

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Factors Influencing Migration and Population Movements – Part 1

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Key Points

- Socio-political, economic and ecological factors are the main forces driving migration.
- Rising communal violence world-wide, often as a result of ethnic or religious intolerance, has led to increased levels of migration.
- Economic disparity between developing and developed economies encourages the movement of skilled labour from the former to the latter. Temporary migration visas allow for an increase in the rate of circular migration.
- Changes in the ecological environment have the potential to worsen food and water insecurity in various parts of the globe. Limited access to food and water resources may push people to migrate to countries where these resources are more readily available.

Summary

This paper explores some of the factors contributing to immigration and population movements. Numerous domestic forces, known as push factors, can encourage individuals to leave their home country. Simultaneously, conditions in foreign countries, known as pull factors, can also influence their migratory destination. These determinants can be broadly divided into social, political, economic and ecological factors.

Analysis

Many factors that influence migration are difficult to predict. While social, political and economic developments are exceptionally difficult to predict precisely, judgements can be made based upon current situations. Ecological disruption is easier to pre-empt as there is a large body of scientific evidence to suggest that this factor will be a cause for concern in the near future. Environmental modelling, as well as worsening food and water security in many countries, shows that ecological issues are already beginning to present challenges globally. Ecological factors have the potential to become an increasingly significant force influencing migration over the 21st century.

Migrants themselves can be divided into two broad categories: humanitarian and economic. Humanitarian migrants include asylum seekers and refugees. These individuals generally migrate to countries geographically close to their country of origin. Over the past decade, Afghanistan has been a major source of humanitarian emigrants, with Pakistan and Iran becoming their main destination countries.¹ Economic migrants, on the other hand, migrate in order to find employment or improve their financial circumstances. In the past, these migrants have generally moved from poorer to richer countries, however, recent evidence suggests that this is beginning to change with increasing levels of south-south and circular migration being seen.

Socio-political Factors

Social push factors can include ethnic, religious, racial, and cultural persecution. Warfare, or the threat of conflict, is also a major push factor. In the Australian context, most asylum seekers arriving by boat in the last decade have come from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Sri Lanka. All of these countries, apart from Iran, have undergone extremely destabilising conflicts in recent years. On the other hand, while it is free of violent conflict, Iran has one of the worst human rights records in the world leading many of its citizens to seek asylum outside of its borders.

The politicisation of religious and ethnic identities has the potential to cause significant levels of conflict within states. Empirical evidence suggests that states undergoing a political transition from authoritarian rule to democracy are at greater risk of instability and internal conflict.² Often these states lack the ability to properly respond to social instability. Several states within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), including Burma, have recently begun to democratise while failing to simultaneously develop a shared national identity capable of tying together the various groups within their borders. In socially diverse states the potential for conflict may be greater than in more homogenous or inclusive societies. The future level of migration from these countries is wholly dependent upon the longevity and severity of any conflict that could arise from social grievances.

Individuals migrating due to social or political conditions are more likely to do so as humanitarian migrants. This will have an impact upon where they settle as some countries have more liberal approaches to humanitarian migrants than others. In the first instance, these individuals are likely to move to the nearest safe country that accepts asylum seekers.

This does not, however, prevent them from undertaking a second migration to a country that provides a broader range of legal rights to asylum seekers and refugees.

Economic Factors

Economic factors relate to the labour standards of a country, its unemployment situation and the overall health of its economy. If economic conditions are not favourable and appear to be at risk of declining further, a greater number of individuals will probably emigrate to one with a better economy. Often this will result in people moving from rural to urban areas while remaining within the confines of their state borders. As the low- and middle-income countries of today continue to develop and the high-income countries experience slower economic growth, migration from the former could decline.

Economic migrants are drawn towards international migration because of the prospect of higher wages, better employment opportunities and, often, a desire to escape the domestic social and political situation of their home country. These migrants are most likely to come from middle-income countries where the population is becoming increasingly well educated. Salaries and wages, however, are likely to remain relatively low compared to those of individuals with a similar educational background in other, higher-income countries. This disparity has the potential to lead to some highly-skilled individuals from developing countries migrating to more developed countries. This form of migration is known as south-north migration and has historically been the main form of economic migration.

