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# GLOBAL MIGRATION AND THE “GREAT RESHAPING”

The future of societies worldwide is currently being reshaped at a fundamental level by concurrent crises: the coronavirus pandemic, the resulting economic recession and climate change. Steven Vertovec considers how these three crises are seriously affecting global migration. He describes the complex factors that relate to global migration and outlines the challenges that loom ahead.

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National politics, international institutions, legal parameters and economic structures and social practices are already undergoing a process of fundamental change today. Until now, migration has been an important driver of economic vitality, social transition and political changes all over the world. However, the pandemic has had a hugely negative impact on global migration. Now that borders are largely closed and economies are constrained, millions of migrants have been made destitute. As key workers, many migrants are disproportionately exposed to the risk of infection with Covid-19 in hospitals and care homes, food factories and agricultural businesses. Whether or not they are seen as being highly skilled or low skilled, currently migrants all over the world are also particularly affected by job losses.

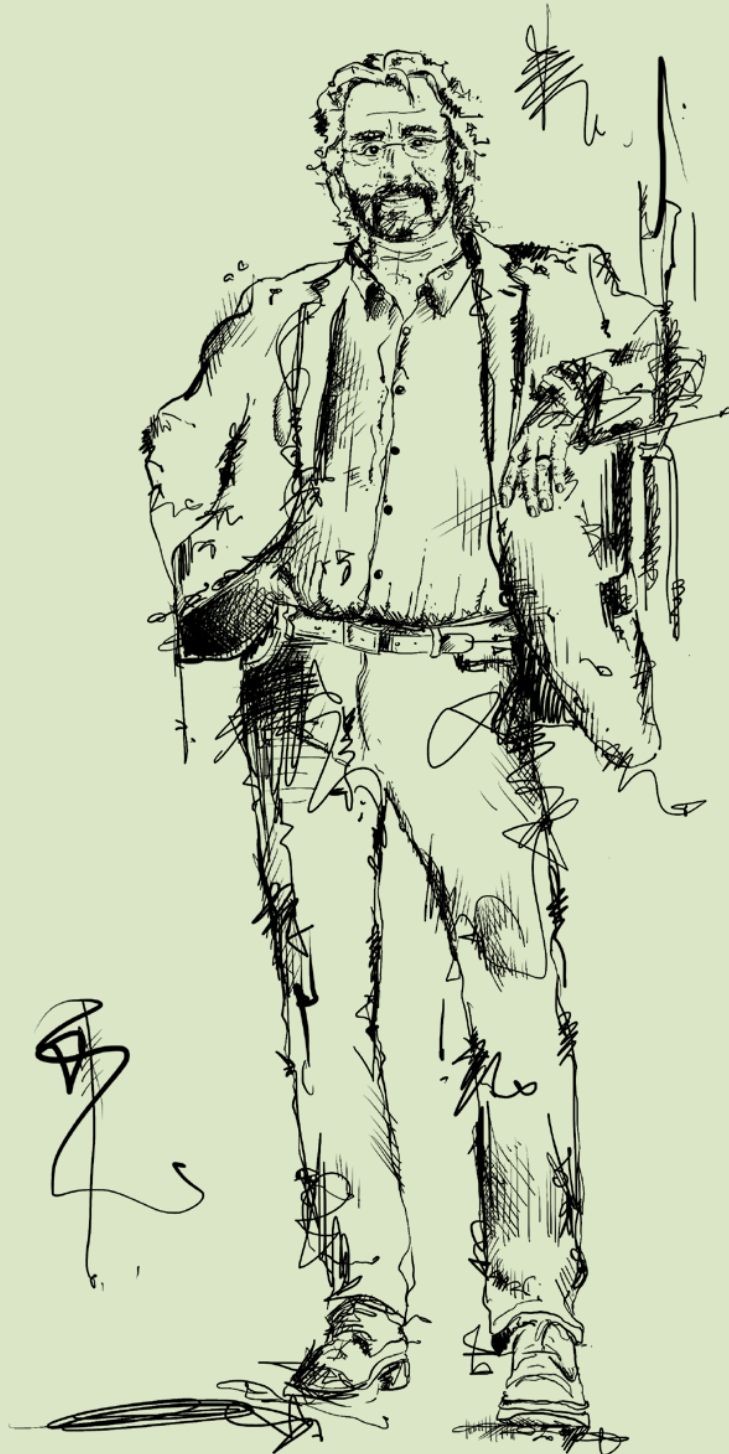
At the same time, national politics, international institutions, legal and economic structures and social practices are already undergoing a process of fundamental change. As a result of the pandemic, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the European Union all forecast the worst economic breakdown since the Great Depression. In fact, this breakdown has already started. A reduction in demand for goods and services, the interruption of supply chains and the resulting bankruptcy among businesses are all leading to large scale unemployment. The recession is also taking its toll in the developing countries. Before the outbreak of Covid-19, the amount of money transferred by migrants to their home countries totaled more than USD 554 billion. That corresponds to triple the amount of money contributed

