

Population and Migration

We recognize the positive contribution of migrants for inclusive growth and sustainable development. We also recognize that international migration is a multi-dimensional reality of major relevance for the development of countries of origin, transit and destination, which requires coherent and comprehensive responses. We will cooperate internationally to ensure safe, orderly and regular migration involving full respect for human rights and the humane treatment of migrants regardless of migration status, of refugees and of displaced persons. Such cooperation should also strengthen the resilience of communities hosting refugees, particularly in developing countries.¹

While there are many compelling social issues that could be considered at least in part at the global level, this chapter takes as a specific example the related issues of population and migration. It is rapid population growth that has brought society up against planetary boundaries. While people have always migrated, the flow of migrants has accelerated, with environmental displacement from climate change adding to economic migration and the flood of refugees from war and persecution, making this a priority for global governance.

The United Nations has had a Population Commission since 1946, later renamed the Commission on Population and Development to follow up on the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, and established the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in 1969. It is supported by the Population Division within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in New York. While the UN has played an important role in assembling population statistics and debating related issues, it has not always been very successful because of the strong ethical, religious and ideological differences between nations over the issues of reproductive rights, birth control, abortion and other factors relevant to the rate of population growth. There is no independent UN agency charged with

¹ UN. 2015. "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." para. 29.

the larger issues of the human carrying capacity of the planet, the relationship of population to resources or questions of population concentration and movement.

The most invasive species on the planet today is *Homo sapiens*. The human population has at least tripled within living memory.² A principal role of governance should be to find a place for, and ensure the welfare of, every human being on this planet. There are a number of dimensions to this challenge: the total number of people, their age structure and rate of growth or decline, their locations relative to the carrying capacity of their environments, and their movements or migrations.

These problems have been aggravated, if not created in part, by the relatively recent emergence of the concept of national sovereignty over a national territory with fixed borders inhabited by legally recognized citizens whose movements can be controlled. We tend to forget that the concept of the modern passport as a permission to travel is only a hundred years old, dating back in Europe to World War I, 1914–1918.

Not all of these problems need to be addressed by global governance. This is clearly an issue where subsidiarity applies (that is, the principle that decisions should be taken at the lowest possible level of organization or closest to where they will have their effect), and a diversity of approaches will need to evolve naturally in each community, country and geographic entity with physical rather than political boundaries, such as islands or river basins. Nevertheless, the total world population is on track to overshoot our planetary carrying capacity, and natural, political, and economic pressures are displacing large numbers of people across national frontiers, requiring a planetary response beyond what any country can manage.

POPULATION GROWTH

Population growth is often depicted as a major global problem and a threat to planetary stability, and extreme measures are sometimes suggested to prevent “others” from multiplying excessively. Certainly, the still rapidly growing world population, projected by the UN to reach perhaps 11 billion people by the end of this century, is creating political, social and environmental stresses of major proportions.³

² The world’s population surpassed the 1 billion mark around the year 1800. It has grown at an exponential rate since then, reaching 2.3 billion in 1939, at the outset of World War II, and is estimated to have reached about 7.5 billion in 2018.

³ Some of that growth is built into the age structure, where recent growth has been rapid and a significant part of the population is only now reaching reproductive age, but the official projections (some argue) may underestimate the impacts of urbanization and the spread of cellphones and other information technologies accelerating female education and precipitating a fast drop in birth rates where they are still high. See Bricker, Darrell and John Ibbitson. 2019. *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline*, New York, Penguin Random House.

