



# On the move: the migration imperative

While globalisation has increased mobility, Western perceptions of the negative effects of migration are exaggerated. The flows of migrants are not all in one direction – most asylum-seekers find refuge in neighbouring countries and South-South migration accounts for 40 percent of the international total. But with an estimated 214 million people living outside their country of origin, and many millions more wanting to leave home, tensions at the national and international level have to be resolved if the positive outcomes of migration are to be realised

**Robin Cohen**

For many years, how we understood international migration was crucially influenced by the American experience over the period 1836–1914, when 30 million immigrants arrived in the USA. Greeting many of the migrants was Emma Lazarus’s poem, displayed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” Some of the huddled masses, most of them from Europe, would have been able to buy tickets for the 1908 Broadway hit play, *The Melting Pot*, in which the pogrom-orphan protagonist declared in his powerful monologue that the “fires of God” would incinerate prior immigrant identities. “German and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians” would be thrown into the crucible. “God”, he declaimed, “is making the American.”

Migrants were on a one-way ticket, abandoning their impoverished pasts and their old ways. Even before they were officially admitted to the USA, the children of the immigrants took part in flag-waving parades at Ellis Island, where they were screened for entry to New York. They were expected to embrace their new identities with patriotic zeal and help to build their new country. Cautious historians warn us that it was not quite like that in practice. Old ways persisted, some migrants returned to their homelands and, in the end, a hyphenated identity – Italian-American, Polish-American and many more – became a way of reconciling ethnic and national loyalties.

Whatever the correctives, the image was enduring. Just over a century on and the representation of international migrants has shifted radically. There are more of them to be sure – some 214 million in 2010, using the proxy measurement of ‘foreign-born residents’. But the pervasive anxiety about international migration arises only partly from numbers; at least as significant are changes in national ideologies and in the character of migration. In short, many host countries and their populations have fallen out of love with immigration. Many governments in rich countries want migrants, but only those with appropriate skills, capital and familiar cultures. Immigration policies have become increasingly selective, while governments are engaged in ‘shopping’ for favoured categories, not in laying out the red carpet for those “huddled masses”.

As for public opinion, allegedly – I need to repeat allegedly – there are too many migrants; they cannot be assimilated, they are often illegal, they procreate too much, they insist on maintaining their religions and ethnicities, they are not ready to accept democracy, they cling to backward social practices (honour killings, female circumcision, the *burqa*), they take ‘our’ jobs, housing and benefits, they are prone to crime and they harbour terrorists among their midst. I am not sure this list is comprehensive, but you will immediately get the idea – in the public mind, international migrants are often cast as devils incarnate.

It is difficult to overcome the weight of this negativity. We need, perhaps, to start with a clear recognition that contemporary migration is indeed different in important respects from the iconic Ellis

Island experience. First, increased connectivity, a crucial aspect of globalisation, has hugely facilitated the movement of people. They do not cross international frontiers as quickly as ideas, commodities, images and capital, but cross-border migrants move a whole lot faster than they once did. When steamships replaced sail in the 1880s, the journey time across the Atlantic was cut from three months to two weeks. Now intercontinental journeys have been reduced to hours, and a dense network of roads, railways, ferries and airlines sustains cheap and ubiquitous mobility. Settled populations are bemused and sometimes threatened by the sheer variety of humanity that presents itself in local shops and public spaces. Nor, of course, are they always able to distinguish between the 214 million migrants and the rather more impressive number of foreign visitors, pilgrims, students and tourists (according to the World Tourism Organization there were 880 million tourist arrivals worldwide in 2009 alone).

Second, we need to acknowledge that many international migrants are able to, and prefer to, ‘bi-locate’ – oscillating between homeland and ‘host-land’ as the demands of family, work, income, leisure, educational opportunities, access to health care and other factors propel migrants backwards and forwards from their countries of origin to their countries of destination. This phenomenon is sometimes captured by the label ‘diaspora’ and sometimes by the description ‘transnational’. I have suggested that this behaviour is a matter of preference, but of course it is much more complicated than that.

