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Globalization, poverty and mobility: an introduction to the developmental dimensions of international migration

Jeff Crisp

Head, Policy Development and Evaluation Service
UNHCR

crisp@unhcr.org

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UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Policy Development and Evaluation Service

**Policy Development and Evaluation Service
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
P.O. Box 2500, 1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland**

**E-mail: hqpd00@unhcr.org
Web Site: www.unhcr.org**

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Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a substantial increase in the total number of people who are moving across international borders. More than 200 million people are now living outside their country of birth. The global labour force is becoming increasingly mobile, and it seems certain that the scale of international migration – or at least the desire of people to move to another country or continent – will increase in the years to come.

International migration has also become a genuinely global phenomenon. Only two decades ago, experts in international migration used to joke that they would be out of a job if every country was like Albania, which refused to let anyone out of the country, or like Japan, which refused to let anyone in. The last thing threatening any migration expert today is the risk of unemployment. For in recent years, states such as Albania and Japan, which were previously unaffected or only marginally affected by international migration, have experienced very significant movements of people out of, into and across their territory.

Migratory movements have also become increasingly complex: complex in terms of the routes that migrants take and the way in which their travel is organized; complex in terms of the legal status pertaining to migrants at different stages of their journey; and complex in the sense that traditional categorizations can no longer be rigidly sustained.

The distinction between countries of origin, transit and destination, for example, has become an increasingly redundant one. Many countries around the world now fall into all three categories. The traditional distinction made between permanent and temporary migration has been undermined by the phenomenon of circular migration. Even the basic distinction between a citizen and a foreigner has been called into question by the spread of dual nationality and the growth of transnationalism.

The motivations for migration have become more difficult to identify and to categorize. A single person or household may decide to her or his own country and to seek residence in another state for a complex mixture of economic, social, political and personal reasons which can be extremely difficult to disentangle.

The public and political discourse on migration has to a considerable extent been driven by this issue of motivation. Are the people arriving in foreign territories looking for a better standard of living, or are they seeking protection from persecution and armed conflict in their country of origin? And if they are bona fide refugees, why did they choose to make their way through a number of other countries before reaching and claiming asylum in their country of destination?

Development disparities

While international migration is an increasingly complex phenomenon, it would be a mistake to get too carried away with the notion of complexity. For one rather simple conclusion can be drawn from all of the evidence available. And that is that the vast majority of international migrants, whether they move on a temporary or permanent

basis, whether their status is legal or irregular, whether they remain in their own region or move from one continent to another, generally migrate from poorer to more prosperous states. This applies equally to those movements that take place from the North to the South, as well as those that take place within the South.

Poverty, in other words, is central to the dynamics of contemporary international migration, just as it has been in the past. That statement needs to be qualified, however, as it is not referring to absolute or abject poverty. We know from long experience that the most destitute members of society lack the resources, the information and the social capital needed to move from one country or continent to another.

In fact, those people who are the poorest of the poor are most likely to migrate from a rural to an urban area of their own country. Alternatively, they are likely to resort to coping mechanisms and survival strategies (such as begging and survival sex, for example) that lack any migratory dimension. Rather, it is the issue of relative poverty and socio-economic disparity that plays such an important role in prompting people to leave their own country.

The linkage between relative poverty, socio-economic disparity and international migration is in two respects a manifestation of the globalization process. First, there is now a good deal of evidence to suggest that while the globalization process has had some beneficial consequences, lifting millions of people out of poverty, it has also led to the growth of socio-economic disparities: disparities within societies, disparities amongst states, and disparities between different regions of the world.

Such disparities provide those people who have lost out in the process of globalization with a very powerful incentive to move away from their own country and to seek residence elsewhere: in states that offer them new and better opportunities in life, countries that enable them to enjoy a higher standard of living, and countries which provide them with the opportunity to send remittances home, thereby alleviating the poverty of family members who they have left behind.

Second, as well as providing relatively poor people with a powerful incentive to migrate, the process of globalization has provided those same people with the means which they need to move from one country and continent to another. In fact, the very success of globalization in establishing cheap and accessible information, communications and transportation networks has not only made millions of people acutely aware of the relative poverty in which they live. It has also provided them with the infrastructure and the resources which they need to move, even if their presence is officially unwanted by the states to which and through which they move.

One sees this taking place in the movement of people from West Africa, the Sahel states and North Africa to the European Union. One sees it happening in the migration of people from many different parts of sub-Saharan Africa to South Africa. And one sees the same pattern of events in the movement of people from the relatively poor countries of South Asia to the more prosperous states of the Middle East and South-East Asia.