When combined with the excessive consumption of a consumer society, there is no way with present resources and technologies to both maintain the standard of living of the rich and meet the essential needs of the poor in the decades immediately ahead as the world population peaks and then starts to decline.⁴ It is not that this would be technically impossible, but it would require fundamental changes in our lifestyles, consumption patterns, social relationships, institutional structures and value systems.⁵

The present rapid population growth is a symptom of the extreme inequality in the world. Attempts to limit birth rates through legislation or constraint raise serious issues of human rights. The reasonable solution lies in addressing the root causes of rapid population growth. It is extremes of wealth and poverty, coupled with the lack of empowerment of women, that have maintained the world for so long in an unstable intermediate state between high and low birth and death rates. Modern health advances have been widely shared to prevent or control epidemics, and to reduce infant mortality, bringing down death rates around the world. At the same time, we have not shared enough wealth with the poor to reduce poverty, educate girls and women and provide meaningful employment, which would reduce the incentive to have many children. It is well-known that countries go through a demographic transition as the standard of living rises. A better distribution of wealth, coupled with universal education and social security, would be the best route to stabilizing the world population. The population could then grow in balance with our efforts to restore and then raise the human carrying capacity of the planet.⁶

From this perspective, the sustainable solution to the world's population problem lies in the transformation of the world economy so that it is more firmly based on principles of social justice and equity, reducing the present extreme inequality within and between states (see Chapter 14). The world today generates sufficient food and wealth to meet everyone's basic needs. The challenge is one of distribution, which improved global governance could address. Economic systems need to be redesigned to enhance their altruistic and cooperative attributes, to create meaningful employment for all and to eliminate poverty in the world, as this is now a realistic possibility, given global wealth.⁷ There are already many small-scale experiments in alternative economics that global governance mechanisms could

⁴ Randers, Jorgen. 2012. *2052: A Global Forecast for the Next Forty Years*. A Report to the Club of Rome. Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of The Limits to Growth. White River Junction, VT, Chelsea Green Publishing.

⁵ Hanley, Paul. 2014. *Eleven*. Victoria, BC, Friesen Press.

⁶ Dahl, Arthur Lyon. 1996. *The Eco Principle: Ecology and Economics in Symbiosis*, London, Zed Books Ltd. and Oxford, George Ronald.

⁷ Bahá'í International Community. 1998. *Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development*. A concept paper written for the World Faiths and Development Dialogue, Lambeth Palace, London, February 18–19, 1998.

help bring into the mainstream.⁸ It is the same excessive differences between wealthy and poorer countries, maintained by barriers of excessive national sovereignty and an exploitative international economic system, that are behind the global pressures for economic migration.

POPULATION AGE STRUCTURE

Many of the most industrialized countries, including China, are faced with aging populations as birth rates have declined below replacement levels. The costs of caring for old people are rising, while there are proportionally fewer young people of working age to support the necessary social services. In addition, China, because of the one child per family policy that it maintained until recently, and a strong cultural preference for male offspring, has a large excess of men who cannot find spouses, adding to social tensions.⁹ Other countries see half or more of their population under age 21, although many have now passed “peak children” and are now at or beyond “peak youth.” These are population trends with large economic and social repercussions that take decades to work through.

The logical solution would be for those countries with large younger populations of working age to more substantially “share” them with countries which lack enough younger people in the work force to maintain a demographic balance. Yet today, what country would open its doors to migration on such a scale, when facing seemingly insurmountable political, social and cultural barriers at home?

CARRYING CAPACITY

Carrying capacity refers to the ability of a geographic area and its resources to support the population living there on a sustainable basis. In nature, some animal species will multiply to the extent that their food supply will allow, until they finally consume all the food available and the population crashes. Only when the food supply regenerates will the cycle begin again. However, in most mature ecosystems, there are multiple control mechanisms and predator–prey relationships that keep

⁸ See for example: Schumacher, E.F. 1973. *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as If People Mattered*, London, Blond & Briggs; Brown, Peter G. and Geoffrey Garver. 2009. *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy*. San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers; Jackson, Tim. 2017. *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow*. 2nd ed. London, Routledge; Beinhocker, Eric D., 2006. *The Origin of Wealth: Evolution, Complexity, and the Radical Remaking of Economics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, and London, Random House Business Books; and the B-corp movement <https://benefitcorp.net/what-is-a-benefit-corporation>.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the multiple implications of slanted sex ratios, see López-Claros, A. and Bahiyih Nakhjavani, 2018. Chapter 1, “The People Problem,” in *Equality for Women = Prosperity for All: The Disastrous Crisis of Global Gender Inequality*, New York, St. Martin’s Press.

the system more or less in balance. Human populations were also regulated traditionally by war, famine, and pestilence. Modern technology has pushed back those threats but not eliminated them as ultimate forms of control, if we do not consciously prevent them.

