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The Future of Migration

By Jochen Oltmer

Translated by Jennifer Ingalls

Migration has always been a central element of the human adaptation to changing environmental conditions, as well as to social, economic, and political changes. The movement of people in space has changed the world in recent centuries: countless examples demonstrate the extent to which migration due to work or settlement opportunities, or flight, expulsion, or deportation have changed the composition of a population, thereby influencing the development of labor markets or cultural and religious orientation. Migration will remain a global theme in the future. The clearest examples are present in the current debates concerning the further impact of increases in world population, the aging communities of the rich “North,” climate change, or the lack of skilled laborers in an increasingly complex and tightly interconnected international “community of knowledge.”

The future development of global migration ratios can be estimated based on trends in recent years and decades. In what follows, I am primarily interested in a single connection: What effect will the continued increase in world population have on global migration ratios?

According to the United Nations, the world population in 2013 stands at over 7.1 billion people. One could draw a reasonable scenario from this data: 8 billion by 2025, 9.6 billion by 2050, and 10.9 billion by 2100. The development of the earth’s population points to two trends in the coming decades that could not be more contradictory: In the (relatively) wealthy “North,” of the world, population growth will stagnate due to birthrates and populations will become older, as the number of young people declines and life expectancy increases. In the (relatively) poor “South,” however, population will increase dramatically and the number of young and younger people will grow.

Nevertheless, the prognosis for the extent of migration out of the less developed nations into the more well developed nations in the coming decades continues to decline—although it was already fairly low in the past, a finding that completely contradicts the vociferously and often stated views about the threat to “western” societies posed by mass immigration from less developed regions of the world. In the five-year period from 2000 to 2005, the United Nations reported that 17.6 million migrants immigrated from the global “South” to developed countries. For the period from 2005 to 2010, the UN has already observed a decline to 16.6 million. This trend will continue: for the period 2010 to 2015 the UN predicts 12.5 million immigrants, for 2025 to 2030 around 11 million South-to-North immigrants, and for 2045 to 2050 9.5 million.

Why does South-to-North immigration stay so low? The fact remains that financial resources—that is, money—present an essential prerequisite for the development of individual immigration projects: one must pay for entrance and exit visas, added onto that are transportation costs (travel expenses and transportation), and illegal immigrants usually have to pay (expensive) contractors. It is also not a reasonable expectation that these expenses will dissipate upon arrival in the target location; some initial investments are necessary, savings are consumed, and money has to be borrowed. For the majority of the world’s inhabitants, the undertaking of such a

migratory project is illusory. Countless studies confirm that poverty massively limits the ability to move.

But it is not only financial resources that are lacking. In order for migration to reach a certain level and be of a certain duration, it also requires continuous and reliable information about the target area. A key element is oral or written communication of knowledge about local opportunities through early (pioneer) immigrants, whose information is highly valued due to kinship and knowledge of economic conditions in both locations. Against the background of the already low global South-to-North migration in the recent past, the number of pioneer-immigrants, the scope of kinship networks and economic knowledge stretching over continents, and the fact that the reliability of knowledge about the potential for exploitation by developed nations of the global poor are all very small. This fact also keeps South-to-North immigration at a very low level.

The decline of the already low migration rates from the world's poorer countries into developed nations does not imply that global migration rates will drop: the UN currently estimates that more than 230 million immigrants worldwide have crossed borders either temporarily or permanently. However, the vast majority of these movements have occurred between the world's more developed countries, rather than the less developed ones. The Federal Republic of Germany provides a good example: only 5% of all immigrants that currently arrive in Germany come from countries outside of Europe or outside of Turkey. Despite the appearances of globalization, immigration to Germany remains primarily European.

Much points to the fact that the movement between nations that count as developed today will not decline in the future. This is also a result of these countries' immigration policies in the present and in the foreseeable future: borders are in large part (relatively) open for skilled laborers, especially the highly qualified, who mostly (are able to) come from developed countries. The continuing discussion concerning the future of the aging populations in the wealthy "North" demonstrates clearly that the orientation favoring qualified and more highly qualified immigrants will change little in the coming decades: the immigration of un- or less-qualified workers cannot compensate for either the problem of an aging population and the somewhat sinking economic productivity and ability for economic innovation, or the problem of recruiting nurses and other medical professionals for a population with a continuously rising median age and a need for care due to age-related illnesses. We can also suspect that the immigration between less developed countries will not change in the coming decades. Above all, the emerging economies of Asia, China, India, Thailand, and Malaysia, which are quickly developing and until recently have had more emigrants than immigrants, will attract more people in the future. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Malaysia and Thailand have already put over one million foreign laborers to work. Taiwan and South Korea as well, in the last decades of the twentieth century, have both undergone a rapid industrialization process and are becoming immigrant countries.

The economic importance of migration for immigrants' countries of origin should not be overlooked. According to estimates by the World Bank, in 2011, migrants transferred \$372 million to their relatives alone (in addition to large sums that were transferred through irregular means) and thereby exceeded the scope of development initiatives three-times over. This too is unlikely to change in the future.

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