

CHAPTER 5

Unwanted migration

Since the 1990s it is mostly the United States and Europe that have put migration at the top of the list of their political problems. However, many other countries across the world are also dealing with large numbers of migrants. As discussed in the chapter on migration as a global structure, 'migrants' is a generic term for people who are moving from one country to other countries ('international migration') or within in their own country ('domestic migration'), either voluntarily or forced, whereby the causes for migration can differ considerably. Migration may become a challenge when one of two issues come into play: the migration is unwanted in the destination country (this is the issue of illegal or undocumented migration) or when there is a sudden and significant movement of migrants (this is the case with displaced persons or refugees). The question, however, is when such a challenge can be considered a global challenge.

Global challenge - who?

International migrants pose a problem when they are unwanted. This is in stark contrast to the migrants who have been invited. For instance, countries like Canada, Australia and the United States have migration policies that regulate migration, primarily by identifying the types of professions that their societies need. Member states of the European Union have opened their borders to each other with the deliberate purpose of having unhindered exchange of 'goods and people'. Israel welcomes immigration of all Jewish people. In all these instances, migration is wanted, albeit for a variety of motives, and subject to strict regulations.

Migrants can be unwanted for several reasons. **'Illegal' (or: 'undocumented') migrants** are migrants who enter a country regardless of the migration rules of that country. This type of migration is mostly of an economic nature: people are seeking a better life. This is what international migration organizations call 'voluntary migration' (although we have seen that the voluntary nature of such migration can be disputed). These two types of migration are usually undertaken by individuals: people decide for themselves if and when they want to migrate.

The other types of international migration that may pose a problem are the **displaced persons (or: refugees)** who are fleeing war, famine or political oppression. A difference with the 'undocumented' migrants is that refugees usually move in large groups at the same time following a sudden disastrous event. This is also known as 'forced migration', which may be relatively small on the world scale in 2024 estimated to be (1.4 percent of the total world population) but can be

very substantial for countries who are receiving these migrants. Another important difference is that only refugees who are recognized as such hold **legal status**. Under the international Refugee Convention, these refugees are entitled to settlement in other countries, either as individuals who apply for asylum in another country, or under the auspices of the International Organization of Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commission of Refugees (UNHCR), which will finance and create shelters for large communities of refugees.

A new pressing reason of migration is **climate change**. Rising sea levels, temperature changes and droughts are causing people to move away from their homes. While reference to these people is usually made with the descriptive term 'climate migrants', the legal term 'climate refugees' is also being applied: while the first term is descriptive, the second term implies certain rights of protection under the Refugee Convention.

UNHCR: climate refugees

"In the last decade, the interlinkages between climate change impacts and conflict have become particularly apparent. In 2022, 70 per cent of refugees and asylum seekers fled from highly climate-vulnerable countries, an increase from 56 per cent in 2012.⁸ Climate change and environmental degradation increasingly drive displacement, in combination with social, economic and political factors. Many countries are affected by both conflict and disaster that interact and overlap as triggers and drivers of displacement."

(UNHCR, *Focus Area Strategic Plan for Climate Action 2024-2030*)

Global challenge - where?

A 'global' challenge implies that an event has global repercussions. However, the situation of illegal and forced migration mostly involves two or several countries (one country of origin and one or more neighboring countries of destination). Strictly speaking, problems posed in these situations present challenges to both the originating and arriving countries. The question then is: when does migration become a global challenge? In other words, in what instances does migration affect people worldwide, and needs to be addressed through the concerted efforts of various actors?

Displaced persons or refugees

In the case of displaced persons and refugees, their migration is often very localized (mostly domestic or crossing only one border). It may nevertheless be considered a global challenge because of its frequency and because it happens worldwide. Moreover, a war or a drought that causes a sudden and massive displacement of people anywhere in the world necessitates immediate and large-scale humanitarian aid. These considerations have prompted the international community to establish international organizations like the IOM and the UNHCR to manage such situations. They are equipped with the means and finances to act swiftly and practically. In most instances of a refugee crisis, they will create large camps to shelter the refugees and provide them with food and medical care.

