



Migration

Background

We live in an Age of Migration, with 244 million people, or 3.3 per cent of the world's population, living outside their country of birth in 2015.¹

Migration, as such, is not new. Studies by paleoanthropologists suggest that, since the earliest times for which we have evidence, our human ancestors and other hominids have migrated. More recently, many significant migrations have been recorded — for example, between 1836 and 1914 more than 30 million European immigrants moved to North America.²

The difference today is the greater scale and continuous nature of the movement of people around the world — and the fact that there are no more “empty continents” for us to occupy.

Economic migrants, refugees or asylum seekers?

Those seeking to migrate to developed nations are often referred to as either economic migrants, asylum seekers or refugees, but the terms are not mutually exclusive.

An economic migrant is a person who has left their own country and seeks by lawful or unlawful means to find employment in another country.³

An asylum seeker is a person who has applied for asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention on the grounds of a well-founded fear, if they return to their country of origin, of persecution on account of race,

religion, nationality, political belief or membership of a particular social group.⁴

A refugee may be an asylum seeker whose application has been successful or, more generally, may be a person fleeing, for example, civil war or natural disaster but not necessarily fearing persecution.⁵

Asylum seekers may be persons genuinely displaced, oppressed or in fear of persecution, but alternatively may be simply economic migrants hoping to secure entry to a country by claiming asylum.⁶

Factors driving migration

Numerous factors contribute to the desire to migrate. For many people from less-developed countries, the principal reasons are the hopes of achieving a better life elsewhere and/or escaping deteriorating or already intolerable conditions in their country of origin. Economic migrants hope for a better quality of life by living in a wealthier country, or they may seek to work abroad in order to send money to relatives back at home.

Conditions in which it is dangerous or otherwise intolerable to stay include extreme poverty, oppressive regimes, war, famine, drought and other natural disasters. In such circumstances, people may be denied even basic **human rights**, and migration may be a measure of last resort.

There are many reasons why quality of life in poorer countries may deteriorate, though many are directly

or indirectly related to unsustainable population levels or to climate change, or both (See box).

Summary of interrelated population sustainability factors driving migration from poorer countries:

- unsustainable population growth
- growing differentials between rich and poor
- unemployment
- competition for land
- over-exploitation of resources
- deterioration of agricultural land
- water shortages
- crop failures
- climate change
- rising sea levels

These are often aggravated by war and/or corrupt or ineffectual government.

An increase in population to unsustainable levels usually results in a progressive deterioration of living conditions, which drives migration from the country concerned. Greater numbers of people reliant on finite quantities of food, land, water and other resources invariably reduce the amount available per capita. Competition for these increasingly-scarce resources can lead to conflict, with large numbers of people becoming refugees.

Migratory pressure is likely to be increased by **climate change**. People in the poorest countries have minimal control over this and are seldom able to mitigate the consequences.

Many of the regions where agricultural output is predicted to be most adversely affected by changes in temperature or rainfall are already highly populated. There's good evidence that anthropogenic climate change made the drought and resulting famine in Syria more likely, and this is thought to have contributed to the civil unrest,^{7,8} along with rapid and sustained population growth.

Sea level rise is a further consequence of climate change. The median prediction for 1.5 degrees Celsius of global warming is a 2.9 metre rise in sea level which would threaten a (2010) population of nearly 140 million people.⁹ Figures for alternative warming scenarios are shown in Table 1.¹⁰

Table 1 Sea level rise predictions for different levels of global warming		
Warming °C	Rise metres	Locked in population millions
1.5	1.6 - 4.2	51 - 291
2	3.0 - 6.3	130 - 458
3	4.7 - 8.2	255 - 597
4	6.9 - 10.8	470 - 760

Areas especially at risk include low lying islands, and river deltas — for example, the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta, which is home to some 111 million people,¹¹ — while it is estimated that a three-foot rise in sea level would eliminate half the rice production in Vietnam.¹²

