

The future of mobility

Few things will affect our future more than migration. A new book provides one of the best analyses of its costs and benefits.

When a Bangladeshi man goes to work on a construction site in the Middle East, his wife typically moves in with her husband's family. Not all wives enjoy this. They sweat in a strange kitchen, take care of a bossy mother-in-law and see their husbands only for a few weeks each year. And although their husbands send home plenty of money, they often send it to their parents, not their wives. Migration creates losers as well as winners.

But the gains vastly outweigh the losses, as Ian Goldin, Geoffrey Cameron and Meera Balarajan make plain in their new book, "Exceptional People". If rich countries were to admit enough migrants from poor countries to expand their own labour forces by a mere 3%, the world would be richer, according to one estimate, by \$356 billion a year. Completely opening borders would add an astonishing \$39 trillion over 25 years to the global economy. That is more than 500 times the amount the rich world spends on foreign aid each year. Migration is the most effective tool yet devised for reducing global poverty.

The same worker can earn 15 times as much if he or she moves from say, Yemen to the United States. The wage gap between rich and poor countries is far wider than it was a century ago, during the great age of migration from Europe to America. And the emotional costs of leaving home, though still hefty, are much lighter than they were. A 19th-century Russian emigrant might never see or speak to his family again. A 21st-century migrant can Skype them in the taxi from the airport.

Small wonder that the number of international migrants has doubled in the past quarter-century, to more than 200m. Increasing mobility combined with cheaper communications means that in the future, "the global community is becoming connected in a manner not experienced since our small-world evolutionary origins in Africa." This is a fascinating point, which the authors could have pursued further than they do.

Overall, however, this is a book of bold ambitions ably fulfilled. Mr Goldin and his co-authors offer a history of migration, from man's earliest wanderings in Africa to the present day. Thanks to modern techniques for decoding genetic evidence, far more is known today about the great movements of prehistory than was suspected even a decade ago. Genetic tests are now so cheap that Mr Goldin can draw us a map of how his own ancestors moved from east Africa 31,000 years ago, across Arabia and through Central Asia before swinging back into northern Europe.

After filling in the historical background, the authors give a rigorous but readable guide to the costs and benefits of modern migration. Poor countries may suffer when they lose their best brains to the West: 43% of Liberian doctors, for example, now work in North America. But the prospect of migrating spurs people in poor countries to acquire marketable skills. Some then decide not to migrate after all. Others spend several years abroad but then return home with new skills, new contacts and a pot of savings to invest. Overall, the brain drain actually helps poor countries. And of course, it benefits the migrants themselves. If it did not, they would not leave home.

Immigration is unpopular in rich countries because people overestimate its costs and underestimate its benefits. An influx of unskilled migrants may drag down the wages of unskilled natives, but this effect is "very small at most, and may be irrelevant", according to a number of different studies. Migrants often create employment for natives. Indian entrepreneurs in San Francisco create new technology firms. Mexican nannies hold babies while American mothers go out to work. Migrants come when their services are wanted and stay away when they are not. Through the migrant grapevine, they know that jobs are drying up several months before government statisticians notice.

"Exceptional People" is packed with surprising insights. The authors knock down wild predictions that climate change will create 200m refugees by mid-century. Global warming may cause more frequent floods, but most flood victims go home when the waters recede. The authors cite as evidence the deluges that hit Mozambique in 2000 and America's Gulf Coast in 2005. This reviewer, who saw both disasters up close, was struck by the sheer determination of the displaced to return.

The next big wave of migration will come from Africa. Today, most Africans are too poor to move far. A typical Congolese peasant cannot afford the boat fare to Kinshasa, let alone Belgium. But as the continent becomes less poor, more and more Africans will acquire the means to migrate.

More generally, the authors predict a future of labour shortages in rich countries which only migration can solve. As Europe and America age, they will need more young and energetic nurses, care assistants, housekeepers and cleaners. Robots cannot do everything, even in Japan. The demand for highly skilled workers will grow too, and countries will start to compete more fiercely for mobile talent. Migration will "define our future", the authors say. They are probably right.

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