REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION SYSTEM

Introduction

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International migration is already this century's unavoidable issue. More countries are now significant players in the international migration system than at any other time in history. In fact, almost all high-income countries, as well as most fast-growing middle-income ones, are now already or are fast becoming major migration actors. For the biggest such actors, which now number well into the dozens, migration is fuelling rapid, profound and highly visible social and cultural change – and the resulting transformation is happening almost literally before people's eyes.

This context was the impetus for a seminar on Immigration Futures, which was hosted by the Metropolis Project and the Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements in May 2006. Papers from this seminar formed the basis of this issue of *Canadian Diversity*, and they have been supplemented by papers presented at the 12th International Metropolis Conference in October 2007, as well as by submissions from a number of additional contributors. This collection thus brings together articles from a range of perspectives, linking together research, policies and practice on an issue fraught with uncertainty, complexity and social, economic and ethical challenges.

Indeed, the absolute size of international migration has grown significantly in the last few decades, although certainly not at disproportionate rates relative to the world's population. If one removes the nearly 30 million people who are presently counted as immigrants in the United Nations' (UN) population statistics but who never actually "moved" (because it was borders that moved, not them, when the Soviet Union gave way to the Commonwealth of Independent States), the 160 to 170 million or so remaining immigrants today comprise about 2.5% of the world's population of 6.7 billion. This proportion is only slightly larger than the percentage of the world's population (approximately 2.3%) counted as immigrants by the UN throughout most of the last 40 years.

Of course, as John Martin implies in his article in this issue, absolute numbers do matter. In the last 30 years, immigrant density in member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nearly doubled (from about 4.5% to 8.3% of the population) and now accounts for 60% of all the world's immigrants, while staying relatively stable (at about 2%) for the less- and least-developed countries. Making an already complex picture even more so, nearly half of that total is intra-OECD country migration, and hence of much less interest in terms of its contribution to the social, cultural, economic and political arguments about migration in most high-income countries. On the flip side of this argument, the UN numbers that analysts use refer to the immigrant *stock* and thus do not account for the much more dynamic – and politically troubling – *flows*, which are thought to include ever increasing proportions of unauthorized immigrants.

Yet the volume of migration, large as it is, may not be at the root of the anxiety with which most immigrant-receiving countries now view immigration. That distinction belongs to the speed at which migration has been growing in many countries and to its composition.

The rate at which immigration has been growing in many high-income countries is simply unprecedented. Some of these countries have become *major* immigration players for all practical purposes in the course of a single decade. Spain, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Greece, Russia (which now has more immigrants than any other country except for the United States), South Africa, South Korea and other East Asian countries are the best known, but there are others. Similarly, the ranks of large-scale *e*migration countries have been growing briskly, as have those of migrant-transit countries – and increasing numbers of countries are simultaneously significant *im*migration, *e*migration *and* transit countries.

Furthermore, unlike migration trends for most of the last century, among the defining features of today's flows is the fact that the majority of those who move – and virtually all those who move outside of legal channels – come from countries of vast social, cultural and often racial "distances" from the countries in which they enter. And there is more. In the world of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the subsequent attacks in Madrid and London, and thwarted or unsuccessful attacks elsewhere, religious

distance often seems to take pride of place among these differences. These realities increase the "visibility" and "other-ness" of newcomers, which in turn fuels the discomfort of host populations and their reactions to them.

Confronting migration's challenges

Public and private sector institutions, including civil society writ large, are struggling to respond to the challenges that migration poses, but the effort is extremely complicated. Consider, for instance, how the issue fares in most European countries. Some European governments and societies, most notably Germany, chose to deny for far too long the permanence of immigration and its embedment in the host society's "life," thereby delaying essential efforts to have immigrants become members of the German society and polity. Remarkably, alternative policy choices, whether officially "welcoming" (the Dutch and Nordic models) or of "splendid neglect" (the French model), seemed to have had similar outcomes. In fact, in virtually all cases, most immigrants and their offspring are well behind the native born in terms of educational achievement and access to opportunity – and, accordingly, in how they measure up in such economic benchmarks as employment rates, earnings and quality of housing, among other considerations – and of social and political engagement. (Countries with much less experience in migration, such as those in Southern and Eastern Europe, are understandably struggling even more, and do so mostly without the full legal and administrative framework required to manage an immigration system and begin the long and difficult effort of immigrant integration.) These cumulative disadvantages translate into varying degrees of economic, social and political marginalization. Marginalization, in turn, breeds mutual wariness: many immigrant communities see themselves as aggrieved, while many native-born residents view immigrants and their children with impatience, if not mistrust and suspicion.

