

September 20, 2006

Are Migrants the Hope of Mankind, or a Blight on Man's Future?

By Douglas A. Sylva

There is a simple truth that all of the moralistic posturing of United Nations apologists cannot obscure: when it comes to international development policy, ideology matters. Beliefs guide policy design, which in turn affects outcomes.

And so it is worth examining the current United Nations debate on worldwide migration, to see how ideology may impede or assist the international community's response to this massive issue (in 2005, there were 191 million international migrants).

To begin with, there is a dispute over whether the very existence of international migration is a problem to be solved, or an opportunity for continued economic development. Those who look upon globalization – the movement of information, goods and capital across borders– as the driving force for international poverty alleviation, will also look upon the movement of people in a positive light.

So, the UN Population Division, the international community's chief statisticians and demographers, tend to see migration positively, since it contributes to the globalization that has been improving the lot of people worldwide. According to the Population Division, "migrants bring to the global economy hard work, courage, a willingness to take risks in order to succeed....Chiefly, international migration today is one of the additives that makes the global economic machine perform better. And, as an 'additive,' it generally improves human well-being." The Population Division goes on to say that, "migration not only improves economic outcomes, it is also part of the glue that ties societies together and that exposes the 'us' to the 'them' and, in the process, makes us all aware of the similarities that unite us, migrants and natives, and of all that we have in common." Here is confidence and optimism based upon knowledge.

The Population division also makes it clear that, if economic development from globalization is to continue, migration will also have to continue, even increase, due to the simple fact the developed world is not reproducing adequately: "Although demography is not destiny, it certainly shapes it....Because developed countries are farther along the path to population ageing than the rest of the world, they are poised to see their working-age populations decline. And without migration, the expected deficit of young people in developed countries would be even greater." Thus, migration can be considered a necessary good, keeping the rich world rich and making the poor world richer.

Contrast this with the opinions of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the international community's professional population controllers, who look out onto the world with dismay, where all human growth, be it in consumption or in population, is akin to infestation. According to UNFPA, migrants are not courageous risk-takers seeking out greater opportunity, but refugees escaping the horrors of overpopulation, "fleeing poverty, a degraded environment, conflict or human rights violations." About the only good thing that UNFPA can say about international migration is that it "relieves population pressure."

And so UNFPA's response to migration is dreadfully predictable: reduce population. If there are fewer people in the world, fewer people will move: "Today the highest unmet need for family planning is in sub-Saharan Africa....These are the same countries with the highest rates of poverty and population growth, factors that often lead people to migrate....There is a connection between financial flows for population and migration flows."

UNFPA is joined in this contention by its allies, mainly the governments of Scandinavia. As a Swedish minister put it last year, "Let me particularly highlight the importance of sexual and

reproductive health and rights. This question embraces all parts of society and is necessary for social development.” In other words, not only is population control and reproductive rights the correct response to international migration, it is the correct response to every international issue; by this logic, reducing the number of humans necessarily reduces the size of every human problem.

Whether optimism or pessimism wins out during the current UN debate will largely determine how the international community addresses international migration.

Should we welcome migrants, and protect their rights, in order to help them to contribute to the burgeoning international economy, or should we spend our money to ensure that the developing world follows the developed world on the path of its historically unprecedented fertility decline, with its familial, spiritual, and eventually economic, impoverishment? At essence, do we believe in human increase, or not – do we believe that humans should be fruitful and multiply, or not? As I said, ideology matters.