

# MIGRATION MYTHS AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The Dominant Discourse on International Migration Privileges a Northern Agenda  
and Obfuscates the Real Causes and Consequences of Human Mobility

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Far from seeing human movement as natural and essential, we live in a world of obsessive border policing: walls and fortresses; gated compounds and ghettos; camps and detention centers; and proliferating zones of elite luxury alongside shrinking public spaces. Whether through calculated legal processes or gradual gentrification and de facto apartheid, we maintain ever-stricter distinctions between migrants and refugees, citizens and non-citizens, insiders and outsiders, haves and have-nots. The dominant discourse on migration helps create and perpetuate such a world by privileging certain types of individual suffering—discrimination, persecution, torture—as worthy of international notice and protection, while normalizing the more widespread and systemic suffering caused by poverty, inequality, disease, famine, drought, climate change, and environmental degradation, from which one is neither expected nor permitted to flee across borders.

The human species is by nature migratory and its spread from Africa across the globe has occurred through great climatic shifts, the spread of deserts, and the ebbing and flowing of ice ages. These movements spurred the onset of agriculture and civilization as resource scarcity and insecurity drew people to the great river valleys such as the Tigris, Euphrates, Nile, and Indus. As such, human migration has been and will continue to be fundamental to our survival and evolution. Yet, the categories, classifications, and dichotomies through which we understand and purport to govern

migration today are inconducive to this historic reality. It is important to understand how dominant discourses on international migration limit or constrain our knowledge, governance, and practices, particularly with regard to implications for the Global South, which makes up most of the world yet rarely receives most of our attention. The dominant discourse of migration assumes that

▷ Ethiopian migrants waiting to cross over to Saudi Arabia in the town of Haradh, Yemen, March 16, 2012. *Khaled Abdullah/Reuters*



most migration happens in the Global North and ignores that movement and mobility of people had taken place in the South long before the emergence of European-like nation-states limiting migration. Movements of people seeking protection for their lives are heavily influenced by the Refugee Convention, which was negotiated and adopted in 1951 in response to realities different than those of today. Only when all issues facing the Global South and the Global North are equally considered can human mobility be effectively addressed.

Migration has catapulted to the center of public attention in recent years and seems likely to remain there, with mass media showing no signs of abating interest. Has increased attention translated into a more accurate understanding of migration among policymakers and the general public? Are we, as a result, able to debate the issue in more useful ways? Much of the renewed interest is due to displacements from the Arab region into Europe, particularly from Syria but also Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. However, the tendency to pay more attention to migration from the Global South to the Global North precedes the current refugee crisis, and has created distortions in discourse and knowledge production about migration.

Scholars in this field are used to the waxing and waning of public interest, which at times bears little correlation to real change in migrant numbers or movement. The number of international migrants has hovered at roughly 3.3 percent of the global population in recent decades. Despite being a comparatively minor and remarkably stable global phenomenon, migration has always captured perpetual, cyclical, and disproportionate amounts of public attention in the past.

### **Dominant Discourse vs. Reality**

Predominant discourse shapes public debate in respect to any subject. It reflects the productive power—the ability to produce ideas and to make them acceptable and legitimate as sole subjects of debate—of those who articulate it. Predominant discourse on international migration emphasizes large flows to, and stocks of migrants in, the Global North, originating in the Global South. It represents international migration as a threat that undermines the social, economic, and cultural systems of host countries and their security. Besides the large volumes of people, this discourse underlines the irregularity of migration status, which is explained as mostly resulting from criminal smuggling activities. Not all actors in the Global North have adopted this discourse. However, it certainly is the predominant one.

The reality of flows and stocks of international migration may be viewed differently in the Global South. According to the 2017 United Nations International Migration Report, the total number of international migrants from 2000 to 2017 increased from 173 million to 258 million. Half of the increase took place in developed

countries of the Global North and the other half in developing countries of the Global South. During the same period, the number of international migrants residing in the South increased from 40 to 43 percent, the corresponding percentage thus decreasing in the North. Between 2000 and 2017, the share of international migrants residing in Asia increased from 29 to 31 percent and in Africa from 9 to 10 percent. In Europe, the share declined from 33 to 30 percent. Incidentally, despite this decline, international migration helped Europe's population grow by 2 percent. Without net migration, it would have fallen by 1 percent, which would have obviously undercut economic activity and the social systems the predominant discourse purports to protect.

