanner, University of Geneva

This project aims at understanding and measuring the impacts of the new migration on society by analyzing three domains: the labor market, the social insurance system and the spatial distribution of inhabitants. Based on statistical approaches, the project gives priority to longitudinal analyses such as sequential data analysis approaches or forecasting methods.

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The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies. The center aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary migration and mobility patterns. Designed to develop new perspectives on the changing migratory reality, the nccr – on the move brings together research projects from social sciences, economics and law. Managed from the University of Neuchâtel, the network comprises nineteen research teams from eight universities in Switzerland: the universities of Neuchâtel, Basel, Bern, Fribourg, Geneva, Lausanne and Lucerne, as well as ETH Zurich.

“in a nutshell” provides answers to current questions on migration and mobility – based on research findings, which have been elaborated within the nccr – on the move. The authors assume responsibility for their analyses and arguments.

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