

The Impact of Migration: A (Natural) Disaster?

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Editorial

Millions of people are on the move. They migrate to another country to improve their life and to escape poverty, violence, or impotence to change their direct living environment. Their migration is facilitated by modern information technologies, affordable transport facilities and social networks. Source and destination of migration determine how migration is seen and understood. Migration between economically developed countries is regarded as greasing oil for the economy to compensate temporary shortages in certain types of labour. Migration flows between developing countries remain mainly “unnoted” and do not get much attention from media and scholars in the post-industrial societies unless these flows ended up into a humanitarian disaster in an improvised camp in a remote site near national borders to a neighbor country where war and lawlessness prevail. However, immigration from developing to developed countries has attracted much attention from public opinion. Accordingly, recent academic debate has been dominated by studies examining the impact of immigration and assimilation (performance) of immigrants from mainly developing countries in post-industrial societies (North America, Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand).

Immigration from developing countries has effects on many domains of society. It leads to changes in the social-cultural, economic and political landscape in the receiving countries. A large number of immigrants with different socio-economic, religious and cultural background results in a series of shocks in receiving countries. As native populations feel less secure in their neighborhoods and cities where immigrants become more visible in public domain, opposition against immigration grows. Anti-immigration sentiments are usually led by populist right-wing politicians, and are organized not only along conventional economic arguments such as ‘immigrants pick up jobs of natives and depress wages’, but also along cultural arguments. Whereas migration leads to a perceivable social unrest, can we regard migration as a (natural) disaster? What drives migration and can national authorities stop immigration?

It is probably worth to start giving an answer on the last question. National authorities are not able to stop immigration from abroad within the scope defined by the common rules of modern democracy and universal human rights. They try to regulate immigration by allowing a selective group of immigrants with various degrees of success. It is a widely accepted fact that much disequilibrium in the world is source of migration decisions. In addition, the modern world generates the need for migrants. Migration may be seen as a component of a dynamic world and is not necessarily problematic. The nature of migration effects is critically dependent on the following variables: motives, type and size of migrant flows and conditions in the destination countries. National states try to manipulate these variables to limit harmful effects and to optimally benefit from advantages of migration.

Economic Motives

In a globalizing world, international migration is driven by not only huge differences in wages but also differences in welfare systems and living standards between countries. Annually, millions of migrants knock on the ‘door’ of the place of prosperity: post-industrial societies

in the western hemisphere. From the economic point of view, people in developing countries are triggered to migrate by relatively low wages and relatively low prices of goods and services that they produced in their home country. Economic theories suggest that low wages are a result of abundance of labour and relative scarcity of another production factor, capital. Accordingly, developing countries produce labour intensive goods while developed countries with high capital endowment are specialized in capital-intensive production technologies. Classical economic theory suggests that differences in prices of production factors (wage for labour and interest rate for capital), called disequilibria, will be offset by international trade of goods. Differences in prices of production factors and goods generate international trade: developing countries will export labour intensive products and import capital intensive products. And developed countries will do the opposite. In fact, relatively low prices of goods produced by labour-intensive technologies are more attractive for markets where capital-intensive production technologies prevail. In turn, other goods produced by capital-intensive technologies are attractive for developing countries. If there will be no barriers for international trade, trade of goods will finally lead to a convergence of all prices so that there will be no need for mobility of labour (migration) and capital. Trade of goods will include labour and capital that are unequally distributed across countries. In the real world, however, an absolute equivalence of prices will never be reached because of financial and psychological costs of migration and huge differences in infrastructure of production locations.

Reasoning in this line suggests that contemporary immigration from poor to rich countries occurs because the mobility of other production factors and of goods has been limited by restrictions on international trade. In other words; international migration does the job which would have been done by a freer international mobility of goods. Absorption of immigrants is clearly more difficult than import of goods that are produced in developing countries by workers who might have a strong inclination to migrate to developed countries.

Shift on Political Spectrum

Immigration literature suggests that the macro impact of immigration on a national economy is small. Immigration affects, in particular, income distribution: workers who have comparable qualifications with immigrants would face a competition while workers with complementary qualifications would benefit from immigration. Capital owners (employers) potentially benefit from immigration since

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immigration extends labour supply which is associated with a decline in wages. Therefore, capital owners are traditional supporters of free migration. This generates a ground for conflict with liberal conservative political parties that are in favor of restrictive immigration policies to represent interests of their supporters who are relatively more sensitive for absorption problems of immigration.

In developed destination countries of migration, there is growing concern about absorption of immigrants in terms of economic and cultural adjustment. It is widely believed that particularly low skilled immigrants enter economically developed countries and deteriorate the economic position of low skilled natives. Besides, these low skilled immigrants are often from developing countries in which different socio-cultural and religious codes are prevailing. Assuming that immigrants would 'take' jobs of native unskilled workers and can hardly adjust to the new and modern environment; populist politicians argue that immigrants are source of many contemporary problems, such as unemployment, criminality and high costs of welfare state. Immigration literature does not unambiguously support this statement. There is little evidence that immigration has led to a deteriorated economic position of unskilled natives. A more frequent dependence of immigrants on welfare benefits in North-Western European countries has been documented but the related literature suggests that a substantial part of this high dependency has to do with the limited accessibility structure of labor markets and society in these countries. Another strain of literature indicates that immigration can contribute to innovation and economic development when high ability immigrants are allowed to enter the country and when immigrants are facilitated to benefit from their creative potential [1,2]. Nevertheless, this type of suggestions has been successful to mobilize electoral support for populist political parties as the receiving society faces practical problems of immigrant absorption process, such as a high incidence of inactivity, criminality or any form of intolerance for other cultures and ethnicities. An increasing number of (native) citizens, fearing loss of prosperity and identity, support populist and anti-immigration political parties.

The break-through success of the nationalist populist parties in Northwestern European countries may be seen as an electoral response to large scale immigration and associated integration problems. These parties often share common anti-immigration platforms. These parties

consciously used a stark nationalist "us versus them" rhetoric, praising a better past when their country used to be free of immigrants. They have relied on similar tactics: They approach an electorate, which initially is largely based on low skilled and relatively old voters who are worried about their prosperity and the sustainability of the welfare state in a globalized world. Populist right-wing leaders assert to speak a language of the street as an antidote to political correctness and resort to a strong dose of anti-elitism. They are not averse to ideological opportunism. Populist leaders are successfully combining an anti-immigration stance with views normally associated with the left side of the political spectrum. For instance; in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders strongly opposes immigration and official development assistance for developing countries and, at the same time, supports gay and animal rights and opposes raising the retirement age and the relaxation of dismissal.

Organizers of anti-immigration campaigns use a specific language to emphasize the seriousness of the migration problem and to mobilize public opinion against immigration. In the Netherlands, for example, the leader of an anti-immigration party speaks of a tsunami of islamization to reinforce his opposition, instead of indicating the actual number of Muslims that have immigrated into the Netherlands. The power of metaphors in politic debates has been recognized by political scientists [3]. Metaphors are often typically related to natural disasters.

The recent massacre in Norway by a Norwegian anti-immigration extremist provided the latest reminder of a dangerous stage how anti-immigration rhetoric has influenced political landscapes. It is apparent that European societies have been changed under the pressure of immigration. The question is whether this change is big enough to regard immigration as a (natural) disaster for groups of people who have directly influenced from this process.

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