

# International Migration amid a World in Crisis

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## Executive Summary

This article comprehensively examines international migration trends and policies in light of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. It begins by reviewing migration developments throughout the past 60 years. It then examines pandemic-related migration trends and policies. It concludes with a series of general observations and insights that should guide local, national, regional, and international policymakers, moving forward. In particular, it proposes the following:

- National measures to combat COVID-19 should include international migrants, irrespective of their legal status, and should complement regional and international responses.
- Localities, nations, and the international community should prioritize the safe return and reintegration of migrants.
- States and international agencies should plan for the gradual re-emergence of large-scale migration based on traditional push and pull forces once a COVID-19 vaccine is widely available.
- States should redouble their efforts to reconcile national border security concerns and the basic human rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.
- States and the international community should accelerate their efforts to address climate-related migration.
- States of origin, transit, and destination should directly address the challenges of international migration and not minimize them.

## Keywords

migration, movement, migrants, refugees

## Introduction

Having recently experienced the largest movement of people in human history, the world is now in the midst of a sudden disastrous crisis due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. Among its many repercussions, this pandemic has greatly affected international migration, which has become a fundamental and essential component of the globalized economy.

In their attempts to stem the spread of the virus, governments worldwide have closed their borders, issued travel bans, and severely limited human mobility. Those measures, however, have been largely ineffective in

halting the virus' spread (Bier 2020). In a matter of several months, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has traveled rapidly among and within countries worldwide.

As of midyear 2020, no less than 12 million people had been infected by the virus, and more than half a million have died from COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> The daily lives and overall well-being of the world's population of nearly

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<sup>1</sup>The cited numbers of cases and deaths from the coronavirus are from Worldometer as of July 15, 2020 (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>).

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8 billion men, women, and children have been enormously affected by the pandemic, especially migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who due to their personal circumstances are among the most vulnerable.

In addition to its indiscriminate human carnage, growing economic fallout, widespread social and cultural disruptions, and government interventions, this new global health crisis has resulted in abrupt and far-reaching consequences on the levels, trends, and types of international migration. Those consequences in turn have greatly affected local communities and nations as well as the hundreds of millions of migrants and their families.

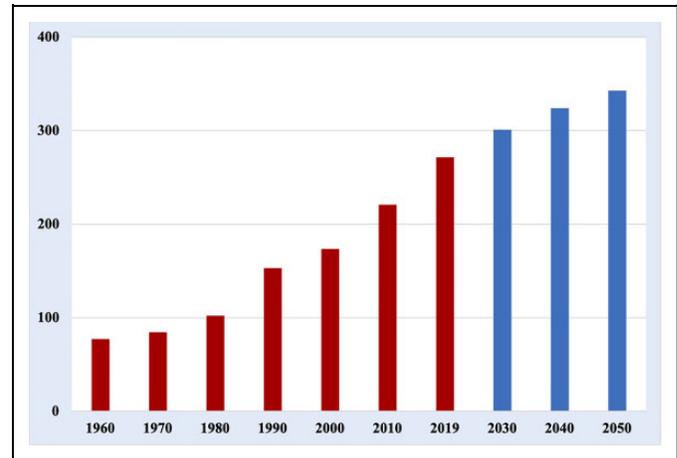
The coronavirus pandemic has come at a time when the world is struggling with a host of global challenges that are also affecting human mobility. Among those challenges are climate change, environmental degradation, population growth, poverty, famine, armed conflict, and forced displacement. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the gravity of these global challenges.

To gain an understanding of the state of international migration amid the current health crisis, it is instructive to briefly review levels, trends, and major dimensions of international migration during the recent past. A review of the past half century coupled with an assessment of the current migration situation resulting from the pandemic can provide a sound and informed basis for anticipating likely future levels, trends, and critical aspects of international migration.

Reviewing the past, assessing the present, and anticipating the likely future of international migration also offer a solid foundation for governments to formulate relevant policies and develop appropriate programs. Such a strategy also permits the coordination of regional and international efforts to address critical aspects of international migration.

## Recent Past

Although widely recognized, it is sometimes overlooked that international migration is by no means a new global phenomenon (OECD 2019). International migration, both voluntary and forced, has been a continuous and prominent characteristic of humanity and demographic change throughout the ages (Boghean 2016). In the recent past, however, extraordinary changes have taken place in the magnitude, sources, causes, and



**Figure 1.** International Migrant Stock and Percentage of World Population: 1960–2050 (millions).

consequences of international migration (Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2014).

The world has been experiencing the largest movement of people in human history. Millions of men, women, and children have crossed international borders to settle in another country, and many millions more would migrate if they could (Esipova, Pugliese, and Ray 2018). The extraordinary changes in international migration during the recent past have transformed human mobility into a major global issue, with some considering it to be the defining issue of the twenty-first century (Betts 2015).

International migration has affected social and economic development in every major region of the world. Its effects have resulted in public debate, legislation, government interventions, a number of international agreements, and numerous responses by humanitarian and human rights organizations.

With the unprecedented rapid growth of the world's population following the Second World War, the number of international migrants<sup>2</sup> grew rapidly during the second half of the twentieth century (Figure 1), from 77 million (2.1 percent of the world's

<sup>2</sup> Although definitions, categories, and terminology vary by country, the United Nations has established recommended definitions and guidelines for measuring and analyzing international migration. The United Nations defines an international migrant as a person who stays outside their usual country of residence for at least a year (United Nations 1998). According to that definition, the estimated worldwide number of international migrants in 2019 was 272 million.

