Improving and Scaling Evidence

RESEARCH CONFERENCE ON FORCED DISPLACEMENT
January 16 –18, 2020
UN City, Copenhagen, Denmark

Introduction

The public discourse on forced displacement does not always appear informed by the evidence which emerges from the work of academics, practitioners and members of international organizations. Moreover, the dialogue between these agents and other stakeholders (governments, policy makers, donors, etc.) needs to be improved and made more effective, in order to exert more lasting effects on the decision-making process on forced displacement around the globe. Through greater availability of evidence and data, stakeholders will have a great ability to make timely and evidence-informed decisions that can improve the lives of people affected by forced displacement.

To these aims, the Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement (JDC)[1] organized the Research Conference on Forced Displacement 2020. The conference took place on January 16-18, in Copenhagen, Denmark, in partnership with the World Bank's Development Economics Research Group, the Population Studies and Training Center at Brown University, and the Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD) and Middle East Initiative (MEI) at Harvard University. Papers presented at the conference were eligible for consideration for a special issue on Forced Displacement in the Journal of Development Economics. The event brought together over 100 members of the research community and gave the participants the possibility to discuss and analyse current and future topics on forced displacement. Recording of all the sessions are available on the event page.

The conference largely centred around the role of data gathering, management and analysis in improving and scaling evidence on Forcibly Displaced Persons (FDPs)

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[1] The JDC is a collaboration between the World Bank and UNHCR to improve the generation and dissemination of evidence in forced displacement settings in order to inform programmatic and policy decision-making. More details can be found on the webpages of UNHCR and the World Bank.

Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement

WORLD BANK GROUP   UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency

The specific objectives of the conference were four-fold:

1. Entice more economists and other evidence-driven disciplines to enter this field of research;
2. Create a platform/an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to meet;
3. Connect data users with data providers;
4. Establish a "community of practice".

On its initial day, the conference featured the presence of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr Filippo Grandi: his remarks on the role of data in the current political context helped set the scene for the subsequent series of exchanges between researchers and other stakeholders, including discussions on open data policies.

The role of data handling in the research on FDPs

The title of the conference (Improving and Scaling Evidence) highlights the crucial role that careful collection, management and use of data can play in informing policies and shaping global decisions. This is in line with the recommendations of the High Commissioner for Refugees, who indicated how the appropriate handling of data can facilitate the achievement of three outcomes:

1. Inform the public discourse on forced displacement;
2. Help mobilize resources; and
3. Break the anti-refugees' rhetoric and push countries to open up more towards FDPs.

In this respect, the contributions presented during the conference indicated three main areas of research and intervention (see Figure 1) which can be presented in a naturally sequential order.

