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CALLING THINGS BY THEIR PROPER NAMES: THE TRUTH ABOUT MIGRATION IN A POLARIZED WORLD

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CALLING THINGS BY THEIR PROPER NAMES: THE TRUTH ABOUT MIGRATION IN A POLARIZED WORLD²

“It is too easy to dodge the truth in economics, and the tolerance for prevarication - despite its evident harmfulness—is much greater than in other branches of knowledge... The best way to fight is to call things by their proper names.”

— Grzegorz W. Kołodko, *Truth, Errors, and Lies: Politics and Economics in a Volatile World*

Abstract

Migration remains one of the most politicized and misunderstood phenomena in contemporary public discourse. This essay interrogates four persistent myths that continue to shape migration narratives: that global migration is historically unprecedented; that we are facing a large-scale refugee crisis; that poverty is the principal driver of migration; and that migrants constitute a burden on host societies. Drawing on robust empirical evidence - primarily from the work of Hein de Haas and leading international datasets – the author demonstrates that these claims do not withstand scrutiny. While the absolute number of international migrants has risen, their share of the global population has remained stable. Refugees comprise a small fraction of this total, and the notion of “crisis” often reflects political response more than demographic reality. Moreover, development tends to facilitate migration rather than suppress it, and migrants - contrary to popular belief - make net positive contributions to host economies over the long term.

Rather than treating migration as an aberration or emergency, this paper argues for recognizing it as a structural and enduring dimension of global transformation. By replacing rhetoric with evidence and complexity with clarity, scholars and policymakers can foster more accurate, constructive, and equitable approaches to migration governance.

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² This text has been linguistically revised with the assistance of OpenAI’s ChatGPT, used exclusively for copyediting (grammar, clarity, and tone). The intellectual content and analytical insights are entirely my own.

Introduction

Perhaps there is no topic as persistently politicized and emotionally charged as migration. Over the past three decades, especially within Europe, migration has not only remained at the center of political debates but has also been a magnet for media attention and public anxiety. This issue often becomes a vessel for political manipulation framed as an existential crisis, a threat to national security, or an emergency requiring drastic intervention. As a result, migration is rarely discussed in sober, evidence-based terms. As scholars, however, we must feel a responsibility to step back, strip away the rhetoric, and consider what the data actually say. This essay aims to challenge dominant narratives about migration and replace common myths with facts, as supported by rigorous empirical evidence. Using empirical evidence, primarily grounded in the work of Hein de Haas and the sources he cites, this essay challenges several dominant myths that frame the migration debate.

Myth 1: Migration is at an all-time high.

One of the most common assumptions in media and political discourse is that we live in an age of mass migration and that the world is more migratory than ever.

