

## **The demographic significance of international migration**

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Over the years, the Red Cross / Red Crescent Movement has worked hand in hand with the United Nations. The cooperation between our organizations continues to grow along with an ever more demanding humanitarian agenda. Among the many challenges the 21<sup>st</sup> century faces, this conference invites us to explore the increasingly complex issue of international migration.

Migration has become an increasingly visible phenomenon and, in many parts of the world, a highly controversial issue. Migration is viewed through a variety of polarized lenses that often makes it difficult to hold a rationale debate. In addition, getting the facts right about international migration is in itself a challenge. Despite the growing importance of international migration and the concerns it often raises, the statistics needed to characterize migration flows, to monitor changes over time and to provide governments with a solid basis for the formulation and implementation of policies are very often lacking. Also, a large number of international flows remain undocumented.

A common view of the dynamics of international migration is that developing countries experiencing rapid population growth are the most likely sources of international migration and that international migrants move mainly from developing to developed countries. Recently, the debate on population and migration took on another dimension with the controversy over replacement migration: Could immigration be a “solution” to declining and ageing populations of the developed world? Both issues have a bearing on the receptiveness towards migration issues in receiving countries. However, both issues are more complex than it appears at first sight and have often been subject to misinformation.

In order to properly address these two issues, let me first try to give you a sense of the magnitude and dynamics of international migration:

The total number of migrants in the world is currently estimated at 150 million. This is a very crude figure. Whether the actual figure is higher or lower by a few million does not change one important fact: the number of migrants in the world is large. However, it should be pointed out that this fig-

ure does include the very large number of short-term migrants, namely those who stay abroad less than one full year.

Not only is the number of migrants very large, it also has increased steadily. The number of migrants, worldwide, has doubled since 1965 and rose by approximately 30 million during the last decade of the twentieth century. Migrant workers and their dependants account for the largest share of the migrant population while the refugee population only makes up about 8 per cent of the total migrant stock.

In contrast to voluntary migration, the trend in refugees has been downward since early 1993 where the total number of refugees reached a maximum of 18.2 million. The latest estimate put the number of refugees at 12 million in early 2001. While the number of refugees recently has decreased, the number of internally displaced persons who have been forced to flee their homes, but who have not reached a neighbouring country is on the rise. The UNHCR estimates the current number of internally displaced persons at 20–25 million.

While the total number of migrants is very large, it only makes up a small proportion of the world's population – about 2.5 per cent. The fact is that only very few people find the motivation, the means and the stamina to embark upon moving to another country. Nevertheless, it is important to note that just a marginal change in the propensity to migrate would immediately result in large additional numbers of migrants. If 3 per cent of the world population were migrants – instead of 2.5 per cent – this would add another 30 million migrants to the world total.

Now, is rapid population growth a significant push factor leading to international migration? To address this question on solid ground, one needs to look at past trends in population growth and migration.

In the late 1960s, population growth was already low in a majority of the developed countries while it was still high in most of the developing world. Yet, developed countries were by far the major source of persons admitted as migrants by other developed countries. The region having the highest population growth rate, sub-Saharan Africa, registered the lowest number of emigrants. By the late 1980s, the developing regions with relatively low population growth rates such as Latin America as well as Eastern and South-eastern Asia, became the main sources of migrants to the developed world. In contrast, sub-Saharan Africa, the region with the highest growth rate, continued to be the source only of the smallest number of emigrants to developed countries.

Another important characteristic of international migration is that, despite an increase in south-to-north migration, international migration still occurs mostly within a regional context. As a consequence, the majority of international migrants – approximately 55 per cent and over two third of the refu-

gees – live in developing countries. Over one third of the world migrants live in Asia. In comparison, Northern America and Europe make up approximately 20 per cent each of the total stock of migrants.

The analysis of migration trends since the late 1960s therefore leads to the unambiguous conclusion that, up until now, the developing countries experiencing the fastest population growth have not been the main sources of migrants to the developed world, nor have those with the largest population.

Could immigration from rapidly growing population be a “solution” to declining and ageing populations of the developed world? Before addressing this issue, it is useful to get a picture of demographic trends in both the developed and developing regions of the world.

