

Historic shocks can bring about historic changes. Fixing our broken migration system should be one of them*

Today's global migration is impacting the public and political debate more than it has in the past 70 years. Its direct implications - for human rights, the economy and security - as well as the indirect ones - as a lever for broader political and economic interests - will shape the societies we live in for the coming decades. If one believes that COVID-19 is reversing this trend, think twice. As with previous global shocks, the state of affairs will hardly remain the same once the pandemic is over. Ensuring it takes a turn for the better or allows us to dig deeper into the current migration system, will depend largely on the kind of decisions and actions we take in the coming months.

There are reasons to believe that we are in front of a make-it-or-break-it point and we should seize the opportunity to reform the migration system.

We had a demographic window of opportunity and our response to COVID-19 opens a new one related to labour markets. Europe and the United States are seeing their populations age and their labour markets change. The demographic pyramid narrows at the bottom and contributes to transform a labor market that attracts immigrants of all skill levels. But this is a far-reaching phenomenon that hardly fits in with the electoral shortsightedness of the existing migration policies. So, it is a good thing that the current crisis is showing

wealthy societies the importance of migrants for their economy and health systems. Better late than never. Europe risks missing out on a demographic window of opportunity that opens in Africa but begins to close in Latin America and Asia. Safe and orderly migration opportunities reduce the attractiveness of irregularity and multiply the benefits for countries of origin and destination.

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This shock could allow us to introduce far-reaching policies that go beyond border protection or humanitarian assistance. The arrival of migrants is seen by many as a threat to the security and identity of those that receive them. For others, it's seen merely as a humanitarian emergency, trespassing democratic red lines. But this narrow migration debate does not reflect the reality of nearly 280 million migrants worldwide, most of which are workers and students, not victims. This 19th century labour mobility model needs to be recalibrated to respond to the demands of a modern labour market. We need alternative and ambitious strategies that consider the evolution of our economies and the skills that these will demand, loosen the self-defeating rigidities of the current rules and provide foreign workers with the skills and incentives that would make them participate in orderly and predictable migration programs. This is the true solution to the challenge of irregular migration and it should start by bringing millions of undocumented back out of the shadows, as it is now being done in Portugal and discussed in Spain and Italy.

Crises are always a good opportunity to put forward the most creative and appropriate ideas. The Global Compact for Migration is one of the very few good news pieces in recent years when it comes to the governance of human mobility. Its true value does not lie on hard rules and one-size-fits-all models, but rather on providing a level playing field to share best practices and replicate them. Some of these are already happening successfully and often discreetly, like New Zealand's Skilled Migrant Category Visa, the employment of refugees in Uganda, the Global Skills Partnership model developed by the Center for Global Development or the integration

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and reception initiative by Welcoming America. These solutions combine diverse private partners and enable public administrations to turn what is often seen as a problem into a resource.

In order to effect change, we must win the hearts of the 'movable middle', not just their minds. The so-called 'Overton Window'¹ of the migration debate is getting alarmingly narrower and more conservative. Anti-immigration populism is not winning the game because of its electoral success, but rather because of its ability to contaminate the debate and the political landscape making acceptable what was previously intolerable. The political left unwillingly contributes to reinforce the idea of emigration as a problem when they focus on "helping them stay at home" rather than providing prospective migrants with safe and orderly ways that would maximize the benefits for them, their families and their countries of origin. We need to change this public perception by better understanding the diversity of our audiences and how to reach them. The key lies in persuading the 'movable middle', which represents half of the audience in many countries: they could go either way in this debate and they are not impressed by the academic arguments about migrants' contribution to fiscal balances; but they have their hearts in the right place and respond to narrative frames that highlight the value of diversity, personal ties and mutual dependence.

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Beyond the tragedy, uncertainty and anxiety, COVID-19 is leaving us a fundamental message: We are all in this together. The sudden realisation that our lives literally depend on the foreigners that nurse our sick in hospitals or pick our vegetables can be a powerful driver for change. The certainty that this virus will stop by helping other countries fight it rather than isolating from them should be used as an opportunity to overhaul the way we manage borders. Let's take advantage of the opportunity that history offers us to change it.

¹The range of policies politically acceptable to the mainstream population at a given time.

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