Figure 1 The data chain: from data collection to policies
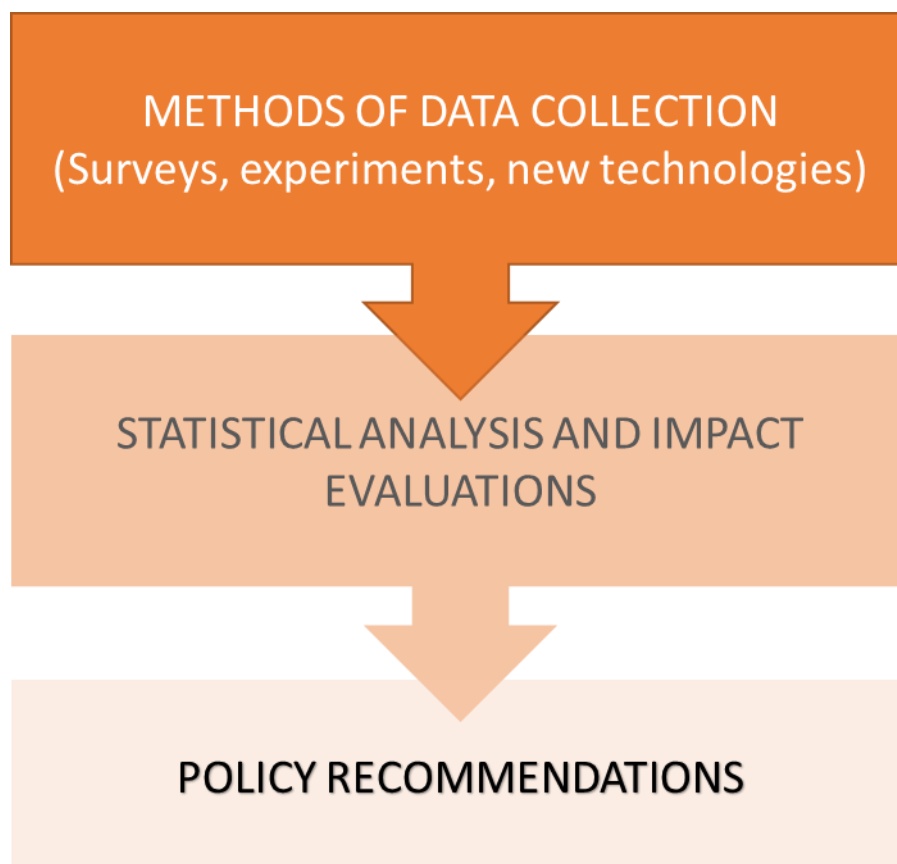
The **methods for data collection** have changed considerably during the last years and represent one of the most dynamic areas of research. This is a highly relevant theme, considering that many refugees and IDPs are located in fragile states and therefore, innovative methods are often necessary for obtaining reliable data. Specifically, the availability of new technologies opens up a number of new avenues for gathering data in a timely and relatively inexpensive way. Examples of these new methods where presented by the researchers of the World Bank during the launch of their two books (Data Collection in Fragile States: Innovations from Africa and Beyond and Using Micro-Data to Inform Durable Solutions for IDPs) at the beginning of the conference. They showed how mobile phones can prove to be invaluable tools to reach FDPs, interview them and guarantee the possibility of repeated contacts with surveyed individuals. At the same time, mobile phone technology *per se* represents a useful tool in the tracking of both migrants and refugees: for example, evidence from Turkey, presented during one of the academic sessions, indicates that data from mobile telecommunication cells can be used to identify the mobility patterns of FDPs, with important repercussions in terms of housing, employment, and education policies, to name a few. In addition, several presentations highlighted the importance of an effective representativeness of the employed samples. The UNHCR registration data play a critical role in this respect, and more traditional methods of data collection, such

as surveys or experiments, can still prove relevant and effective. Synergies between researchers, local authorities and international organizations can be particularly useful in scaling up experiments which otherwise risk to be confined to very local contexts, and therefore, exert a limited impact on the process of policy making.

New data, often collected with innovative methods, represent both an opportunity and a challenge for researchers. On the one hand, , as new waves of data become available, new research opportunities open up in geographical areas often neglected in large research studies; on the other hand, data obtained from innovative sources also call for a careful analysis to guarantee a correct extrapolation of results. The papers and studies presented during the conference showcased several contemporary **methods for the analysis of data.** Scholars devoted particular attention to those cases in which these techniques of data analysis could be employed for the evaluation of policy interventions, leading to the identification of causal effects of these policies on the population of interest (see also the next section).

This tendency is in line with much of the current literature in empirical economics. Evidence provided during the conference, and based on a comprehensive literature review, indicates that the studies of forced displacement and its effects increasingly rely on quantitative analyses of large representative datasets involving advanced econometric methods. It is therefore not surprising to observe that researchers tend to employ in their analyses a large number of statistical and econometric tools whose validity is generally accepted in economic fora.

The collection and analysis of data often aim to produce a set of recommendations that can inform the policy debate and ultimately affect the life trajectories of FDPs and members of the host communities. However, the steps for **linking the evidence to policy recommendations** often prove to be the most difficult, as highlighted in the discussion between the conference attendees and the UN High Commissioner. In general, as is the case in other fields, the ability to reach policy makers and influence their actions still appears to differ considerably between practitioners and academics.

The research themes and the populations of interests

One import element that characterized the studies presented during the conference was the wide breadth of research aspects investigated across the papers. To briefly summarise such vast research spectrum, several (but not all) contributions can be classified within the following three categories:

1. **The impact of the presence of FDPs on the host communities.** Typically, these studies did not limit their analysis to standard economic variables, such as employment levels or wages. Conversely, evidence was presented on a number of outcomes which can give a better representation of the effective socio-economic impact of FDPs inflows. Examples of such indicators are educational outcomes,

levels of crimes, or the environmental consequences of mass inflows. Moreover, other researchers focused on the individual behavioural responses vis-à-vis FDPs shocks, as well as the role social media can play in fostering anti-refugees sentiments in host countries.