The size and characteristics of today's – and even more so tomorrow's – international migration is challenging nations to better manage the transformation that the process entails. Success promises political and economic gains through migration's dynamism and the potential for contributing to the host country's growth and prosperity, especially at a time when demographics make such contributions nothing short of essential. The articles by Skeldon, Legrain, Martin and Castles in this issue make that clear. Failure risks social unrest and political instability. More importantly, perhaps, it foregoes the opportunity for dramatically improving the immigrant's, and his or her family's, circumstances.

With the benefits of success and the costs of failure both so high and hanging in the balance, managing the international migration system through thoughtful regulation and other policy interventions at the local, national, regional and, gradually and carefully, international levels becomes paramount. In their articles, Skeldon, Hugo, Teitelbaum, Rowthorn, Vertovec and Yeoh all speak to this issue, if from different angles and often referring to different types of immigrants. As Vertovec and Yeoh both argue, the case for doing so is strengthened further when the development potential of well regulated migration for the countries of origin is also taken into account.

Mitigating strains, maximizing gains

States that host substantial numbers of immigrants are trying to find ways to gain better control over the process and produce better policy outcomes. In doing so, their objectives are laudable: to shape the process in ways that advance their national economic interests and priorities while minding social cohesion; and to be fastidious in applying the rule of law while staying true to their commitments to social justice, human rights and the protection of refugees. Teitelbaum's article on this issue emphasizes some of the same questions.

These goals may be more complementary than is commonly assumed, as may be the goals of societies of origin, host or destination societies, and those of the immigrants themselves. The appearance of divergent, even conflicting, interests is fuelled partly by the fact, noted above, that in all but a few states (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and, in recent years, perhaps the United Kingdom, being notable exceptions) too much of overall migration is neither "selected," nor otherwise "truly regulated," and that changing immigrant admissions' formulas is akin to trying to negotiate a political minefield.

There is seemingly widespread agreement in the literature that given the skill needs of high-income countries, actively selecting substantial shares of one's immigrants leads to greater economic benefits for host countries. Hugo's thoughtful article about Asia and its future as a source of skilled immigrants is both reassuring about where the skills are likely to come from but also sounds the alarm about the long-term reliability of the skills' supply chain as intra-regional migration in Asia grows and the economic vitality of the region is beginning to attract highly skilled immigrants from outside the region, a trend that he expects will grow. The articles by Skeldon, Rowthorn and Castles address similar issues as does, somewhat more skeptically, that by Teitelbaum. Teitelbaum is particularly cautious about most aspects of skilled migration – from the definition of skilled immigrants and the ambiguous evidence and rationale for admitting them in large numbers, to the effects of their presence on the career choices of native students – while also expressing concern both about the utilization of their skills *and* their treatment. (See also Yeoh's article on the underutilization, and even wastage, of the human capital of university educated female immigrants in South East Asia and on their isolation from the receiving society.)

At the other end of the skills continuum, one finds both large scale needs and even greater variability both in how such workers are perceived by host populations and in how they are treated by employers. Legrain, by arguing quite provocatively for open borders, and Rowthorn, by making the practical and moral cases against the "cherry picking" of skilled immigrants by immigrant receivers, sensitize readers and policy-makers alike to the complexity of cost/benefit analyses of all forms of migration, as does Castles and, from the perspective of returning Chinese immigrants from Canada, Sin Yih Teo.

