8
Distressed migrants

Preserving dignity

Key messages

• The circumstances surrounding distressed migration are often irregular and painful. This type of migration also entails costs for destination countries, but these countries have no international legal obligation to host distressed migrants. Many countries seek to prevent the entry of distressed migrants, but restrictive policies often undermine migrants’ dignity, which creates difficult policy trade-offs.

• In this context, the challenge is to reduce the need for distressed migration, including by extending the scope of international protection, shifting incentives through the establishment of legal entry pathways, and strengthening the match of migrants’ skills and attributes with the needs of destination economies through development.

• Transit countries face particular issues, which can be addressed only through bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

• Overall, migrants’ inherent dignity should be the yardstick of migration policies (figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1 The policy challenge is to reduce distressed movements while treating migrants humanely

Source: WDR 2023 team.

Note: Match refers to the degree to which a migrant’s skills and related attributes meet the demand in the destination country. Motive refers to the circumstances under which a person moves—whether in search of opportunity or because of a “well-founded fear” of persecution, armed conflict, or violence in their origin country.
Acknowledging policy trade-offs

Some of the most difficult challenges for immigration policy arise when migrants do not bring skills and attributes that match the needs of the destination country, nor are they entitled to international refugee protection. An example is people who leave a low-income country where their life is not at risk, but who do not have the basic literacy skills that would enable them to contribute to a middle- or high-income economy. In such cases, the costs of accommodating them often exceed the benefits for the destination country. International law gives this country a large degree of discretion about whether to accept such migrants in its territory.

Because the movements of many such migrants are irregular and harrowing, those movements are referred to here as distressed migration. Indeed, many distressed migrants are very vulnerable and at risk of marginalization, both while in transit and once at their destination. They therefore pose important development issues, including in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its central pledge to “leave no one behind.”

Such movements are also causing political controversies in middle- and high-income countries. Although they represent only a fraction of people crossing borders, distressed movements are relatively visible. They contribute to shaping perceptions in destination countries, including concerns that some migrants are abusing the immigration system or that the authorities have “lost control.” These perceptions may, in turn, translate into xenophobic narratives and discriminatory practices. In some cases, they could undermine the entire architecture of sound migration management and so reduce the development benefits of mutually beneficial movements.

Difficult trade-offs at the border

At the root of many distressed migrations are the vast economic differences between countries of origin and possible countries of destination. When these differences—and the corresponding drivers of migration—are acute, some people try to move even if they face high risks.

Many destination countries do not allow entry of distressed migrants. In crafting their immigration policies, they prioritize their own interests, considering the labor market effects of migration as well as the broader effects on society. They typically give preference to migrants who have skills and attributes that match their needs.

The conflation of high pressures to move, on the one hand, and severe entry restrictions, on the other, has led to the emergence of an illegal market for people smuggling and irregular movements. Most visible are the irregular entries—for example, at the US southern border, on the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, or at the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Yet in many countries the majority of irregular migrants enter legally and overstay their visas. In the United States, from 2010 to 2016 there were twice as many visa overstayers as irregular border crossings. Similarly, in the United Kingdom the number of visa overstays exceeds illegal entries, even in 2021 when irregular inflows across the English Channel were at an all-time high.

In the absence of legal pathways, some distressed migrants, upon entering their destination country, ask for asylum—that is, to be recognized as refugees (a status granted to those who have a “well-founded fear” of persecution or violence in their countries of origin). This request generally prevents their immediate deportation because it initiates a review process of the merits of their application for international protection. A large share of such requests are rejected, but the adjudication process takes time, allowing some distressed migrants to disappear into the fringes of society so they cannot be identified and
deported. Indeed, many asylum and reception systems are ill-equipped to process large numbers of people efficiently. The delays create large backlogs, with extended waiting times. In the European Union, for example, more than 950,000 asylum cases were pending at the end of November 2022. Such delays prolong the uncertainty under which all asylum-seekers live—including those who will eventually be recognized as refugees—and thus their vulnerability.

Against this backdrop, many destination countries face difficult challenges in maintaining effective control of their borders. To deter distressed migration, some countries have adopted approaches that aim to make the movements less attractive to potential migrants. They include intentional policy measures, as well as toleration of situations—both in transit and at destination—that discourage unlawful entry and stay. However, when human distress becomes the modulator of migration flows, many destination countries have adopted policies that reflect the difficult trade-offs between their migration objectives and their commitments to respecting migrants’ human rights:

- **Many destination countries have taken measures to deter irregular migration, especially of migrants who do not bring skills and attributes that match their labor market’s needs.** Such measures include penalties such as fines and imprisonment. Some countries maintain provisions in their laws that include corporal punishment, such as judicial caning in Malaysia and Singapore. In 2018, the US government implemented a program at its border with Mexico that separated children and infants from their parents or guardians with whom they had entered the United States in an explicit effort to deter irregular movements. In recent years, several high-income destination countries have entered into arrangements with third countries to “externalize” border control (box 8.1).