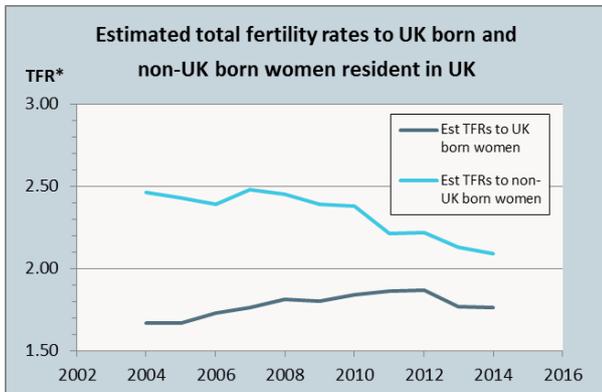
Migration and global sustainability

In the short term, migration does not alter the total number of people alive on the planet. In the longer term, the overall effect on human numbers depends on whether the migrants and their descendants have higher or lower birth rate trajectories and, to a lesser extent, life expectancies in their destination country than if they had remained in their country of origin.



When migrants leave developing countries with high birth rates and move to more prosperous ones with lower birth rates, their birth rates and those of their descendants tend to drop towards those of the host

country. For example, the total fertility rate (TFR) of non-UK-born women in the UK fell significantly between 2004 and 2014.¹³



*TFR = fertility rate = number of children per woman

The global impact of migration on natural resources and the environment depends on other factors in addition to population numbers. By moving to a country with higher standards of living, individuals will generally increase their per capita consumption levels, which will thus tend to converge over time with those of the indigenous population.

If the prosperity and consequently per capita consumption of the country of origin gradually converge with those of a more prosperous destination, the ultimate impact of migration on global sustainability is likely to depend on its long-term effect on global population. During the transition, the impact of increased per capita consumption will often initially outweigh the effect of falling birth rates of the migrants and their descendants.

The preceding discussion presupposes that rates of migration are not so great that they destabilise the economies of the destination countries. Should this happen, the impact on global sustainability will be hard to predict. The adverse effect on the lives of those in the destination country could be extreme, and the benefit to those migrating largely negated.

In evaluating the immediate effect of migration on resources, it is important to take into account that many wealthy countries consume large amounts of resources from outside their own borders, often embedded in imported goods and/or services.

Contribution of migration to destination countries

There are both benefits and costs to developed countries accepting migrants. Immigrants can reduce labour shortages, both for low-wage jobs and for highly-skilled tasks.

Migrants can contribute positively to the destination country's cultural diversity, though large-scale migration may also lead to social divisions and tension. However, even if social integration proceeds well, increased numbers put pressure on the resources of their adoptive country.

Though some developed states also see the arrival of young immigrant workers as a way of reducing their country's age dependency, this should not be seen as a benefit. Future generations are likely to inherit similar or worse age-dependency problems when these young people themselves become old.

In most cases, immigrants eventually contribute to the economies of their destination countries, though, for example in the case of elderly refugees, this is not always the case. Moreover, there is often resentment due to a perception that migrants are using resources at the expense of the existing population. However, studies have shown that immigrants often make less demand on welfare and other social benefits than is assumed,¹⁴ and that, on average, immigrants to Western European countries usually make a small positive fiscal impact.¹⁵

Indigenous workers are often concerned that their wages will fall or they will lose their jobs to cheaper migrant labour. Whereas there is some truth in this, studies suggest that the perception is often worse than the reality.^{16,17}

Nevertheless, any increase in the number of people will inevitably require further investment in services and infrastructure, as well as increasing the local demand for food, energy and many other resources. As worldwide competition for diminishing resources grows, the consequences of developed countries' dependence on developing countries for their imports will become painfully evident.