Host populations are often hostile, while anti-immigrant political parties are gaining ground in many countries. Even in such traditionally progressive and social democratic countries as Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, the far right made significant electoral gains in September and October 2010. A complex process of the mutual amplification of hostility and suspicion sets in. “They are not like us and they must become more like us” is one common cry, which started on the political right and has now moved nearer to the centre of political opinion in Europe. The Belgian, French and (probably) the Dutch governments will ban the burqa

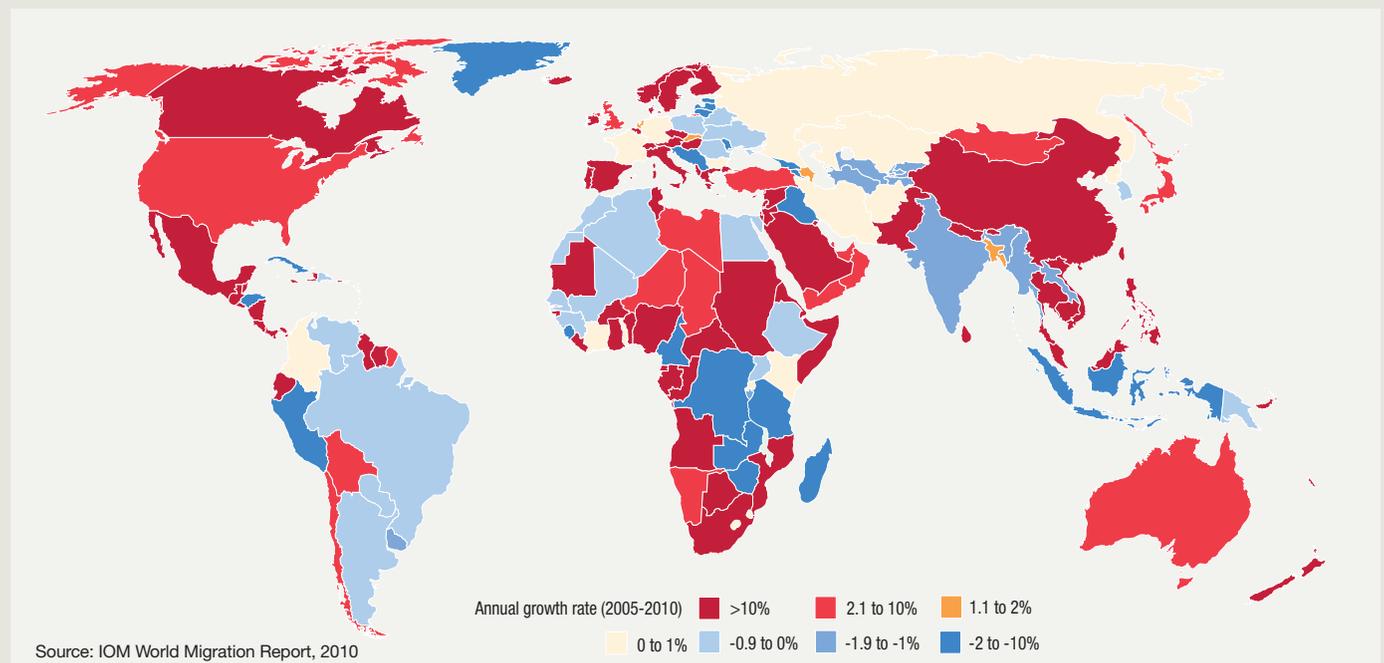
in public spaces. Learning the local language is strongly enforced. Citizenship tests are now common. However, as the desire for conformity has escalated (often replacing what is seen as an unsuccessful experiment in multiculturalism), migrant sensibilities have been inflamed. Feeling threatened by public inhospitality creates the conditions for cultural isolation, social segregation and the retention or reaffirmation of homeland links, in turn feeding the conventional wisdom held by the majority population that certain minorities “stick to themselves”.

## Many international migrants prefer to ‘bi-locate’, oscillating between homeland and ‘host-land’ as the demands of family, work, income, education and health propel them backwards and forwards

How important are international migrants to the economy? The answer is somewhat different depending on which cluster of countries we are considering. For a number of rich, developed countries, imported subordinate labour has made the wheels of industry, commerce, agriculture and public services go round for many years. We need only think of Mexican *braceros* on US farms, Irish workers in the early industrialisation of the UK, Turks servicing the post-1945 boom in Germany or West Indians working in the British National Health Service and public transport systems. In general, local workers were not prepared to accept employment on the terms or conditions offered, and dual segmented labour markets emerged – good jobs for the natives, dirty, dangerous and difficult ones for the migrants.