- **When distressed migrants manage to enter, most destination countries do not provide them with any status, often as part of an explicit effort to reduce incentives for such movements.** As a result, distressed migrants are exposed to higher risk of abuse and marginalization. Migrants are three times as likely as citizens to work in situations of forced labor—especially in sectors such as construction and domestic work—and this particularly affects distressed migrants. Undocumented distressed migrants typically have only limited or no recourse in such situations. Moreover, in some countries undocumented status restricts migrants from access to education or health care services.

- **In some cases, destination countries tolerate situations that aggravate migrants’ distress and discourage their movements.** Nearly 50,000 migrants have died while in transit since 2014. Half of them perished while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea, but the deaths on other routes are also increasing (figure 8.2). Distressed migrants are taking increasingly dangerous routes, and some have become victims of kidnapping, trafficking, sexual violence, and exploitation. About 45 percent of those arriving in Italy in 2018 reported experiencing physical violence while in transit through African countries. Some worked without pay, and some were held captive by criminal gangs. Many undocumented migrants on their way to the US border through Central America face similar risks from criminal gangs.

Harsh policies against migrants may effectively deter irregular migration, but they also undermine the fundamental principle that all migrants deserve fair and humane treatment. The challenges are particularly pressing for high-income destination countries—such as the United States and the southern European Union countries—that are in the immediate geographical vicinity of low- and middle-income origin countries. They are less urgent in destination countries farther removed such as Australia and Canada because of the significantly smaller numbers involved.
Box 8.1 The externalization of migration policy

In response to irregular migration pressures, several high-income destination countries have entered into agreements with other countries—typically low- or middle-income countries—to shift border control or asylum processing functions away from their physical borders. This externalization of border control takes various forms, as described in these examples:

- Italy entered into a series of bilateral agreements with Libya to cooperate on coast guard patrols and to provide development financing and technical and material support to combat irregular migration in the Mediterranean and in Libya.
- Australia entered into an agreement with Papua New Guinea and Nauru in which these countries would process the claims of people seeking asylum in Australia and would settle those whose claims were successful (the agreement with Papua New Guinea ended at the end of 2021). Under this arrangement, Australia provided a “package of assistance and other bilateral cooperation.”
- Türkiye and the European Union agreed on the return of irregular migrants who had crossed from Türkiye into the Greek islands, while the European Union committed to (1) resettling some Syrian refugees; (2) providing financial support for Syrian refugees in Türkiye; and (3) facilitating the issuance of Schengen visas to Turkish citizens.
- The United States and Mexico entered into an arrangement in 2019 in which Mexico would take “unprecedented steps” to increase border enforcement to curb irregular migration and would hold asylum-seekers who had crossed the border from Mexico while their asylum claims were being adjudicated in the United States.
- The United Kingdom established a partnership with Rwanda whereby asylum-seekers who reached the United Kingdom irregularly would be sent to Rwanda to lodge their asylum claims there. The arrangement also included financial commitments to supporting Rwanda's development. This partnership is currently under legal review.

Such arrangements have been controversial. In the absence of sufficient safeguards, their implementation can contravene countries’ legal obligations related to due process and the nonpenalization of asylum-seekers (non-refoulement) and human rights. For example, Italy’s arrangement with Libya was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights in 2012 and denounced by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants as exposing distressed migrants to death, torture, sexual and gender-based violence, labor exploitation, and other forms of contemporary slavery.

Similarly, in 2016 the Supreme Court of Papua New Guinea found that detention of migrants and asylum-seekers transferred from Australia contravened Papua New Guinea’s constitution. Ongoing debates in the United Kingdom and the United States, among others, have yet to be settled.

a. FitzGerald (2019); Gammeltoft-Hansen (2011); Longo (2018); Sandven (2022); Shachar (2019, 2020).
b. Hatton (2017); Kaufmann (2021); Lutz, Kaufmann, and Stünzi (2020); UNHCR (2021).
c. See, for example, the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation between the Italian Republic and the Great Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, 2008 (MPISOC 2014); Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Fields of Development, the Fight against Illegal Immigration, Human Trafficking and Fuel Smuggling and on Reinforcing the Security of Borders between the State of Libya and the Italian Republic, 2017 (Odysseus Network 2017).
e. See, for example, the 2013 Australia–Papua New Guinea Memorandum of Understanding (DFAT 2013).
f. EC (2015); European Council (2016).
g. US State Department (2019).
j. OHCHR (2017).
The peculiar situation of transit countries

Some distressed migrants travel through several countries before reaching their destination. In some cases, they merely pass through for a few days or a few weeks. In others, they stay longer—a few months or a few years—for a variety of reasons, including at times to earn the income needed to pay for the next stage of their journey. In still other cases, they try to settle, and only when they fail do they engage in further movements. These distinct situations call for various responses by transit countries.

