IPS

MIGRATION AND THE EUROPEAN LEFT 25.07.2017 | Lisa Pelling

Why the left should be open to open borders

Unless we strive towards openness, nationalism will eat our societies from the inside

In 2016 more than 5,000 people drowned in the Mediterranean in an attempt to reach Europe, according to the International Organisation on Migration (IOM). Some of them were refugees fleeing persecution and war. Others boarded boats they knew to be unsafe simply because they felt they had nothing to lose after the nightmare of crossing the Sahara, the "desert sea". Given the human catastrophe unfolding before our eyes on the Mediterranean, we have a moral imperative to pursue manage migration to Europe more humanely.

What is morally right, however, is not always economically rational or politically feasible. Increased mobility can bring development and prosperity, but only when managed well. The left needs to find a concrete strategy for building trust and long-term support for a policy of freer migration.

For starters, it is important to recognise the positive economic impact migration can have on the migrants themselves, the countries they leave and the communities that receive them. Equally, the benefits of migration tend to be long-term and diffuse, while the costs are often short term and concentrated. Long-term economic gains are no consolation for those who carry the short-term costs, such as the overcrowded, socially deprived neighbourhoods that tend to receive most newly arrived immigrants, or low-skilled workers forced to compete with migrant labour.

Resentment around migration from those living in the host countries often springs not from an objection to the principle of migration. It is usually a response to the disproportionate impact of migration on particular communities. So rather than keeping borders tightly shut, there needs to be a greater focus on making sure both the costs, and the

huge human, economic and social benefits that migration brings, are shared across all levels of society. This requires coordination at local, national and supranational level.

Borders between states matter. They mark out where one democratic structure ends and another begins; they define geographic limitations (though not absolute) to states' and governments' powers and responsibilities. A world without borders would be a world with one single global government. Such a world order could not be democratic: it would be very difficult to hold global rulers accountable. So rather than "a world without borders", the left should aim for a world in which borders are as open as possible.

Paradoxically, in attempting to secure their borders, European states have actually lost control over them, since flexible and opportunistic smuggling rings are always two steps ahead of sluggish bureaucrats. Repressive policies and a lack of legal migration channels only entrench smuggling operations and underground labour markets. Unscrupulous recruiters and employers are free to exploit undocumented migrants, increasing the precariousness of their situation, which in turn leads to more deaths at sea and more human rights violations.

Without a doubt, border controls hinder migration. In 2015, the IOM counted 1,046,599 arrivals to Europe: 34,887 by land and 1,011,712 by sea. In 2016, after a (non-legally-binding) agreement between Turkey and the EU, arrivals decreased to 387,739, just over a third of the previous year's numbers. But no border is completely impenetrable, and migrant conditions are largely determined by the borders they have to cross.

Over the last few decades, the EU has increasingly treated its borders like the walls of a military fortress – designed to keep people out at all costs. The way the EU manages migration is neither humane nor efficient. Those needing protection are turned away at the borders; others drown in their attempts to reach safety. People whose manpower or skills could benefit the European labour market find it unnecessarily difficult to travel into Europe. Many cross the borders at great cost: either due to costly and time-consuming visa procedures, or because they are compelled to pay smugglers, thus strengthening the very criminal networks that undermine border management. The higher the walls, the more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation are the migrants who manage to scale them. The current system – open enough for European employers to import the labour they need, but closed enough to make migrant workers flexible and cheap – primarily benefits big business.

Doing the maths

Discussions on global migration often lack a sense of proportion. It's true that we've witnessed a sharp rise in migration in recent years. The UNHCR estimates some 65 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes, more than at any time since World War II. The World Bank estimates that 250 million people have migrated to another country. If international migrants had their own state, it would be larger than Brazil. But that's still only around three per cent of the world population. And Europe has dealt with larger movements of refugees and migrants in the past.

There is a need for proportion not least when it comes to Europe's relationship with Africa. According to UN predictions, Africa's population will double to more than two billion by 2050, while the EU's population will stagnate at around half a billion. That represents a huge demographic change. But giant demographic shifts have already taken place in Africa, without particularly dramatic consequences north of the Mediterranean. In 1995, Europe's population roughly equalled that of Africa: Europe had 730 million inhabitants, Africa 741 million. Twenty years later, there are marginally more Europeans at 742 million, while 1.2 billion people now live in Africa. The main reason we haven't seen more migration from Africa is that moving countries is costly. People migrate, but primarily from the countryside to the urban centres.

Today's migrants move in a world shaped by huge inequalities in the distribution of resources and opportunities. One of the our world's deepest injustices is the fact that one's fate in life (prosperity, health, safety, human rights, freedom of expression, etc.) is so much determined by one's place of birth. Migration should always be a choice, not a necessity. But to those who could improve their lot by crossing borders, access to migration is an issue of equality.

Obstacles to migration have a high human price: for those who are forced to stay, and for those whose movement is costly and dangerous. But they also have an economic cost. According to the American economist Michael Clemens, the gains from eliminating migration barriers "exceed the combined current levels of development assistance and foreign direct investment to the developing world."

A left-wing migration policy

There is currently a global momentum around migration issues, which the left should use to forward a progressive agenda for freer migration.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015 explicitly addresses the issue of migration with goals and targets. These include facilitating legal channels for migration, respecting migrant workers' rights and increasing the positive impact migration has on economic development, by for example reducing the costs of remittances.

Legal channels for migrants seeking protection have to be enforced and enlarged, for example by expanding UNHCR resettlement programmes. EU member state should look into granting humanitarian visas. They should also enable refugees to work, and offer them guarantees they won't be sent back to the countries they have fled.

Legal channels should be open to labour migrants at all skills levels. While many countries have schemes for the legal entry of highly qualified labour immigrants, low-skilled migrants – who often have the most to gain from international migration – are largely confined to temporary programmes open only to a very limited number of immigrants. Many of them have no other option than risky irregular migration.

Temporary work permits, and permits tied to a single employer, increase labour migrants' vulnerability. Labour immigration visas should be renewable in the host country, and allow for periods of unemployment so the labour migrant has an opportunity to change employers. Programmes and legislation for labour immigrants at all skills levels should include avenues to permanency.

The rights of women migrants should be a particular focus. More countries should follow Germany's example and ratify the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention. Women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In many countries, women have no individual right to a passport, and need the permission of a male guardian (father, brother, husband) to migrate. Women need access to safe and legal migration channels, and to identity documents.

Migration and remittances

When migrants send money home, their <link regions africa article show building-up-mali-brick-for-brick-2154>remittances help bridge gigantic income gaps and aid development. Estimated at more than 442 billion US dollar in 2016, the sum of remittances to developing countries is more than three times larger than the sum of the world's total official aid. Knowledge and know-how transmitted by migrants, so-called social remittances, also make a tangible difference for families and societies.

Remittances cover school fees; they are used to pay for medication or invested in housing, enabling people to stay healthy and safe. Foreign aid programmes can do a lot to enhance the impact of remittances, for instance by creating investment opportunities in long-term health insurance schemes or pensions. Foreign aid can be used to strengthen the financial infrastructure by, for example, promoting access to mobile telecom services and the internet.

In conclusion, resentment around migration is understandable. When a wave of displaced people move somewhere new, it changes the nature, fabric and wellbeing of the host community. But shutting out migrants isn't the solution. Rather, governments and local authorities need to find ways of capitalising on the benefits migrants bring, and spreading the short-term impacts. The left preaches equality, social justice, compassion for the weakest in society. It should extend these values to migrants and refugees, who often need our help the most.



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