The demographic imbalances in rich countries have also created opportunities for work in the health and care sectors, as ageing populations require affordable care. The oil-boom countries of the

### Growth in immigrant populations 2005-2010



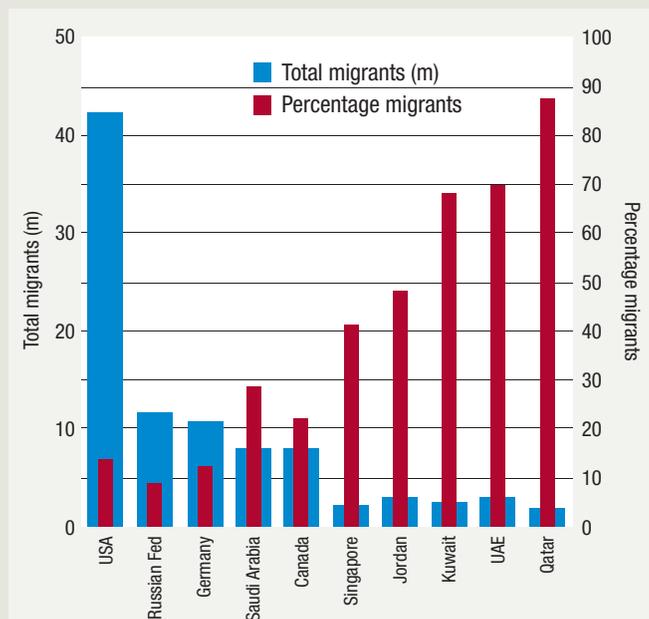


migration matters. Even the most powerful political elites, such as those in the USA, are often engaged in cosmetic exercises to reassure their electorates that they have control of national borders. Despite the rhetoric of migration management, the number of irregular entrants never seems to diminish to a significant degree. Instead, periodic amnesties are granted to bring law-abiding and productive undocumented workers into the mainstream, where they can pay taxes and contribute openly to the common good. Although always controversial – the argument that regularisation will simply encourage further immigration is probably true – there is often little alternative to legalisation.

As for South–South migration, there remain many tensions and important fault lines. The data are disputed, but there are probably about 3.5 million people born in Bangladesh living in India, with 1 million born in India and living in Bangladesh. With the Ganges Delta prone to periodic flooding, further population movements from Bangladesh to India are likely, but are inhibited by an Indian-built fence, stretching for nearly 4,100 km. In South Africa, by contrast, the attempt to seal the Zimbabwean border has been largely abandoned. Faced with a constitutional procedure that required tedious individual determination of refugee claims, in August 2010 the South African government made the pragmatic decision to allow easy access to six-month visas. Similarly practical and generous decisions have been taken in a number of other African countries.

There are many differences between historical and contemporary patterns of international migration. At the most macro level, we need to recognise the growing and contradictory pressures of globalisation (which accelerates mobility of all kinds) and xenophobia (which tends to restrict migration). At the national level, different ministries pull in different directions. Denser international links are fostered by a department of trade and industry, thereby increasing mobility. A department of education may encourage universities to recruit foreign students to balance their books, but foreign students do not always go home. By

### Total number of migrants and percentage of migrants in population, 2010



Source: IOM World Migration Report, 2010

**214m**  
number of international migrants worldwide

**15.2m**  
number of refugees in the world in 2010

**27.1m**  
internally displaced persons in the world in 2009

**\$316bn**  
remittances sent by migrants to developing countries in 2009

Source of estimates: International Organization for Migration

contrast, interior ministries implement increasingly draconian visa restrictions for security reasons and to placate public opinion.

Can these opposing tensions be resolved at an international level? Although much mooted, the idea of a single global governance structure for migration (akin to the World Trade Organization), is unlikely to materialise. The international agencies (like the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration) and a number of other bodies are doing a good job of bringing rationality into the regulation of global migration flows, but this is not going to be enough. Some states (notably the Philippines and Bangladesh) want to promote labour exit; most states want to control entry. There are many intermediate actors (such as people smugglers, lawyers and travel agents) who are facilitating movement. And, perhaps most important, migration has entered what the French social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, described as the “habitus”, the set of dispositions governing social practices and aspirations. Even when the economic signals are unfavourable, the prospect of migration has become hardwired into the social imagination and remains a tantalising dream for many people. ☺

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