Most transit countries are part of broader corridors, with the longest corridors leading to high-income countries (map 8.1). These routes are highly dynamic, responding to legal restrictions and border controls by the transit and destination countries. Among those are the following:

- **The corridor from Latin America to the southern border of the United States through the Darien Gap and Central America.** This corridor is primarily used by irregular migrants originating from Latin America, although there are increasing numbers of distressed migrants from other parts of the world. The share of children and unaccompanied minors along this corridor has fluctuated according to the US policies affecting undocumented migrants’ families.

- **The corridors leading from Sub-Saharan Africa to the European Union.** These corridors are composed of a set of distinct routes across the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea that originate in West Africa and East Africa. The use of these routes is also fluctuating in the face of circumstances in countries of origin and restrictive measures adopted by destination countries. Irregular crossings on the Western Mediterranean route, through Morocco and Algeria, peaked in 2018 and are now declining, but irregular crossings on the Central Mediterranean route have been picking up since 2019 after a period of decline.

- **The corridors leading from South Asia and the Middle East to the European Union through Türkiye.** This route was used extensively by refugees and distressed migrants in the mid-2010s, but it is now less significant.
Additional corridors include convoluted routes to high-income countries, such as the Arctic route used by over 5,000 migrants in 2016 that involved traveling through the Russian Federation and crossing its border with Norway. They also include some relatively less visible corridors leading to middle-income destination countries such as South Africa and Thailand. In some cases, transit countries have actively encouraged migrants to come and cross from their territory to a destination country with which they have poor relations. For example, in 2021–22 Belarus provoked a crisis at its border with Poland in a situation referred to as the “instrumentalization” or the “weaponization” of migration.

Some transit countries—the last countries before the border with attractive high-income destinations—face special challenges. When high-income destinations restrict entry into their territory, some distressed migrants end up stranded in the “last border” countries of transit. Some choose to return or are deported to their country of origin, but others stay—either to establish themselves in a second-best destination or, more commonly, to prepare for another attempt at border crossing. Such stays can last for years.

For last border transit countries, accommodating an often-vulnerable population of distressed migrants comes at a cost. The distressed migrants’ skills and attributes are not a strong match with the needs of their intended destination country, but they also may not meet the labor market needs of the last border transit country. Distressed migrants intending to continue their journey from the last border transit country also have limited incentives to integrate in its economy and in the broader society. Moreover, their demand for the services of smugglers fuels criminal networks and organizations, with heightened risks for the migrants and negative impacts on public safety.

The challenges faced by last border transit countries and the intended destination countries are intricably linked. The situation of the last border transit countries is the result of restrictive policies adopted by the intended destination countries. However, the effectiveness of these restrictive policies depends on the ability of last border transit countries to manage distressed movements across their territory.

Thus the management of distressed migration cannot be resolved through unilateral approaches by destination countries; it requires cooperation. Most pressing is bilateral cooperation between the intended destination countries and the last border transit countries to ensure that the respective entry

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**Map 8.1 Main transit migration routes**

Sources: WDR 2023 team calculations based on Conant (2015) and World Bank (2018b).
and asylum policies, and their implementation, are consistent (although not necessarily identical). Such coordinated policies must be grounded in the central tenets of international human rights law and recognize the inherent dignity of all migrants. In some situations, cooperation may also entail arrangements to ensure that the costs generated by high-income countries’ policies and incurred by last border transit countries are shared adequately.

But what happens when the intended destination country and the last border transit country create a coordinated migration area? The border of this area then becomes the last border and another country finds itself in a difficult situation. Ultimately, then, for such an approach to achieve its full intent, a broader set of multilateral cooperation arrangements must be adopted along the entirety of a corridor.

