

International Migration: Calling for a Holistic Approach

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Human migration, a not new phenomenon, is steadily picking up speed under the deepening globalization. The UN estimates that there were 272 million international migrants in 2019, an increase of 51 million since 2010. In addition to Europe and North America, Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia saw rapid growth of migrant populations. Furthermore, forced migration has grown much faster in recent years than voluntary migration, due to war, conflict and human rights abuse and violations, as we have seen in various parts of the world today, from Syria, South Sudan, and Myanmar to Venezuela.¹

Hosting a large number of immigrants challenges a country's capacity for the provision of a whole range of social services, from law and order to jobs, education and health services. In addition, clashes of culture, values and lifestyle as well as religion create tensions between and among different social groups, causing and catalyzing the differences in societies. The current pattern of uneven distribution of international migrants, the large increase of forced migration and the diversity of immigrants combine to pose new challenges, more than ever, to individuals, societies, policy makers and world leaders.

Closing borders or building a wall will not stop the trend of migration. To address this pressing issue, a holistic approach is needed, requiring coordinated action at the structural, national and societal level.

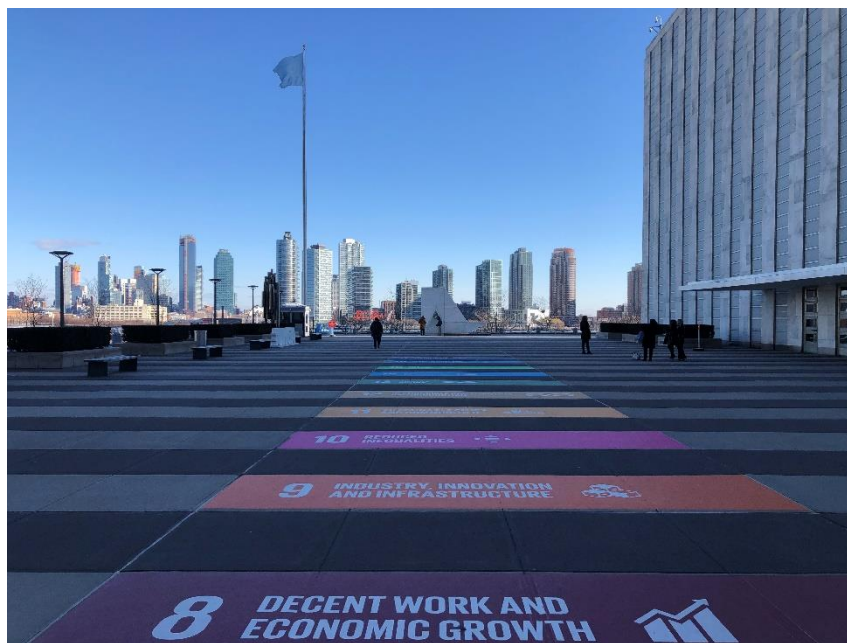
First and foremost, peace is the only way to stem the rise of forced displacement and to enable orderly migration. From the civil war in Syria to communal conflict in Myanmar, war and conflict devastate a country, destroy people's lives and generate a large exodus of migrants in search for a future. In a globalized world, no country can escape the impact of war and conflict, which is vividly illustrated by the migration crisis in Europe. Therefore, at the structural level, prevention of conflict, engagement in dialogue for the resolution of conflict, respecting international order, and promotion of international rules and regulations all contribute to reduce war and conflict, hence minimizing the structural cause for irregular migration.

On the other hand, peace and economic development in origin countries could facilitate the voluntary return of migrants. I observed, in the American town where I live, that Japanese mostly emigrated to the United States in the 1980s, followed by Koreans in the 1990s and Chinese in recent years. This pattern correlates with the economic development curve of these countries. The better the origin country's economy is, the more likely their nationals will choose to return after

¹ See Population Facts issued by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, available at https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/populationfacts/docs/MigrationStock2019_PopFacts_2019-04.pdf.

temporary migration, which is the case of Chinese students in the United States today. Many more Chinese students choose to return to China after their graduation now than twenty years ago.

Realizing the need for collective action, the world's countries negotiated and adopted the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), an inter-governmental agreement under the auspices of the UN, in 2018. GCM sets up 23 objectives, including ensuring migrant legal identity, decent work and access to basic services as well as their full inclusion and integration in society.² While 164 countries signed the agreement at its adoption, demonstrating a strong political will, the fact that the major immigrant recipient countries were reluctant to sign the agreement, under the pressure of their domestic constituencies, exposes the deep-seated tension and division within these societies over immigration.³



The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) painted on the plaza in front of the United Nations Headquarters, New York (Photo by the author)⁴

As the tensions between immigrant groups and host societies in Europe demonstrate, successful immigration policy involves not only opening doors but also efforts to have immigrants truly integrated in a society. Prejudice, discrimination and stigmatization will only prevent immigrants from integrating and identifying with the culture and society where they live. In some extreme cases, they could turn to extremism and terrorism.⁵ Thus, at the national level, it is important that legislations and policies be put in place to ensure immigrants equal entitlements as any other

² Available at <https://migrationdataportal.org/global-compact-for-migration#22>.

³ Jack Goodman, "What's the UN Global Compact on Migration?" *BBC News*, December 20, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-46607015>. See also the meeting coverage of the UN, available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/dev3375.doc.htm>.

⁴ For the first time, migration is recognized in the SDGs as one of the key elements contributing to their attainment. Eleven out of seventeen goals contain targets and indicators relevant to migration.

⁵ For example, see Peter Bergen, "A Pattern in Terror—Second Generation, Homegrown," *CNN*, May 24, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/24/opinions/homegrown-terrorism-opinion-bergen/index.html>.

citizens. To promote non-discrimination, President John F. Kennedy signed the first affirmative action provision in 1961 to ensure minorities be employed and treated equally.⁶ Some Asian countries also introduced affirmative action to help disadvantaged social groups, such as the education policy in favor of minorities in China and the standardization policy assisting geographically disadvantaged students to gain higher education in Sri Lanka.⁶

At the societal level, NGOs could play an important role in helping and facilitating the inclusion and integration of immigrants. I had first-hand experience with a NGO called Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE) in the United States. As its name suggests, AAFE aims at advancing equality in communities. It provides a variety of services, ranging from ensuring the right to decent housing, helping its clients to get social support programs, and providing small loans to providing English as a Second Language courses as well as civil education.⁷ It organizes activities to celebrate and promote Asian culture, and to promote political participation of Asian immigrants to have their voice and concerns heard and heeded by the government. Through the organization, Asian Americans not only obtain the resources they need for adjusting and adapting to life in a new country, but also find a community they could belong to and rely on.

With accelerated globalization, multicultural coexistence is a reality facing world communities. An influx of immigrants brings challenges as well as opportunities, considering that 74% of migrants are at working age.⁸ This is particularly true to an aging society where labor resources are much needed. Debate over the “melting pot” approach to immigration, where a common identity is forged through assimilation, or the “salad bowl” approach, which advocates for the retention of separate cultures under the law and the bond of markets, goes on.⁹ Regardless, both approaches would agree that racism and xenophobia could only breed hostility and distrust, tearing the social fabric and breeding extremism. As UNESCO rightly points out, “cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.”¹⁰

The contents of this article reflect solely the opinions of the author.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affirmative_action.

⁷ For more information, see <https://www.aafe.org/2016/10/aafe-helps-people-improve-their-lives.html>.

⁸ See footnote 1.

⁹ For more details, see <https://www.hoover.org/research/melting-pots-and-salad-bowls>.

¹⁰ UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity, available at http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.