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# VIEW POINT

## STEVEN VERTOVEC

ILLUSTRATION: SOPHIE KETTERER



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Steven Vertovec, who is from the U.S., studied anthropology and religious science. He gained his doctorate at the University of Oxford, where he eventually became Professor for Transnational Anthropology and the Director of the Centre for Migration, Policy and Society. In 2007, he was appointed Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Goettingen. He has worked as an expert and an adviser on migration issues on behalf of various British ministries, the World Bank, the European Commission, the G8 and UNESCO. His core theories on migration are reflected in his concept of “superdiversity”, which describes the growing complexity of many societies around the world.

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by the industrial nations as development aid. These transfers have already decreased by 20 percent, and further reductions will follow. For dozens of countries and countless households, this money is essential in order to survive. Now that these payments are being reduced, a large number of people will inevitably fall into extreme poverty

The climate crisis will have significantly worse and more far-reaching consequences on global migration than the pandemic and economic crisis. The Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change assumes that by 2050, global warming will be at least 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels, and possibly even higher (particularly in certain regions). Both “rapid” changes are expected, such as extreme weather events and flooding, as well as “slow” changes through ongoing droughts, a rise in sea levels and a decrease in the supply of food and clean water. Estimates of how many “climate migrants” will be created as a result vary widely. The International Organization for Migration estimates that by 2050, between 200 million and one billion people will have to leave their homes due to the climate crisis.

**MIGRATION IS  
A HOUSEHOLD  
STRATEGY:  
ONE MEMBER  
LEAVES HOME  
IN ORDER TO  
SUPPORT THE  
OTHERS FROM  
FAR AWAY**

Before the pandemic, there were around 272 million migrants worldwide (or 3.5 percent of the total global population). We know from research that migration is never a question of obvious push-and-pull factors or clear differentiations between voluntary and enforced migration. When viewed as a system, migration is so multi-faceted that it makes sense to apply complexity theories used in mathematics and physics. Important factors here are the growing number of migrants and their increasing differentiation with regard to age, gender, level of education, nationality and legal status. These features are increasingly interacting and mixing, creating emergent new systems. All this leads to unforeseeable processes and unpredictable chains of events.

The reasons why people are leaving their home countries also vary widely. Instead of the simple concept that persecution leads to “refugees” and poverty leads to “economic migrants”, we have to understand that migration always has several causes that are interwoven. Among others, these include political reasons, such as when a state riddled with corruption, suppression and violence, failing to provide for its people. Other causes are of a social nature, such as the desire for education, health and wellbeing, or the causes may also be economic and demographic, arising from increasing competition for resources due to a growth in the population, for example. Finally,

there are ecological reasons for migration, such as destruction of the environment and climate-related disasters. All of these causes are interdependent, continuously reinforcing and compounding each other.

Migration only rarely entails the movement of entire groups of people (for example due to wars or flooding). Instead, it is usually a strategy employed by an individual household, from which one or more members move away in order to gain access to resources with which they can support those who have stayed behind. For people in rural areas, the first step can be moving to a city, while migration to a neighboring country is often the next option; long-distance international migration is a more radical, though often

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necessary, option. In all cases, economic resources are an essential requirement for people who decide to migrate. For this reason, the people who migrate from a country are not usually the absolute poorest, unless they are forced to leave.