Beyond the trade-offs

Distressed migration often entails much suffering—in transit and at destination—for those who undertake such movements. That leads to difficult trade-offs between managing borders and respecting human rights that frequently are not resolved satisfactorily. Reducing the need for such movements is thus critical. Progress will require short-term action to expand protection to the most at risk among irregular migrants, to develop legal channels for entry that can shift migrants’ incentives, and to use development to provide alternatives to cross-border movement and strengthen the match of migrants’ skills and attributes with the needs of destination economies (figure 8.3).

Figure 8.3 Coordinated policy action in origin and destination countries can reduce distressed migration

Source: WDR 2023 team.

Note: Match refers to the degree to which a migrant’s skills and related attributes meet the demand in the destination country. Motive refers to the circumstances under which a person moves—whether in search of opportunity or because of a “well-founded fear” of persecution, armed conflict, or violence in their origin country. The dashed vertical line in the lower-left quadrant highlights the distinction between distressed migrants who have some needs for international protection and those who do not.
Extending international protection

Some distressed migrants are facing high risks if they return—or are deported—to their countries of origin. For example, they may be moving to escape gang violence, severe economic deprivation, or other forms of harm. The simple dichotomy between refugees and nonrefugees masks, in fact, a continuum of international protection needs (figure 8.4). International law distinguishes between refugees (who are entitled to international protection and its associated rights) and other migrants (who are not entitled to any particular rights or status beyond what national legislation may provide). Yet the degree of harm to which people would be exposed if they were to return—or be sent back—to their country of origin varies, along a range of possible threats with different levels of severity.

In this context, some distressed migrants have international protection needs but not to a level that would qualify them as refugees. The risks they are willing to take to cross borders reveals a degree of despair and suggests that the conditions in their country of origin are worth risking their life to escape. These migrants may need some form of protection, but for reasons that fall outside of the 1951 Refugee Convention such as acute humanitarian crises. Others may not receive international refugee protection because of different interpretations of the 1951 Refugee Convention and other applicable legal instruments (box 8.2).

There is no consensus, however, on how to precisely identify or define those who fall between the cracks of the international protection system. Several terms and concepts have emerged to serve a variety of academic, institutional, advocacy, and statistical purposes, although they do not determine legal status. Some categorizations are based on legal protection needs (whether people would be at risk of serious harm if returned and whether their country of origin is willing and able to mitigate such risks). This approach is exemplified by the term persons in need of international protection used by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Other categorizations focus on the vulnerabilities of migrants in a specific situation, such as the references in the Global Compact on Migration to “migrants who face situations of vulnerability” and “missing migrants” or the concept of “migrants in vulnerable situations,” which is used by the International Organization for Migration and other international organizations. Still other categorizations reflect the motivations for movements, proposing terms such as climate refugees, survival migrants, or flee-ers of necessity.

Amid pressing situations, some destination countries have acknowledged that some distressed migrants, although not refugees, still need a form of international protection, even if it comes at a cost. They have developed instruments to provide complementary protection for these people and to regularize their entry or stay. These instruments are defined by national or regional laws and include a variety

Figure 8.4 A continuum of needs falls under international protection

![Continuum of needs](image-url)
**Box 8.2 The evolving definition of refugee**

Although the 1951 Refugee Convention provides the overarching legal framework for international refugee protection, there are substantive variations in the way the corresponding principles are implemented:

- Within the framework of international refugee law, states exercise discretion in how they process and adjudicate asylum claims. A person whose claim for international protection would succeed in one destination country may not succeed in another, as evidenced by the wide variations in the recognition rates for Afghan asylum-seekers across European Union countries in 2021 (figure B8.2.1). Although some of the differences are due to the way these rates are computed, they also stem from the different legal instruments, interpretations, and priorities in these countries.

- The definition of *refugee* also varies across regions, reflecting historical circumstances and the varied nature of displacement crises. For example, the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa expanded the definition of *refugee* to include those who flee due to “external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order.” This definition was drafted not only to protect those in Africa not covered by the individualized, persecution-based refugee definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention, but also to ensure that refugee issues would not be a source of friction between states and that individuals fleeing colonial and apartheid rules would receive refugee protection. Similarly, in Latin America the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees extended international protection to several groups, including

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**Figure B8.2.1** Recognition rates for Afghan asylum-seekers varied greatly across EU countries in 2021

![Recognition rates for Afghan asylum-seekers varied greatly across EU countries in 2021](source)


*Note:* The figure excludes some European Union (EU) countries that received very few applications from asylum-seekers from Afghanistan.