**Table 1.** International Migrants, Refugees, World Population, and Percentage: 1960–2050.

Year	World Population (millions)	International Migrants (millions)	% Migrants	Total Refugees (millions)	% of Migrant Refugees
1960	3,035	77	2.5%	2	2.1%
1970	3,700	84	2.3%	2	2.9%
1980	4,458	102	2.3%	8	8.3%
1990	5,327	153	2.9%	17	11.4%
2000	6,143	174	2.8%	12	7.0%
2010	6,957	221	3.2%	11	4.8%
2019	7,713	272	3.5%	26	9.5%
2030	8,548	301	3.5%	29	9.5%
2040	9,199	324	3.5%	31	9.5%
2050	9,735	343	3.5%	33	9.5%

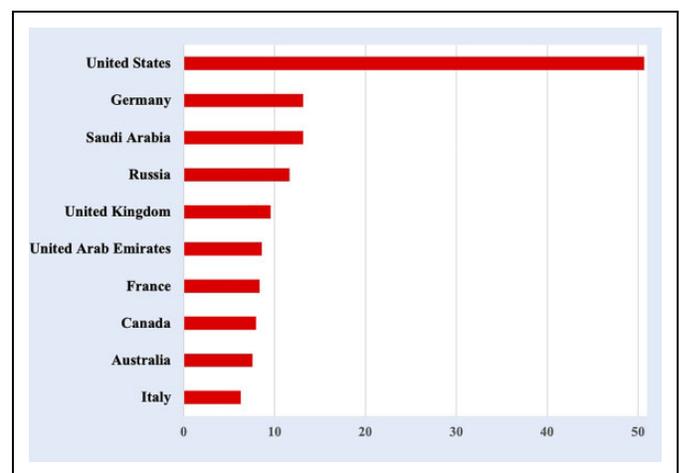
Projections assume that 2019 proportions of migrant stock and refugees remain constant. Source: United Nations (2019).

population) in 1960 to 174 million (2.8 percent of the world's population) by the close of the twentieth century.

In 2019, the number of persons residing outside their country of birth reached 272 million people, or 3.5 percent of world population, nearly four times the number of migrants in 1960 (Table 1). If the current proportion of international migrants were to remain constant at its current level of 3.5 percent, the numbers of migrants would necessarily increase as world population grows. In this instance, the projected number of international migrants would reach 343 million by the mid-twenty-first century.

The majority of today's 272 million international migrants, approximately 60 percent, live in the more developed regions.<sup>3</sup> About 30 percent of international migrants live in Europe, slightly more than a fifth reside in North America, and 3 percent live in Oceania. Nearly a third of all migrants reside in Asia, with Africa at 10 percent and Latin America and the Caribbean at 4 percent.

Half of the world's migrants lived in ten countries. The United States hosted the largest number of international migrants at 51 million, Germany and Saudi Arabia had the second and third largest numbers of international



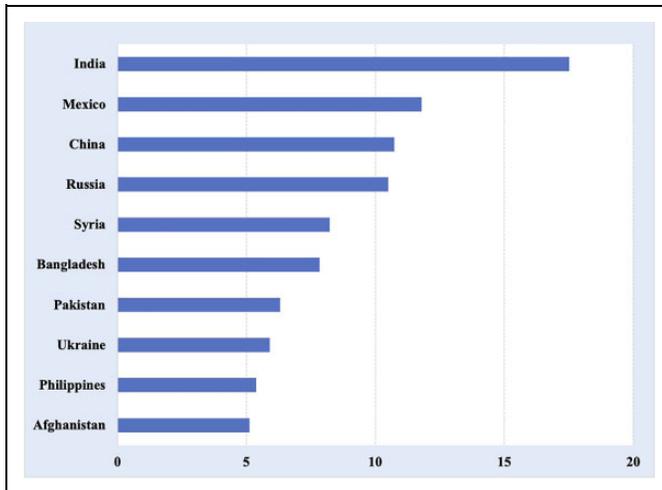
**Figure 2.** International Migrants in Top Ten Receiving Countries: 2019 (millions).

migrants worldwide at around 13 million each, followed by the Russian Federation with 12 million and the United Kingdom with 10 million (Figure 2).

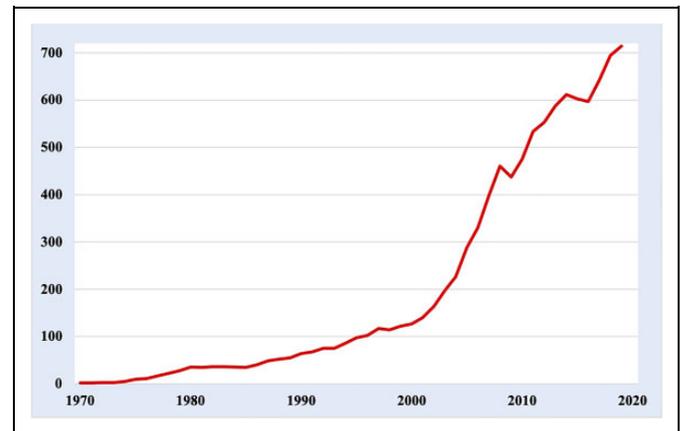
International migrants come from a large number of sending countries. The top ten sending countries in 2019 accounted for slightly more than one-third of all international migrants. The leading countries of origin of international migrants were India with 18 million, followed by Mexico with 12 million, China with 11 million, Russia with 10 million, and Syria with 8.2 million (Figure 3).

In addition to the rapid growth of international migration, the remittances that migrants send home to assist their families have increased rapidly during the past half century (World Bank 2020). Annual remittances have increased from several billion US dollars in 1970 to

<sup>3</sup> According to the UN Population Division, more developed regions comprise Europe, North America, Australia/New Zealand, and Japan, and less developed regions comprise all regions of Africa, Asia (except Japan), Latin America, and the Caribbean, plus Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia (<https://population.un.org/wpp/DefinitionOfRegions/>).



**Figure 3.** International Migrants in Top Ten Sending Countries: 2019 (millions).



**Figure 4.** Total Global Remittance Inflows: 1970–2019 (billions US\$).

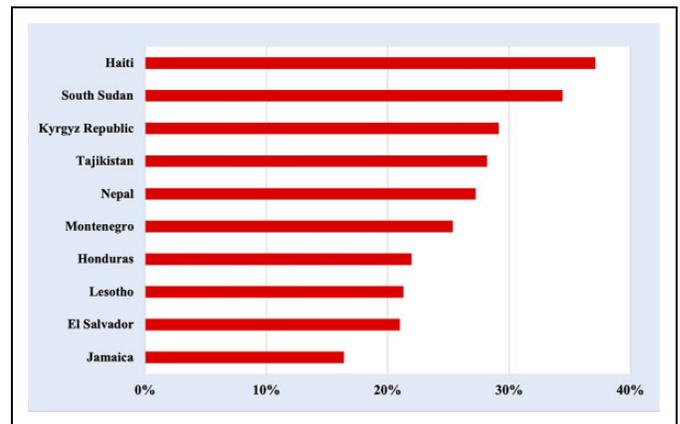
more than 700 billion US dollars today, far exceeding overseas development assistance (Figure 4).