Among those who migrate to another country, the destination, mode of travel and the conditions under which they leave are determined by several factors. So-called regular channels involve numerous immigration regulations and visa programs that apply to the individual states, with complex preconditions that have to be met in each case. Programs for uniting families make it easier in different ways for relatives to follow on. By constantly experimenting with migration regulations, governments have attempted to meet the demands of employers and to control public opinion. Migration that occurs beyond the framework of immigration measures and employment migration measures is termed "irregular". The lack of opportunities for international migration via regular channels often leads to exploitation by people smugglers. Refugees are defined as people who are officially recognized as being persecuted and in need of protection. Generally, migration channels tend to correspond to specific combinations of nationality, ethnic origin, religion, age, gender, education and class. Over the past 30 years, the configurations of these characteristics

of migrating populations worldwide have changed considerably, creating a condition of "superdiversity" that is markedly more complex than social structures of the past.

After a migrant arrives in a destination country, what happens next depends on yet another series of influences. There is no uniform "integration" process. Rather, integration is a broad concept referring to an array of areas: the labor market, housing, language acquisition, education, legal administration, every-



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day interactions, social services and healthcare. One's ability to participate in each of these areas often depends on factors including legal status, linguistic competence, age, gender, work skills, social networks, and education levels.

As part of the Max Planck Society research initiative on migration, integration and exclusion, we have learned that the "integration" of those migrants who came to Germany during the mass migration of 2015/16 was dependent on the interplay of elements, including asylum policies, adjustments in the law, municipal and civil reactions, discrete approaches of local authorities and migrants' own needs and resources. Minor contextual differences, such as administrative structure, type of accommodation, or even the specific town or city to where an asylum-seeker was sent, led to fundamental differences in the procedure, speed and success of a person's "integration".

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WHEN WEALTHY  
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The fact that national policies, legal frameworks and economic structures are currently undergoing a process of fundamental change will influence all these elements and processes surrounding global migration, likely limiting opportunities for migrants. The pandemic has already led to numerous restrictions on international mobility. Covid-19 and the risk of future pandemics have led to specific measures designed to limit the risk of infection and restrict cross-border migration. The economic crisis will lead to high levels of unemployment, which in turn will decrease demands for imported labor, and possibly also reduce the level of public acceptance of economic migrants. In developing countries of the global South in particular, the climate crisis will lead to insufferable conditions, which will cause a further deterioration of the economic situation and further intensify the complex causes of migration. The decline of agriculture and fishing will lead to a wave of migration to cities, which will in turn create enormous social, economic and ecological strain. While some countries might promote migration as a kind of pressure valve, others, particularly those that are currently considered to be fragile, might collapse, triggering mass displacement.

Some international observers are calling for a special status for "climate refugees". However, this looks highly unlikely. Since there is a wide range of reasons why people migrate due to climate change, it will be very difficult to develop a specific concept of refugee "protection". Also, however the term "climate refugees" is defined, there will be far too many of them for the world

to be able to meet their needs. A vicious circle is looming: the more the wealthy countries try to limit global migration, the more money transfers to poor countries will decrease. This in turn will increase the level of hardship among the people in those countries in which ecological, economic, social and political conditions are steadily worsening. This will lead to the desperate need for even more migration. What can we do?

ONE ANSWER  
COULD BE  
TEMPORARY  
CIRCULAR  
MIGRATION  
PROGRAMS

We need political decision-makers to start developing future-oriented ideas now. The standard approach of considering problems in isolation and then offering conventional, short-term solutions must be abandoned. Instead, systemic, complexity-oriented research, assessments and answers are needed. Despite a number of different ideas (including the “Global Compacts”), there is no international system for regulating migration. One possible coordinated, multi-faceted answer could be the establishment of new, large-scale, more comprehensive cooperation programs for temporary, circular migration between developing and wealthy countries. Such programs already exist, such as the Canadian program for seasonal agricultural workers. In the receiving countries, these programs offer important sectors (for instance, care work, agriculture and construction) the workers they will still significantly need

despite the great reshaping, as well as money transfers for the families of migrants and foreign capital for their countries of origin. Due to their temporary nature, programs such as these are often more acceptable to the members of the host country. An integrated set of new technologies could make it easier to administer, safeguard and “healthproof” such programs. These include technologies for data processing and screening for competence and disease, as well as for monitoring working conditions, facilitating return travel home and providing international money transfers and investments. If they are introduced on a large scale, bilaterally or even globally, these time-limited, circular migration programs could offer many advantages that might help alleviate some of the effects of the three crises – the pandemic, economic depression and climate change.

This “great reshaping” marks the beginning of a new age that presents us with urgent and momentous challenges. Global migration should not be regarded as part of the problem, but as an opportunity to take remedial action.