Refugees: countries of origin and destination (2024)

Countries that host the most refugees:

1. Iran (3.8 million)
2. Turkey (3.3 million)
3. Pakistan (3.0-4.0 million)
4. Colombia (2.9 million)
5. Germany (2.6 million)

Countries from where most refugees originate:

1. Afghanistan (6.4 million)
2. Syrian Arab Republic (6.4 million)
3. Venezuela (6.1 million)
4. Ukraine (5 million)
5. South Sudan (2.3 million)

(<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>)

Illegal or undocumented migrants

Illegal migration can acquire a large regional dimension in case of **lengthy trajectories of international migration**. Europe and the United States are two examples, with undocumented migrants trying to reach Europe from Africa and Asia, and the United States from Central and South America. Here, not only the countries of origin and arrival are affected, but also the countries of transit that lie between. For instance, for decades there has been an increasing flow of illegal migrants from Central and South American countries heading for the United States.

While Mexico serves as both a country of transit and origin, many migrants do not make it across the American-Mexican border, and they remain stuck in Mexico, which therefore becomes the involuntary destination country, thereby creating its own set of problems. A different example of long-distance illegal migration is the one heading for Europe. While the United States is a single-country of destination, the European Union is a multi-country destination with multiple-entry possibilities. If each European country were to take its own measures to regulate or even stop the migration, the problem is not solved but repositioned to the next country. Such unilateral actions can create a waterbed effect: if one pushes on one side, it will rise on the other side. Concerted efforts among the countries of destination will therefore be needed to address this migration issue.

Global challenge - what?

If unwanted 'migrants' of any type (undocumented, refugees, or any other) are said to pose a global challenge, what exactly, then, is that challenge? While these discussions tend to focus on the countries of destination, there are also challenges for the **countries of origin**. For instance, the departure of large segments of the population may leave agricultural land untilled or a society without skilled workers. This may, in turn, generate more migration, leading to a vicious cycle. Psychological and social problems of the migrants themselves pose another challenge: large numbers of displaced persons and refugees, in particular, often face lengthy periods of time when they live in remote places in basic conditions waiting to return to their homeland. While this may be deplorable on humanitarian grounds, it may also give rise to other concerns: the concentrations of large numbers of displaced persons may be disruptive to their psychological wellbeing, and may even cause some among them to be so disgruntled and resentful that there is a possibility that they become a security risk (as was one of the causes of the rise of the Taliban).

The rise of the Taliban

The 1979 invasion of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the ensuing civil war caused the first large waves of Afghan refugees to Iran and Pakistan. In Pakistan, the refugee camps housed an estimated 4 million Afghan refugees. In these camps, Islamic schools (*madrassas*) provided basic education, but also gave rise to the Taliban ('students') who after 1994 became a prominent force in the civil war. They established an 'Islamic emirate' in large part of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, were thereafter subdued by American-led allied forces, but resurged in 2021 when they took power in entire Afghanistan.

Most discussions about migration as a global challenge focus on the **countries of destination**. The main problem is said to be the number of ‘migrants’, although it is not always clear to whom this generic term refers. Most often it refers to refugees and illegal migrants, but in the public and political discourse of many Western countries this category of migrants is mixed up with residents of these countries who are of migrant origin from non-Western countries. As a result, the discussions of the nature of the migration as a global (or national) challenge are quite diffuse, ranging from the impact of migration on the demographics, economy and society of the country of origin or destination. These will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

“Mass migrations are inevitable, and more than ever, they are necessary. (...) The world of tomorrow is not only full of mobile people but is defined by the mobility of everything.”
(Parag Khanna, *Move. How Mass Migration will Reshape the World*, 2022)

Impact on demographics

A large influx of people can disrupt the demographics of the country of destination. However, the notion of a demographic disruption is relative, and mostly related to the nature of influx and the type of migrants.

In the case of **displaced persons and refugees**, the influx of migrants is usually sudden and substantial. However, the aim of these migrants is not to stay, but to return to their country of origin. Their stay is therefore intended as temporary, although reality may be different. The approximately 700 thousand Palestinians who fled their country in 1948 were given shelter in neighboring countries like Syria, Lebanon and Jordan with the expectation to return, but they still have not. Similarly, millions of refugees from Afghanistan have for decades been living in neighboring countries Pakistan and Iran with the hope of return. In such cases, the original temporary refugee camps have gradually been reshaped into towns and suburbs.