(Box continues next page)
of rights, legal statuses, and scopes of application based on humanitarian principles or national interests. They take a variety of forms, such as subsidiary protection or temporary protection measures (figure 8.5). They also provide flexibility and enable international protection to be provided quickly without placing much additional pressure on asylum systems. For example, the United States provided Honduran nationals with complementary protection in 1999 in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch and Haitians with such protection in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 earthquake. The global share of people receiving such complementary forms of protection has been increasing over time, particularly since 2011. Ad hoc systems have, however, proved insufficient to address what has become a growing human and political crisis. Complementary protection measures can be withdrawn through simple executive decisions, as occurred in the United States for Salvadorans in 2018. For some destination countries, there is simply no legal route to entry for those in need of some degree of international protection. Complementary protection regimes are also inconsistent across destination countries, with wide variations in terms of who can benefit from complementary protection and what status they receive. Although some of these differences reflect national or regional circumstances, they also lead to inconsistencies that have detrimental consequences for the affected individuals, and they diminish the potential for an effective system of responsibility-sharing.

A forward-looking approach based on coordinated, flexible international responses is needed. There is no reason to believe that the number of crises, conflicts, natural disasters, and other situations that give rise to distressed cross-border movements will significantly decline in the coming period. In fact, the acceleration of climate change suggests that extraordinary measures may be needed (box 8.3).
Complementary protection is a complex maze

Source: WDR 2023 team.

Note: RSD = Refugee Status Determination.

Box 8.3 Climate-related mobility in Small Island Developing States

Some countries are facing high risks from climate change. For example, if and when climate change imperils the local adaptation and habitability of the Small Island Developing States and low-lying coastal settlements, the populations of these areas may need some planned relocation and a managed retreat. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration includes specific commitments to better protect those involved in or affected by these movements.

Many Small Island Developing States have proactively integrated climate change–related mobility into national policy frameworks. The objective is to help people to remain in place where it is viable to do so and ensure that those who choose to move have opportunities to do so. For example, Vanuatu’s National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement, adopted in 2018, includes actions on return and reintegration, local integration, and planned relocation. It also incorporates mobility into development planning. Fiji’s Displacement Guidelines emphasize the interconnections among environmental change, human rights, and mobility. In the Caribbean, two free movement agreements by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) grant protection to Caribbean nationals displaced by catastrophic hurricanes, including a right of entry to other islands, a waiver of work permit requirements, and a mutual recognition of skills.

Depending on the magnitude of climate impacts, migration may become unavoidable for Small Island Developing States, and planned relocation may be an option of last resort. Plans for relocation will need to empower people to make their own decisions. International assistance may be needed, including to develop a form of international protection or similar status to enable migration.

c. NDMO (2018).
e. Francis (2019).
f. UNHCR, Brookings Institution, and Georgetown University (2015); UNHCR, Georgetown University, and IOM (2017).
Accordingly, coordination among destination countries is needed to adopt a more coherent, predictable approach that offers some type of international protection quickly and efficiently to those who warrant it. This approach could include providing prima facie protection to specific groups—that is, granting protection to all persons in that group, such as citizens of a certain country of origin or members of a minority—instead of going through an individual refugee status determination process. It also could include adapting or expanding complementary protection mechanisms in particular crises and ensuring that individuals are able to secure safe legal pathways from their country of origin. Moreover, this approach would require building the institutional capacity needed for timely, transparent adjudication of protection status and for safeguarding human rights for those who need to be returned once their applications have been denied following due process.

**Shifting migrants’ incentives through legal pathways**

Establishing legal pathways for people at all levels of skills to enter destination countries and work in the formal sector—and doing so at scale—can help reduce the incentives for distressed movements. It can also transform distressed movements into mutually beneficial migration, in which migrants bring skills and attributes in demand in the destination labor market. Such legal pathways can include temporary or even seasonal arrangements.

By providing legal pathways, destination countries shift potential migrants’ incentives, including for those who otherwise would engage in high-risk movements through irregular channels. For example, by offering legal entry pathways to people with certain qualifications, destination countries can encourage would-be migrants—and the communities that often help finance their movements—to acquire the skills and other attributes needed to contribute in the new country. This process can help shift the composition of migratory movements—who moves and under what circumstances—toward an outcome that more closely matches the needs and preferences of the destination society. Moreover, the availability of legal pathways reduces the incentives for migrants who are already in the country to overstay their visas and end up in a protracted irregular situation.

In designing legal pathways, destination countries need to closely reflect the needs of their labor market. In many countries, legal entry pathways are primarily available to high-skilled migrants. However, many destination countries also need lower-skilled workers. By recognizing and acknowledging unmet needs in their labor markets and providing migrants who have the corresponding skills with legal entry pathways—including for relatively lower-skilled jobs, such as in agriculture, construction, or household services—destination countries can shift potential migrants’ incentives and reduce the pressure for distressed movements. This effort requires engaging with employers, labor unions, and other stakeholders to determine which skills are in demand.