In 2017, 38 percent of international migration was from South to South countries, 35 percent from South to North, 20 percent from North to North and 6 percent from North to South. In Africa and Asia, 80 percent of international migrants headed for destinations in the two regions, the corresponding share being 60 percent for Latin America and the Caribbean. From the origin perspective, 60 percent of international migrants originating in Asia remained in the Asian continent, while the corresponding figure for Africa was 53 percent. However, for West Africa, the proportion of international migrants whose destination country was in the sub-region rose to 84 percent, seven times larger than migration to any other part of the world. Only four countries in West Africa had emigrant populations who chose an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country as their top destination.

All of this means that migrants from the Global South are staying more and more in the Global South when they migrate. This flow of South–South migration looks only to increase in the coming years.

### **Governing Human Mobility: A Southern Perspective**

Mobility within sub-regions in Africa, and also elsewhere in the South, predates the emergence of the European nation-state model after early or late decolonization. One function of nation-states is to regulate international mobility, especially for non-citizens. Naturally countries in the South have had to regulate their citizens' high intraregional mobility through principles, policies, and institutions that together constitute the governance of this special type of international migration.

Two conflicting factors contributed to how states in the South approached the governance of migration in their sub-regions. First is the reality of mobility in the sub-regions that responded to logics of economic activity and of ethnic and cultural kinships. Sub-regions were considered economic units within which trade and services flowed and people moved freely. Second is the restrictive logic of nation-states, which emphasizes the privileges of citizens in labor markets and social benefits, in addition to security considerations.

However, as late decolonization unfolded in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a contradiction emerged. European integration came about and progressively recognized the rights to freedom of movement and employment. Freedom of movement was considered necessary for integration, which in turn was an approach to ensuring peace and realizing accelerated economic growth. This positive development in nation-states' perspective was encouraging for states of the South. It allowed for the recognition and reinforcement of old mobility circuits and for the creation of new ones, thus permitting rapid economic growth and development. On this basis, nation-states in the South embarked on processes of sub-regional integration. In Africa, sub-regional integration schemes are intended to eventually converge in regional and continental integration. Virtually all sub-regional integration processes had freedom of movement as an objective and means of action. Some went further, putting in place regimes of freedom of movement and labor.

It was in this vein that the 1979 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol relating to the Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment, and its supplementary protocols emerged. The 2009 Protocol on the establishment of the East African Community Common Market prioritized the community's accelerated economic growth and development through free movement of goods, persons, labor, services, capital, and the rights of establishment and residence. The Protocol dedicated its chapter 11 to the free movement of workers.

Meanwhile in Latin America and the Caribbean, regimes for freedom of movement of persons and labor were developed in the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) and the Community of Andean Nations (CAN). The most advanced regime or plan for free movement of workers in Latin America was that of the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) whose member states adopted the Residence Agreement in 2002. In Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) put in place its own free mobility regime. In sum, in many sub-regions, regional integration and free mobility are considered means to overcome often artificial borders that split communities and obstruct development.

Sub-regional integration schemes vary in the extent of freedom of movement, establishment, and employment they recognize for nationals of their member states, in the rights they grant them, and in their actual implementation. Often, freedom of mobility is authorized before the right to work. Freedom of mobility is frequently granted to the highly skilled before the low-skilled workers. Freedom of establishment is facilitated by holding capital. In Africa, ECOWAS, and especially MERCOSUR in South America, have made significant progress in their labor mobility regimes. The MERCOSUR Residence Agreement authorizes nationals of a member state to reside and work for a period of two years in another member state if they can prove citizenship



and a clean criminal record. The agreement also provides a number of rights to these migrants, including the right to equal working conditions, family reunification, and access to education for their children. After two years, the permit may be transformed into permanent residency.