One difficulty in determining carrying capacity and planning to identify and respect environmental limits is the frequent time lag between an action and its observable consequences. This often happens when excessive consumption of a resource does not yet exhaust the resource but reduces the capacity to produce the resource, so that we are living off the capital rather than the interest on that capital, leaving a debt or future impact for later generations to pay back or experience. With intensive agriculture, for example, every ton of grain produced in the American Midwest means a ton of topsoil is lost to erosion. At a planetary level, we have degraded 37 percent of all the world's arable land since World War II.¹⁰ By some calculations, our present civilization already consumes the current annual production of planetary resources in the first seven months of the year, so for the last five months we are living off of the planet's capital and reducing its long-term productive capacity.¹¹

The integration of the global system through trade and transport has added some resilience to the human capacity to resist or recover from disasters, most of which are local or regional in scope, so aid can be provided from elsewhere. This does not mean that a large-scale disaster could not push us over planetary limits and result in massive loss of life. Already in 2008 and 2012, widespread crop failures meant that the world produced less food than it consumed, drawing down food reserves. The possibility of a global catastrophe is in fact not remote, and one aim of global governance should be to anticipate and prevent such a catastrophic situation from materializing. The 2018 New Shape Prize of the Global Challenges Foundation was specifically aimed to award innovative ideas for global governance able to avoid risks that might annihilate 10 percent or more of the world population.¹²

POPULATION DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION

Migration and growing mass movements of refugees have become a defining issue of the first years of this century, and the subject of great political controversies. Recipient countries are already experiencing a political backlash from this

¹⁰ Montgomery, David R. 2007. *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

¹¹ WWF. 2018. *Living Planet Report 2018: Aiming Higher*, Gland, Switzerland, WWF International. http://wwf.panda.org/knowledge_hub/all_publications/living_planet_report_2018/.

¹² Global Challenges Foundation. 2018. New Shape Prize. <https://globalchallenges.org/en/our-work/the-new-shape-prize>. Awardees: <https://globalchallenges.org/en/our-work/the-new-shape-prize/awardees>.

unmanaged international crisis. No proposals for global governance can ignore this issue threatening the stability of many countries and regions. As in the Middle Ages in Europe, when the rich barricaded themselves behind castle ramparts, wealthier countries are today closing their frontiers, even behind walls and high fences, to keep migrants out, often exacerbating the human suffering of already distressed people.

Yet it is important to place migration in its proper context. The human race has always migrated, from the first migrations out of Africa to the gradual colonization of all the inhabited places on Earth, even to the most remote Pacific islands. Empire building and migration went together. The great religions, too, spread by migration. Moses led the migration of the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Islam migrated out of Arabia as far as Spain and Indonesia. National borders changed often in the past, and, as mentioned, passports for travel are a recent phenomenon. The great economies of America, Canada, and Australia were largely built through the hard work of immigrants, and even today, with many countries experiencing aging populations and birthrates below replacement levels, their future will depend on migration. Migration therefore can be a positive phenomenon for receiving countries, even if the migrants have been forced to leave because of various traumas or lack of opportunity at home. As the distribution of the world carrying capacity and resources changes in future years due to changing environmental conditions, it will be necessary to reduce the number of people living in some regions under stress and to populate other areas that become newly inhabitable.

It can be helpful to distinguish different categories of migrants, including those that choose to leave their country for better opportunities elsewhere, sometimes called economic migrants, and those refugees that are forced to leave their homes because of war, violence or persecution. Religious intolerance is another leading cause of forced displacement by denying equal citizenship rights on religious grounds. A new category of environmentally displaced persons includes those who migrate because rising sea levels, drought, storms, flooding and other disasters, often associated with climate change, have permanently rendered their former homes uninhabitable. Their numbers are expected to increase substantially in the years ahead.