In parallel, some destination countries have strengthened their cooperation with countries of origin to develop skills that are in demand and to facilitate win-win movements—for example, through Global Skills Partnerships. Under this approach, destination countries finance the training of potential migrants in their origin countries and provide them with entry upon graduation. These programs can also shift incentives for would-be migrants and the communities who support them to acquire skills that are in demand. To date, such programs have largely focused on relatively high-skilled occupations, but they could be extended to include workers with lower levels of qualifications.

In addition to developing legal pathways for entry—and to ensure their sustainability—destination countries need to ensure enforcement of the existing laws and regulations aimed at discouraging irregular entries. Enforcement often requires action in several directions:
• Combat smuggling. Human smuggling operations take many forms (box 8.4), and they are increasingly assuming professionalized forms. Some smugglers behave as professional businesspersons, guaranteeing services and agreeing to receive final payment when the migrant reaches the final destination. Other smuggling operations are far less benign, with migrants undergoing traumatic ordeals throughout their transit. Destination countries have launched far-reaching programs to combat smuggling through law enforcement, educational programs, and efforts to protect the rights of those who have been smuggled. The programs have to rely on effective international cooperation along entire corridors.

• Clamp down on irregular labor markets. The attractiveness of irregular channels depends on whether there is a demand for irregular labor from employers. For distressed migrants—whose skills are not a strong match for the needs of the destination economy—such irregular labor is often exploitative. Yet the welfare gaps between origin and destination countries are often so large that they create formidable market forces that drive people to move. Efforts to restrict distressed migration cannot succeed if employers are willing and able to hire these migrants. Most countries have laws and regulations against such irregular—and often exploitative—employment,
but they are unevenly enforced, if at all. Clamping down on the irregular labor market—and reducing the costs of compliance with the law—is critical. For countries with large numbers of migrants in an irregular situation, transitioning to regular status requires policies that often include some amnesty for migrants and their employers.

- **Return migrants humanely.** Destination countries may choose to return some distressed migrants who do not face risks in their countries of origin. Deportation is always a tragedy for the individuals involved, but it may be necessary to ensure the sustainability of the migration system because it demonstrates to both citizens and would-be migrants that rules are enforced. However, enforcing returns is fraught with risks, including possible human rights violations. Accordingly, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration calls for cooperation between states in facilitating safe, dignified return and readmission for migrants, as well as sustainable reintegration. In practice, forced returns are exceedingly difficult if the origin countries do not cooperate. Thus to be sustainable, such agreements should reflect the interests of both the destination and origin countries and possibly be framed within the broader context of bilateral migration arrangements. Some destination countries have attempted to accompany involuntary returns with support for their reintegration into their countries of origin, but with mixed results.

In some destination countries, efforts are also needed to strengthen the capacity of the institutions that process entries, including when people require asylum. For example, following the arrivals of large numbers of migrants and refugees in the summer of 2015, Germany’s Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) engaged in a modernization and digitalization effort that dramatically increased its ability to process requests for asylum. Processing requests for asylum or for visas expeditiously can reduce the incentives for distressed migrants’ use of irregular channels for entry.

**Strengthening the match of migrants’ skills and attributes through development**

Over time, development can reduce the need for distressed migration. As countries develop, their citizens become better educated, and their skills better match the needs of the domestic and global labor markets. They also become more resilient to shocks, and domestic alternatives reduce the need for distressed cross-border movements.

The effects of economic development on the propensity to emigrate are complex. A review of the existing evidence suggests several patterns. As middle-income countries develop, emigration steadily increases, and it is increasingly directed toward higher-income countries. By contrast, as low-income countries develop, emigration initially declines until they reach middle-income levels of development. These effects depend significantly on the size of a country’s population: they are significant in smaller, less populous countries (which account for half of all countries but only 3.5 percent of the global population), and they are much more muted in larger countries. On average, emigrants from middle-income countries have more skills and easier access to attractive destinations when compared with those from low-income countries.

How countries develop also matters. The gains of development are typically not distributed uniformly within a country. When development and income gains disproportionately benefit particular segments of the population, migration patterns are affected. For example, if domestic income gains accrue only to those who are relatively well-off and educated—and who are more likely to emigrate to high-income destinations—then emigration to those destinations may increase even though emigration to low-income
countries remains unchanged. On the other hand, if domestic income gains from development accrue to the poorest people in low-income countries, emigration to low-income countries and neighboring countries may fall without increasing emigration to high-income countries (which is costlier).