Recent immigration into the European Union

At the time of writing, immigration into and within the EU is a matter of considerable concern. Net immigration of non-EU nationals to the EU between 2010 and 2014 is shown in Table 2,^{18,19} and Table 3 shows the recent large increase in the number of people from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq seeking asylum in the EU.²⁰ These figures reflect the parlous state of the countries from which many of the migrants originate. However, it's also worth considering them in the context of the number of migrants already resident in Europe. Eurostat data indicate that 34.3 million people born outside the EU-28 were already living in an EU Member State on 1 January 2015.²¹

Year	Immigration	Emigration	Net
2010	1,455,953	707,927	748,026
2011	1,391,147	697,487	693,660
2012	1,352,027	753,675	598,352
2013	1,372,789	833,730	539,059
2014	1.6 million *		

* definitive data not available at time of writing

Year	Total	Syria	Afghanistan	Iraq
2010	208,935	3,835	16,240	13,045
2011	263,705	6,450	22,290	12,790
2012	278,820	20,810	21,075	11,365
2013	373,620	46,460	21,035	8,785
2014	563,350	119,005	37,850	14,850
2015	1,256,205	362,775	178,235	121,530

These three countries comprise 53% of 2015 total

Migration into the UK

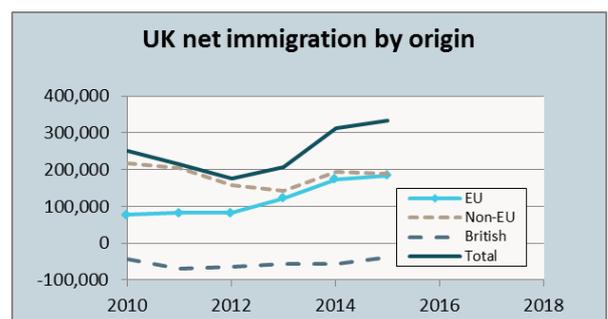
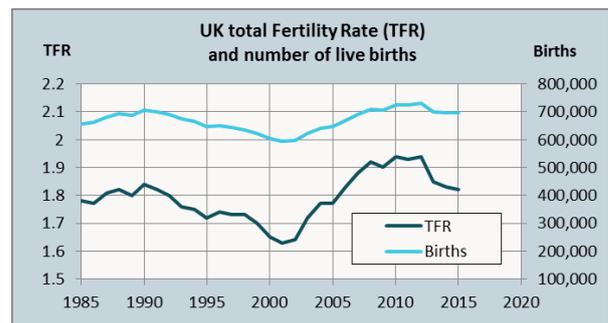
In most respects the effects of net migration into the UK are similar to those for many other Western European states. However, there are also significant differences, owing to the UK's existing high population density, and there are potential

differences because of changes which may result from the 2016 referendum on EU membership.

The UK's population is already more than 60 million, and this is projected to increase to more than 74 million by 2039.²²

The projected increase in numbers results from the combination of births and net immigration exceeding the number of deaths, the latter being somewhat reduced as life expectancy increases. Recent UK birth rates²³ and net immigration²⁴ are shown in the figures below.

If post-Brexit UK retains an agreement for the free movement of people from EU states, ongoing immigration from EU countries is likely to be unavoidable. However, overemphasis on intra-EU migration is misleading; the figures show that between 2010 and 2015, EU citizens represented less than half the UK's total net immigration.



Clearly any civilized country should support the right to asylum, but those seeking asylum currently only represent a relatively small proportion of total net immigration into the UK. Table 4 indicates the top three countries of origin for recent first time asylum applications.²⁵

Table 4 UK first time asylum applications by origin

Year	Total	Top 3 countries of origin		
2010	24,340	Zimbabwe	Iran	Pakistan
2011	26,915	Pakistan	Iran	Sri Lanka
2012	28,795	Pakistan	Iran	Sri Lanka
2013	30,585	Pakistan	Iran	Sri Lanka
2014	32,790	Pakistan	Eritrea	Iran
2015	38,795	Eritrea	Iran	Pakistan

Migrants arrive in the UK for many other reasons including, in particular, work-related reasons, to accompany or join a partner, or for study.