The UN responded to the refugees created by World War II and subsequent events by creating the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and adopting the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, including rights of asylum and an assumption that refugees would return home once the cause of their displacement was removed. The International Organization for Migration was created at the same time to resettle the millions of people uprooted by the war. There is no equivalent normative framework for economic migrants or the environmentally displaced, a major gap in international legislation that needs to be filled, and that is acknowledged in the Sustainable Development Goals target 10.7.

In 2018, the UN negotiated and endorsed two new texts to consolidate and clarify the international approach to migrants and refugees, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and the Global Compact on Refugees.¹³

As described above, economic migration is driven largely by the income gap between the origin and destination countries, with average incomes 70 times larger in the latter, and the lack of educational and employment opportunities at home.¹⁴ Migrants have always left homes and families in search of a better life and have generally been successful. As mentioned above, a second driver today is the demographic divergence between regions with a high proportion of young people and the aging populations of the advanced economies that need workers and a larger working population to support the rising costs of supporting the elderly.¹⁵

Contrary to much contemporary popular opinion and political discourse, migration is usually beneficial for all concerned. Migration is integral to development; people need to move to where the jobs are. For economically deprived populations, migration can provide the best opportunity to escape quickly from poverty and unemployment. Increasing migration can produce greater economic gains than trade liberalization. Migrants see increases in income and child education and reduced infant mortality, with additional benefits for women and minorities. For countries of origin, migration lowers unemployment and creates more productive, higher paying jobs, and is thus a powerful force for development. Remittances from migrants can be an important source of foreign exchange, investment capital and direct support to the poor. According to the World Bank, remittances to developing countries in 2018 were US\$528 billion, nearly four times larger than Official Development Assistance.¹⁶ Migrants can also transfer knowledge and technology, with a diaspora supporting development at home. For receiving countries, migration has a positive fiscal effect, increasing goods and services and lowering prices for consumers. It addresses labor shortages at both the high and low ends of the job market. Prices for health care and university education are also lower because of the high number of immigrants employed in these sectors. There are labor market complementarities, and a high number of inventors, innovators and entrepreneurs

¹³ Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, endorsed by the UNGA on December 19, 2018, <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/migration-compact>. Global Compact on Refugees, affirmed by the UNGA on 17 December 2018. www.unhcr.org/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html.

¹⁴ The ratio of the average income per capita in the high-income countries to that of the low-income countries is about 70, using the latest data from the World Bank's World Development Indicators.

¹⁵ For a good overview of the links between migration and development, including the trade link in developing economies, see Robert E.B. Lucas (ed.). 2014. *International Handbook on Migration and Economic Development*, Northampton, MA, Edward Elgar.

¹⁶ World Bank. 2018. "Migration and Remittances: Recent Development and Outlook." Washington, DC, World Bank Group, December.

among migrants. The more the host community facilitates integration and assimilation, the greater the benefit.¹⁷

Despite these overwhelming advantages, popular opinion is easily turned against migrants, with people's perceptions of the percentage of migrants in their countries greatly exaggerated. Crime rates among migrants are actually lower than among the native population. Moreover, most efforts to control migration, especially irregular migration, are ineffective. However, large-scale immigration can challenge governments to provide social and physical infrastructure and confronts civil society with issues of adaptation and assimilation.

Two things have changed in recent years to give migration a bad name. First, a reaction against economic globalization, with the rise of nationalisms for political ends built on nativism and xenophobia, coupled with the revival of ancient tendencies toward racism and religious intolerance, have led in many countries to increasing divisions and social fragmentation, if not violent rejection of those who are different, even in places where peaceful coexistence had long been the rule. The resulting negative view of migration is quite recent.