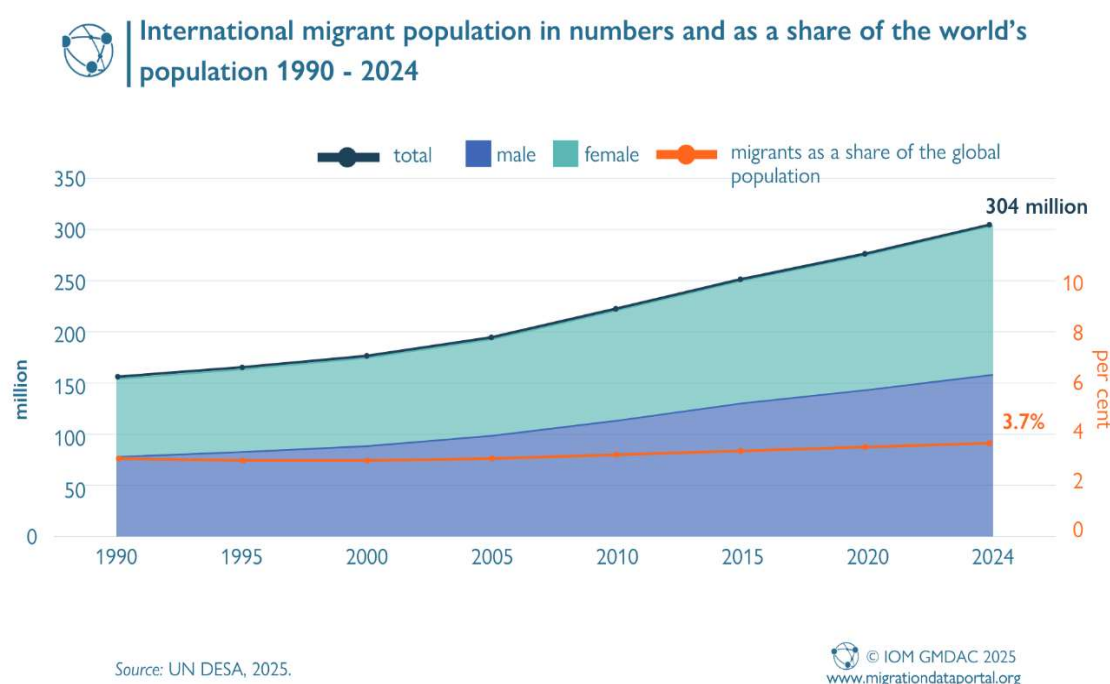
A prevailing belief in political and media narratives is that international migration is rapidly accelerating, reaching historically unprecedented levels. While the absolute number of international migrants has indeed increased - from approximately 153 million in 1990 to an estimated 304 million in 2024 - this does not necessarily mean the world is more migratory than ever (figure 1).

According to the latest data (figure 1) from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2025), the share of international migrants in the global population has remained relatively stable, hovering around **3.7%** for over three decades. This clearly shows that the increase in absolute migration numbers is due to global population growth - not a surge in migratory behaviour. In other words, although more people are migrating in total, the share of migrants relative to the world population has remained relatively stable.

Furthermore, historical migration trends reveal that earlier periods witnessed significantly higher levels of relative migration. Between 1846 and 1940, approximately 150 million people moved globally. These flows primarily occurred from Europe to the Americas (around 58 million), from South and Southeast Asia to India and southern China (around 52 million), and from Manchuria,

Siberia, and Central Asia to Northeastern Asia and Russia (around 51 million) (McKeown, 2004, 2010). Around the beginning of the 20th century, international migrants constituted nearly 9% of the global population—a figure substantially higher than today’s 3.7%. This historical perspective makes clear that while numerically larger, contemporary migration levels are moderate in proportional terms.

Figure 1.



Myth 2: “We Are Facing a Global Refugee Crisis”

The term “refugee crisis” often conjures images of unmanageable waves of asylum seekers threatening Europe’s social fabric. However, the global refugee population in 2022 constituted only about 0.3% of the world’s population (UNHCR, 2023). In addition, the vast majority of forcibly displaced persons remain within their country of origin or flee to neighbouring countries. According to the UNHCR Global Trends 2022 report, 76% of refugees are hosted by low- and middle-income countries, including Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, and Uganda (UNHCR, 2023, p. 3).

Europe’s reception of about one million Syrian refugees in 2015–2016, while politically significant, is comparatively modest when viewed globally. For instance, Lebanon - with a population of under 6 million - hosted over one million Syrian refugees, meaning nearly one in

four residents was a refugee at the peak of the Syrian crisis (UNHCR, 2016; World Bank, 2017, p. 8).

A more recent case - the Ukraine refugee crisis - has also resulted in large-scale displacement within and beyond Europe. By the end of 2022, over 5.7 million Ukrainian refugees were recorded across Europe, with Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic among the largest host countries (UNHCR, 2023, pp. 16–17). Unlike the Syrian situation, the EU's response to Ukrainian displacement was rapid and unified, including the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive - highlighting how political response, not numbers alone, shapes the perception of a “crisis.”

These cases show that the term “refugee crisis” often reflects policy readiness and media framing rather than the scale of displacement alone.

