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# Problems On The World Frontier

## UN Report: Curtailing Migration Now A Priority

Reportage by Roy Beck

The United Nations Population Fund, in its annual report, has confronted worldwide migration with a candor seldom found in population organizations — international or American.

Not all is steely-eyed pragmatism in "The State of World Population 1993"; the writing sometimes falls back into vague, idealized internationalisms, such as: "The point of departure should be the human right to live and work where one pleases, so long as it does not infringe on other people's rights to do the same." But implicit in most of the 54 pages is the hard reality that after the entire history of humankind in which significant segments of the population in one settlement could pick up stakes and migrate to some sparsely populated part of the globe, no frontiers remain.

"Migration has always been a feature of development; but today's migrants are pushing into territory already occupied by others," states the report, issued under the name of Dr. Nafis Sadik, UNFPA executive director.

The UN report finds that the urgency and sweeping effects of migration now make it "a priority issue equal in weight to other major global challenges such as the environment, population growth and economic imbalances between regions." The scale and diversity of today's migrations "are beyond any previous experience."

### Migration Is More Harmful To Receiving Countries Than Numbers Suggest

Countries of destination understandably are resisting the growing tide of migrants seeking entry. "Migration has usually been seen as evidence of a thriving economy ... (but) in today's increasingly uncertain conditions, migration may be seen as a threat to the security and well-being of the local workforce and society at large," Sadik writes.

The report looks at both internal and international migration. The largest number of migrants are those moving from rural areas to the congested major cities of their own countries. But the impact of international immigration is much greater than the numbers would suggest, the report states. For one reason, migrants tend to arrive in the peak years of their fertility. "They introduce an element which sharply breaks the usual development pattern of a population," and even when the migrants integrate fairly well into the economies of a country, their social integration lags.

Unfortunately, the UN report notes, the economic

gains from immigrants may benefit primarily the upper crust of a receiving country and reinforce existing gaps between rich and poor.

### Migration Not Always So Helpful To Migrant

Although migrants may improve their economic conditions in their new home country, that success often is accompanied by the reality of being the most vulnerable members of the host community.

The plight of women is especially discouraging. "Most educated women end up in the low-status, low-wage production and service jobs as unskilled female migrants. ... Migrant women, especially refugees, are vulnerable to rape, abduction, sexual harassment and physical violence, and demands for sexual favours in return for documentation or obtaining goods. ... (Women migrants') status may be improved by migration, but the advantages are not clear cut."

### Underdeveloped Countries Harmed In Several Ways By Migration

Humanitarian organizations in wealthy countries often promote immigration as a form of international aid to underdeveloped countries. But the UN report states repeatedly that the economic benefits to poor countries is uncertain.

"Migration draws off the skills and energy of the young, the talented, and the better educated," the report says. The poor countries lose their investment in the upbringing and education of its citizens who migrate. Meanwhile, rich countries obtain "ready-made workers without any investment."

For many advanced-degree graduates, their country does not offer a job in their expertise, the report notes. This is a legitimate reason for a brain drain to wealthy countries which can use the high skills. (But a reader might wonder about the wisdom of educating students in fields of no use to their home country.)

The brain drain, however, is not always so neutral. Migrants often take with them skills desperately needed by their poor home lands. "The loss of skilled professional, technical and business migrants creates skill shortages in key areas, higher costs and development bottlenecks; Africa, in particular, has lost an estimated one-third of its highly-educated manpower in recent decades."

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International migration also tends to break up families and communities. "Migration is transforming household structures in a way that increasingly leaves women with sole responsibility for dependent children and the elderly."

**Remittances Huge But Of Mixed Value**

There are some positive aspects of immigration to a sending country. The most visible is the remittances sent from the wealthy countries by migrants back to families in the home country. Migrants sent back some \$66 billion of remittances last year. Only the sale of oil brings more world trade money into the developing countries.

Yet, the United Nations finds those remittances to be of mixed value. "To some extent the remittances of urban migrants relieve rural poverty. But remittances do little to redress the balance of resources between countries; nor do they diminish the concentration of power and wealth in the cities."

Studies demonstrate that "remittances are used for current consumption" and that they contribute to higher living standards for remittance households. But they do not contribute to national development that provides for permanent improvements for the population as a whole.

The burden migration places on women is demonstrated by studies documenting that "fewer than one in five wives has received any remittances" from husbands who migrate. And when remittances are received, they seldom account for as much as half of the family income.

**Answers At Home, But Migration Fatalism Accepted**

The UN report stresses that solutions for miserable people around the world in most cases must come in their home country, or at least home region. Even refugee and asylum problems "cannot be solved by simply opening doors. ...Recipient areas and countries are already under stress. More people are on the move, but options for successful migration are fewer than ever before."

Nonetheless, the report falls into a fatalism that high migrations are somewhat inevitable. "Where legal channels are closed, migrants will enter by whatever means are available to them," it states. It quotes without disagreement a report to a 1992 population conference that "international flows are inevitable. Rather than attempting to prevent the flows, policy-makers should be prepared to plan for them." Of course, the report probably was prepared before the

U.S. Border Patrol knocked the wind out of inevitability with its experimental and highly successful Operation Blockade in El Paso, Texas.

A 1978 report is quoted suggesting an international moral obligation of wealthy countries to allow migration as a form of distribution of income. It also suggested that countries do not have the right to unilaterally act to halt the flow of migrants across their borders.

Despite those few glaring exceptions, the report is more infused with a basic pragmatism: "There is recognition that refugees have a right to seek asylum. At the same time, states reserve the sovereign right to grant or withhold it. The role of international co-operation is limited to mitigating particularly heavy burdens on countries of asylum."

It also is noteworthy, that in its final recommendations no mention is made of the need to persuade receiving countries to take more migrants or even to continue the current high level of admissions.

Receiving nations are assigned a major role in solving the migration problem, but in helping to change conditions in sending countries, rather than in making room for migrants.

Among the UN suggestions: countries might create systems of temporary refuge in which they withhold the right to permanent residence. The report also emphasizes that societies must treat the foreign-born in their midst humanely.

**Population Stabilization Key**

Perhaps the most important suggestion for dealing with the problems of migration is to help sending countries stabilize their population. "Both internal and international migration are driven by population growth, and by inequities between countries. ...The only effective means to reduce migration pressures over the long term are to slow population growth, to stimulate economic growth and job creation at home, and promote the development of the individual and the family as the basic economic and social unit."

The UN Population Fund disagrees fundamentally with those U.S. economists who insist that population growth is good for a country's economic health: "The perception that slower population growth is associated with faster development is not now seriously challenged. ...Some 90 percent of the peoples of developing countries live under governments committed to reducing the rate of population growth."

The report comments with approval on the reduced fertility in Southeast Asian newly industrializing economies and on how the resultant tight labor market has forced wages upward by 50 percent between 1987 and 1992 in Korea, for example.

## **Suggestions For Reducing Migration Push Factors**

Among the suggestions for reducing the pressure for migration:

- Help with the provision of family planning assistance. "An estimated 100 million additional women would use modern contraception if it were available."
- Reduce tariff and other barriers in rich countries that restrict developing countries' efforts to expand their share of world trade.
- Stop development aid to developing countries that exacerbates the draw of rural residents into the cities and that leaves countries saddled with debilitating debt and interest payments.
- The promotion of a "more liberal world trading regime so that developing countries could take advantage of their low labour costs and that industrial countries would not protect domestic industries against competition."

But the foundation of solutions is cutting worldwide fertility: "The aspirations for a better life that drive the movements of people cannot be solved by development assistance alone. Nor can they be solved by mass migration." ■