2. **The consequences of forced displacement.** The research presented during the conference testifies how forced displacement is a traumatic event whose consequences may have lasting effects on a number of personal and inter-personal dimensions. The studies analysed, for example, psychological, psychosocial, and marital outcomes of FDPs. All theseevidence proves how complex the phenomenon of forced displacement is and the need for comprehensive interventions to facilitate the social inclusion of FDPs in the host communities.

3. **The effects of policy interventions on FDPs and returnees.** Governments in host and origin countries have implemented several policies and interventions on FDPs, often in collaboration with international organization and NGOs. The differences across these interventions in terms of target population, geographical areas of intervention and specific aims, offer the researchers with a wide array of opportunities for conducting studies aiming to identify the causal effect that these policies can exert on the affected individuals.

It is worth mentioning that such a variety of themes and analytical methodologies was reflected in the number of thematic sessions that were featured throughout the conference. Moreover, this richness in research topics characterized both the poster session that concluded the first day of the conference, and the flash session for graduate students, organized in collaboration with Brown University and Harvard University. This testifies how younger researchers in this field are already able to interpret and represent the complexity of forced displacement events and their multifaceted consequences.

The Conference: Attendance and social media attention

The conference consisted in a 2.5 day gathering of policy makers, practitioners and researchers on forced displacement, discussing 33 papers and books in 37 separate presentations. In total, some 130 people attended in person. In addition, the event was broadcasted live and attracted more than 500 viewing.

The conference also attracted attention in the social media, with posts from the World Bank, UNHCR, and other partners appearing on various platforms, such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram. In all, the event's announcement collected over

44,234 impressions,[2] and 318 active engagements via the World Banks Twitter handle *@worldbank*. The guests and partners who also tweeted about the event included the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr Filippo Grandi; Mr Ola Rosling, President of Gapminder; Ambassador Mohamed Abdi Affey, UNHCR's Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa,; and the account managers of Harvard University and The Forced Migration Review.

Figure 2 Distribution of participant by type of institution
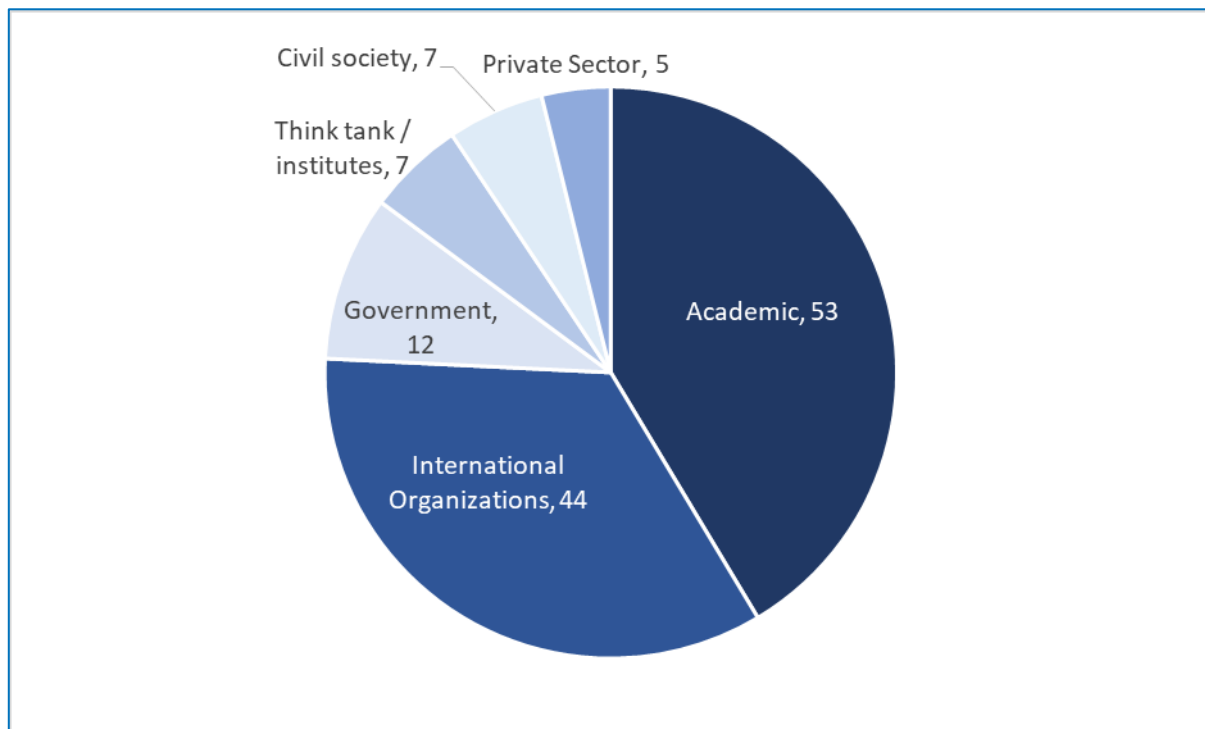
Looking at the characteristics of the conference (in person) participants, Figure 2 below presents their distribution by type of affiliate institution. While the vast majority of participants came from universities and international organizations, the participation from other institutions was not negligible and represented around a fourth of the total participants. This reflects both the diverse nature of the members of the research community who focus on the analysis of forced displacement, and the plurality of stakeholders who maintain an interest in the development of policies for FDPs.