Myth 3: “Migration Is Caused by Poverty and Underdevelopment”

It is a common belief that migration is a desperate escape from poverty or misery. And it is assumed that development aid will “fix” the root causes of migration. While this may seem intuitive and politically appealing, the reality is more complex. Studies have shown that emigration tends to increase with economic development until countries reach upper-middle income levels. This pattern, known as the “migration hump,” has been observed in contexts such as Mexico, Turkey, and Morocco (Clemens, 2014; de Haas, 2007).

Development increases people's capabilities, access to information, and aspirations. When incomes rise, and education improves, more people can afford to migrate and are willing to do so. Conversely, the poorest individuals often lack the financial and social resources necessary to migrate internationally. Thus, rather than stopping migration, development in poor countries often facilitates it.

This phenomenon, often referred to as the “migration hump,” suggests that only at higher levels of development does emigration tend to decline. Thus, development is not an antidote to migration - it is often a catalyst. Promoting development in poorer countries might be a good policy for many reasons, but reducing migration is not one of them (Hein De Haas, 2023).

Myth 4: “Migrants Are a Burden to Host Countries”

Another dominant myth is that immigrants drain public resources, take jobs from locals, and contribute to social decline. However, robust research shows otherwise. In a comprehensive fiscal study across OECD countries, immigrants were found to contribute more in taxes and social

security payments than they receive in benefits over their lifetimes (OECD, 2013). These findings remain valid even after adjusting for age, education, and employment status variables.

With regard to labor markets, empirical studies show minimal or no overall negative effects on native employment. One study in the UK found that immigration had a very small effect on wages at the lower end of the labor market, but even that effect was temporary and sector-specific (Dustmann, Frattini, & Preston, 2013). In fact, in many high-income countries, migrants fill critical shortages in health care, agriculture, construction, and elder care sectors.

Moreover, migrants often contribute to innovation. In the United States, immigrants accounted for over 25% of all entrepreneurs and were responsible for a disproportionately high number of patents (Kerr & Kerr, 2020). These findings challenge the narrative that immigrants are passive recipients of host countries' welfare systems.

However, the benefits of immigration are not automatic or evenly distributed. Integration outcomes vary depending on factors such as migrants' legal status, education level, and access to labor markets. In some cases, poorly managed migration policies can lead to labor market segmentation, social tensions, or exploitation - especially in sectors with weak labor protections. Moreover, local communities may experience short-term strain on public services in areas experiencing sudden inflows, even if these pressures are later mitigated.

Rather than being inherently burdensome or beneficial, the impact of migration depends on policy design, institutional capacity, and the socio-economic context into which migrants arrive. Reducing the issue to a question of "asset or liability" oversimplifies a complex and dynamic process.

Discussion - Migration as a Structural Feature, Not a Crisis

Migration is not a temporary disruption to be managed away, but an inherent and enduring feature of global social transformation. It is fundamentally linked to processes such as modernization, urbanization, educational expansion, and demographic transition. Rather than being a chaotic or exceptional occurrence, migration reflects deep patterns of economic interdependence, global labor market shifts, and unequal development. Attempts to frame it as a "crisis" - or to force the issue into simplistic "pro" versus "anti" binaries - obscure its structural roots and hinder meaningful debate.

The empirical record is clear: international migration is not at a historic high, the share of refugees in the global population is relatively small, development often facilitates rather than prevents emigration, and migrants, on average, contribute to host economies in the long term. These are not ideological preferences but evidence-based conclusions derived from decades of rigorous scholarship.

Conclusion

In a time of growing uncertainty and polarized debate, using accurate language to describe migration is not only important for academic clarity but also for fostering constructive dialogue. Migration is a complex and enduring aspect of global change - closely tied to economic shifts, demographic patterns, and human aspirations. Reducing it to simplified slogans or crisis narratives risks obscuring the broader picture. By grounding our understanding in careful research and empirical evidence, we can move the conversation beyond speculation and toward a more balanced perspective. Scholars, policymakers, and citizens alike have a role to play in shaping a more thoughtful and inclusive discourse - one that recognizes migration not as an exception to be managed but as a regular and meaningful part of human development. Through this, we may be better positioned to design policies that are not only more informed but also more equitable.

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