

Foreword

by Stephen Castles

In a world of nation-states, a key aspect of sovereignty is the ability to control flows across national borders. Neo-liberal globalization since the late 1970s has mandated the deregulation of cross-border flows of capital and commodities, yet paradoxically, states have clung to regulation of people flows—perhaps as a last vestige of sovereignty. National control of human mobility has become problematic. Increasingly people live across borders, with significant political, economic, social and cultural affiliations in two or more countries. Migrants are the forerunners in this trend towards transnationalism, but it affects many non-migrants too: their lives and relationships no longer fit inside neat national containers. What is the future of national migration models and of international regulation in a globalized and increasingly transnational world? That is the theme of the contributions in this special issue.

Migration has become a key political theme at the national level. Origin countries such as Mexico, the Philippines, Vietnam or Morocco have to find ways of protecting their citizens while still reaping the potential economic benefits of migration. Destination countries seek to meet pressing economic and demographic demands, without antagonising the large sections of the population who feel threatened by the social, cultural and security aspects of growing diversity. One solution to this dilemma has been the differentiation of entry policies, to welcome in the highly-skilled (even if this may have negative effects for poorer origin countries), while restricting entry of forced migrants and of lower-skilled workers.

Many states that have signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention—and have thus undertaken to provide protection for those in need—make it impossible for asylum-seekers to enter their territory to apply for refugee status, forcing victims of violence and persecution to pay for the services of people-smugglers. Irregular migration has become another area of emotional nationalism. Since lower-skilled labor for such sectors as agriculture, construction, catering, cleaning, and domestic work is urgently needed, a widespread approach of governments is to crack down on irregular migrants, while tacitly accepting their major contribution to the economy. The US, with its nearly 12 million irregular residents, is the world leader in this hypocrisy, but southern Europe, Japan, Malaysia, and many other countries are not far behind.

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There are no global governance institutions for migration, comparable to the IMF and the World Bank for finance, or the WTO for trade. Labor-importing nations have combined, especially through the European Union or the OECD, to control flows to safeguard their own economic, political and security interests. Labor-exporting nations have only been included where they can be bribed or cajoled into accepting first world priorities—for instance through EU's European Neighbourhood policy. Effective cooperation by origin countries to ensure protection and rights for their citizens has yet to emerge. Existing power relationships ensure the economic and political predominance of the labor importers. There is a major governance deficit in the international migration field, shown clearly by the refusal of destination countries to sign the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

Yet there are signs that things may change. As economic and demographic transitions take place, the global surplus of labor may soon disappear. The highly developed countries will find it increasingly difficult to meet their economic needs and to alleviate the effects of population ageing. Cooperation with origin countries may prove essential, and this is likely to lead to measures to ensure that migration can take place in safety and dignity. In its 2009 Human Development Report,¹ the UN Development Programme points out that human mobility has always been about seeking opportunities and that it has been one of the greatest forces for innovation and improved livelihoods throughout history. This understanding is beginning to lead to new forms of cooperation, such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development, which has met annually since 2007. So far, this is only a talking shop, but it indicates a new willingness to address migration as an issue that requires action no longer bounded by myths of national autonomy. There is a long way to go and many barriers, but at least this is a start.

Notes

¹ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2009: Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2009), <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2009/>.