A globalizing labour market

On the basis of this evidence, we might conclude that international migration, and more specifically irregular international migration, is an integral part of the globalization process. Indeed, there now seems to be a strong demand for cheap and flexible migrant labour in the world's more prosperous countries. Because in practice, governments which speak in very strong terms about the need to exclude undocumented foreigners from their territory, often seem prepared to tolerate the existence and even the growth of informal labour markets which provide employment to significant numbers of irregular migrants.

The United Kingdom, for example, has a large population of casual (and sometimes irregular) migrant workers, many of whom are employed by a shady network of gangmasters, recruitment agencies and sub-contractors, but who are nevertheless providing goods and services to some of the country's largest and most respectable companies. The growth of this casual migrant labour force is directly attributable to the process of globalization, which obliges the private sector in the UK to compete against suppliers in low-wage economies by minimizing labour costs and by compromising labour standards.

At the same time, it must be recognized that the world's poorer countries – those countries from which most migrants originate – have little real incentive to obstruct the departure of their citizens, even if they are leaving in an illegal or irregular manner. From the perspective of the developing countries, migration reduces the need to create jobs for large numbers of unemployed and underemployed people, especially those younger people who are entering the labour market for the first time. In this respect, migration acts as a social and political safety-valve, providing opportunities to people who might otherwise become frustrated, angry and a threat to social stability and political order.

For the world's poorer states, international migration, whether it is of a regular or irregular nature, also brings with it the promise of remittance transfers, diaspora investment and the establishment of social networks that will lead to new trading opportunities. Such resources are of evident value for countries that are struggling to maintain their balance of payments, to enhance their economic competitiveness and to prevent the issues of poverty and economic disparity from becoming a threat to social and political stability.

The international debate on the issues outlined above has not always been as transparent and honest as it might have been. Indeed, there would appear to be what the Global Commission on International Migration has described as a 'common hypocrisy' in the current discourse on migration, particularly migration of an irregular character.¹

The world's more prosperous states – those states which have been in the vanguard of the globalization process – bear a significant degree of responsibility for the forces which have prompted and sustained the movement of irregular migrants from one

¹ The author of this paper was also principal author of the Global Commission's final report, *Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action*, Geneva, 2005.

country and continent to another. And yet it is equally clear that the world's poorer countries have an interest in the continuation of such movements.

There is also a darker side to the role that international and irregular migration currently plays in the global economy. Despite the fact that they are purposeful actors, seeking to improve their situation life and offer new opportunities to their children, many migrants, both regular and irregular, are also victims, in the sense that they have limited access to their human rights. They do not enjoy what the ILO refers to as 'decent work', and they are often marginalized in society, especially when they come from countries or cultures which are associated in the public mind with violence, extremism and terrorism. There is a particular propensity for migrants to be marginalized and even demonized when such fears are deliberately exploited by the media.

It would be wrong to be totally negative when it comes to the situation of migrants in the world's more prosperous countries. There are certainly many examples of good practice in relation to the recruitment, employment, protection and integration of foreign nationals. There is an evidently need to identify, learn from and replicate such good practices wherever possible. But there is also a need to acknowledge that in many parts of the industrialized and industrializing world, international migration has become associated with a variety of negative phenomena: xenophobia and racism; migrant alienation; social disharmony; and the growth of an unregulated informal sector which threatens the ability of both migrants and nationals to enjoy decent work and wages.

Migrant remittances

Academic researchers and policymakers alike have placed considerable emphasis on the economic potential of international migration for countries of origin. Migrant remittances, it has been argued, as well as diaspora investment and other forms of economic engagement, represent an important developmental resource which could be used more effectively to promote sustainable growth at home.

This argument should not be discounted entirely. Recent research demonstrates quite clearly that the global volume of migrant remittances has expanded very rapidly in recent years, and that it is now considerably larger than the amount of Official Development Assistance provided to the world's less prosperous states. Indeed, current estimates suggest that the annual value of remittances is in the region of 100 to 120 billion US Dollars – around double the value of Official Development Assistance.

Research in countries such as Afghanistan, Mexico and the Philippines indicates that migrant remittances play an important role in supporting national and local economies, and that they provide very direct and tangible benefits to the household that receive them: the ability to send a child to school, for example; the ability to construct a better house; the ability to start a small business; and the ability to survive an economic crisis or natural disaster.

There is a need to maximize the positive outcomes of remittance flows, and recent analysis of this issue has provided us with a very rich menu of policy options. The transfer costs of remittances, which can be as high as 10 or 20 per cent of the money

transferred, can and must be brought down. Migrants and their families can be given better access to banking facilities and given training in 'financial literacy'. Countries of origin and destination can work more closely together in the effort to meet these objectives.

