



A migrant worker picks blueberries in Lake Wales, Florida, US, in March 2020.
● MARCO BELLO/REUTERS

Human resources

In addition to harming migrants, this broken migration system is fueling a political backlash. More and more governments are embracing restrictive policies. Some are rolling back asylum protections. In 2024, both Finland and Poland passed legislation that allows border officials to turn back asylum seekers at their land borders. The United States has also significantly restricted its asylum protections for those seeking refuge at its land borders. And South Africa is contemplating withdrawing from the Refugee Convention altogether.

Ironically, this anti-immigration wave is hitting at the same time that immigration is becoming more essential than ever. Global fertility rates have dropped from 5.3 births per woman in 1963 to 2.3 in 2021. When the asylum system was set up, in 1951, many of the most advanced countries in the world were experiencing a baby boom. Veterans flooded the workforce, and the demographic trend meant there were plenty of workers to meet economic needs for decades into the future. Today, many societies are experiencing the opposite trend. By 2050, nearly 40 percent of the population in Japan and in South Korea will be over the age of 65. Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain also have fast-aging populations. Governmental efforts to encourage families to have more babies have largely failed, as have attempts to replace work often done by migrants, such as elder care, with artificial intelligence. Thirty of the largest economies in the world suffer from labor shortages, and those unfilled jobs cost an estimated \$1.3 trillion in lost GDP in 2023 alone.

Give me your tired, your poor

Given the current anti-immigration mood, revising the Refugee Convention to expand access and protection to a greater number of people is a political nonstarter. Worse, such a move could risk rolling back the refugee and asylum protections that remain critical for tens of millions of vulnerable people. Yet without a modernized approach to the movement of asylum seekers, increasingly negative public perceptions of immigration may cause governments to chip away at these protections. Governments need to adopt an approach that recognizes the

link between development and migration: lack of development fuels migration, but migration also fuels development in source and destination countries.

The evidence is overwhelming that poverty is a key driver of the recent and unprecedented uptick in irregular immigration. As recently as 2008, more than 90 percent of the people stopped at the US-Mexican border were Mexicans. Seventeen years later, as the Mexican economy has grown, only around one-third of the migrants trying to cross the border without authorization are Mexican, and there are many more families and unaccompanied minors. Today, those apprehended hail from more than 100 countries, with growing numbers from poor communities in places such as Bangladesh, China, and India. Many are fleeing poverty, which in many parts of the world has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and a changing climate.

Help wanted

For the millions of people around the world suffering from the effects of poverty, climate change, and violence, the response of the aid community has been to rely on official development assistance in sectors such as health care, education, infrastructure, and agriculture. Legal immigration has been an underutilized tool. Migrants' remittances already significantly boost developing economies; in 2022, migrants sent home over \$831 billion. Creating opportunities for vulnerable people to migrate legally and secure formal work can empower them to rely more on their own capacity and less on aid.

That so many migrants who are undocumented find jobs in the informal markets of their destination countries signals an imbalance between legal immigration pathways and economic need, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, construction, hospitality, and healthcare services. The United States, for example, relies on migrants entering irregularly to meet over 70 percent of its agricultural labor needs. Nearly one in five workers on dairy farms is an immigrant. During the early days of the pandemic, the share of meatpacking workers who were foreign-born stood at 45 percent, 28 percentage points higher than the average share for all industries combined.

Without migrant farm workers, the United States would not enjoy a stable food supply.

There are some promising programs that demonstrate how to address labor shortfalls through immigration. Since 2021, India has signed bilateral migration deals with Australia, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. These accords create legal immigration channels, aligning visa quotas with workforce needs, especially in high-demand sectors such as agriculture, health care, and construction. They also include provisions for skills training in the countries of origin for migrants, so they are better prepared for those key industries. Another forward-looking approach comes from, of all places, the right-leaning government of Italy. In 2023, despite having campaigned on a hard-line approach to immigration, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni announced adjustments to the country's immigration policies to allow in more foreign workers to address labor shortages. Over the next three years, Italy will admit more than 450,000 new workers to meet demand in various sectors, including agriculture, health care, and caregiving, in exchange for the origin country's agreement to accept back migrants who entered the country irregularly and do not have a legal right to stay.

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, an unprecedented effort by European countries to share responsibility for the union's external borders, presents another promising model. In addition to improving border management by protecting security while preserving the safety and rights of those crossing borders, the agreement calls for the recruitment of foreign talent to meet the EU's labor-market needs.

Win-win

With the right systems in place, all parties — migrants, their countries of origin, and their host countries — can benefit. To get there, high-income countries should direct development funds toward skills training for workers that will prepare would-be migrants for high-demand industries. Such targeted aid would benefit the country receiving the aid by boosting the skills of its own workforce, in addition to ensuring that a migrant is also ready for work in a destination country.