Some of the largest remittances in 2019 were to India (\$83 billion), China (\$68 billion), Mexico (\$39 billion), the Philippines (\$35 billion), and Egypt (\$27 billion).<sup>4</sup> The largest sources of migrant remittance outflows were from the United States (\$68 billion), United Arab Emirates (\$44 billion), Saudi Arabia (\$34 billion), Switzerland (\$27 billion), and Germany (\$25 billion).

Remittances are a key source of foreign exchange for many countries (Figure 5). In Haiti, remittances in 2019, which came mostly from the United States, made up 37% of the gross domestic product (GDP). In South Sudan, remittances accounted for one-third of that nation's GDP. In another seven countries in various regions, remittances represented between a fifth and a quarter of those nations' GDP.

Similar to the rapid increase in the numbers of international migrants, the numbers of refugees worldwide have also increased markedly in the recent past. The global number of refugees and asylum seekers at the end of 2019 was nearly 26 million, an increase by about 13 million since 2010 (Figure 6).

About 20 million refugees are under the mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),



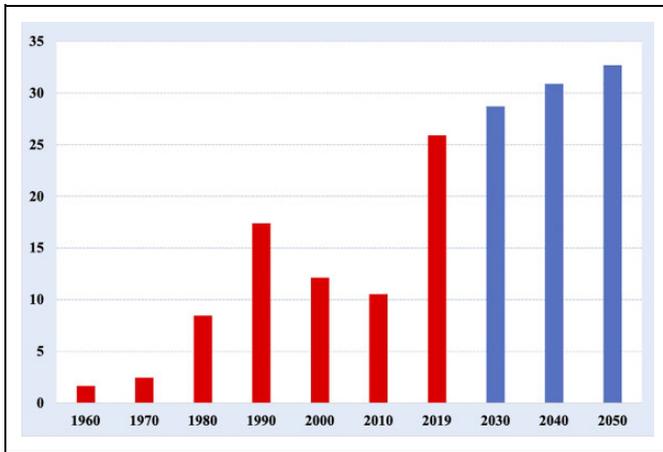
**Figure 5.** Remittances as a Proportion of GDP: 2019.

and approximately 6 million Palestine refugees are registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). By the end of 2019, more than 4 million people were asylum seekers, including 800,000 Venezuelans. An estimated total of 4.5 million people fled Venezuela to neighboring countries, the region's biggest exodus in recent history and one of the world's largest displacement crises (UNHCR 2019).

Approximately 80 percent of people displaced across international borders originated from ten countries (Figure 7). Five of them — Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan — have been in the top ten countries of origin throughout the past decade.

Since 2014, the main country of origin for refugees has been Syria. Nearly 7 million Syrian refugees are now hosted by 126 countries. The largest numbers of Syrian refugees are located in the nearby countries in the region.

<sup>4</sup>See World Bank, KNOMAD, "2020 Remittances Data," <https://www.knomad.org/data/remittances>. This includes inflows and outflows for countries with latest years of 2019 and 2018, respectively.



**Figure 6.** Refugees Worldwide: 1960–2050 (millions).

Turkey hosted the largest number of Syrian refugees (3.6 million), followed by Lebanon (910,600), Jordan (654,700), Iraq (245,800), and Egypt (129,200). Outside the region, the largest numbers of Syrian refugees were in Germany (572,800) and Sweden (113,400).

Ten countries hosted close to 60 percent of persons displaced across international borders. Nine of the ten countries hosting the largest populations of refugees and Venezuelans displaced abroad were in developing regions. For those fleeing conflict and persecution, geographic proximity is an important factor in determining where they are hosted. The vast majority of refugees have largely remained close to their country of origin. Globally, the three countries having the largest numbers of persons seeking asylum were Turkey, with 3.6 million Syrians; Colombia, with 1.8 million Venezuelans; and Pakistan, with 1.4 million Afghans (Figure 8).

Another major global challenge is irregular immigration. Millions of men, women, and children who have slim chances of immigrating legally to other countries are often risking their lives to reach and settle in another country, especially in the more developed regions. A major underlying reason for irregular migration is that the demand for migrants in immigrant receiving countries is far less than the supply of potential migrants wishing to settle abroad.

Often closely linked to irregular migration are smuggling and human trafficking. Due to the demands for cheap and compliant labor, sexual exploitation, and the low risks and high profits, criminal groups are increasingly involved in smuggling and human trafficking in virtually every region of the world. Growing numbers of men, women, and children are falling victim to

deception and mistreatment, including debt bondage, torture, unlawful confinement, sexual abuse and rape, and threats and violence against them, their families, and their friends (Chamie 2015).

In recent years, international migration flows, especially irregular migration, have seriously challenged the capacities and finances of government authorities and intergovernmental organizations as well as public attitudes toward immigrants. Governments in virtually every region have adopted policies to limit international migration — restricting levels and composition, reducing refugee flows and rejecting asylum seekers, repatriating those unlawfully resident, and redefining or denying citizenship<sup>5</sup> to certain groups.

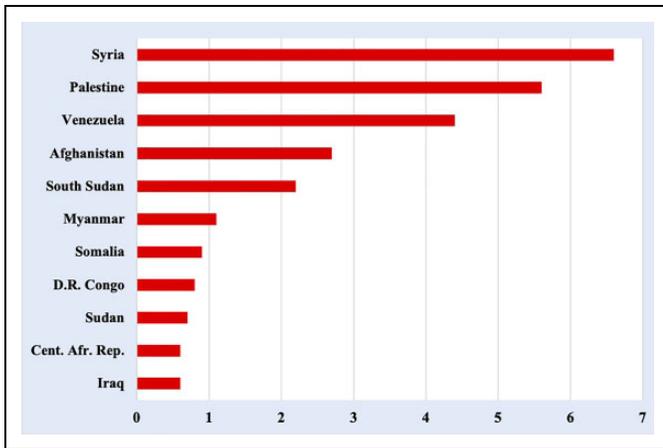
At the intergovernmental level, two global compacts, one concerning international migration and one on refugees, were endorsed by a large majority of the UN Member States in December 2018.<sup>6</sup> Countries that voted in favor of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration<sup>7</sup> collectively hosted around 181 million international migrants in 2019, representing 67 percent of the total worldwide (Appleby 2020). Meanwhile, countries that voted in favor of the Global Compact on Refugees<sup>8</sup> hosted around 25 million refugees, or 89 percent of the global refugee population.