Discussions of the effects of foreign aid on emigration are taking place in a context where some donors aim to use their assistance to address the “root causes” of migration—especially distressed migration. As for many development activities, the impacts vary across countries and sectors, and programs need to be tailored to each context. For example, in some countries support for better governance has dampened emigration by improving government capacity and reducing grievances. Infrastructure projects can enhance market integration and increase local incomes. In the long term, development assistance also helps transform the origin society, with profound consequences for migration patterns.

Development is typically associated with an improvement in institutional capacity. As countries become wealthier, they are better equipped to manage migration for their own purposes, as well as through cooperation with other countries. Development is also associated with demographic changes—a reduction in fertility rates and an increase in life expectancy. These changes affect, in turn, social dynamics, the size of the pool of potential migrants, and opportunities in the domestic labor market that can provide alternatives to cross-border movements.

**Better skills matching**

Economic development is almost always accompanied by improvements in human capital such as education and skills. People and countries invest more in education as they become wealthier, and, in return, their better-educated workforce becomes an engine of economic development and growth. For example, as Bangladesh’s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita doubled between 1960 and 2015, the average years of schooling for the adult population increased drastically—from 1.0 years to 6.9 years—and the share of adults with some tertiary education grew from 0.33 percent to 8.6 percent. This experience matches that of almost all low- or middle-income countries that have experienced economic growth.

Higher educational attainment shifts migration patterns toward better-educated and higher-skilled workers. As countries of origin develop, the skills composition of their emigrants changes. Lower-educated workers tend to be better qualified with stronger language and vocational skills, and a larger share of emigrants tends to be tertiary-educated (figure 8.6). Emigrants from more developed countries thus tend to be a stronger match for the needs of destination labor markets. This is especially true where the expectations for low-skilled workers are increasing—for example, in terms of communication, interpersonal skills, and the ability to work with autonomy—in parallel with the stepped-up demand in service occupations, such as caregiving and hospitality.

**Strengthened resilience**

As origin countries develop, governments become increasingly able to help citizens strengthen their resilience to shocks, such as those produced by economic downturns and natural disasters. Social protection systems serve as a safety net for the poor and vulnerable and for people who because of personal circumstances, such as illness or accidents, are facing temporary hardship. In Ethiopia, for example, the Productive Safety Net Programme provides assistance through public works in an adaptive manner: it expands when shocks and crises materialize. Evidence of the impacts of such programs on international migration is scant, but they have reduced the need for domestic movements. An example is a place-based public works program in India. Such programs essentially give people going through a difficult period more options.
Development also increases the economic options at home, especially in relatively large countries. As low-income countries develop, economic activities and people shift from largely rural subsistence agriculture to manufacturing and service activities in the cities. Indeed, the share of the population in urban areas in low- and middle-income countries has risen steadily, from 23 percent in 1960 to 51 percent in 2020. Domestic migration offers higher incomes than in the region of origin, and it typically entails lower costs and risks than international migration. In fact, it can act as a substitute for international migration, particularly for distressed movements. Inclusive development, the availability of decent jobs at home, and their accessibility to all increase the range of options, so that migration, when it occurs, becomes the outcome of a larger rather than a smaller opportunity to choose.

Finally, development allows countries, communities, and households to adapt to the effects of climate change. Building domestic resilience to climate change means enabling people to adapt where they live when viable or to move under better circumstances, and it prepares destination areas to receive them. The cities that will serve as key destinations for internal mobility in many regions will have to account for climate risks in urban planning and land use management, including in the form of climate-resilient housing and infrastructure investments, connectivity networks, social services, and employment opportunities.

**Figure 8.6** Economic development changes the composition of migration flows: The education level of emigrants improves as countries develop

_Education level of emigrants, by GDP per capita growth rate of origin countries_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GDP per capita growth in origin country (% relative to baseline)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very slow (0–50)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow (50–100)</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate (100–200)</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast (200–500)</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very fast (500+)</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Adapted from figure 9 in Shrestha (2023).