According to migration law expert Diego Acosta, the driving force behind the MERCOSUR agreement was (unlike in the European Union) to find a solution to irregular migration and not to pave the way for an internal trade market. The agreement's main objective, as declared in the preamble, is to solve the situation of intraregional irregular migration while deepening the regional integration process and implementing a policy of free circulation of people. The predominant discourse on international migration is thus again put into question. For states of the South, situated in the same sub-regions, irregular migration as a concept does not have the same meaning. Nor should it be criminalized in letter or in practice. It seems that for at least some of the states in the South, following age-old routes across recently traced borders is not completely illegitimate.

Despite the advances, problems persist. Member states may not incorporate provisions of their freedom of movement regimes in their own laws and policies. Domestic laws and policies may even be in contradiction with the sub-regional mobility regimes and thus partially invalidate them. More importantly, political disputes and economic interests may frustrate altogether attempts at setting up sub-regional integration schemes and associated mobility regimes. In Northwest Africa, political disputes frustrated the development of the Arab Maghreb Union, making a free mobility regime between its member states inconceivable. Despite the large labor migration from both Egypt and Tunisia to Libya, no labor mobility regime was put in place between either of the former two countries and the latter.

Between Egypt and Sudan, the implementation of the Four Freedoms Agreement is subject to political vicissitudes between the two countries. In southern Africa, the considerable disparity in development and economic structures between South Africa, and Botswana and Namibia, and other countries in the sub-region stood in the way of adopting a protocol on freedom of movement for persons in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The same may be said about the entry into force and implementation of the regime for free movement of persons and labor in the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). Freedom of movement is unimaginable in the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Besides political disputes and defending economic interests, preserving customs revenues and weak institutional capacity of regional integration organizations have been advanced as explanations for the unsatisfactory realization of sub-regional integration in the South, including the design and implementation of regimes for the free

movement of persons and labor. Accordingly, a Southern perspective on international migration, its dimensions, and its governance may differ from the more prevalent discourse on the subject in the Global North. Such a perspective raises different issues that need to be addressed. It is only when an open international discourse which discusses all issues—those facing the Global South and the Global North—are equally considered that questions of human mobility and migration will have a chance to be effectively addressed.

### **Refugees in the South: Beyond Binaries**

While migrants are presently 3.4 percent of the world population, refugees are a much smaller subset of all migrants, a mere 0.3 percent of the total population, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Global Trends report in 2017. Despite cries of refugee crises from rich countries in recent years, since 2000 refugee numbers have increased only from 9 percent of all migrants to 10 percent. Countries of the Global South host 84 percent of the world's refugees, and this percentage is increasing, with the current number the highest in more than two decades. The poorest countries in the world—the least developed states or (LDCs)—host 28 percent of all refugees, and this number is also increasing. Indeed, just ten states host 57 percent of all refugees. What is clear from these statistics is that, first, the refugee issue is almost entirely confined to the Global South; and second, those least able to bear the responsibility are forced to shoulder it. This situation is not happenstance but a systematic process of externalization by rich states in which control over knowledge production plays a key role.

Much of the dominant discourse on migration turns on binaries: some migrants are voluntary, others are forced; some are international and others are internal; some are legal and others are irregular; and, perhaps the most formative of the binaries, some are migrants whilst others are refugees. In actuality, people usually move for reasons of economic betterment. This type of movement is characterized by law and policy-makers as voluntary and subject to domestic regulation. When migration is perceived as involuntary, or forced, then in such cases the application of international protection is attempted in specific instances where state protection is seen to be absent. The primary means through which international protection is applied is the 1951 Refugee Convention that requires state parties to provide refugee status to persons fulfilling the following conditions: first, refugees should be outside their country of nationality; second, they should prove a well-founded fear of persecution; third, this persecution needs to be attributable to discrimination on the basis of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group; and fourth, their state should be unable or unwilling to protect them.

The 1951 Convention has been central in shaping migration discourse. Refugee status is a unique exception to the otherwise absolute sovereign prerogative to control migration and as such refugeehood has been carefully defined and closely interpreted by states. Despite popular usage of the term “refugee” to mean anyone fleeing their home, in reality refugee protection is only assured to the small group of people that fit the aforementioned carefully circumscribed conditions.

