

Migration in a sustainable world

We recognise that there are many legitimate reasons for wishing to migrate. We support the right of political asylum, for example. In an increasingly global economy there are valid reasons why employers and their staff seek freedom of movement and, with families increasingly spread around the globe, people will often wish to move for personal reasons.

Ideally, we would prefer a world where people had unfettered freedom of movement. In a fully sustainable world, communities would be in balance with their environments and the resources available to them. There would also be relatively small differences in living standards between regions. Under these circumstances, there would be little pressure for large-scale net migration.

At present, economic disparities between countries are pronounced. Whilst there remain large differences in living standards between developed and developing countries, pressure to migrate will continue and is likely to intensify. Additionally, the increasing number of people aspiring to higher standards of living is putting ever greater demand on dwindling resources. The ensuing conflicts over remaining resources are also likely to increase the number of refugees around the world. Moreover, accelerating climate change is likely to increase the number of people who are forced to relocate because their homelands are made uninhabitable, for instance by sea level rise, because it is no longer possible to grow sufficient food, or because the water supply fails.

One of our principal concerns is the impact that large scale migration has on the sustainability of destination countries. Typically these are more economically advanced than the countries from which their immigrants

originate. But they do not necessarily have greater amounts of sustainable resources per capita and are often already consuming at an unsustainable level, with many of their imported resources coming from developing countries.

The world must address the causes of migration. The two essential aspects are:

1. enabling sustainable economic development to provide viable livelihoods *and*
2. providing universal access to affordable reproductive health services to reduce population growth.

The UK situation

The UK is an appealing destination for many would-be migrants, with a high standard of living, a globally accepted language and a relatively generous and open welfare state. It is, however, also the most densely populated of any of the larger European countries. The UK population is projected to continue rising at least until the middle of this century due to the combined effect of increased longevity, a relatively high birth rate (albeit below replacement level) and net inward migration.

The present UK ecological footprint is approximately four times its biocapacity. This indicates that there is already a much higher population than can be supported sustainably at the present standard of living. The extent of this difference is too large for realistic improvements in technology to render the UK sustainable in the foreseeable future. Therefore any net inward migration to the UK can only exacerbate the extent to which the country is drawing down resources from other parts of the world. The situation will eventually become untenable and living standards are

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likely to fall. Even if the birth rate drops significantly, the population will not fall for some decades.

It is argued that large numbers of immigrants are required, either to fill low paid jobs, or to support an ageing population. We believe such arguments are short-sighted and that, in any case, such shortages can be addressed through better management of the UK workforce. We propose that net migration between the UK and non EU countries is balanced, i.e. the number of inward migrants should not exceed those leaving the country.

As a member of the European Union, free movement of labour between the UK and elsewhere in the EU is a treaty obligation. It is anticipated that net inward migration from other EU countries will become less attractive and diminish as newer member countries are helped to develop.

Immigrants from developing countries generally come from cultures where the practice is

to have more children than the UK average and immigrant women therefore tend to have a higher birth rate than those born in the UK. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of immigrant mothers in 2009 was estimated at 2.48 compared to 1.84 for those mothers born in the UK¹. Hence, it is clearly as important to explain the benefits of having smaller families to new citizens as it is to existing ones.

Immigration can generate strong emotions. What we suggest is that the issues it presents need to be discussed openly, rationally and objectively if we are to find the best solutions, both for our own citizens and those of other parts of the world. Any such solutions are likely to allow some level of migration to continue, but without undue adverse effects on the sustainability of destination countries.

Population Matters does not accept that matters of race, religion, ethnicity or culture should be influencing factors in setting government policies on migration.

Reference

Accessed 06/12/2010

1. www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/births0810.pdf