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Conclusion: Let Their People Come

Because the arguments in this monograph have been painfully simple and, I hope, clear, I need not devote too much space to a summary, which boils down to three points:

—There are five irresistible forces in the global economy creating growing pressures for greater movement of labor across national borders, particularly from poorer to richer countries.

—These forces are met by the immovable ideas of rich-country citizens who oppose such movements, with the result that although mobility has increased somewhat, labor mobility is suppressed.

—Proposals for development-friendly labor mobility policies will have to work to accommodate the immovable ideas in the interests of increased flows.

This gives space for a conclusion to address the question of why anyone—policymaker, politician, policy advocacy group, or global citizen—should become the champion of policies for development-friendly migration. After all, in many countries, the “increase migration” voters are outnumbered by five to one or even ten to one by voters who would prefer to “reduce migration.” Wise and pragmatic people often deliberately ignore insurmountable problems to surmount the surmountable. Perhaps increasing flows of

unskilled labor from poor countries in a systematic way, even if it would be enormously beneficial to the world's poor, is simply insurmountable. Perhaps a modest amount of charity work for those trapped in poor countries is all that can be surmounted. Clearly, any proposal for "open borders" or "free immigration" is simply pointless. But it is worth asking if there are not modest steps that can be taken toward realizing the potential benefits. The question is: When?

The "founders" of the post-World War II international political and economic structure have to be thanked, especially by anyone who lives in a country belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The years from 1945 to 2005 stand out as perhaps the best sixty years for human material progress in history. The postwar founders created institutions to promote the increased mobility of goods. They created institutions to facilitate capital movements. But people were frozen. Any restrictions governments chose to place on the movement of persons—including banning entry, banning exit, banning movement within a country, or even, to a lesser extent, forced migrations and resettlements within a country—are, within some broad limits, simply outside the scope of international concern. Institutions were created to resolve conflicts among nation-states. Organizations were created to promote the economic progress of nation-states. But there has been almost no systematic pressure for improving the conditions for the movements of people to pursue economic opportunity.

A "Burkean progressive" combines a deep aversion to throwing out babies with the bathwater with an optimistic belief that the bathwater can nevertheless be cleaned.¹ The postwar systems have demonstrated that international systems that create pressures for gradual change, are allowed to adapt, and devise mechanisms for adjudicating disputes and resolving conflicts can achieve enormous results over time. The success of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in weaning the OECD, and then the rest of the world, from pre-World War II protectionism and toward a liberalized trade regime through protracted rounds of negotiation has been truly startling. Yet the

1. One debate the history of the twentieth century should have settled once and for all is the "revolutionary" versus the "incrementalist" approaches to improving the human condition. The most grisly and tragic episodes of the twentieth century are those in which an inspired leader pursued a radical and revolutionary program that attempted to remake an entire system in a new image of human nature—Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and Kim Il Sung all had a vision they believed to be for the betterment of humankind that could be achieved quickly. Even a cursory comparison of Chinese history from 1949 to 1976 versus 1978 to the present suggests the huge advantages of creative tinkering and forceful muddling through over "great" leaps of any kind.

postwar international system has no labor mobility equivalent of the International Monetary Fund, which serves as an international guarantor and advocate for the international system of payments, successfully maintaining an orderly system of international payments (even when the previous Bretton Woods arrangements broke down). Even if migration policies are to be set bilaterally, the creation of an international organization—perhaps the World Migration Organization, as proposed recently by Jagdish Bhagwati (2003)—would be a feasible step.

Although keeping labor mobility off the international agenda may have been a wise choice by the postwar founders, given their immediate conditions and thinking, the question must be asked: How long should the world wait? How long after free trade is promoted before people should also be at least freer to move? How long after capital is free to move before people are allowed? How long should transfers through aid be the only mechanism for promoting development? How long must *only* Bolivia, Armenia, or Nigeria figure on the international agenda and *not* Bolivians, Armenians, or Nigerians. *When* does one conclude that migration can, and must, come onto the development agenda, and *how* is this made a surmountable problem?