Largest refugee camps in 2024

Kutupalung (Bangladesh): 930,000 refugees (from Myanmar)

Kakuma (north Kenya): 200,000 refugees (from Sudan)

Dadaab (south Kenya): 240,000 refugees (from Somalia)

Za'tari (Jordan): 100,000 (from Syria)

In some instances, refugees have been granted asylum in countries further away. And although they may still aim to return to their home country, many create a new life in their destination country. This seems also to be the case with most of the (legal as well as illegal) labor migrants: they might intend to migrate for temporary work only, but many stay on and build their lives in the destination country and try to acquire legal residence.

If significant numbers of both wanted and unwanted migrants remain in the destination country, this will have an impact on the demographics of that country. In some countries, migration can be a **restorative demographic** factor. In countries where the population is declining, there will be fewer young people to sustain the economy and care for the growing number of elderly people. Migration can restore this balance. On the other hand, migration can also be seen as disruptive to a country's demographics if the migrants are of a **different ethnicity or religion** than the people of that country. This is the case when the self-proclaimed 'original' population fears for a 'dilution' of its characteristic features by people of different color, race, culture or religion (see elaboration below, under 'Impact on society').

Migrant health care workers after Brexit

One of the motivating factors behind the United Kingdom leaving the European Union in 2021 ('Brexit') was to put a stop to migration. However, Brexit also put a stop to intra-European migration. As a result, the health care system lost many of its workers from EU countries. To compensate for this loss of work force, large numbers of health care workers have been recruited from India, Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

(Center for Global Development, *Blog post 19 February 2024*)

Impact on economy

A large influx of people can disrupt a country's economy. This is the case when the influx is sudden and substantial, as in the case of displaced persons and refugees. While in most of these cases the refugees are housed by international organizations, there will always be a spillover into urban areas, resulting in rising rents for houses and apartments, falling salaries, and the shortages and overpricing of food, medicine and daily necessities. An example is the more than one million Syrian refugees in the small country of Lebanon with a population of five million. This was caused by the Syrian civil war in 2014 but was exacerbated by the Israeli attacks in 2024 that caused half a million Lebanese to flee their homes and seek shelter elsewhere in the country. Such disruptions are not usually the case in Western countries, although this economic argument is often used in the political discussions about migration.

Impact on society

The complaints about migration are mostly heard in Western countries, and while the arguments against migration are often couched in terms of demographic and economic disruption, the concerns are usually cultural. These concerns are directed at migrants who are ethnically and culturally different from the residents of the destination country. The arrival of large numbers of such migrants can be seen as disruptive to the cultural structures and social cohesion of that society (although there is always the question of what is the tipping point is of these 'large' numbers: when do they become disruptive to the local culture?). In this way, the discussion of migration shifts from concerns about *interests* ('they take our jobs') to concerns about *identity* ('I cannot be myself anymore') or even insecurity ('I feel unsafe in my own country').

These cultural concerns play no or a lesser role in countries where migrants share the ethnic or cultural identity of the residents of that country. This may explain the welcome of the 6 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe in 2022 as opposed to the 1 million Syrian refugees in 2017. This may also explain why the discussions about cultural concerns are more likely to be heard in Europe and the United States than in countries like Iran or Pakistan, where the millions of mostly Afghan refugees mostly share the culture and language of those countries. One may wonder if the reception of these Afghan refugees would have been different if they had been Ukrainian. Could this, then, be the reason why **racism** or **xenophobia** is more present in these discussions in Western countries, or are these sentiments innate to the Western mindset, as has been argued?

This situation may also explain why discussions about migration in Western countries are often about **identity** and **values**. Obviously, these societies feel that their own cultural identity and value system is threatened by migrants from different backgrounds. Whether this concern is justified is not easily answered, but it clearly plays an important role in the political debates in these societies. What is relevant for the student of International Studies, however, is to realize that these debates encompass the local and national to the global level: they have permeated political and academic debates about global spheres identified on the basis of culture (and often religion), which are in turn assumed by some to be 'clashing' because of the nature of their cultural and religious differences.

Nativism is the term used for the position that the interests and culture of the native citizens should be protected against those of the citizens of migrant origin. Problematic in nativist thought is that the 'native' does not include the indigenous people in countries like America or Australia, nor migrants of colour who have lived there for generations.

Nexuses

When migration is considered a global challenge, then there are numerous nexuses to consider when trying to make a concerted effort to address this challenge. For example, if migration is considered a challenge for a particular destination, that region may seek to physically stop the influx of migrants, but it may also seek to address the causes of migration. These causes can be diverse: civil war, lack of economic prospects, political persecution, natural disasters. Addressing each of these causes will, in turn, open a series of nexuses (see figure IV.5.1). For example, if the cause of migration is identified as a lack of economic prospects (see figure IV.5.1), then creating such prospects may involve the improving education, civil society, and good governance. And if the focus is on education, for example, experience has shown that educating girls contributes considerably to improving a country's economy – another nexus of women's empowerment.

