

Migrating To Modernity

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By Sebastian Mallaby
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After the terrorist attacks of 2001, voters understood that poor failed states could hurt them. President Bush launched a smart new foreign aid program and multiplied the U.S. commitment to fighting HIV-AIDS, and rich countries around the world boosted development spending. But our approach toward poor countries remains confined, idiotically, to the debt-aid-trade box. People don't see that other policies in rich countries have a major impact on poor ones.

Consider immigration. Just about all rich countries are arguing about border enforcement, employer sanctions and so on, but nobody relates this stuff to the parallel arguments about development. Contemplating the noisy immigration politics in the United States, Gawain Kripke of Oxfam confesses, "we've been mostly bystanders in the debate, and I really regret that."

Development charities such as Oxfam certainly should feel sorry. In "[Let Their People Come](#)," a new book published by the Center for Global Development, Lant Pritchett reports that if rich countries permitted extra immigration equivalent to 3 percent of their labor force, the citizens of poor countries would gain about \$300 billion a year. That's three times more than the direct gains from abolishing all remaining trade barriers, four times more than the foreign aid given by governments and 100 times more than the value of debt relief.

It's true that there's a downside to immigration from poor countries. This isn't that it depresses wages in the United States; researchers find that this effect is [small or nonexistent](#). Rather, it's that when doctors, nurses and other skilled people leave Africa, they hit the development process in its [weak spot](#). A lack of trained workers is a more serious obstacle to poverty reduction than any lack of money.

Still, Pritchett's numbers show that the development gains from migration swamp the brain-drain problem. For the migrants themselves, a ticket to the rich world is the fast track out of poverty: A laborer who moves from San Salvador to Phoenix can multiply his income without altering the type of work he does or how good he is at it. And this process benefits developing countries, too. Migrants send home remittances, which exceed aid flows and are probably more effective, since the migrants ensure that their hard-earned cash is used productively by relatives. After a few years the migrants may return home armed with savings and ideas. The brain drain becomes a brain gain.

So migration ends up as a net plus for development. But a development-friendly migration debate would sound different from the current one. Immigration advocates in the rich world feel most comfortable making the case for allowing in skilled workers. Skilled migrants, however, trigger the biggest brain-drain concerns; allowing in unskilled workers does more to reduce global poverty. Equally, immigration advocates tend to want arriving workers to assimilate. But the best way to promote development is to allow a rolling cohort of poor workers to amass savings and experience -- and then return to their own countries.

Many immigration experts [insist](#) that a guest-worker program isn't feasible: As the old saying goes, there's nothing more permanent than a temporary worker. This is where Pritchett gets really interesting. Germany's Turkish guest workers have put down roots, he concedes, but Singapore, Hong Kong and the Arab Gulf states have taken in vast numbers of foreign workers who leave after a few years. Perhaps this is only possible in authoritarian states? Pritchett's answer is partly no, and partly that there are worse things than authoritarianism.

If the United States offered Mexico a million temporary work visas, it could attach conditions. It could stipulate that these workers be recruited by agencies in Mexico, which would screen candidates for criminal records, require minimal English skills -- and ensure repatriation. The agencies could do that, for example, by withholding some of the migrants' pay until they returned home. An agency that failed to bring people back could be ejected from the program.

Enforcing repatriation would still require tough government action. The United States would have to decide what to do about migrants who marry Americans, which is one obvious way in which temporary guests turn permanent. Singapore deals with this problem by denying guest workers the right to marry citizens. That is beyond the pale, you say? But if desperately poor migrants accept the no-marriage condition in exchange for a visa, who are we to second-guess them?

Pritchett is getting at a ticklish issue. Because the immigration debate is conducted without reference to development, it is couched in terms of American ideals; we don't want to let people in and then treat them harshly, for that would offend our own self-image. But if you bring development into the picture, it's obvious that extremely harsh poverty afflicts billions of people and that opportunities to alleviate this suffering are few and precious. An expanded temporary worker program is one such opportunity. If American ideals stand in its way, what does that say about them?

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