Home-town associations established by migrants can be encouraged to transfer collective remittances, which can be used to sponsor infrastructural and other projects which bring benefits to whole communities rather than single households. And in situations where such collective remittances are transferred, both governments and international agencies could be encouraged to provide matching funding, so as to increase the scale and impact of the investment made. All of these options must be explored.

At the same time, there is a need for a note of caution with respect to this issue. For it may well be the case that specialists in international migration have placed unrealistic expectations on remittance flows as a means of promoting sustainable growth and development in the world's poorer countries. Indeed, it was particularly striking that the Millennium Project's report, 'Investing in Development', makes very little reference to the issue of remittances. Is there a risk of over-estimating their importance?

First, international migration and remittance flows can never be a substitute for an effective macro-economic development strategy or a coherent population policy. In too many of the countries that have sizeable numbers of their citizens working abroad, remittances may actually be obstructing the introduction of reforms that would provide a more effective basis for long-term economic growth.

Second, while remittances may bring many immediate benefits to those families and communities that receive them, their developmental (as opposed to poverty-reduction) impact would appear to be limited. Indeed, the very advantage of remittances – the fact that they consist of private money, transferred directly to the intended recipients – is also the reason why they cannot be used for broader and longer-term development purposes. It is for this reason that there is a need to be very wary indeed of any suggestion that the growing volume of migrant remittances might allow a reduction in levels of Official Development Assistance.

Third, while seeking to maximize the positive outcomes of international migration and remittances, we should also take account of their negative implications. The benefits of remittances, both common sense and the research indicates, are not shared equally, and such financial transfers may exacerbate the socio-economic disparities that exist between different households, communities and regions in the country of origin. In seeking to maximize the number of migrants they send abroad, and hence the level of remittances which they receive, countries of origin may also be at risk of 'killing the golden goose'.

In Asia, for example, countries such as Cambodia and Viet Nam, are beginning to see the export of migrant labour as an increasingly important part of their economic policy. Countries with established overseas labour programmes, such as the Philippines, have already indicated that their migrant workers may in future have to accept lower wages and poorer working conditions in order to compete with these newcomers to the global labour market. In terms of migrant rights and welfare, there

are some evident dangers in this situation, especially at a time of rapidly rising food and energy prices. .

Fourth, when calculating the economic benefits of migration, it is essential to factor in the high social costs that are incurred when migrants (husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters) decide to leave their own household and community in order to work in another place. In Southern Africa, for example, the social and human costs of the migrant labour system established under the apartheid regime are still painfully apparent. The family life and social fabric of many communities in Southern Africa has been disrupted by international migration. Indeed, one of the cruellest consequences of international migration in this part of the world is the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has been fuelled by the separation of men from their families.

Finally, and again South Africa is a case in point, international migration may indeed promote financial flows that are of significant value to the people, the communities and the countries which receive them. But international migration can also lead to the long-term or permanent departure of a society's brightest and best-educated young people: people who have an essential role to play in providing essential services, in promoting development and fostering democratic forms of governance in the world's less prosperous societies.

Brain drain

While the term may not be a fully satisfactory one, the issue of 'brain drain' must form an important part of any discussion about the link between globalization, poverty and mobility. First of all, there is a need to whether the migration of skilled personnel from developing countries has a detrimental impact on the society and economy which they leave behind. Addressing this issue, some researchers have asserted that the evidence remains sketchy, and that there is no proven correlation, for example, between the emigration of doctors and nurses and the health status of the population in areas where they previously worked. Other commentators have suggested that while such personnel may take their talents with them when they migrate, they are likely to remit significant amounts of money, and that they will eventually return home, bringing new skills and resources which will be of great benefit to their country of origin.

Finally, it has been said that in a globalizing labour market, where the supply of certain skills cannot keep pace with the demand, people will inevitably move to those locations where wages and working conditions are best. To impede such movements, it has been suggested, defies economic logic and the law of supply and demand, and is in any case a denial of the right to leave one's own country.

While there may be some truth in all of these arguments, it appears dangerous to be so sanguine on the issue of skilled migration and 'brain drain', especially in the health sector. For there is little doubt amongst front line health personnel, that when countries lose a significant proportion of their trained health workers as a result of emigration, then the health services available to citizens - especially poorer citizens living in the more remote rural areas - are at serious risk of deterioration.

That risk should not be exaggerated. It is known, for example, that many trained personnel have withdrawn from the public health sector in South Africa not to emigrate, but to find employment in other sectors, including private hospitals, where the pay, working hours and conditions are more attractive. At the same time, it appears that the emigration of South Africans has to some extent been compensated by the immigration of health personnel from neighbouring and nearby countries which are even poorer.