<sup>5</sup>The issue of citizenship has become a major political issue in India, the country with the world's second largest population. The citizenship status of an estimated 2 million people in India is believed to be in limbo (Raj and Gettleman 2019). See <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/asia/india-muslim-citizen-list.html>.

<sup>6</sup>In addition to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018) and the Global Compact on Refugees (2018), other notable intergovernmental agreements relating to international migrants include the ILO Convention Migration for Employment (1949), Refugee Convention (1951), Refugee Protocol (1967), ILO Convention Migrant Workers (1975), Migrant Worker Convention (1990), Migrant Smuggling Protocol (2000), and Human Trafficking Protocol (2000).

<sup>7</sup>The Intergovernmental Conference to adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration took place in Marrakech, Morocco, on December 10 and 11, 2018 (<https://undocs.org/A/CONF.231/3>).

<sup>8</sup>On December 17, 2018, the UN General Assembly affirmed the Global Compact on Refugees, after two years of extensive consultations led by UNHCR with Member States, international organizations, refugees, civil society, the private sector, and experts. The Global Compact is a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility sharing, recognizing that a sustainable solution to refugee situations cannot be achieved without international cooperation ([https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR\\_English.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf)).



**Figure 7.** Refugees by Country of Origin: 2019 (millions).

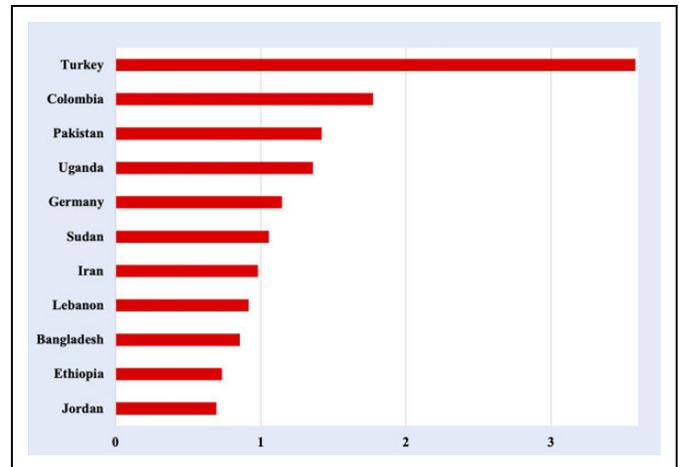
By the close of 2019, instruments designed to protect refugees or to combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking had been ratified by more than three-quarters of all UN Member States. In contrast, instruments protecting the rights of migrant workers had been ratified by fewer than 30 percent.

## Present Day

The novel coronavirus outbreak that is believed to have begun in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 created an unprecedented worldwide health crisis. By mid-March, a pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO). By that time, many countries worldwide had already decided to close their borders. Governments hoped that limiting travel from abroad would curb the spread of the coronavirus.

By April no less than 90 percent of the world's population, or 7.1 billion people, resided in countries with restrictions on people arriving from other countries, including tourists, business travelers, students, and new immigrants (Connor 2020). Many countries also imposed a self-quarantine period, usually 14 days, for those allowed to enter the country (OECD 2020). Most countries suspended asylum hearings, claims, and resettlement programs; some also banned the entry of asylum seekers.

Adding to its earlier restrictions, the United States in April became the first, and so far the only, country to explicitly justify mobility limitations not on grounds of health risk, but to protect the jobs and economic well-being of US workers (Chishti and Pierce 2020). The US administration has further extended and broadened its travel restrictions to the end of 2020, making its



**Figure 8.** Refugees by Host Country: 2019 (millions).

current policy the most sweeping ban on immigration in American history (Somin 2020).

The new US travel restrictions limiting the importation of foreign labor and suspension of various foreign work-visa programs are opposed by many business leaders. They contend that those travel restrictions will block their ability to recruit critically needed workers from countries overseas for jobs that Americans are not willing to do or are not capable of performing (Shear and Jordan 2020). Some believe that the US administration has seized on the coronavirus threat to public health as a pretext to issue a series of policy changes affecting almost every aspect of the immigration system, including asylum, immigration, and naturalization (Herreta and Tsui 2020).

As a result of the travel bans and mobility restrictions, the movement of people across international borders came to a virtual standstill. In just a matter of several months, the world experienced the biggest and most rapid decline in global human mobility in modern times.

Following the closing of their borders, countries began taking additional measures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. Those measures included economic shutdowns, sheltering-in-place, school closings, and social isolation. The economic, social, and political fallout from those and related measures had immediate and calamitous economic consequences on migrant-sending countries and exacerbated the conditions and vulnerabilities of many immigrants, their families, and their communities.

Not only were migrant workers unable to travel in search of work, but also many headed back to their home

countries. Due to the border closings and travel restrictions, however, some migrant workers were stranded abroad and unable to return to their home countries. The pandemic and the fear of the outsider or foreigner shifted migration rhetoric further, by expanding the focus to include the risk to individual health security as well.

The living and working conditions of international migrants made them especially vulnerable to contracting COVID-19. In some places, stranded migrants were crammed into shelters, encampments, and overcrowded hotel rooms. Consequently, those migrants were unable to practice social distancing or easily protect themselves against infection (Cai and Lai 2020).

In May, the UN Network on Migration and the nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch called on all governments to suspend deportations and involuntary transfers between facilities during the pandemic. They noted that deportations create serious health risks for everyone, including migrants, public officials, health workers, and social workers in both host and origin countries.

Although migrants tend to be younger than the local populations, they tend to live and work in crowded conditions that do not permit social distancing, putting them at increased risk of contracting the disease (Kluge et al. 2020). This occurred in Singapore, where an estimated 40 percent of the country's COVID-19 cases in mid-April were low-skilled foreign workers, and in Saudi Arabia, where more than half of the cases were foreigners.

Migrants' socioeconomic status also negatively affects their ability to take all precautionary measures against COVID-19 and to receive medical care if contaminated due to lack of or inappropriate health insurance and insufficient financial resources. Among international migrants, those in irregular situations are often uninsured and may be reluctant to enter medical facilities for fear of being reported and deported.

