Rohingya refugees wade through a water channel as they flee Myanmar across the border into Bangladesh.

Panos / G.M.B. Akash.
Conflict, urbanization, climate change, globalization and a host of other factors are influencing the current era of migration. But while hundreds of millions of people are on the move between different cities, countries and continents, within this larger process there is also a distinct minority experience that can shape every step of the journey. Indeed, though the specific role that ethnic or religious identity can play is not always recognized, for many minority and indigenous communities this may be at the heart of their decision to migrate.

This may be most apparent in cases where specific communities have been targeted with killings and mass displacement, but many communities find themselves driven to migrate as a result of different forms of discrimination. Land rights violations, political exclusion and restricted freedoms all contribute to the continued movement of minorities elsewhere. In Ethiopia, the government’s crackdown on political dissent, aimed particularly at the Oromo population, appears to have contributed to an upsurge in migration from that community. Data collected by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) showed that by the beginning of 2017 as many as 89 per cent of arriving Ethiopian migrants in the key nearby transit country Yemen stated that they belong to the Oromo minority.

Yet those attempting to escape persecution frequently find new barriers of exclusion elsewhere. For Yezidis displaced by the atrocities of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), for example, their marginalization has persisted far beyond Iraq’s borders, with separate camps set up in Greece to protect community members from attacks by fellow refugees on account of their faith. The experience of discrimination, for many communities, can be difficult to escape, particularly in contexts where refugees and migrants have limited rights and protections. In these situations, members of minorities may be especially vulnerable to exploitation. The situation is further complicated for groups within minority or indigenous communities,
such as women, children, persons with disabilities and LGBTQI people, who contend with multiple forms of discrimination and as a result face heightened threats of sexual assault, physical attacks and other rights abuses. Roma children, for example, are especially vulnerable to trafficking across the European Union (EU), where they may then be coerced into forced sex work, forced begging, petty crime or other activities.

Viewing migration through the lens of ethnic and religious discrimination also provides an important perspective on the journey itself and how different stages can in turn create new challenges as a result of identity. Sub-Saharan Africans in North Africa, for instance, even those who did not belong to minorities in their countries of origin, now find themselves targeted in countries like Libya. Some of these communities, such as the significant numbers of African migrants who settled during the rule of Muammar Gaddafi, are now effectively minorities in the country, with specific challenges and protection needs. In other countries in the region, too, many migrants – stranded for years with little prospect of return or continuing their journey – have now settled and established themselves as permanent communities there.

The challenges remain even for those who reach their intended destination. In Europe, for instance, where millions who have fled conflict and marginalization from Africa, Asia and the Middle East are now hosted, discussions routinely focus on the number of arrivals to date, the extent of support they should be given and how they should be distributed across the region, if at all. This line of thinking, increasingly dominated by voices from the political right, typically concentrates on quotas, borders, containment and the like.

However, viewing the large number of refugees and migrants now in Europe as groups that will likely make up significant minorities for the foreseeable future poses different questions. What challenges will they experience as they struggle to become accepted members of their societies? How can they be assisted with this? And what resources, from housing and language courses to training and counselling, are necessary to achieve this?

Looking beyond the situation in Europe, however, raises different questions for minorities. One solution proposed as a means to curb immigration from developing countries is targeted aid to address poverty and inequality in sending countries. Though this approach has itself been criticized, it would if implemented require a firm understanding of the dynamics of ethnic and religious discrimination in many countries, and so be designed with this in mind. What is striking is how undiscerning, by contrast, the dominant policies of containment and surveillance are in this regard.

In Sudan, for instance, sustained emigration from the country has been driven not only by the desire of many Sudanese for a better life outside the repressive environment of their country but also by the ongoing conflict in Darfur, where the population has for years been the target of state-sponsored violence: despite a peace agreement in place, security forces and militias continue to displace thousands of Darfuri civilians. Ensuring a halt to this displacement, through the enforcement of human rights protections for vulnerable minorities in the region – Sudan is also a major transit country for asylum seekers from Ethiopia, Eritrea and elsewhere – should therefore be a key element in reducing rights violations. But the EU’s strategy has focused heavily
on securitization, with hundreds of millions of dollars channelled to the Sudanese government to contain migration flows out of the country. As a result, the situation for thousands of asylum seekers and migrants has dramatically deteriorated, with many facing arrest, torture and deportation.

Similarly, within Europe measures that seek to simplify and fast track returns of asylum seekers have created serious rights gaps that risk affecting minorities disproportionately. This was the case, for instance, with the establishment of a multi-tiered registration system in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis that provided preferential treatment to some nationalities while scaling back rights to others, including Afghans.

This put civilians of all backgrounds fleeing the conflict in Afghanistan at risk, including a number of groups, such as Christians and ethnic Hazaras, who face high levels of danger as a result of their identity. Recent research on the forcible return of many Afghan asylum seekers to their country has shown that some have subsequently been subjected to killings, harassment and other forms of discrimination.