Many of the authors in this issue of *Canadian Diversity* acknowledge, if mostly in passing, that poorly regulated and illegal migration generally interferes with the ability of immigrants to get the highest returns on their investment in migration. This lowers their potential for earnings, and hence remittances, and reduces the benefits to immigrants and, by

extension, to their families and communities back home. Both Rowthorn and Vertovec, in their emphasis on the importance of maximizing the benefits of migration for immigrants and their households, recognize the drag that unregulated and illegal migration have on such benefits. Of course, there are even greater reasons to be concerned about illegal migration in that it increases the costs for almost everyone concerned – unscrupulous employers being one of the exceptions – and tends to wrap all migration into a shroud of illegitimacy, while enriching the criminal syndicates and smuggling networks that organize it. These organizations find in human smuggling a highly profitable business whose costs – regardless of how they are measured – are worth the risk in large part because they are borne primarily by the immigrants themselves. (Castles' emphasis on the "migration facilitating industry," the network of labour recruiters, travel agents, job brokers, lawyers and landlords, is another important economic segment that makes billions from all forms of migration – and one deserving closer study.)

With illegal immigration growing apace, the policy options available to policy-makers for greater openings to legal migration are reduced severely. The ultimate policy goal is nonetheless as clear as it appears to be unattainable, at least in the near term: creating political space for managing an orderly, smartly and flexibly regulated flow of legal immigrants whose contributions to the economy and society are higher in large part because the process is successfully *regulated*. Skeldon's article is also clear on the need for regulation and controls, a policy and analytical area that is either ignored or treated rather cavalierly in this compendium and must be addressed.

Let me be even clearer on this point. For migration's gains both to grow and become more obvious to everyone, governments must succeed first and foremost in reducing illegalities of all types and must prove adept at managing the inevitable tensions and strains of the process. In this latter respect, nothing may be more urgent than demonstrating to the public that immigrants as a group are law abiding, that they are respectful of their hosts' values, that they make every effort to engage constructively in the community of which they are now part, and that they contribute to the economy more than they take out of it, that is, that they add to the host society's overall economic welfare.

Looking all around and looking ahead

For nearly two decades now, capital and the market for goods, services and workers of many types have woven an ever more intricate web of global economic and, increasingly, social interdependence. In the last few years, however, globalization seems to be on the defensive as governments and publics alike across the globe have begun to reexamine some of the phenomenon's tenets and look more carefully at its effects.

As this and the authors' articles make clear, few by-products of globalization are pricklier for the publics of the advanced industrial societies than the movement of people. Such movement, however, also preoccupies the less-developed countries, albeit from different perspectives. For them, migration is first and foremost an essential lifeline to both their citizens and to their economies. (In the most obvious example, noted by several of this compendium's articles, the World Bank reports that formally recorded financial remittances now exceed $300 billion per year, and informal and other unrecorded transactions add considerably to this amount [Ratha and Xu 2008]).

> Advanced industrial societies must resist the temptation to retreat in the face of immigration's challenge and retrench behind increasingly restrictive, and ultimately undemocratic, controls. As is already apparent, unilateral actions and fortress mentalities misread the complexities of the migration system while denying receiving societies an essential ingredient for their own economic success and social enrichment.

However, the less-developed countries' pre-occupation with migration has another, darker, side. They are deeply concerned about three additional issues. First, that some aspects of the behaviour by the authorities and the population in the countries where their citizens live and work borders on a gross disregard for their human, labour and other basic rights. Second, that the trafficking industry that has grown around the unauthorized movement of their nationals endangers their citizens' lives and systematically exploits them, while undermining the legitimacy of their public institutions and complicating their relationships with transit and destination country governments. Third, that increasingly selective immigration policies by the advanced industrial societies may be tapping too deeply into their human capital pool (the "brain drain" issue). Although not all of these themes are explored to the same degree in this issue of *Canadian Diversity*, the first and last one are treated in sufficient depth.

And what of the future? Projecting how international migration is likely to evolve in the next 20 years is both easier and more difficult than it may appear at first. It is *easier* because we now understand the phenomenon's behaviour well-enough – from what might be called the supply-side, but also, increasingly, from the demand-side – and the articles by Skeldon and Hugo do a particularly good job at laying out the various possibilities. Also, we now much better understand the triggers, drivers and facilitators of migration (Papademetriou 2006). It is *more difficult* because of two factors whose effects are akin to that of wild cards in a game of chance: security (terrorism) and the sociocultural reaction to migration. Both of these factors have been referred to

already. In addition, as McLeman and the International Organization for Migration point out in their articles, the potential impact of environmental degradation or climate change is not yet known, and it is difficult to predict how migrants and states may respond.