In some countries, public services were extended to undocumented migrants. In other parts of the world, rapid returns and expulsions of migrants overwhelmed countries of origin, which were unprepared to deal with the sudden, sometimes large-scale arrivals. For example, the United States, which has the largest number of coronavirus cases in the world, is reported to be spreading the pandemic beyond its borders by continuing to deport thousands of immigrants, many infected with the coronavirus, to poor countries ill equipped to cope with the

disease (Editorial Board 2020). In late April, the government of Guatemala reported that nearly a fifth of their country's coronavirus cases were linked to deportees from the United States (Montoya-Galvez 2020).

The economic contractions and job losses of migrants in the world's major economies resulted in sharp declines in migrant remittances. Those declines, estimated to be the sharpest in recent history (World Bank 2020c), have negatively affected the families of migrants in their home countries. In addition, the declines in remittances are threatening food security and increasing poverty levels in many migrant-sending countries, where a significant proportion of their GDP relies on migrant remittances.

The World Bank reported that the pandemic and the shutdown of rich economies on which many poor countries depend "could push as many as 60 million people into extreme poverty," reversing earlier global gains. In announcing the largest and quickest crisis response in its history, the World Bank (2020b) said in mid-May that it had begun emergency operations to support — with \$160 billion in financial aid — 100 countries that contain 70 percent of the world's 7.8 billion people.

The pandemic has exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons. The resettlement of refugees has stopped for all practical purposes due to limitations in air travel. Moreover, the living conditions of those in refugee camps were of concern for decades before the COVID-19 crisis. The spread of the pandemic and its consequences are endangering the lives and well-being of these people even further.

Migrants living in camps at the doorstep of Europe or the United States face the possibility of a devastating virus outbreak given their proximity to highly affected countries and often cramped living conditions, coupled with already stretched healthcare services. Social isolation is not an option for those residing in the camps, with access to water and sanitation remaining a serious challenge.

The travel restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic, however, did not stop the movement of people fleeing conflict, violence, and dangerous and inhumane living conditions. Many people who choose to leave home are not headed to guaranteed employment; they are escaping conflict and poverty.

As economies continue to crater, sowing poverty, food shortages, and desperation, the desire among the

neediest to relocate will most likely increase again, leading to increased smuggling of migrants. For example, along the Western and Central Mediterranean, the smuggling of migrants continues not least because of the continued conflicts and violence in the region (UNODC 2020).

In some countries, the closure of borders and lockdown measures have also resulted in a rise in extreme nationalism and insularity, leading to xenophobic sentiment among administrations and their citizens. Immigrants are being viewed as carrying and contributing to the spread of the coronavirus to communities.

Some populist leaders have sought to stoke and exploit the health security issue (Gostoli 2020). In March, for example, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in an interview with Kossuth Rádió, “Our experience is that primarily foreigners brought in the disease, and that it is spreading among foreigners.”<sup>9</sup>

## Near Future

With most borders closed and governments generally limiting entry into their countries from abroad, it is evident that the virus has largely halted human mobility across the planet (Salcedo, Yar, and Cherelus 2020). Until a vaccine for the coronavirus becomes widely available, it appears highly likely that at least for the near future, the restrictions on international migration will by and large be maintained.

WHO has recently warned of a dangerous phase of the pandemic as outbreaks widen across regions (Bosman 2020). Resurgence due to the reopening of economies has increased the number of cases significantly in countries worldwide. The outlook for containing the coronavirus has significantly worsened, with 81 countries experiencing an increase in new cases during the first half of June. WHO has urged nations to continue taking aggressive measures to contain the spread of coronavirus as cases rise at an alarming rate (Neuman 2020).

People are increasingly dissatisfied and weary with being at home, however, and wish to return to their normal daily lives and livelihoods. Also, governments are understandably eager to open up their societies, restart

their national economies, and lower high unemployment rates. Some health experts, however, caution that measures to boost the economy by bringing more people back to work may be happening too soon and may contribute to a significant increase in coronavirus cases.

Also, due to difficult living conditions and violence in many migrant-sending countries, which have been worsened by the coronavirus pandemic, the numbers of refugees, asylum seekers, and irregular migrants are likely to increase in the near future. As has been the case throughout history, when people face conflict, natural disasters, and poverty, they relocate in hopes of finding safety, relief, and opportunity.

It is being widely reported that a vaccine for the novel coronavirus may become available by early 2021. If that turns out to be the case, then a gradual return to normal is likely to emerge given the powerful push and pull forces influencing international migration (Table 2).

The world’s population — currently at 7.8 billion — is projected to add nearly 2 billion additional people by the middle of the twenty-first century. Virtually all of this future population growth will take place in developing regions. For example, whereas Africa is projected to add more than 1 billion people to its population by mid-century, the population of Europe is expected to decline by nearly 40 million during the next three decades (Figure 9).

The populations of no less than a dozen African countries will at least double in size during the next three decades (Figure 10). Niger’s population, for example, is expected to nearly triple between now and mid-century, increasing from 23 million to 66 million.

In contrast, many developed countries will experience population decline as well as the rapid aging of their populations. Italy and Japan, for example, are projected to have smaller populations by 2050, with more than one-third of their populations aged 65 years and older. It should therefore not be surprising that many developed countries are turning to immigration to address their shrinking workforces and growing numbers of elderly (Gelin 2020).

The potential impact of international migration on future national populations can be appreciated by examining projected populations with and without migration among countries with varying demographic conditions. For some countries, especially the traditional immigration countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand,

<sup>9</sup>For interview, see “Hungary’s Orbán Blames Foreigners, Migration for Coronavirus,” *France 24*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200313-hungary-s-pm-orban-blames-foreign-students-migration-for-coronavirus-spread>.