But for many minorities and indigenous peoples, the situation is captured more accurately by looking at internal displacement: indeed, some of the most persecuted groups never leave their country but may live in an almost permanent state of displacement.
In Turkey, for instance, millions of Kurds have been displaced since the outbreak of conflict between the government and the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) in 1984. While hosting one of the largest refugee populations in the world, it continues to drive displacement of predominantly Kurdish civilians through its military actions, such as the destruction of the city of Diyarbakir: its operations there and across southeast Turkey between July 2015 and December 2016 are believed to have displaced up to half a million civilians. Since then, former residents have struggled to rebuild their lives.

Migration may also be driven by underlying poverty or marginalization. While not confined to minorities and indigenous peoples, it can at times impact disproportionately on them. The case of the Marshall Islands, subjected to nuclear testing during the Cold War that uprooted large numbers of inhabitants from their homes and livelihoods, is illustrative: lack of resources and continued displacement, the result now of climate change, are driving a large proportion of the country to look for work elsewhere. Around a third of the population now reside in the United States.

The situation of migrant labourers can also bring considerable challenges as migrants may find themselves targeted as a minority in their country of residence. This is the case for the large Central Asian migrant population – around a fifth of Uzbekistan’s working population, for instance, are now based abroad, primarily in Russia. Yet xenophobia and an increasingly hostile regulatory environment have left many vulnerable to hate crime, harassment and deportations. With many wary of approaching security services, they are now a highly vulnerable minority within Russia.

It should be noted, too, that while generalized violence can be a potent cause of migration – for example, criminal violence and some of the highest levels of homicide in the world are driving migration through Central America and into the US – there may still be a discriminatory angle at play. Much of the brutal gang-related violence in Guatemala, for instance, has affected indigenous communities disproportionately: decades of conflict and discrimination have left them impoverished and marginalized, with little recourse to protection from police or the judiciary. Indeed, in many cases their situation has been aggravated by official persecution. While the abusive treatment of asylum seekers and their families crossing into the US has been widely reported, the crackdown within Mexico on Central American migrants, particularly indigenous community members, has received less coverage: significantly, it has resulted not only in the targeting of foreign nationals, including many women and children, but also the arrest and intimidation of indigenous Mexicans by police.

Finally, when looking at migration and displacement, it is important to realize that these forces can affect minorities and indigenous peoples in complex ways that often go unrecognized. Gentrification in cities is one example of a process that, while frequently critiqued, is not necessarily regarded as a racially discriminatory phenomenon. Yet in many cases the impacts hit certain communities hardest. In Australia, Aboriginal populations who first relocated to urban areas like Brisbane decades before as a result of displacement from their lands now face further relocations as rising property values drives them out of the centre to the fringes, in the process breaking up fragile networks of community and connection.
Understanding migration from a minority and indigenous rights perspective provides an important lens to assess the dynamics of different stages of the journey: the exclusion and persecution that can drive the initial decision to migrate, the ways that discrimination can profoundly shape the experiences of migrants in transit and the continued presence of ethnic or religious prejudice even for those fortunate enough to reach their intended destination. A member of a religious minority displaced from Iraq or Syria may, once they reach Europe, no longer be targeted on account of their faith – but their status as a refugee and an ethnic minority may result in a different form of discrimination.

The current approach to managing migration pushed by European countries, not only at their own borders but in other regions, such as Sudan, is characterized by surveillance and containment. This system, typically dependent not only on the hard infrastructure of fences and sea patrols but also the simplistic classification of whole countries into different categories for asylum processing, largely overlooks the particular dynamics of minority and indigenous migration. Indeed, these policies are in many cases making the situation of certain communities, such as sub-Saharan Africans in Libya, even more precarious. And more directly, as discussed before, it may even extend to the forcible repatriation of vulnerable groups such as Afghan Hazaras to a context where the risk of targeted violence remains high. Among humanitarian agencies there is not always sufficient recognition of the barriers and threats that ethnic or religious minorities may experience in displacement, including from other refugees.

This is not to say, however, that a preferential system should be put in place. When the US President Donald Trump announced in January 2017 his intention to give Christian refugees priority entry to the US, his comments were widely criticized by MRG and other rights groups who argued that such a move would not only be unfair, but also risked creating further tensions and placing refugees with minority backgrounds at heightened risk. What is needed, instead, are adequate safeguards and protections to ensure that refugees from marginalized communities have the same access to justice, security and essential services.