According to the medium variant of the demographic projections prepared by the United Nations, the population of the developed countries as a whole, which is currently estimated at 1.2 billion, is anticipated to change little during the next 50 years because fertility levels are expected to remain below the level necessary to ensure that the population replaces itself over the long run, the well-known 2.1 children per woman. However, by mid-century the populations of Japan and virtually all countries of Europe will most likely decline. Some countries, such as Italy, could lose up to one-fifth of their population. This is assuming that developed countries will continue being net receivers of international migrants, with an average gain of about 2 million per year over the next 50 years. Without migration, the population of the developed countries as a whole would start declining in 2003 rather than in 2025, and by 2050 it would be 126 million less than the 1.18 billion projected under the assumption of continued migration. In contrast, the population of the developing countries is projected to rise steadily from 4.9 billion in 2000 to 8.2 billion in 2050 according to the medium variant of the demographic projections prepared by the United Nations. This projection does assume continuing declines in fertility.

With fertility remaining well below average and life expectancy increasing at older age, the population of the developed countries will experience an unprecedented ageing. The population aged 60 or over which today constitutes about 20 per cent of the population of the developed countries is expected to reach 33 per cent by the middle of the century. It has already surpassed the child population and by 2050 there will be 2 older persons per child. In Europe, the ratio of the number of persons of working age to older persons will be halved, from over 3 to 1.5. The perspective of a pervasive ageing has raised serious concerns for the future of the developed countries: the decrease in the supply of labour, the increase in the economic burden put on the population of working age, and the long term prospect of population decline and demise.

The idea that immigration could make a significant difference on demographic decline and ageing has been in the air for quite some time. However, in March 2000, the issue made the headlines of almost all major daily and weekly newspapers following the announcement of the release of the report on the topic by the Population Division of the United Nations. This report also generates debates and discussions at both the technical and the political level. Two years later, reference to this report is often made whenever issues of migration are discussed in the media. The fact that the announcement of the report rather than its substance fuelled the debate suggests that it was the positive characterization of migration within the ageing context that triggered the media attention. What were, indeed, the major findings of the report on replacement migration?

The study uses traditional demographic projection techniques to assess the future levels of immigration needed to offset declines in the size of the total population and the population of working age, as well as to offset the overall ageing of the population in eight low-fertility countries and two regions (Europe and the European Union). A major finding of the study is that the levels of migration needed to prevent population ageing are many times larger than the migration streams experienced in the recent past. Maintaining potential support ratios would in all cases entail volumes of immigration entirely out of line with reasonable expectations. By the same token, the numbers of immigrants needed to prevent declines in the working-age population would be significantly larger than current flows. In addition, if such flows were to occur, immigrants and their descendants would represent a strikingly large share of national populations in the future, over one third in countries such as Germany or Italy.

The study also confirmed that some immigration is needed to prevent population decline in Europe. However, the level of immigration in relation to past experience varies greatly. For the European Union, a continuation of the immigration levels observed in the 1990s would roughly suffice to prevent total population from declining, while for Europe as a whole, immigration would need to double. In contrast, France or the United Kingdom would be able to maintain their population with fewer immigrants than received in recent years. Therefore, the overall conclusion of this exercise in population arithmetic is that immigration cannot prevent population ageing. Population ageing is, indeed, inevitable. However, in the context of low fertility experienced by developed countries, migration will increasingly become one of the most significant factors of demographic change.

Forecasting future trends in international migration is, without doubt, the most difficult part of making population projections. The irregular nature of migration flows, in particular that of non-voluntary flows, the complexity of

migration dynamics and the many social, economic and policy factors that influence in- and outflows of migrants at a given time, makes it a daunting challenge. However, on the whole, all factors being considered, from the increasingly restrictive admission policies of many countries to regional policy integration and the globalization of the world's economy, from the rise of large countries of emigration such as China and India to the migration of skilled temporary workers, new emerging trends in migration and the increasing involvement of both formal and informal migration networks, there seems to be an agreement among experts to assume that migration flows to developed countries will remain significant and might even become larger. For the students of migration policies and politics, there also seems to be little doubt that migration is likely to remain a major policy challenge for the foreseeable future.

In conclusion, let me first reiterate that immigration won't stop ageing. It will obviously impact on the size and structure of the labour force. And it may also prevent the decline of some populations. Second, in face of increasingly restrictive admission policies, it is likely that the flows of undocumented migrants will continue and may even increase. Third, migration is becoming a pervasive issue that has a bearing on the economy, the social fabric and the political life of many countries. Therefore, it is to be expected that migration will remain on the political agenda for the years to come.