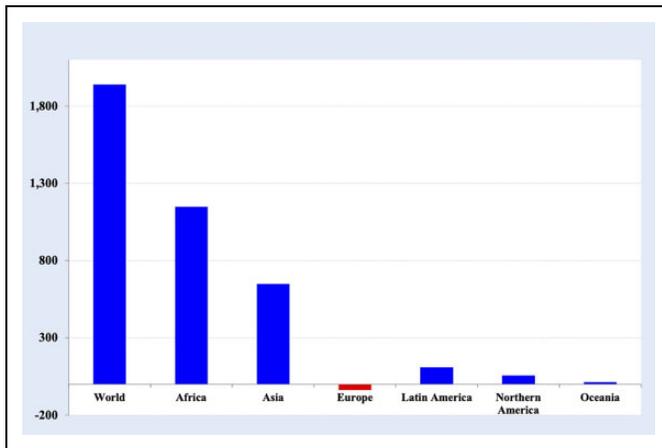
**Table 2.** Major Push and Pull Forces Driving International Migration.

In countries of destination:

- Population decline and aging from below-replacement fertility.
- Labor shortages, combined with desire for low-wage and service workers
- High-skilled brain gain
- Improved transportation and communications
- Opportunities for children
- Safety net for families

In countries of origin:

- High population growth, high fertility, and young age structure
- Unemployment, underemployment, and limited career development
- Urbanization and growth of megacities
- Living conditions, including poverty, housing, schooling, and climate change
- Political, social, and ethnic unrest, violence, and armed conflict
- Lack of opportunities



**Figure 9.** Population Increase for World and Major Regions: 2020–2050 (millions).

and the United States, as well as France and the United Kingdom, international migration accounts for a substantial amount of future population growth during the next three decades. In the case of Canada, the absence of international migration implies a decline of about 5 percent in its current population size by midcentury (Figure 11).

In other developed countries, such as Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Spain, Russia, and Ukraine,

international migration reduces the expected declines in their future populations due to their projected negative rates of natural increase. In Germany, for example, the absence of international migration is projected to result in an 11 percent decline in its population by 2050.

For traditional emigration countries, such as Bangladesh, Mexico, Kyrgyzstan, and the Philippines, projected populations would be larger in the future without the outflow of their emigrants. In Bangladesh, for instance, its population by midcentury is expected to experience a 17 percent increase with migration versus a 23 percent increase without migration.

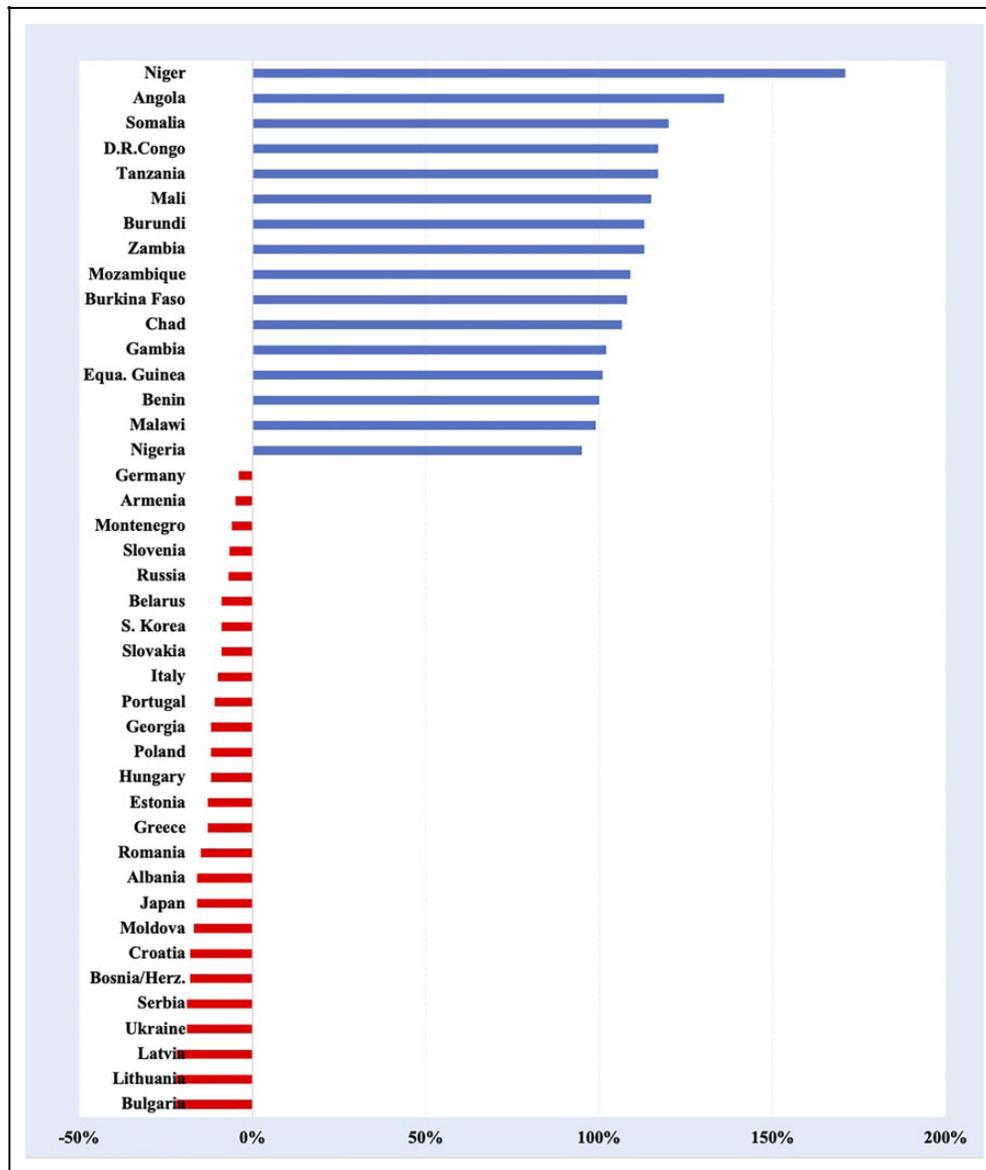
In addition to demographic factors, other powerful push factors are influencing people's desire to emigrate. Prominent among those factors are difficult living conditions, human rights abuse, violence and armed conflict, climate change, environmental degradation, and shrinking natural resources. According to international surveys (Esipova et al. 2018), the number of people indicating a desire to immigrate to another country is estimated at more than 1 billion. That figure is considerably larger than the current 272 million migrants worldwide and far exceeds the world's average level of approximately 6 million migrants per year (Figure 12).

