



# Human Migration: Myths, Hysteria and Facts

Migration is an issue that can raise high hopes for migrants and deep fears among native populations. Sometimes this fear amounts to outright hysteria: you only have to think of the British press stories about the likelihood of a rush of Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants when they gained full mobility rights in Europe. A few months earlier, when a boat full of migrants sank off Lampedusa, Italy, politicians and media talked about an 'invasion of migrants'. 'Something needed to be done', they said, otherwise the situation would get out of control.

There are a number of so-called fundamental truths about human migration that are based on flawed assumptions about its nature, causes and consequences. Governments' responses to migration are often based on these flawed assumptions and, as a result, immigration policies often fail to meet their stated objectives. I will discuss seven such 'migration myths' to illustrate that much common-sense thinking about migration is not based on facts.



## Myth 1: We live in an age of unprecedented mass immigration

The estimated total number of migrants around the world almost doubled between 1960 and 2000 (according to the Global Bilateral Migration Database), but the world population has also grown. So, in percentage terms, the level of migration worldwide has remained pretty stable – in a range of approximately 2.75%–3.25% over the period since 1960. However there have been significant changes in the nature and direction of migration. Over more than four centu-

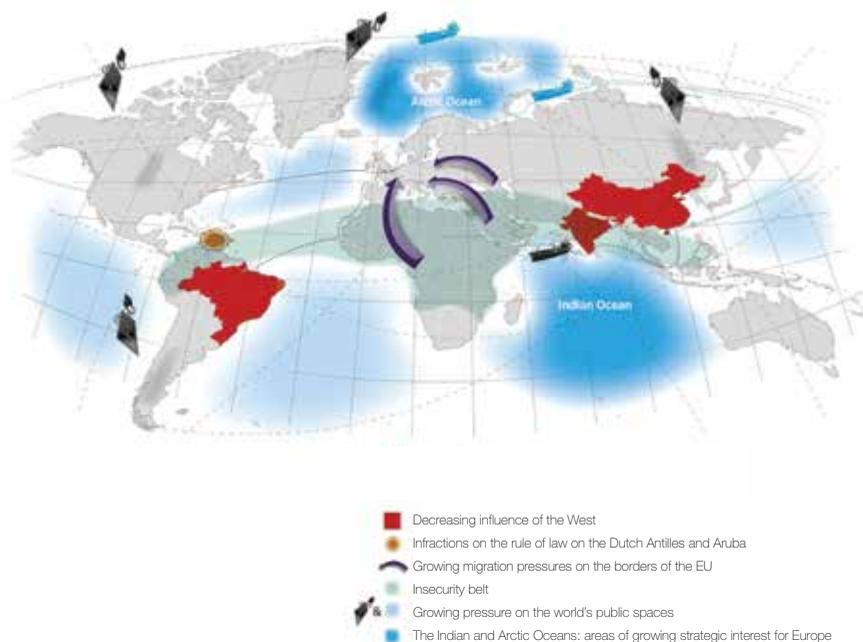
ries, it was mainly Europeans who moved to all continents and occupied and settled in foreign lands. Between 1846 and 1924 some 48 million Europeans moved out, which represents about 12% of the European population in 1900. In the same period, about 17 million people left

the British Isles, which is equal to 41% of Britain's population in 1900.

Since World War Two, these patterns have been reversed: with decolonisation, high levels of economic growth and a drop in birth rates, European emigration has dropped. Instead Europe has evolved into a major migration destination. Another change has been the increasing political salience and 'securitisation' of migration. After the end of the Cold War, there arose a political need to create new external threats.

Since the early 1990s, government agencies and the military have increasingly represented migration as a threat to economic and physical security as well as national sovereignty. A map produced by the Netherlands Ministry of Defence shows a new 'insecurity belt', in which poverty, violence and

### Migration as a security danger



Map produced by Netherlands Ministry of Defence in 2010. Key text translated from the original Dutch

environmental degradation is expected to give rise to mass immigration into Europe. The portrayal of migration as a security threat provides a justification for continued or increased funding of the military and government agencies dealing with migration.

#### Myth 2: Immigration restrictions reduce migration

The evidence suggests that attempts to restrict immigration often achieve the opposite, as they can interrupt circular migration and push migrants into permanent settlement. For example, in the past Moroccans moved backwards and forwards between their origin country and countries like Spain and Italy. Many would come to Europe for a few months or years to earn some money and go home afterwards. Then Spain and Italy introduced visas in the early 1990s, which created an incentive for migrants to settle in Europe.

As the EU has increased border controls, migrants developed counter-strategies, resulting in a massive increase in the number of migration routes and making borders more difficult to control. There has also been a human toll with at least 20,000 people dying while crossing European borders over the last two decades.

