And Now, Reverse Migration

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For many, global migration means refugees pouring out of conflict-ravaged countries in search of safety and, for the lucky, political asylum. In recent history, we have seen images such as these involving Vietnam's boat people, Bosnians escaping Serb atrocities in the Balkans, and, more often, in constant and nightmarish replay, masses of African men, women, and children, hounded and herded by war, trudging in a seemingly interminable march from village to village.

World Migration 2008: Managing Labor Mobility in the Evolving Global Economy
a report by the International Organization for Migration, 2008.

The statistics on refugees are alarming. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 11 million people worldwide are refugees outside their home countries, and another 14 million are internally displaced. It is these groups that have traditionally been the focus of policy makers, governments, and international agencies like the UNHCR as they have dealt with humanitarian issues and questions of political asylum.

World Migration 2008, a publication of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), reminds us that this traditional conception, while it raises important diplomatic and ethical issues, fails to convey the full dimensions of global migration today. Globalization, the editors of the report argue, has quickly remade global migration. However, as we will see, globalization may unmake migration even more quickly.

The number of people who can be considered international migrants—200 million—dwarfs the total for refugees. But we cannot by numbers of people alone measure the importance of global migrations. (By way of comparison, China's "floating population"—that is, internal migrants who have left rural villages to find work in the once burgeoning factories of urban China—numbers an estimated 120 million.) Indeed, what makes cross-border migration a pressing concern for governments worldwide is its economic impact.

The best way to illustrate this is in terms of remittances. In 2007, according to the IOM report, migrants laboring in foreign countries sent home $337 billion in remittances. This, as the report notes, represented a 99 percent increase over 2002. The increase highlights both the importance of foreign laborers to their home countries (countries mainly in the developing world) and the lucrative nature of the jobs available in the developed world, compared to the work that migrants could find in their nations of origin.

The gap between average incomes in countries of destination and of origin has grown markedly over time. The report contrasts today's 10:1 ratio with income differentials of between 2:1 and 4:1 in the nineteenth century. And it is globalization that is largely responsible for the widening of this gap, as well as for the intensification of other immigration-related economic forces. According to the report, the increasingly unrestricted flow across national borders of all manner of things—goods, services, capital, ideas, technology, environmental impacts—has been "giving rise to and shaping contemporary patterns of mobility." The link between globalization and migration is the central insight of *World Migration 2008*, and it serves to broaden and deepen old and inadequate conceptions of how migration works.

FOOTLOOSE WORKERS

Global transfers of capital, along with worldwide manufacturing networks that allow a company like Volkswagen to build cars in Mexico with parts from Argentina, Canada, and a host of other countries, have become the hallmark of globalization (though the recent financial dysfunction that has spread like a contagion from the United States into Europe and East Asia may also become a defining aspect of this era when its history is written). The editors of *World Migration 2008* argue that worldwide labor mobility is also a component

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of globalization. It is a component, they suggest, that too often has been overlooked.

But factors beyond globalization are also at work in the developed economies' creation of job opportunities for foreign workers. One such factor is demography: Aging populations and smaller family sizes in the rich world mean that migrants are required to supplement the workforce. Another factor is the shift of developed-world workforces toward knowledge work based in the service sector. An increasingly well-educated workforce requires replacement labor to take over jobs that "knowledge workers" consider menial or insufficiently remunerative.

This discussion of less-skilled laborers should not obscure another factor driving migration: international competition for highly skilled workers who can provide expertise and capabilities that boost productivity. Some of the largest recent increases in migration have occurred in this area, rather than among less-skilled workers.

The IOM study devotes considerable space to documenting and quantifying these trends. The second half of the report offers a comprehensive assessment of the issues on which policy makers, both nationally and internationally, should focus when it comes to regulating, administering, and generally overseeing labor migration. Countries of both destination and origin are generally urged to devote more attention to migration. The report also makes specific prescriptions for concerted international efforts to regulate labor migration through the use of agreements on human rights, international labor, and international trade.

The IOM, an intergovernmental organization founded in 1951, has more than 400 field locations and a staff of 7,000. It spent $1 billion last year on more than 2,000 projects. It is, in short, as close to the reality of global migrations as anyone. Unfortunately, however, the research and recommendations in *World Migration 2008* do not include any analysis of the consequences of the financial meltdown of 2008 and 2009—a result not of oversight, but of timing. This reduces the relevance of much of its discussion of policy prescriptions, since we do not yet know how origin countries, host countries, and international organizations will react to the continuing economic crisis.

The case of Singapore, in many ways an icon of the age of globalization, is illustrative. This port city-state—"the house that globalization built," as a *Washington Post* news story recently put it—now finds itself a prime exemplar of what may prove to be an age of de-globalization. The *Post* noted in March that:

> Thousands of foreign workers, including London School of Economics graduates with six-digit salaries and desperately poor Bangladeshi factory workers, are streaming home as the economy here suffers the worst of the recessions in Southeast Asia. Singapore is an epicenter of what analysts call a new flow of reverse migration away from hard-hit, globalized economies, including Dubai and Britain, that were once beacons for foreign labor. Economists from Credit Suisse predict an exodus of 200,000 foreigners—or one in every 15 workers here—by the end of 2010.

In both its current economic distress and its dealings with migrant workers, Singapore is not alone in the region. Malaysia recently expelled 100,000 Indonesian workers. Thai factories that once employed illegal Burmese workers have shut down, forcing the Burmese to return home.

The loss of jobs means the end of remittances, of course, and this could have a severe impact on the developing-world economies that rely on them. The Burmese workers returning from Thai factories had earned about $100 a month, much of it going back home to a country where hard currency is a luxury. Kyrgyzstan is another nation rocked by layoffs of expatriate workers; 27 percent of the country's GDP came from remittances, and now it is asking for emergency food aid.

GOODBYE GLOBALIZATION?

It is not clear that any government fiat or international convention can reverse the titanic effects associated with the globalized financial meltdown. Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs, for one, believes that a force larger than an economic downturn may be at work, a phenomenon that will defy efforts at piecemeal regulation. He warns we could be witnessing "the collapse of globalization." Sachs is joined in this pessimistic assessment by Simon Johnson, a former chief economist with the International Monetary Fund who now teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Johnson's prognosis suggests a focus of research for next year's world migration report: "I do think we'll have a lost decade, an unwinding of labor mobility, of capital, of political will. It's about de-globalization." ■