Second, the rapid growth of the human population pressing against planetary limits and its globalization with the support of new technologies is stressing if not seriously eroding the carrying capacity of the planet. When people feel forced to emigrate, there is no place on the planet left to migrate to that is not already well occupied. Furthermore, our environmental impacts, first among them accelerating climate change, are going to displace hundreds of millions of people in the decades ahead, forcing them permanently from their homes due to rising sea levels, increasing drought, agricultural failures, violent storms and other catastrophes. In these situations, it is always the poor who have the fewest options. These displacements do not fall under the current criteria for refugees, since they have no hope of returning once the cause of the displacement is removed. The most extreme case is that of the Small Island Developing States on low atolls that risk losing their entire national territory, and thus not only their homes and occupations but their culture and national identity, becoming citizens without a state.

All of this is in addition to the migrations and displacements caused by social and political factors, from war and violence to terrorism, failed states and persecution of minorities, generally covered by the present Refugee Convention. We must anticipate greatly increased flows of migrants.

The fear of migrants cultivated by certain politicians and the media has important consequences for human rights. Many human rights violations today are against migrants, and illegal migrants are often denied even the most fundamental human rights protections. The label "illegal" from the simple fact of crossing a border may be seen by some to withdraw their right to exist as human beings, and can be thrown

¹⁷ World Bank. 2016. "Migration and Development: A Role for the World Bank Group." Washington, DC, World Bank Group, September.

up as a barrier to defend a “national interest.” Even those who are legally in another country face discrimination. One of the issues raised at the 2010 UN Human Rights Council Social Forum on Climate Change and Human Rights was the need to extend concern beyond those migrants who are victims of climate-induced violations of their human rights, to focus on the education of receiving communities.¹⁸ Forced migrants need to be seen as human beings, as victims of events beyond their control. Since we are all generally, through our lifestyles, part of the cause of climate change and environmental degradation, we have a duty of solidarity to those who are its victims. By educating those in the communities receiving migrants to have sympathy for their circumstances and a sense of responsibility toward them, welcoming them and assisting in their settlement, many human rights violations could be avoided.

THE RESPONSE NEEDED

From the perspective of global governance, greatly increased environmentally induced migrations can be anticipated. They should thus be planned for and well organized; we should not wait until a natural disaster or catastrophe forces such displacement, no doubt with great misery and suffering. This also means determining where such displaced persons could best be settled: where adequate resources are available, and perhaps with a situation and climate not too different from what they have known. Where whole communities are displaced, it should be possible for them to migrate as a unit, keeping families together and retaining as much as possible of their social capital. The UN International Organization for Migration could have expanded responsibilities in this area. The UN is presently adopting Global Compacts on Migration and on Refugees, and pressure is building for strengthened UN mechanisms to manage migration from a global perspective.¹⁹

Special educational programs need to be developed both for migrants and for their receiving communities. Among the issues to be addressed is that of assimilation or cultural preservation. Should migrants be encouraged to abandon their culture, traditions and faith and assimilate completely into the receiving community? Should they be allowed to cluster in their own in-group, maintaining their differences in a kind of cultural ghetto? Neither extreme is desirable. If the receiving community is welcoming and offers all the necessary opportunities for education, employment and participation, each person can choose the balance he or she feels comfortable with. Ideally, those migrating should see the culture and faith that they bring with them as enriching the diversity in their new community, something to

¹⁸ International Environment Forum. 2010. *Climate Change and Human Rights*. <https://iefworld.org/node/249>.

¹⁹ Bahá'í International Community. 2018. *Migration: A Chance to Reflect on Global Well-Being*. Statement for the Sixth Intergovernmental Negotiations on the Global Compact for Migration, Geneva, July 12, 2018. www.bic.org/statements/migration-chance-reflect-global-well-being.

offer on equal terms as they also receive new perspectives from the community they have joined. Children can share the richness of multiple heritages, and young people, as they intermarry, will pass this human richness on to their offspring. Learning diverse languages as an infant has been shown to increase intelligence. With a proper understanding of shared values on both sides, migration can be an enriching experience for everyone, as demonstrated by the experience of millions of people during the past century.

Finally, given what we now know about the changes to come in the world, not to mention other potential crises and catastrophes that past experience suggests could well be on the horizon, we could all find ourselves as migrants, refugees or displaced persons; no country or group within a given country is immune. The golden rule of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us certainly applies.