#### Myth 3: Poverty is the main cause of South-North migration

Migration requires considerable resources so the real victims of poverty do not generally have the option to migrate, particularly over long distances and across international borders. One researcher calculated that to cross the Sahara, you would on average need a year's salary from the country of origin – a significant amount of money.

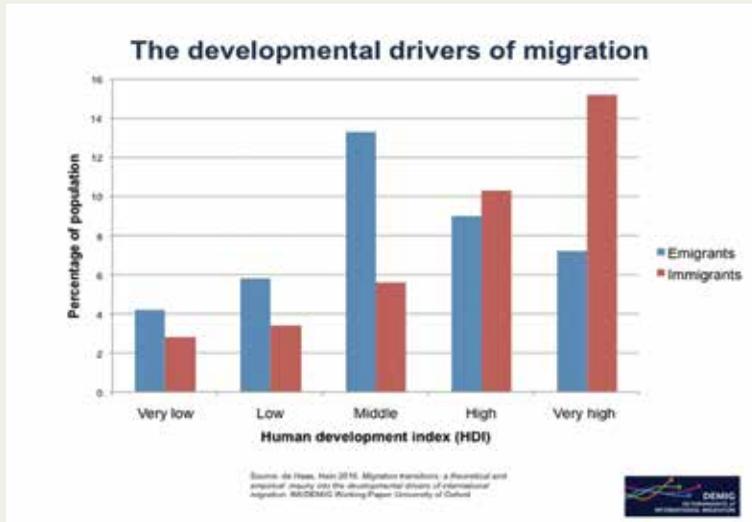
#### Myth 4: Development will reduce migration

Historical evidence shows a more mixed picture. In the graph (see page 6), I have divided all countries in the world into five groups using the UN Human Development Index (HDI) as a rough estimate of the development level of each country. When we look at the levels of migration for each, we see that on average, the more developed a country the more immigrants it tends to attract. More surprisingly the highest levels of emigration do not occur in the poorest countries. It is rather the middle group – including countries like Mexico, Turkey and Morocco – that have high levels of emigration. This confirms evidence that levels of emigration initially increase, rather than decrease, with development.

#### Myth 5: Migration leads to a brain drain

People opposing immigration often argue that it is to the benefit of the country of origin to retain its skilled people. However, it is misleading to suggest that the departure of skilled people is the cause of underdevelopment. While the overall levels of skilled emigration are generally exaggerated, it is rather the lack of opportunities that motivates the skilled to leave. For instance, research has cast serious doubt on the assumption that emigration of doctors and nurses is the cause of the healthcare crisis in several African countries, or that they would have been working in basic healthcare if they would have stayed.

Conversely, migration can bring benefits to origin countries. The level of remittances from migrants has been soaring since the mid 1990s and now dwarfs development aid. If conditions are favourable in origin countries, many migrants also invest there. Overall, it would be misleading to see migration either as the cause of



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underdevelopment or the solution for structural development problems which migrants cannot tackle.

**Myth 6: Migrants take away jobs and threaten the welfare state**

This is inherently contradictory – migrants cannot be welfare scroungers and take all the jobs at the same time. Much migration is primarily driven by the demand for labour, so if an economy is doing well, migrants will be drawn in, often to do jobs locals refuse to do. This is a worldwide phenomenon. If we look at the overall impact of migration on economic growth, we find the effects are small but on the positive side, although the benefits mainly accrue to the wealthy and the middle classes.

**Myth 7: There is a quasi-unlimited supply of migrant labour**

There is a common assumption that there will always be masses of people ready to come to Europe. This assumption seems naïve, if we take into account the global decline in fertility levels, the slowing down of population growth in major emigration countries and the rise of new economic powers

that are starting to attract an increasing number of migrants – such as China, Brazil or Turkey.

**Conclusion**

So, the key question for the future is not whether there will be more or less migration, but where migrants will come from and go to. These patterns are bound to change, although the way in which they do so crucially depends on future economic, demographic and political change in different world regions. In the future the question might no longer be how do we prevent migration, but increasingly how do we attract migrants.

In this short article, I have tried to illustrate that much ‘common-sensical’ thinking about human migration is based on flawed assumptions on its nature, causes and consequences. Recent insights from research demonstrate that migration is inevitable and that wealthy countries will always attract migrants. This partly explains that most immigration policies are ineffectual and potentially counter-productive. ■



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You can find out more about Hein’s work on his departmental website, [www.imi.ox.ac.uk/about-us/people/hein-de-haas](http://www.imi.ox.ac.uk/about-us/people/hein-de-haas) or on his blog [heindehaas.blogspot.co.uk](http://heindehaas.blogspot.co.uk)