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ANALYSIS

Mass migrations, income inequality and ecosystems health in the second wave of a globalization

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares conditions for intercontinental migrations during the first and the second globalization waves and proposes a system model describing basic relationships between migrations, income inequality, economic growth and environment. The model suggests that in a situation where a strong asymmetry in economic power and wealth dominates global economic and political relations, further trade and migration liberalization may have predominantly negative impact on Southern natural systems, while solving little or nothing of the poverty problems. In the North, uncontrolled immigration may in the long run produce economic, social, and probably ethnic tensions which costs could by far exceed the medium-term benefits (rejuvenation of active population and reduction in the strain imposed on the pension system).

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Mass migrations¹ are closely intertwined with globalization dynamics and with income/wage gaps that exist among emitting and recipient countries (Williamson, 1996; Hatton and Williamson, 1998). During the first wave of globalization in the late 19th–beginning of the 20th century, mass migration flowing from Europe to the US (and to other New World countries) reduced wages and increased inequality in the receiving countries, while producing contrary effects in the Europe. The perceived

effects of immigration on wages produced intense political debate in the receiving countries and by the year 1914, as a result of restrictive immigration legislation and protectionist measures (especially in the US), the globalization process was halted (Williamson, 1996; Hatton and Williamson, 1998). The current globalization wave has been unfolding under substantially different conditions which pull migration dynamics in different directions. First, we have diverging demographic trends between North and

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¹ What is the benchmark that distinguishes «large scale» or mass migration from lower scales is not entirely clear. We can resort to the historical example of emigration from Europe in the period 1870–1910 to have an idea as what may be a mass migration. Some 13% of Europe's labor force migrated from poor rural areas to the New World during those 40 years and from some countries, e.g. Italy and Ireland, emigrated as much as 45% (WDR, 2003, pp. 72–73). Williamson (1996) calculated that net immigration to the U.S. in the period 1870–1910 contributed 27% to the total size of the labor force in 1910 and refers to it as a mass migration. By contrast, cumulative migration to the US from 1970 to 2000 represents less than 2% of the labor force in Sub-Saharan Africa and less than 5% in Latin America and Caribbean—the two regions with highest emigration ratio (WDR, 2003).

South,² which create a long term shortage of the labor force in the former and immediate excesses in the latter. Second, today's world population is three times larger than at the beginning of the 20th century and is still continuing to grow with an estimated peak between 8 and 11 billion in 2100 (Lutz et al., 2001). Third, emigration is less of an option today than it was when high-income countries were industrializing, and compared to the first wave of globalization, migrants from developing countries face legal migration restrictions and higher skill requirements (WDR, 2003, pp. 44, 73). Fourth, the wage gap appears to be considerably wider today than during the first globalization wave.³ Fifth, compared to the beginning of the 20th century human societies have overstretched the source and sink functions of ecosystems they depend upon: not only has the health of ecosystems worldwide deteriorated considerably but the growing scarcity of water and arable land in the Southern economies is reaching critical points (Worldwatch Institute, 2005). Finally, international terrorism and an increased demand for national security complete the modern scene on which migration takes place. Therefore, the context of the migration process in the beginning of the 21st century appears to be more complex and worrying than at any time before.

The key motives for migration can be identified in economic, demographic, environmental and socio-political factors. Among these count political persecution, war, natural disasters, lack of employment, family reunification, and rural poverty (Nierenberg, 2002). Export-oriented agricultural policies and intensification of agricultural practices in the South also contributed to the ongoing migration process from rural to urban areas. Large cities in the South with their scarce capacity to provide adequate employment become focal points for emigration of unskilled and skilled labor alike in the direction of the industrialized North. The "real motivator of migration," according to Homer-Dixon (1999) "is the gap between the potential migrants' current level of satisfaction and the level they expect to attain in a new land. The larger the gap, the greater the incentive to migrate (Homer-Dixon, 1999, p. 110, quoted in Nierenberg, 2002). Given the large and still growing gap in the average standard of living between the North and South, the motive to move along this wealth gradient appears to be intense. The numerous cases of accidental death along illegal immigration routes and the frequent criminal abuse reported in media suggest that desperation rather than prospect of higher wages drive at least some of the current immigration dynamics.

² "North" refers to high income (GNI p.c. > 19,000 US\$) OECD countries, while "South" refers to low income (GNI p.c. < 3,000 US\$) countries that lie between the 7th and the 12th parallel of latitude.

³ The average PPP equivalent wage in the OECD countries was 16 times higher for farm labor and 22 times higher for unskilled construction work than in most Southern countries (WDR, 2003, pp. 72–73). The figures on wage difference between Europe and the US in the 1870–1910 period reported in Williamson (1996) appear to be within much lower range.

The United States is the largest recipient of foreign-born migrants—at the end of the 1990s, more than 25 million nonnative citizens lived in this country, accounting for nearly 10% of the total population (Nierenberg, 2002). Although this information is not comparable to historic data of the first globalization wave (see footnote 1), it appears that this does not yet constitute a case of mass migration. Opponents to (mass) migration in the US added recently to the old argument of rising inequality an environmental one: they claimed that most new migrants to the US use up more resources and do more eco-damage than they did back home. This argument, even if proven to be technically correct, is rather trivial in the larger context of the aforementioned global trends. In the national context it is dwarfed by potential problems like those highlighted by Herman Daly: "In the face of unlimited migration, how could any national community maintain a minimum wage, a welfare program, subsidized medical care, or a public school system?" (Daly, 2004).

At the global level, figures show that "more than 150 million people—about 3 out of every 100 human beings—were living outside their country of origin as the new century began" (Nierenberg, 2002). However, most migration occurs on the same continent and more than half of all international migrants live in developing countries (Nierenberg, 2002). According to a recent report, "for developing countries today, outmigration from the rural periphery is toward coastal urban centers and peri-urban shantytowns, not North America, Western Europe or other developed countries" (WDR, 2003, p. 73). Consequently, we are still not facing anything close to the world mass migration process, especially in the South–North direction (see also Williamson, 1998). In the next section I will explore a systemic link between globalization, mass migrations (as if it were to happen), economic growth, income inequality and environment.

1. The centripetal pull of Northern growth

Ecological economics can provide a systems perspective on the mass migration issue by encompassing the three interrelated dimensions: ecological, social and economic. I take a sustained material growth of economies, which is both a marking phenomenon of modernity and a central dogma of the neo-liberal worldview, as a starting point in a systems analysis of mass migrations.

There is a systemic drive for material growth in complex, market-based, socioeconomic systems. It comes from at least three sources: (1) profit expectation on private and corporate investments, (2) income inequality among the active population, and, (3) increasing costs of managing complexity. The first stands as the basic motive of entrepreneurship, and is essential for free markets to exist at all. In a nutshell, it creates a positive feedback loop where an increase in economic activity is expected to increase profits, which are then partially reinvested in expanding the business. This process is further fueled by capital markets, which reward present growth and promises of future growth, and thus put constant pressure on the

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