In south-north migration, individuals from developing countries moved to more developed countries for work and sent remittances back to their country of origin. Over the past decade, however, south-south migration has become increasingly common. In 2013, south-south migration accounted for 36 per cent of all international migration while south-north movements accounted for 35 per cent.³ According to the Migration Policy Institute, migration between developing countries is built upon proximity, identity networks, income differentials and seasonal migration. For these reasons, 80 per cent of south-south migration occurs between states with contiguous borders where common cultural identities are likely to be found.⁴ The increasing prevalence of south-south economic migration is likely to continue as the barriers to migration are lower than south-north migration. Migrants from the south are generally less skilled and lower-educated than their counterparts from the north, making it difficult for them to migrate to more developed countries. Additionally, since migration occurs over smaller geographical distances it is potentially less disruptive to migrants and communities.

Technological advancement, both in communications and transport, in addition to the liberalisation of labour markets, has the potential to increase the rate of circular migration. This form of migration occurs when individuals migrate between an origin and a destination on several separate occasions.⁵ Generally, economic forces motivate individuals to move to countries where employment prospects are better before returning to their country of origin. Studies have shown that circular migration can have positive development outcomes. Most importantly, circular migrants are more likely to send larger remittances back to their country of origin than those who permanently settle within their destination country. Furthermore, issues relating to brain drain and a hollowing out of the labour force are

largely averted.⁶ Problems of exploitation still remain, suggesting that efforts need to be made to ensure that standardised regulations are adopted to protect the rights of circular migrants.

Economic migrants have a greater degree of choice in determining their destination than humanitarian migrants. Many asylum seekers will flee to the nearest safe country that will accept them whereas economic migrants will move to countries that either require their skills or have better conditions than their country of origin. Pull factors within the destination country are therefore more likely to influence the decision making process of economic migrants.

Ecological Factors: Climate Disruption Exacerbates Other Forces

Of the ecological factors that push individuals to migrate, climate change is, arguably, the most serious. Over the next decade, climate change has the potential to intensify the impacts of the social, political and economic push factors described earlier in this paper. Even if individuals affected by climate change move only short distances this has the potential to alter social, political and economic dynamics. The possibility of social issues arising increases when tribal, ethnic and religious groups that were historically separate are forced to intermingle due to traditional lands no longer being able to support human settlement. Individuals engaged in agriculture, for example, could be forced to find alternative forms of employment as their land is no longer capable of producing or sustaining viable quantities of goods. Food and water prices are likely to increase in parts of the region due to greater scarcity of these resources. These burdens place additional strain upon the capacity of the state to ensure welfare for all and, in some cases, maintain its stability.

The observable impacts of climate change are likely to become more apparent over the course of the next decade. States must utilise this time to prepare for the increased migratory flows that will be a consequence of the inevitable disruption that will occur over the next century. Climate change will have an impact upon water resources, agriculture, food security, public health and, in some instances, threaten the very existence of some states. The impacts of climate change will be most apparent in developing countries which lack the wherewithal to adequately address, or adapt to, the changing environment.

Food and water security are expected to become more salient issues over the coming decades. The most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report suggests that climate change will have its largest impact upon food security by the middle of this century. Regions that can no longer sustain agriculture are likely to experience rural to urban migration or, in some cases, increased levels of international emigration. Another factor that can worsen food insecurity is water security. Increasing water insecurity in parts of the IOR, especially, has the potential to influence international migration.

Individuals who are severely impacted by changing ecological conditions may choose to migrate from their home state in search of more favourable environmental conditions elsewhere. Those who choose to emigrate due to more frequent or more destructive natural disasters may identify as climate refugees and seek asylum in other countries less affected

by climatic extremes. Climate refugees are defined as ‘people who have to leave their habitats immediately or in the near future, because of sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment related to at least one of three impacts of climate change: sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity.’⁷ This definition, however, has no standing in international refugee law and organisations, including the United Nations, prefer to use the term environmental migrant. Fearing that it is now too late to take action to prevent climate change the international community is preparing measures for adaptation. Environmental migration is one such adaptation measure that must be taken into greater consideration by the international community.

Conclusion

Increasing levels of intolerance, economic disparities between countries as well as the threat of climate change and its associated impacts are all key factors that drive immigration and population movements. This part of the paper has looked at the major factors that influence population movements and immigration. The next will explore how these factors are likely to impact the IOR over the next decade.

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