Irrespective of whether it is caused by immigration exceeding emigration or births exceeding deaths, what is clear is that countries such as the UK simply cannot sustainably support an ever-increasing number of people.

Zero net migration

At first glance, and in the absence of other constraints, there is some logic for countries that want to stabilise population levels to aim for zero net migration together with a replacement-level birth rate. However, justification for this is less clear-cut than may first appear.

Many prosperous countries have **ecological footprints significantly in excess of their biocapacity**. To remedy this, simply stabilising their numbers is not sufficient; they need to reduce them to a sustainable level. This requires net immigration added to the number of births to be smaller than the number of deaths, until sustainable levels are reached. The extent to which this should be achieved by reduced birth rates versus reduced inward migration is somewhat arbitrary. Moreover, zero net migration presupposes a limited need to take in migrants for global justice/ethical reasons.

Another consideration is that most prosperous countries import and/or export large quantities of resources (see *'Migration and global sustainability'*, above). Especially during a period of transition to sustainability, individual nation states may not be the most appropriate level at which to account the biocapacity/ecological footprint balance. Consensus on a practicable alternative needs to be developed.

Ethical considerations

Managing economic migration into prosperous countries with already high levels of per capita consumption introduces some hard moral questions.

It is generally acknowledged that high and growing population levels contribute to many environmental and resource-availability problems, and that high levels of immigration are a major driver of population growth in destination countries. This has led some to argue that, in order to be good environmental citizens, prosperous countries should restrict inward migration to the extent necessary to prevent population growth.²⁶ This would mean that such countries are not required to assimilate economic migrants from other (poorer) countries, though supporters of such policies often also call for increased development aid to improve the lives of would-be migrants in their countries of origin.



Nevertheless, the danger with an approach that limits economic migration is that it has parallels with the infamous 'lifeboat ethics' argument, which suggests that the way to secure environmental sustainability is to cut off help to the global poor.²⁷ This is especially problematic given that, in principle, developed countries could become more sustainable by making further cuts in per capita consumption as an alternative to reducing immigration.

To address these concerns, any acceptable solution to the looming global population sustainability crisis should respect basic human rights, and thus be consistent with basic global justice. This raises serious doubts about the moral credibility of (rich) countries

continuing to enjoy globally unsustainable levels of consumption whilst ascribing responsibility for reducing population growth solely to those who lack the means of achieving it.

This reinforces the view that, at the very least, rich countries should strive to reduce people's desire to migrate from less prosperous places, in particular by providing as much help as they can for them to improve their quality of life and constrain their family sizes. It may also be that, as good environmental citizens, the former should be prepared to reduce their own per capita consumption to enable them to accommodate (some) more migrants.

Above all, sustainability, and particularly the effect of anthropogenic climate change, are global issues. Some measures to manage migration by closing the borders of prosperous countries to would-be economic migrants may be necessary. However, for

this to be the only way that prosperous countries respond to the problem is almost certainly impracticable and undoubtedly morally questionable.



Read more about *human population history and current population trends*.

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⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

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⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/02/global-warming-worsened-syria-drought-study>

⁹ <http://sealevel.climatecentral.org/research/reports/mapping-choices-carbon-climate-and-rising-seas-our-global-legacy>

¹⁰ Ibid (simplified)

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¹³ UK ONS Statistical Bulletin

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/parentscountryofbirthenglandandwales/2015-08-27#total-fertility-rate-for-uk-born-and-non-uk-born-women>

¹⁴ http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/09-013_15702a45-fbc3-44d7-be52-477123ee58d0.pdf

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²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ For further information see: Winthrop Staples III, Philip Cafaro: The Environmental Argument for Reducing Immigration to the United States. <http://cis.org/EnvironmentalArgument>

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