

International Migration: Facing the Challenge

International migration—people moving across national borders— is a global challenge for the 21st century. More than 190 nation-states issue their own passports and visas and regulate who can cross their borders and stay. At least 214 million people were living outside their country of birth in 2012, up from an estimated 120 million in 1990.

However, most of the world's 7 billion people never cross a national border. Most people live and die near their place of birth. Those who cross national borders usually move to nearby countries. For example, people from Mexico to the United States, or from Turkey to Germany. The largest flow of migrants is from less developed to more developed countries. Large flows of people also move from one industrialized country to another, from Canada to the United States, for example. People move in much smaller flows from more developed to less developed countries, such as people from Japan who work in or retire to Thailand.

The international community believes that international migration should be voluntary, and has tried to minimize “forced migration,” whether motivated by persecution or economic deprivation at home. The United Nation’s 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.” However, the right to emigrate does not give migrants a right to immigrate; most migrants are not welcomed unconditionally into the countries to which they move.

Explain the following phrase: “The right to emigrate does not give migrants the right to immigrate.”

Migration in Perspective

As long as humans have wandered in search of food, they have migrated from place to place. But international migration is a relatively recent development. Only in the early 20th century was the system of nation-states, passports, and visas developed to regulate the flow of people across borders.

International migration is the exception, not the rule. Most people do not want to move away from family and friends. In addition, governments try to regulate border crossings. But international migration is likely to increase in the 21st century because of persistent demographic and economic inequalities and because many advances in communications and transportation facilitate mobility.

What might be an ‘economic inequality’ that would cause someone to leave their own country and migrate to another country?

Most countries discourage immigration—they do not welcome the arrival of foreigners who wish to settle and become naturalized citizens. Some also discourage emigration. This was the situation in communist nations as symbolized by the Berlin Wall, which was used to deter crossing from East to West Germany between 1961 and 1989. Today, North Korea continues to prevent its citizens from leaving the country.

Five major countries plan for the arrival of immigrants: the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Israel. However, the number of newcomers arriving in these countries each year exceeds the number planned, suggesting that many are temporary visitors or unauthorized foreigners who find ways to settle rather than newcomers who enter as potential new citizens.

Perspectives on the rising number of migrants can be framed by two extremes. At one extreme, organizations ranging from the Catholic Church to the World Bank have called for more migration, arguing that people should not be confined to their countries of birth by national borders and that more migration would speed economic growth and development in both sending and receiving countries.

At the other extreme, in virtually every industrialized country, organizations are demanding sharp reductions in immigration. In the United States, the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) argues that unskilled newcomers hurt low-skilled U.S. workers, have negative environmental effects, and threaten established U.S. cultural values. Political parties in many European countries have called for reducing immigration at one time or another.

Describe the ‘two extremes’ regarding the issue of migration.	
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The first step toward making migration manageable is to understand why people migrate. Most people do not want to cross national borders, and even though the number of migrants is at an all-time high, international migration is still low relative to the 97 percent of the world’s residents who did not migrate. Furthermore, economic growth can turn emigration nations into destinations for migrants, as it did for Ireland, Italy, and Korea. The challenge is to manage migration by reducing the differences that encourage people to cross borders.