The convention operates only when a person has left their state of nationality. It privileges a particular type of forced migration—that which is attributable to persecution—above all else. More narrowly, it privileges only persecution that is attributable to a particular type of discrimination. That is to say, there is no interna-

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tional protection for other types of movement that normally would be understood as “forced” in the ordinary usage of the word like for example, displacement due to widespread conflict or human rights abuses, natural or manmade disasters such as famine, drought, desertification, floods, earthquakes, submersion of territories, and so on. The 1951 Convention was the product of its culture and history and reflected Western concerns in the aftermath of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War. Yet, nearly seventy years later, the convention remains in place today and is widely ratified, albeit with important exceptions in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Arab region.

What are the consequences of understanding migration through the voluntary/forced distinction? We treat political persecution and religious persecution as intolerable, but we see drought and famine as natural. We see war and conflict as terrible evils, but we see the millions of preventable and unnecessary infant deaths from unsanitary water or malaria as normal. We see ethnic strife as a serious threat to international peace and security, but we treat widening inequalities in power and wealth as natural. We see terrorism as an abomination, but we see climate change as an inevitability.



Because of our fixation with an artificial, irrational, and unsubstantiated distinction between forced and voluntary migration, in its current state, our discourse makes it almost impossible to talk about migration in a useful way.

The reasons people move cannot be understood through the rubric of choice, or lack thereof. Through its categories of privilege and protection, our modern-day discourse around migration and refugee status and the laws and institutions this discourse produces arbitrarily creates hierarchies of suffering as a means of legitimating international protection in certain areas and abdicating responsibility in others. Renouncing international responsibility for internally displaced peoples ignores the greater protection needs of vast numbers who do not have the means to cross an international border but whose suffering is otherwise identical to those who managed to seek refuge internationally. Abdication of international responsibility over so-called voluntary migration allows a thriving system of domestic migration policies that maintain a growing body of exploitable laborers rendered invisible because of their irregular or undocumented status. These people—obscure and disposable to the international system—are mostly women and people of color.

Historically, people have moved—for the most part—because of environmental and economic causes and this is not going to change. Migrations brought about by climate change have already begun and they will be vast, protracted, and unstoppable. The present discourse is inadequate to understand or govern such a phenomenon. It cannot stop movement but will increase suffering and vulnerability as sites of irregularity and exploitability exponentially multiply. As the habitable zones of our planet change, the ensuing movements are inevitably producing challenges of public order, health, and security. These are challenges that policymakers could potentially ameliorate. Yet, current discourse prevents us from addressing these issues as they are beyond our purview—rendered unspeakable by the terminology we have created for ourselves. The most visible manifestation of this quandary today is negotiation of the Global Compacts, separated into one compact for migrants and another for refugees.

The predominant discourse tells us what a crisis is and how we should react to it and by that time it is usually too late to address systemic causes. By that time, we can only apply Band-Aid solutions such as widespread detention, refugee camps, safe havens, temporary visas, more money to UNHCR, offshore processing, international zones, visa conditionalities, border policing, and so on. The discourse obfuscates the questions of justice that permeate the systemic causes of migration. Who is responsible for economic inequality and climate change? Who is responsible for war and widespread human rights abuses? The causes of migration are rarely the responsibility of the Global South, yet flows of migrants and refugees often are.

### **Toward Inclusivity**

Our discourse around migration tells us the nature of the problem and circumscribes the range of possible solutions. In this way, it shapes governance, laws, and institutions. In its current state, it prevents us from developing rational and effective approaches to governing migration, a situation made more evident in an era of climate change.

Discourse plays a role in institutionalizing the misery that increasing numbers of migrants endure today, providing protection against some types of violence but also structuring, maintaining, and normalizing others. The ethics of migration are rarely subject to scrutiny. For the most part, we are reluctant to examine ourselves too closely on an issue that has long been a repository for some of our most deep-seated and fundamental fears and insecurities. Though small in proportion to the global population, migrants are magnified in the public psyche because they act as a receptacle for broad and at times subconscious cultural fears about belonging, security, and significance.

For these reasons, asserting discursive and governance authority and control over migration is a high-stakes endeavor, centering on the issue of identity, in which dichotomies such as South and North, rich and poor, black and white, maintain a stranglehold on our imagination. Paying more attention to migration in the South—who is moving, where, and why—is one way to change how we understand and talk about migration. It can move us toward a more accurate, effective, and just governance of migration.