Fortunately, the “when” question has an answer. The “development community” has put itself on the clock. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are specific, measurable, time-bound goals. These ambitious goals, which have been signed off on by all major agencies and donor governments, propose between 1990 and 2015 halving poverty, achieving universal completion of primary schooling, equalizing school enrollments by gender, reducing infant mortality by two-thirds, and the like. We are about exactly at the midpoint of this period, and it is obvious that the MDGs are unlikely to be achieved in every country (although it is conceivable that some or even most of them will be achieved in the world aggregate, depending on what happens in India and China).

Two recent reports on the MDGs—by the UN Millennium Project (United Nations 2005) and the Commission for Africa (2005)—are state-of-the-art efforts resulting from high-profile international exercises involving impressive analytical minds and top-ranking politicians. They both emphasize the need to accelerate progress in the poorest countries, especially in Africa, if the MDGs are to be met. Both of them emphasize the traditional means by which the “international community” can contribute to meeting the MDGs—primarily more and better aid, better market access, and more support for global public goods. In both reports, the issue of migration is next to invisible—especially any suggestion that rich countries could allow more unskilled labor to immigrate. In the 356 pages of the UN report, “migration” (or variants) is mentioned

twenty-one times, of which exactly one is a suggestion about progress in the General Agreement on Trade in Services mode 4 in the Doha round multilateral trade negotiations and the rest frame “migration” as a problem—of “brain drain,” as a cause of conflict, or as an urbanization issue causing pressures on urban infrastructure. Similarly, in the text of the Commission for Africa report, migration is mentioned eleven times, again in only one instance in the sense that the rich countries could (or should) do something positive.²

This is not a criticism of these reports. They faithfully mirror the political milieu in which they were produced—the Group of Eight’s Gleneagles meeting. The reality is that the Group of Eight’s political leaders, meeting to discuss actions to assist Africa, are enormously more likely to agree (at least in principle) to increase aid to African governments than they are to agree to admit more Africans. Moreover, the reality is that the Group of Eight’s leaders were not under any pressure to reduce barriers to labor mobility—from the left or right of the political spectrum. The large effort to create a public relations effort to influence the meeting created no pressure on migration issues.

Perhaps the existing plans will succeed in reaching the MDGs and “make poverty history.” Personally, I hope they do. But what if they do not? The clock is ticking on the MDGs; what is plan B? The usual plan B for ambitious development targets is some variant on squirming out—blame the “lack of commitment” as the reason for failure, or keep the same targets but lengthen the horizon (as has been done with universal primary education many times; see Clemens 2004), or gradually let the movement lose steam in favor of some new agenda.

An alternative plan B is to use the deadline for the MDGs as a focal point to bring labor mobility explicitly onto the development agenda. If, in 2010, it is clear that the MDGs will not be achieved, then an international forum (such as the Group of Eight or the World Economic Forum) and international organizations (such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and United Nations) should have a plan B to begin to promote development-friendly labor mobility. Plan B is shifting from the “globalization of everything but labor” with modest financial flows to adding improved labor mobility and migration policies in rich countries explicitly to the list of instruments to promote poverty reduction.

This might be one way to create pressure on “when?” But the question is still “how?” We need to begin now, today, to develop the details of mechanisms

2. The paragraph outlines why rich countries will not liberalize General Agreement on Trade in Services mode 4 and concludes with a less-than-ringing call to action: “However, some modest progress could generate benefits for Sub-Saharan Africa.”

of development-friendly labor mobility that are politically feasible. Perhaps these will be along the lines I have suggested here. Perhaps (actually, almost certainly) I am wrong about the specifics of the accommodations that will be needed to match the economics—which is simple—to the political economy—which is not. There is no question that steps forward will be both incremental and difficult, and they will require a political confrontation with an issue nearly everyone would just as soon avoid: What are the conditions on which it is acceptable to offer nationals of other countries the opportunity to be physically present to perform economic services?

This question is difficult to confront both because the enormous gaps in well-being across countries mean that people will be willing to migrate on terms that make rich-country citizens uncomfortable and also because it requires addressing the often-ignored differential effects of economic policy. But it is to be hoped that—just as pressure is brought to bear on leaders for greater liberalization of trade and greater financial assistance to poor nation-states—pressure can be brought to bear to finally address the missing link in the current global system, both surmounting the immovable ideas opposing and productively accommodating the irresistible forces for greater labor mobility. Eventually, the citizens of the rich world must decide on what terms they will let the world's poor people come.