But this does not alter the basic point; namely that the departure of skilled personnel, especially those offering essential health services to the population at large, represents a net loss to countries of origin, especially in the shorter-term. According to the 2004 World Health Assembly, “many countries face an urgent need to deliver more and better services to their poorest and sickest people. The absolute shortage of health personnel, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, is recognized as the principal constraint to achieving the health objectives of the Millennium Development Goals.”

While it would be foolish to ignore the laws of supply and demand and unacceptable to disregard individual human rights, the ‘brain drain’ issue must also be regarded from the perspective of ethics, equity and global public goods. From that perspective, it is unacceptable to ignore a situation in which poorer states devote scarce resources to the education and training of their citizens, only to see those people being recruited by states whose citizens already enjoy a far higher standard of living. Nor is it possible to ignore the contradiction that exists when countries which are committed to poverty reduction, multilateral development initiatives and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals are simultaneously involved in the recruitment of scarce skilled personnel from developing countries.

What can be done to address this problem? It would seem sensible to reject any proposal that would seek to prevent individuals from leaving their country of origin in order to take up employment elsewhere. Such an approach would almost certainly prove to be unworkable in practice. And is inconsistent with the notion, espoused by this paper, that migration is motivated not simply by a desire to maximize personal income, but also by a determination to support family members and to ensure that they enjoy better opportunities in terms of their education, employment and cultural experience.

The suggestion that the world’s poorer states should be provided with direct financial compensation for the skilled personnel which they provide to the world’s more prosperous countries can equally be ruled out. It is known that such proposals will get short shrift from countries that are currently recruiting skilled personnel from Africa, Asia and other developing regions. It is known that if such financial compensation were to be provided, it would not necessarily be used for productive, developmental or socially useful purposes. And it is known that any demand for compensation will reinforce the unfortunate image of developing countries as ‘suppliant states’, perpetually seeking support from donors and international organizations.

It is therefore necessary to look for an alternative approach – one that the ‘brain drain’ issue as a common interest and common responsibility of both sending and receiving countries, and an approach which appeals to what might be called the ‘enlightened self-interest’ of the developed world. Such an approach, it should be pointed out, is very much in line with the Millennium Development Goals and the Monterey

Consensus, which commit the industrialized states, developing countries and international development institutions to work in partnership with each other.

Unless these different actors are able to pursue common and coherent policies at the national, regional and global levels, the MDGs will not be attained. And if the MDGs are not attained, then developing countries will be at greater risk of social tension, political violence, armed conflict, mass displacement and humanitarian disaster. Hence the need to see the 'brain drain' issue in terms of enlightened self-interest.

What, then, can be done to address the problems created by the movement of skilled personnel from poorer to more prosperous states? First, while recognizing that the notion of centralized economic planning has fallen out of fashion, developed and developing states have an obligation to engage in effective and long-term workforce planning. Indeed, it is irresponsible for states, especially prosperous states, to ignore this obligation duty and then to find a quick-fix solution to their workforce problems through the active and sometimes aggressive recruitment of personnel from developing regions.

Second, there is a need to appeal to the enlightened self-interest of the North. The demographic reality is that countries in the South have growing pools of young people who could acquire the kind of skills required by their own and other countries. But they will only be able to acquire such skills if adequate levels of investment are available to provide them with education and training.

There is scope for the creative use of Official Development Assistance in reinforcing the health services and training capacity of countries which have been affected by the migration of doctors, nurses and other personnel. In this context, the report on Human Resources for Health by the Joint Learning Initiative, supported by WHO, the Rockefeller Foundation and the World Bank, makes an interesting point. It points out that if just \$400 million of the \$10 billion of ODA currently devoted to the health sector were dedicated to community-based human resource capacity-building, it would be possible to develop a sustainable human resource base for health in developing countries.

Third, there is a need to take full account of recent research which demonstrates that health personnel in developing countries often seek work abroad or move to other sectors of the economy because their pay and working conditions are so poor. In many cases, the research shows, they are confronted with harassment and violence in the workplace. Their employment prospects are poor, and they are often subject to gender-based discrimination. Needless to say, these problems are especially common for nurses and for teachers, a large proportion of whom are women.

In accordance with the principle of common responsibility, developing countries must address these issues in an urgent manner. Hypocrisy must give way to straight talk. Developing countries have an obligation to position themselves as good employers and to create a better environment for home-grown talent to flourish than many have done so far. And the industrialized states have a duty to examine, understand and mitigate the adverse consequences of their international recruitment practices.