The first step is for destination countries to analyze their own

labor-market gaps and, if needed, change their policies to ensure a better alignment between skills shortages and visas, as Italy is now doing. They should also map current trends in irregular migration and share this information with aid agencies, which should use it to prioritize skills training in source countries.

The development arms of governments must then work with organizations on the ground to ensure that the most vulnerable communities have access to regular migration opportunities. Bangladesh, for instance, is now home to many technical schools where would-be migrants learn how to fix cars or take care of children, helping them build skills they can use in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Since 2013, Germany has had an initiative to train and recruit nurses in other countries. The program doesn't just benefit the nurses; it also fills labor gaps in the German healthcare sector and creates much-needed additional skilled workers in the origin countries. Long-term strategies on the part of rich destination countries should focus on training or retraining workers from poorer source countries. Collaborative projects between the imaging company Planet Labs and the International Organization for Migration are helping identify agricultural and pastoral communities most likely to be displaced by climate change. This data-driven approach enables governments and aid organizations working in vulnerable communities to take proactive measures, such as improving water management and teaching more efficient agricultural techniques, that help people succeed and remain in their home countries while also imparting new skills linked to future job opportunities for those who will choose to move.

In places where jobs are scarce, development organizations must ensure that workers who have been trained in new skills are able to access employment abroad through legal channels. The market works reasonably well in connecting high-skilled workers to job opportunities around the globe. Low-skilled workers, by contrast, are not able to land jobs as readily through ethical, safe, and legal pathways. But there are some promising fixes in the works. In 2023, for example, Australia and Tuvalu, an island north of Fiji, established a pilot labor-mobil-

ity program that addresses the threat of rising sea levels in Tuvalu while easing labor demands in Australia. Australia committed \$110 million to Tuvalu for various infrastructure projects, including coastal adaptation and telecommunications, and established a special visa pathway allowing up to 280 Tuvaluans per year to live, work, and study in Australia. Such efforts could be scaled up around the world by using data analytics to identify at-risk communities before large-scale displacement occurs. High-income countries should also invest in apprenticeships and temporary or seasonal migration programs. Such efforts can foster innovation and progress in migrants' home countries far more effectively than can traditional assistance projects. For countries that have diaspora communities across the globe, encouraging the diaspora to invest in development programs and skills building can enhance local skills training and services. Finland, for example, has an initiative that temporarily deploys Finnish-Somali healthcare professionals to Somalia.

The world needs workers to be trained in their country of origin so that they can readily access jobs in host countries, send home remittances, and eventually bring their skills back home to fuel development there. And vulnerable migrants need to be able to access safe and legal immigration pathways when necessary. Officials should not assume that the labor market, left to its own devices, will protect migrant workers or support the communities that host them. Governments must make investments in migrant protections, empower civil society organizations and unions to play a monitoring role, and enforce labor laws.

Likewise, local officials, community leaders, and the private sector in destination countries must ensure that there are sufficient services to meet the demands of a growing population — and that migrants receive the support they need to integrate successfully in their host country. When immigration is poorly managed, communities feel the tension. Yet when local officials receive the support and resources required to manage immigration, they are often the first to express their support for newcomers.

Finally, to make the regular pathways to immigration more

attractive than the irregular pathways, countries must enforce their borders, including by deporting migrants who do not qualify for asylum or other protection; immigration authorities should process these deportations quickly and carry them out quickly, treating deportees with dignity. By encouraging migrants to rely on regular, legal pathways, current asylum systems will be able to help fulfill their original purpose by responding to refugees more effectively.

Promise of migration

In recent years, it has become evident that public perceptions of migrants are often as outdated as the regulations that oversee immigration. By restricting immigration, countries across the globe, rich and poor alike, are missing critical opportunities to boost economic growth and social unity. The world's most vulnerable people, meanwhile, are left unprotected.

To realize the promise of migration, policymakers need to overhaul the system. Every country has the right to manage its own borders and decide who can remain in the country lawfully. But rather than spending tens of billions of dollars annually exclusively on border enforcement, which has limited effectiveness (particularly when migrants seek asylum and do not try to evade detection), governments must invest in an approach that links immigration trends with labor-market needs and development gaps.

Migration can work for all. States must build a system that takes advantage of the global marketplace and empowers people to connect with opportunities for security and prosperity. Newly skilled individuals must be able to take advantage of safe and legal immigration opportunities and then reinvest their resources into fueling development in their communities of origin.

The politics of migration seem almost impossibly fraught. But countries must pursue strategies to address their looming labor shortages. Doing so will also help address some of the world's most persistent development and humanitarian challenges, taking pressure off the desperate people who now see irregular immigration as their only way to survive.

The full article first appeared on Foreign Affairs.



Migrants are stopped at a border staging area in Jacumba Hot Springs, California, US, in June 2024.
● YO NAKAMURA/REUTERS