For the next 20 years, the supply – the so-called migration "pipeline" – will remain robust. There is nothing within this rather short horizon that will change dramatically for the better to affect the major developing country suppliers of immigrants in ways that will lead to a pronounced drop in the interest of many of their nationals to emigrate. If anything, a number of still relatively small migration "players" are likely to grow in importance, while China, India and South East Asia could well become massive players in the international migration system with relatively little "notice."

While the supply is thus expected to remain, in practical terms, near infinite, the demand for immigrants will also grow substantially, though arithmetically. Three factors will account for the lion's share of that growth. First, demography, and especially the one-two punch of the birth dearth and the growth in the share of the old and very old in the North's population. Second, increasing skill and more general labour shortfalls (including skill and geographic demand and supply mismatches) – a topic that is addressed from different angles in several of the articles following this issue. Third, the sheer momentum of the process itself, whereby pro-immigration coalitions form in support of immigration while formulaic, legal and "rights-based" openings to migration, such as family (re)unification, refugee resettlement and asylum grants, continue to build stronger immigration streams.

As the various articles here make clear, during the next two decades the reach of migration will expand and go beyond the advanced industrial West, Japan and the other "Asian Tigers" to emerging market societies everywhere. The seeds for such an expansion are sown every day. Initially, the government-led or -assisted part of this expansion will most likely take the form, primarily, of regulated temporary (circular?) entry by needed high- *and* low-skilled foreign workers. But it will not stop there. "Front gate" provisions for converting valued "temporary" legal immigrants into permanent ones will also proliferate, turning temporary admission streams into filtration and transition systems for selecting permanent immigrants. In addition, opportunities for admitting better skilled foreigners outrightly as permanent immigrants will also increase, particularly as the world economy rebounds and global competition for talented foreigners intensifies.

At the same time, pressure from unauthorized migration is also likely to remain robust and managing it will continue to be a major preoccupation of governments. Changing the status quo, however, will require much more than the "tried and failed" paradigms of simply applying always greater resources to border and interior controls. It will also require unaccustomed policy discipline, unusual degrees of coordination across policy competencies, and new models of cooperation between countries of origin and destination.

Conclusion

Given the significant economic, social, political, human rights and demographic differentials that continue to divide the world, the realistic response to migration cannot be denial. Advanced industrial societies cannot simply exhort people to stay home without a serious commitment to a long-term and costly endeavour to improve conditions there. Yet, investing substantially in attacking the root causes of flight, a worthy and necessary effort, has a long horizon that will exact substantial domestic political costs before it yields measurable long-term benefits.

In the interim, advanced industrial societies must resist the temptation to retreat in the face of immigration's challenge and retrench behind increasingly restrictive, and ultimately undemocratic, controls. As is already apparent, unilateral actions and fortress mentalities misread the complexities of the migration system while denying receiving societies an essential ingredient for their own economic success and social enrichment. Policies designed within such naïve frameworks are destined to fall short of even relative long-term success.

The facts are not in dispute. Migration ties sending, transit and receiving countries – as well as immigrants, their families, and their employers – into often reinforcing, and always intricate, systems of complex interdependence. It takes the cooperation of virtually all these actors – as well as smart policy decisions, thoughtful regulation and sustained enforcement – to make real progress in limiting the effects of migration's challenges enough so as to draw out even more of its benefits.

For longer than many may wish, people will continue to seek to move and settle elsewhere for reasons that are as old as civilization itself: economic and physical survival (security), improvement of circumstances for themselves and their families, freedom from obvious and not so obvious threats, opportunity (however one chooses to define it, sheer frustration or just a spirit of adventure. For many of these people, the channels that migration opens up will continue to be channels for starting all over in a new place.

Hence the imperative of better managing the migration system. Doing so requires far greater across-the-board cooperation than is now the case (or even possible), across relevant governmental agencies within a single state, across relevant competencies across states, and between the governmental and non-governmental sectors within and across state actors.

Reform is long overdue. Whether such reform will be the product of a judicious effort to address all of a nation's interests, as well as to balance these interests with those of societies on whose workers immigrant receivers rely (whether they care to acknowledge it or not) or whether it will be little more than the by now typical knee-jerk yank on the control levers, cannot be known at this time.

References

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