This applies, too, to the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in Europe and the recognition that these groups will likely constitute an evolving population of ethnic and religious minorities in these countries. To date, discussions around the situation of the millions of refugees recently displaced by conflict have revolved around questions of migration and asylum, yet a clearer acceptance than these groups will have an important stake in their host countries would support an approach that invests in their future. At present, however, many governments have taken actions that, while satisfying short-term political demands to be ‘tough’ on immigration, will likely create additional barriers for inclusion: in the United Kingdom (UK), for example, funding cuts to free English language classes has left many refugees struggling to integrate.
But a minority and indigenous rights perspective can also hold value beyond immediate issues of asylum. Many migrant populations now comprise communities in their destination countries at risk of discrimination: examples include the UK’s Polish community, now the largest population born outside the UK, who reported rising levels of hate crime in the wake of the June 2016 Brexit vote to leave the EU. The danger is that, as anti-immigrant sentiment appears to be on the rise, governments impose more restrictive and discriminatory environments on migrants in their countries. However, what is instead needed is a greater focus on ensuring their protections: the attrition of migrant rights in Russia, for instance, is a major contributing factor to the abuses many Central Asians suffer at the hands of right-wing groups.

Finally, enforcing minority and indigenous rights will also help address the root drivers of migration, particularly around land rights. In Africa, Asia and the Americas in particular the dispossession of land from communities by governments, businesses and other groups continues to drive mass displacement. In post-conflict zones, too, the frequent failure to restore homes and property to uprooted communities is a major barrier to lasting peace that lays the foundation for further displacement in future. Supporting a more secure and equitable environment for all communities will therefore help reduce involuntary migration and displacement.

Encouragingly, many migrant populations have actively created platforms to highlight their issues and mobilize for change. This includes, for example, the ‘Undocumented and Unafraid’ movement in the United States, bringing together many voices from a community who, threatened with deportation, might otherwise be pressured into silence. Across Europe, too, there have been solidarity marches in support of refugees and protesting the rising tide of ethnic and religious discrimination. Communities forcibly displaced from their lands are also publicly challenging their dispossession. Kenya’s Ogiek, who for many years have faced systematic evictions from their territory in the Mau Forest by the Kenyan government, finally secured recognition in May 2017 by the African Court of Human and People’s Rights that their land rights had been violated – a judgment that could enable them and many other indigenous peoples similarly displaced with the opportunity to return to their land. Moving forward, these and other inspiring examples of community-led activism highlight the importance of an alternative narrative to the slurs and falsifications that many migrants, particularly minorities and indigenous peoples, face.
Uphold international human rights standards on migration, asylum and related issues, with a particular focus on marginalized groups, including minorities and indigenous peoples: This should ensure not only measures to prevent the causes of displacement or involuntary migration such as discrimination or violence, but also protections to support those in transit and effective assistance and integration strategies for communities in their areas of displacement.

Prioritize the protections of all displaced groups, including minorities and indigenous peoples, in conflict zones: Instead of relying on containment policies to prevent displacement as a result of violence, the international community should aim to support the implementation of security and humanitarian frameworks for affected communities to ensure further displacement is averted.

Design targeted strategies for humanitarian outreach to ensure assistance is extended to all those in need, including hard-to-reach or high-risk groups such as minorities and indigenous peoples: Relief agencies and service providers should be sensitive to the barriers that may weaken or obstruct services for marginalized communities, taking care to put anti-discrimination measures in place to ensure equitable access.

Integrate minority-sensitive considerations into post-conflict frameworks to prevent further displacement: This should include clear guarantees for security, property restitution and rights protections to ensure the safe return and reintegration of communities who may otherwise be caught in a protracted state of displacement, as well as active participation by these communities in peace-building efforts.
Develop a holistic approach to identifying the wide range of factors contributing to migration and the specific ways these affect marginalized groups, including minority and indigenous communities: Instead of maintaining a narrow focus on containment, the international community should respond to the specific ways that issues such as land grabbing, climate change and environmental destruction are driving minority and indigenous displacement.

Recognize that refugee and other migrant communities in host countries are themselves minorities, in need of specific rights protections: Separate to any debates about future migration and asylum strategies, governments have a responsibility and vested interest in ensuring that integration and equality measures are in place, modelling existing minority rights frameworks, to deliver education, housing and health care to those in need.

Consider areas of intersectional discrimination that may affect particular groups within minorities and indigenous peoples: This includes women, children, persons with disabilities and LGBTQI people who may face specific risks of sexual violence, targeted attacks and exploitation in transit or displacement as a result of their identities, including from other members of their own community.

Empower migrants and minorities to articulate their own perspectives and solutions to discussions around migration: This is especially important at a time when hate speech against these communities is on the rise, threatening to pressure them into silence when their voices are most needed to counter dominant narratives against them.

Ensure a rights-based framework for labour migration: Migrant workers are now contending with a range of issues including discrimination, language barriers and hate crime. Governments should therefore refrain from imposing hostile or punitive regulations in place that may reinforce their vulnerability, instead ensuring that migrants are able to live free of discrimination.