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[2] An impression is defined as the number of times a tweet appears in Twitter's users' timelines.

Figure 3 Geographical distribution of participants
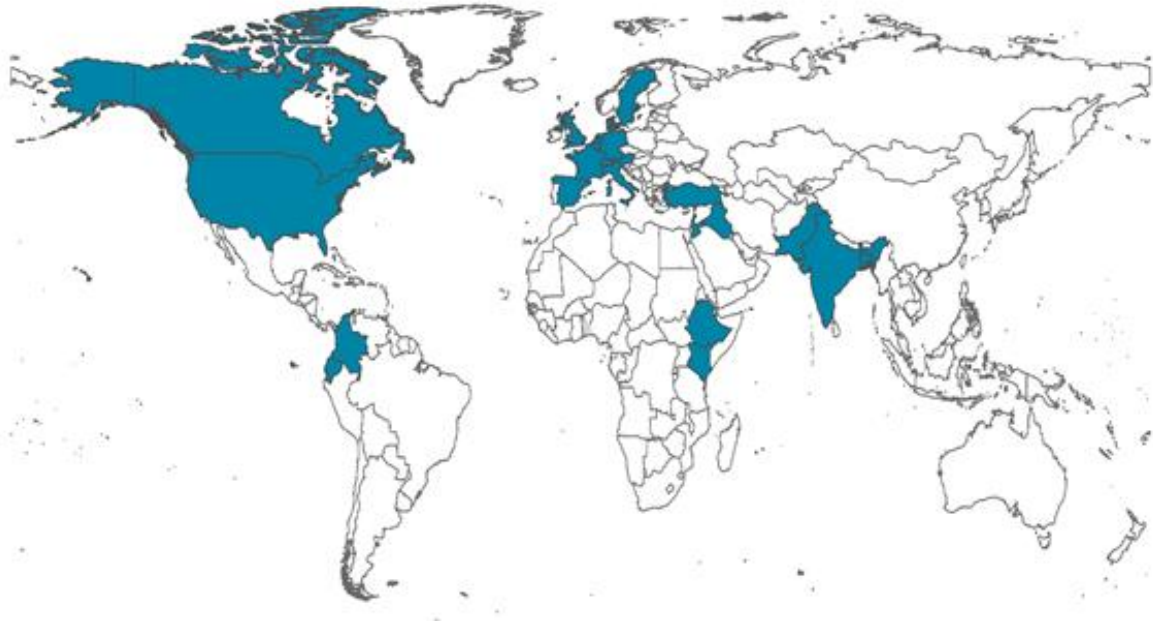
Country	Count
US	45
Denmark	34
UK	9
Switzerland	4
France	3
Germany	3
Netherlands	3
Spain	3
Austria	2
Belgium	2
Kenya	2
Lebanon	2
Luxembourg	2
Sweden	2
Turkey	2
Bangladesh	1
Canada	1
Colombia	1
Ecuador	1
Ethiopia	1
Iraq	1
Italy	1
Jordan	1
Pakistan	1

The type of institutions in which the attendees work, and the filter imposed by the rigorous publication standards of the *Journal of Development Economics*, affected the level of geographic diversity of the conference participants. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