**Note:** The figure plots the educational composition of migrants from low- and middle-income countries to the United States as origin countries develop. The vertical axis represents the increase in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of origin countries relative to the baseline year, defined for each origin country as the year in which GDP per capita (in constant 2017 US dollars in purchasing power parity terms, 2017 PPP$) was at its lowest level since 1960. Observations are grouped by growth, and the bars represent the average share in each group. Low- and middle-income countries were among the bottom two-thirds of all countries circa 1960 in terms of GDP per capita (2017 PPP$). Estimates exclude outliers in terms of emigration rates (Antigua and Barbuda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and West Bank and Gaza).
International migration, when it occurs, can thus take place under better circumstances. Most people putting their lives at risk while trying to enter a destination country irregularly are from low- or lower-income countries. The journeys of migrants from middle- or upper-middle-income countries tend to be less perilous. Their movement is a choice made under less stringent constraints, typically involving less suffering on their part and less excruciating policy dilemmas in their destination countries. “Leave no one behind”—the principle underpinning the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—implies making migration less distressed for migrants and more fruitful for origin and destination countries.

Notes

1. Azevedo et al. (2021); Boomgaard and Vliegenthart (2009); Heidenreich et al. (2020); Innes (2010); Madrigal and Soroka (2023); Průchová-Hrušová (2021); Slavic et al. (2017).

2. Hatton (2017); Lutz, Kaufmann, and Stünzi (2020); Pereira, Vala, and Costa-Lopes (2010); Poynting and Briskman (2020); Průchová-Hrušová (2021); Ravn et al. (2020).


4. IOM (2002); Triandafyllidou, Bartolini, and Guidi (2019).


9. Hatton (2009); Himmelreich (2019); Kaufmann (2021); Lutz, Kaufmann, and Stünzi (2020).

10. EUAAS (2022). Eurostat data on pending cases at all instances in November 2022 were available for 28 EU+ countries, and the October value was used for the missing country. EU+ refers to the European Union, Switzerland, and Norway.


16. Forced or compulsory labor is "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily." See Article 2, Forced Labour Convention, Convention C029 (adopted at the 14th Session of the International Labour Conference, June 28, 1930), NORMLEX, International Labour Organization, Geneva, https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100::NO::P12100_IL0_CODE:C029.


19. GMDAC (2020).


21. Bossard (2009); Busetta et al. (2021); Cornelius (2001); Gathmann (2008); IOM (2021); Jacobsen, Ayoub, and Johnson (2014); Koser (2000); Leyva-Flores et al. (2019); OHCHR (2016); Reques et al. (2020); Vogt (2018); WHO (2022); World Bank (2018a).


28. US Border Patrol (USBP) and Office of Field Operations (OFO) official year-end reporting for fiscal 2020 to fiscal 2022 and fiscal 2023, as of January 4, 2023. Beginning in March 2020, US Border Patrol Encounters statistics include both Title 8 Apprehensions and Title 42 Expulsions. Apprehensions refers to the physical control or temporary detainment of a person who is not lawfully in the United States, which may or may not result in an arrest. Since 2008, there has been a significant increase in unaccompanied children apprehended at the US southern border. Initially, Mexican children predominated, but as of 2012 the number of children from Central American countries was higher.

29. Düvell (2012); Nonnenmacher and Yonemura (2018); Wajsberg (2020); World Bank (2018a).


32. Łubiński (2022).

33. Kuschminder and Waidler (2020); Sačer et al. (2017); Wajsberg (2020).

34. Bakewell (2021); Crawley and Skleparis (2018); Erdal and Oeppen (2018).

35. Türk and Dowd (2014).


42. Johns, Loschmann, and Arekapudi (2023).
44. USCIS (2010).
45. Auriol, Mesnard, and Perrault (2021); Czaika and de Haas (2013, 2017); Czaika and Hobolth (2016).
46. See chapter 5 for further details.
47. Martin (2000).
49. Some countries have put in place incentives and programs to soften the impact of forced returns on affected migrants. Such schemes are typically aimed at facilitating the return and reinsertion of those who are forced to return to their origin country. They may include outreach and counseling (OECD 2020) or financial incentives (Black, Collyer, and Somerville 2011). Their uptake, however, has been relatively low, and their actual impact is unclear (OECD 2020).
52. Koch et al. (2023).
53. See spotlight 8.
54. For example, visa costs are higher for migrants traveling from low-income countries to high-income destinations. Ortega and Peri (2013) also find that migration flows to OECD destinations are very responsive to immigration policies.
56. Bermeo and Leblang (2015); see also NSC (2021).
59. Barro-Lee Estimates of Educational Attainment in the World (Barro and Lee 2013); Eenstra, Inklaar, and Timmer (2015); Penn World Table (database version 10.0), Groningen Growth and Development Centre, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands, https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/productivity/pwt/.
63. Imbert and Papp (2020); Morten (2019).

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NDMO (National Disaster Management Office, Vanuatu). 2018. "Vanuatu: National Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement Policy." NDMO, Port Vila,