Reasonable future levels of legal immigration will be insufficient to absorb even a fraction of those wishing to emigrate. Consequently, irregular migration will likely increase in the future. Syrian refugees in Europe and Central American refugees on the US border are stark reminders that people will make arduous and dangerous journeys in hopes of a better life when they are left with little to nothing at home.

Another important issue that is expected to affect international migration levels and trends in the near future is the demand and types of work. With advances in modern technology, the nature of work is continuing to evolve, with some jobs lost and others created, as is well evidenced during the recent past (McKinsey 2017).

Automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence are expected to make a shift as significant as mechanization in manufacturing and agriculture. The International Federation of Robotics estimates that the number of industrial robots deployed worldwide in 2018 was approaching half a million, which is nearly a quadrupling since 2010 (World Robotics 2019).

Some have noted concerns about a possible dystopian future, characterized by massive job loss due to



**Figure 10.** Population Change for Selected Countries: 2020–2050 (%).

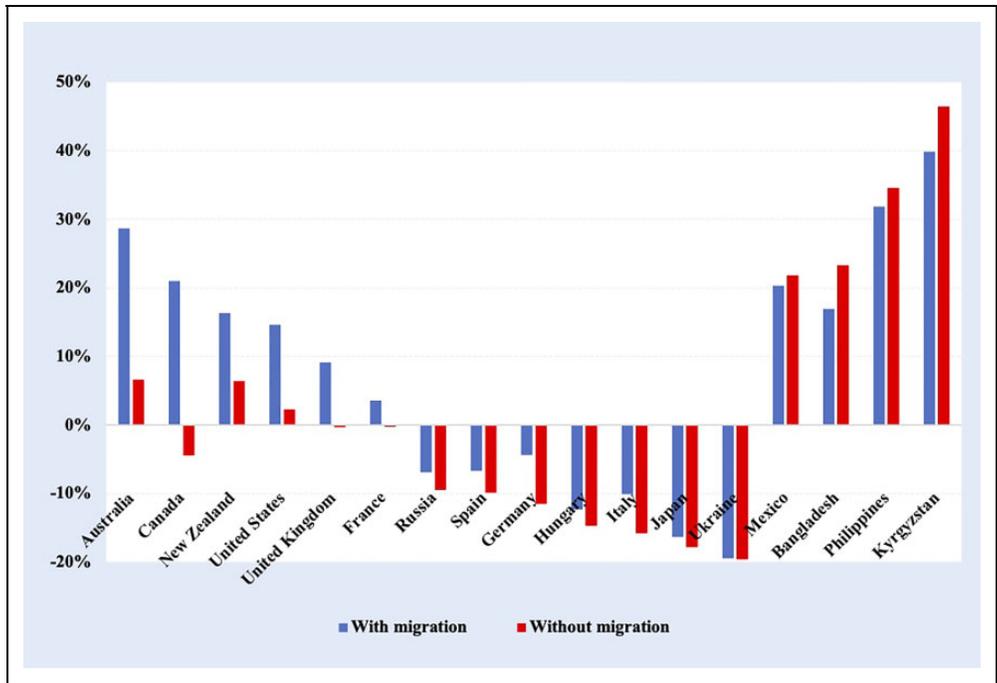
automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence, and have accordingly outlined ethical standards to guide the future of work (Kerwin 2020). Others have considered the question of whether humanoid robots or androids might be a solution to declining and aging populations, especially for countries wishing to avoid large-scale immigration to address their shrinking labor forces (Chamie 2017).

Various scenarios have been advanced to assess the numbers and types of jobs in the future that might be created and those that are likely to be lost due to automation. While the adoption of technology can cause short-term labor displacement, history has shown that

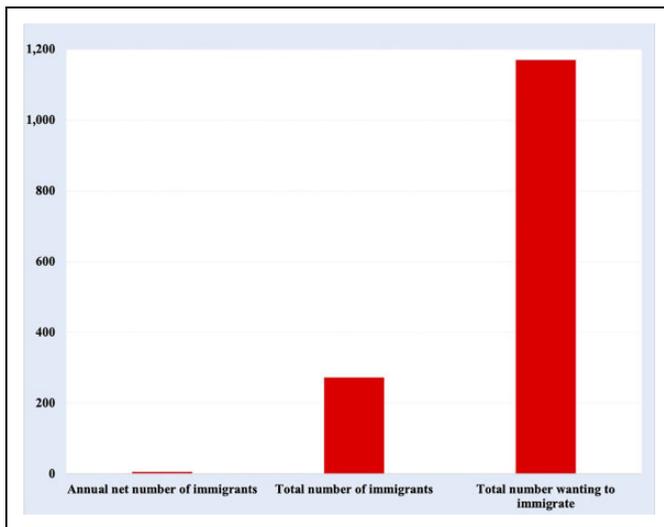
in the long term, it creates new employment opportunities and unleashes demand for existing jobs (McKinsey 2017).

While there may be enough work to maintain full employment in the near future, the shifts in occupations are expected to be challenging, with many workers needing to learn new skills. Even when some jobs are automated, employment in those occupations may not decline because workers may perform new tasks.

Also, work activities in environments that are unpredictable, such as health and medical providers, care of children, and elderly and personal services, are less likely to be lost to automation because those



**Figure 11.** Population Change with and without Migration: 2020–2050 (%).



**Figure 12.** Total Number Wanting to Emigrate, Total Number of Immigrants, and Annual Number of Immigrants: Around 2019 (millions).

jobs are difficult to automate. Increasingly, the labor force on which many of the largest economies rely is to a large extent made up of service workers. Those workers include international migrants in various occupational categories, especially in low-paying and grueling jobs that most native workers are reluctant to perform. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted

the vital contributions performed by many migrant service workers.

Globally, public opinion is divided on the question of whether to increase, decrease, or keep present immigration levels. On average throughout the world, 34 percent would like to see immigration decreased, 21 percent increased, and 22 percent kept at its present level (International Organization for Migration [IOM] 2015). Except for Europe, people in every major region are more likely to want immigration levels in their countries to either stay at the present level or to increase, rather than to decrease.

In a growing number of countries, however, irregular migration is viewed as a serious threat to national sovereignty and security, undermining the rule of law, eroding support for legal migration, and contributing to nativism and xenophobia. For many nationalists, far-right political parties, and their vocal supporters, the changing demographics have come down to “too few of us and too many of them” (Chamie 2020). They believe that demography is destiny and consider the demographic changes being brought about by international migration to be undermining their fundamental way of life.