The figure and its associated bar chart show how a large majority of participants came from North America and Western Europe. Few institutions based in emerging and developing countries were represented and in most cases, these countries could only count on one representative. These figures can be interpreted as evidence that the selection of papers and presentation has a "Western bias" and is driven by the location of the institutions where current research on forced displacement predominantly takes place. However, it is worth noting that these figures do not provide any indication on the countries of origin of the participants. Moreover, the presence of some institutions based in countries which are at the core of the debate on FDPs, such as Iraq, Lebanon or Jordan, can be seen as an important starting point for a more comprehensive involvement of scholars from these countries in international meetings.

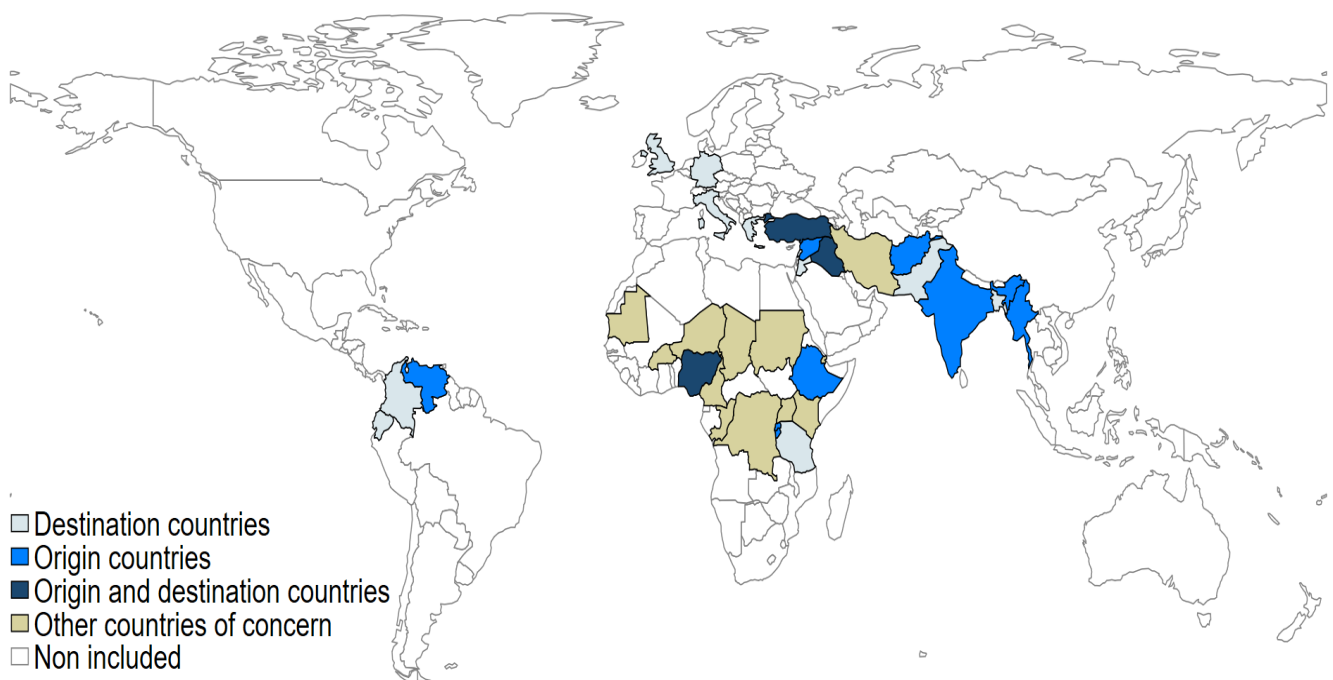## Figure 4 Countries studied in the academic presentations

Figure 4 provides an overview of the countries covered in the academic presentations. In certain cases, the studies focused on global perspectives, and therefore it was not possible to identify the specific countries analysed by the researchers. Nonetheless, as most of the presentations did identify a destination and an origin country, the map

offers a valid overview of the geographical areas which attracted most of the attention of the conference presenters.

The choice of areas covered in the presentations is not particularly surprising: Middle-East, South and South-East Asia, the Mediterranean basin, Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia, are all geographical areas which have been at center of important refugee flows over the course of the last decade. The fact that three countries (Iraq, Nigeria and Turkey) are studied both as destination and origin countries is the result of two different effects: the use of data from different periods of time (in the case of Turkey, one paper employed data from the beginning of the 20th century), and the focus on internally displace people (IDP).

Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that other countries which have witnessed events leading to considerable FDP flows were not covered in the presented papers. As a way to illustrate this, Figure 4 also includes some countries of concern which have not been specifically studied in the papers presented during the conference. For the purpose of illustration, these are countries which either host at least 300,000 forcibly displaced persons, and/or are eligible for funding under the IDA 18 Regional Sub-window for Refugees and Host Communities or the Global Concessional Financing Facility. Data and research gaps, therefore, still exist which should be filled to provide policy makers and stakeholders with a more complete overview of the different features of forced displacement around the world.

Lessons learnt and way forward

The feedback received from the participants indicates that the Conference was very well received and achieved its objectives. At the end of the conference, participants were invited to provide comments on the event through an anonymous survey. Out of the 67 participants who answered the survey, 87 per cent indicated that the conference had been very useful and 95 per cent would like to the JDC to organize other such conferences in the future.

In addition, two specific elements of the Conference can be highlighted as particularly relevant. First, the audience was particularly keen to hear about the possibilities of the forthcoming UNHCR microdata library. A special session was organized to this aim, during which the new library was presented to the researchers, along with other existing resources, such as the World Bank microdata catalogue. Importantly, the presentations did not only discuss the available data, but also the challenges and difficulties that are typically faced when gathering data resources in a systematic way. The interest in this session[3] indicates how relevant the theme of data openness is among researchers and how the process of data and knowledge sharing will be more and more crucial in the near future. This message also emerged clearly in the

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[3] Around 80 per cent of the survey respondents indicated that this session was useful for their purposes.

[stimulating presentation](#) given by Mr Ola Rosling: as free information lies at the heart of modern economic systems, "liberating data is a critical step to properly inform practitioners and policy makers about topics of public interest."

Second, the peculiar structure of the Conference, with its mixed audience, generated many opportunities for side conversations and interactions between researchers and practitioners. For example, 70 per cent of the survey respondents found that the conference had the right balance between in terms of participation of academics and practitioners. This is an element which is typically missing in standard academic-only or practitioner-only conferences and many attendees appealed to the JDC to help generate more opportunities for this type of exchanges.

At the same time, it is possible to identify some areas in which the engagement of researchers can be improved, possibly through new opportunities created by the work of the JDC and its partners.

1. Certain areas globally (for example **Sub-Saharan Africa**) are still largely excluded from the contemporary literature, which tends to focus on a handful of countries.

2. More attention should be devoted to on **IDPs and stateless people**. IDPs, in particular, are more numerous than refugees and yet very little evidence on them was provided during the Conference.

3. Additional efforts should be devoted to fully understanding the **complexity of forced displacement** and the impact of FDP flows on the host countries. This was highlighted very clearly by Ambassador Affey, who, [in his speech](#), pointed out how host countries (often themselves vulnerable and in need of support) are the "first consumers" of data on displaced populations", and called on the JDC and other international institutions to empower national institutions. It is therefore critical to provide policy makers and practitioners with new data and analytical tools for answering a wider set of research questions. In this respect, it is encouraging to see that 91 per cent of the attendees have found the conference useful for identifying future areas of work.

These elements pose some more challenges for the future work of the research community and the support offered by JDC. Some of these challenges can be overcome by broadening the set of researchers and covering aspects which are not typically included in economic analyses, such as political science, sociology, legal and/or anthropology.

Recommendations for the JDC

At the end of the Conference, a set of commitments were made by the JDC:

1. Make the conference on forced displacement a **recurrent event**, with possible venues in host country, such as Colombia, Ethiopia, Jordan, or Kenya;

2. Set up a **Fellowship Program** for researchers in the Global South, as well as a visiting scholar program;

3. Continue **monthly compilations of summaries** of research papers and studies. The Literature Review currently contains summaries of over 300 articles plus, categorized by topic;

4. **Actively work to make relevant datasets available to the research community**, whether through Microdata libraries and/or specific websites;

5. Offer opportunities and spaces for researchers to **engage with the JDC throughout the year** and learn about their work.

For comments or additional information on the Research Conference on Forced Displacement 2020 or the activities of the JDC, please contact