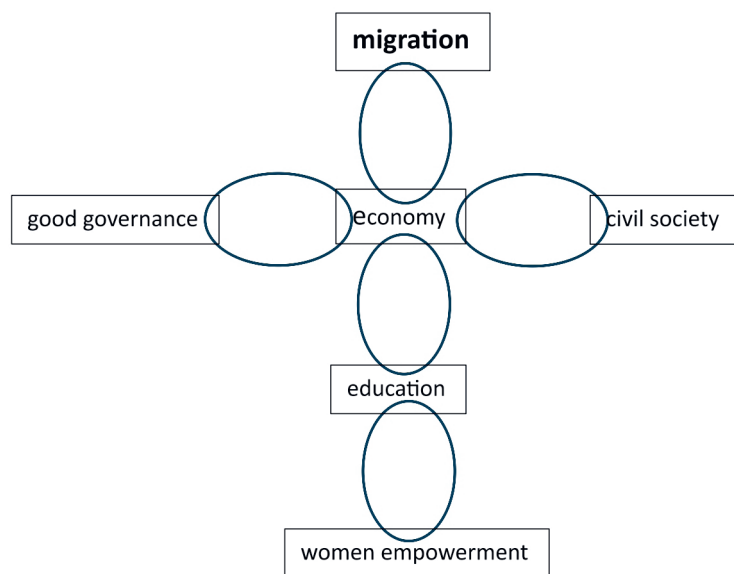


Figure IV.5.1 Nexus migration - economy

If, on the other hand, the country or region of destination decides to physically stop migration, migration becomes a security issue, and another set of nexuses emerges (see figure IV.5.2). One is the strengthening of borders through walls, gates, and border patrols, which is the nexus of policing. Another nexus is cooperation with neighboring countries, where deals can be made, for example, that this neighboring country will host all migrants in exchange for financial (or other) compensation. This may lead to a different set of issues, for instance that this neighboring country

now has political leverage over the country that wants to stop immigration ('we will let the migrants through unless you meet our demands'), or that a large presence of migrants could destabilize this neighboring country (which is a threat to the country that wants to stop migration), or that these migrants could become the recruitment ground for criminal or terrorist organizations (as was the case with the Taliban, who were recruited among the Afghan refugee communities in Pakistan). When these issues are addressed, they become new nexuses.

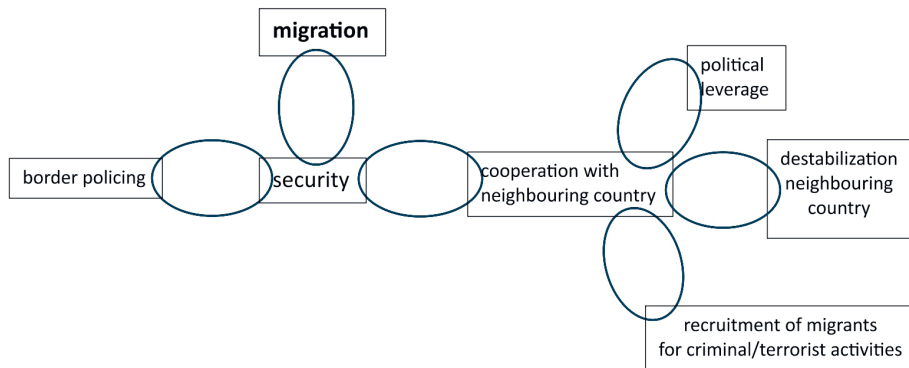


Figure IV.5.2 *Nexus migration - security*

Further reading

- Global Governance*, Special: International Migration, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2010
- Hein de Haas, *How Migration Really Works: The Facts About the Most Divisive Issue in Politics*, Basic Books, 2023
- IOM, annual reports
- Rahel Kunz, Sandra Lavenex, Marion Panizzon (eds.), *Multilayered Migration Governance. The Promise of Partnership*, Routledge, 2011
- UNHCR, *Focus Area Strategic Plan for Climate Action 2024-2030*,
- World Economic Forum, *Climate refugees - the world's forgotten victims*, 2021