The unprecedented scale of displacement that has recently occurred has placed the global refugee system under visible strain, as humanitarian agencies and host communities struggle to provide for ever-rising needs.

According to the UNHCR, “We are witnessing a paradigm change, an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before” (UNHCR 2015).

## **General Observations and Principles to Guide Policy Making**

The world is now in the midst of a sudden, devastating crisis due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. By mid-2020, no less than 12 million coronavirus cases and more than half a million deaths have been reported. The COVID-19 pandemic has moved from being a health crisis to becoming the worst social and economic crisis in recent times (Willmer and Broom 2020).

The wide-ranging consequences of the coronavirus are continuing to reverberate worldwide, and it is not clear when the crisis will be resolved. WHO warns that as countries ease the lockdown rules, the worst of the coronavirus pandemic still lies ahead with the pandemic speeding up and its repercussions spreading (Neuman 2020). A number of general observations regarding the pandemic and international migration can, however, be offered at this point in time. National measures to combat COVID-19 need to include international migrants, irrespective of their legal status, and should complement regional and international responses.

Despite the desires and attempts of governments to stop the entry and lethal spread of the coronavirus among the populations of their countries, it should be abundantly clear to all by now, especially government leaders, that COVID-19 respects neither international borders nor national sovereignty. Without a visa or official authorization to enter, the virus in the span of just a few months has traveled rapidly across continents and within countries worldwide.

In contrast to governments, the virus is not concerned with nationality, citizenship, or immigration status. It simply does not care about such matters. For the lethal coronavirus, it is not personal; it is strictly business, infecting, spreading, and possibly ending human life.

Many nations and world leaders remain divided on how to combat the coronavirus (Feuer and Kim 2020). WHO believes that the lack of unity and global solidarity is contributing to the spread of the virus. In addition to the recommended guidelines to address the pandemic

and curb its spread, national measures need to include international migrants irrespective of their legal status and complement coordinated responses of international organizations. Localities, nations, and the international community should prioritize the safe return and reintegration of migrants.

The coronavirus pandemic has largely brought human movement to a halt, which is unprecedented in modern times (Semple 2020). In addition to the global restrictions on international travel, billions of people have been negatively affected by the pandemic’s expansive economic fallout.

Many migrants have been obliged to return to their home countries. Due to the closure of borders and unavailability of transportation, some migrants became stranded in difficult living conditions and crowded detention centers, which facilitated the spread of the coronavirus. In addition to affecting various types of migrants and travelers, the pandemic has also significantly limited the entry and processing of refugees and asylum seekers. States and the international agencies should plan for the gradual reemergence of large-scale migration based on traditional push and pull forces, once a COVID-19 vaccine is widely available.

A return to the levels and trends of international migration in the recent past is dependent on the availability of an effective vaccine. Promising developments to develop a vaccine are currently underway. Some have suggested that a vaccine for the coronavirus may become available near the end of 2020 or in early 2021.

Following the availability of a vaccine, international migration is expected to gradually return to its pre-pandemic levels. During the past half century, international migration has become a fundamental and essential component of the globalized economy, with many countries relying on immigration to help fuel future economic growth (Smialek and Kanno-Youngs 2020).

The powerful push and pull forces that influenced international migration trends and levels in the past have not disappeared. Those forces will reemerge and reassert themselves in the future. In particular, rapid population growth in sending countries coupled with declining and aging populations in receiving countries will exert tremendous pressures on international migration. States should redouble their efforts to reconcile national border

security concerns and the basic human rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Even in the absence of a vaccine, irregular migration will likely increase. The pandemic has worsened already difficult living conditions in most migrant-sending countries. COVID-19 has stalled many of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.<sup>10</sup> In many developing countries, the measures to mitigate the pandemic's impact have overwhelmed health systems, shut down businesses and factories, and severely affected the livelihoods of much of the workforce (United Nations 2020).

In particular, economic instability, famine, human rights abuses, social unrest, and armed conflict, especially in Africa, are increasing the likelihood of new flows of refugees and asylum seekers as well as "survival migrants" (Betts 2013). Consequently, many men, women, and children who have little chance of emigrating through regular means can be expected to turn to irregular migration to remedy their desperate and worsening living conditions.

In addition to the considerable risks to the migrants, the consequences of irregular migration are seriously challenging the capacities and finances of government authorities and intergovernmental organizations as well as public attitudes toward immigrants. The situation has been further complicated by the coronavirus pandemic, which has given nativists and others a "justification" for keeping migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers out of the country (Somin 2020). Reconciling border security concerns and the basic human rights of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers remains a major challenge for migrant-receiving countries. States and the international community should accelerate their efforts to address climate-related migration.

In the coming decades, climate-related migration is expected to become an even more critical challenge than it is today. Increasing numbers of people, especially in the developing regions, will be forced to adapt to global warming and changing environmental conditions, with many deciding to migrate to survive. A recent landmark ruling by the UN Human Rights

Committee found it unlawful for governments to return people to countries where their lives might be threatened by a climate crisis (Lyons 2020). Under such a judgment, tens of millions of people could be displaced and become refugees in the near future due to life-threatening climate and environmental changes (Taylor 2017).

By midcentury, some have estimated that as many as 1 billion environmental refugees may result from climate change (Laczko and Aghazarm 2009). In contrast to the coronavirus pandemic, no vaccine for climate change is envisioned that would reverse global warming. States of origin, transit, and destination should directly address the challenges of international migration, and not minimize them.

Finally, in a postpandemic world, international migration will continue to raise developmental opportunities and humanitarian challenges for communities, nations, international organizations, as well as the migrants themselves. Governments of origin, transit, and destination countries; international agencies; and nongovernmental organizations are continuing to struggle on how best to manage the challenges posed by the growing numbers of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons.

Denying or minimizing the challenges of international migration will not make them disappear or diminish their weighty consequences. Fully recognizing and understanding the determinants and consequences of international migration will facilitate national, regional, and international efforts in the formulation of effective policies and development of appropriate programs.

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<sup>10</sup>See the statement of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in his report, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals*, [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26158Final\\_SG\\_SDG\\_Progress\\_Report\\_14052020.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26158Final_SG_SDG_Progress_Report_14052020.pdf).

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