

# Immigration's Role Often Overlooked in Global Economy

Leif Brottem | February 7, 2006

The free flow of capital and information is the visible and oft-celebrated face of globalization. Hidden behind the flash of supply chains and e-commerce are countless people that migrate annually from the Global South to North America and Europe in search of work. These economic migrants form an immensely important but largely hidden side of globalization.

2005 was marked by vocal pledges by world leaders and celebrities to address poverty, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Pledges for more aid money were frequent, but there was very little discussion of economic immigration, which for millions of Africans, is an economic lifeline and the only form of globalization that exists. According to the Organization for International Migration, over 1.1 million people immigrate to the U.S. and Canada each year, the vast majority from developing countries. In the European Union, immigrants now comprise 5 percent of the population.

Despite increasingly hostile policies and attitudes towards immigrants in rich countries, the financial contribution they make to their countries of origin is larger than all forms of foreign development assistance combined. Official data show that development countries' remittance receipts totaled \$160 billion in 2004, exceeding development aid from all sources by 50 percent. Total remittances are expected to rise significantly in the years to come. Policies to reduce poverty will be inadequate without broad recognition of this important economic link between the rich and poor countries.

As politicians in the United States and Europe increasingly frame immigration in terms of domestic security, it is essential that new immigration policies do not impede its development contribution. Moreover, fears of terrorism should not impinge on the human rights of people already

living the U.S. and Europe. If the \$2.2 billion proposal to wall off a section of the U.S.-Mexico border is an indication, immigration to the U.S. is likely to become more perilous in the years to come. In December, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to crack down on clandestine immigrants. As it awaits action in the Senate, policymakers in France are also considering legislation that aims to reduce immigration.

The United States economy has an insatiable appetite for low-wage labor that absorbs immigrants by the millions. The same cannot be said for France, which has an unemployment rate that has hovered at 10 percent for years. Unemployment is much higher for immigrants and young people. Although immigrants, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, continue to attempt to reach the European Union by crossing the Mediterranean in rubber rafts, France is much less welcoming to its former colonial subjects than it used to be.

There is a long standing tradition of men immigrating from former French colonies such as Mali, one of the poorest countries in the world, to France in search of jobs and money to send home. In France, they find themselves in a paradoxical situation that is common in the industrialized world: immigrants are needed for their inexpensive labor but unwanted due to their cultural differences. Yet the second largest concentration of Malians, after the Malian capital of Bamako, is in the Parisian



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suburbs. France hosts the largest Muslim population in Europe and over six million immigrants. France does not, however, keep official statistics on ethnicity. Though this reflects France's republican ideal of equality regardless of background; it belies the nation's increasingly multi-cultural character.

French urban areas and U.S. border towns illustrate how deeply enmeshed the worlds of the rich and poor are at the dawn of the third millennium. Migrants risk death to cross militarized borders in Arizona and Morocco, where dozens of people were gunned down by border guards last year when they attempted to cross into Spanish territory. Those lucky to arrive in cities like Paris face a daily struggle to find lodging, employment, and most of all, to avoid expulsion back to their country of origin.

On a chilly January day, as shoppers rushed along the Parisian *Grands Boulevards*, immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa packed a nearby abandoned government building to conduct their weekly discussion of survival tactics and political mobilization. As France reels from the affects of nationwide riots last year, the stakes are high for foreigners wishing to become naturalized French citizens.

French citizenship and the future of foreigners in French society has become a pressing political issue. In November, 2005, nationwide riots demonstrated the limits of the traditional French model of assimilation, in which immigrants are expected to adhere to French cultural norms to gain acceptance. Many of the rioters were youth of North and West African descent, born in France but often lacking a clear place in French society. The riots followed an incident in which two young male immigrants died while being pursued by the police.

French Interior Minister and leading Presidential candidate Nicholas Sarkozy was quick to react to the riots with a threat to expel foreigners who participated, whether they are legal or not. Sarkozy's

infamous reference to the rioters as "*racailles*" or scum, only added to the tensions between the authorities and France's immigrant communities.

"When Sarkozy speaks of delinquents, he is referring to the *sans-papiers*" declared one of the leaders of the collective at the January 7th meeting. *Sans-papiers*, "without papers" in French, is the common term for illegal economic migrants. As the French government seeks to reform its immigration policies, 2006 will be a crucial year for these immigrants, who number in the hundreds of thousands in France alone.

Sarkozy would like to start sending 25,000 clandestine immigrants home each year and curtail the availability of residents permits to those who remain in France. The November 2005 riots provided a pretext of law and order for this move but the real reasons lie much deeper. France faces a chronic unemployment problem and while African immigrants take jobs that often go unfilled, they are an easier scapegoat for the failure of the French economy to create jobs. Moreover, the French have long been ambivalent about globalization and the competition it brings. One reaction is to turn inward and reminisce about *la gloire Francaise* and prosperous days of yore, which is what many French politicians have chosen to do.

The French reaction to its illegal immigrants reflects the complex and paradoxical social dynamics of globalization. Riots were also caused by the failure of France's assimilation model to integrate the children of African, particularly Muslim, immigrants into French society. This has allowed politicians to lump together and target marginalized French youth and Africans who are in the country to work or go to school. Police conducting security checks on the Paris Metro make no distinction and the result can be expulsion for no crime other than carrying the wrong identity card.

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Bemadji Koulo-Bezo, a Chadian national, who lived in France for 16 years and has worked as a consultant to the World Bank, has been asked for his passport twice since moved to the city of Montpellier just a few months ago.

The policy of targeted expulsion denies the human rights violations it can engender. In some African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, immigrants risk political persecution if they are sent home. Leaders of the *sans-papiers* collective spoke of a man from the West African nation of Mauritania who was recently expelled from France but no longer welcome in Mauritania. He was promptly sent back to France.

Former Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin predicts a rightward shift in French politics for 2006, in part due to the public reaction to the riots. Discussing a post New Year's spate of vandalism on a train in Southern France, participants in the meeting recognized the writing on the wall as one warned: "You will see who pays the price: the *sans-papiers*."

African immigrants in France, whether officially recognized or not, simply demand an end to the country's discriminatory policies, which make life so difficult for those who simply look "foreign." They demand recognition that they do make the positive contributions to French society, which politicians claim to be necessary for immigrants to stay in the country.

Immigrants' demands reflect the basic reality that as long as millions live on less than a dollar a day in Francophone Africa, people will continue to move to France in search of work. According to the Organization of International Migration, initial signs of a debate on a "right to migrate" are emerging in expert circles. This debate should include a recognition that financial flows from economic immigrants are growing in importance and value.

The importance of remittances to communities across Africa and the rest of the Global South instills tremendous resilience amongst the individuals who provide them. Without accounting for the sizeable contribution from clandestine immigrants, \$14 billion in financial remittances reached Africa in 2003. In France, walking to the money transfer shop is risky if one's papers are not exactly in order. Immigrants in Paris help each other avoid arrest by text messaging warnings about subway patrols. If arrested, they resist persecution by asserting their rights to interpreters. The *sans-papiers* collective provides naturalization assistance and other legal help.

Due to current climate of insecurity, rich governments such as France and the United States are pursuing policies that are a far cry from the free movement of people. Fears of terrorism and the spread of diseases are creating, rather than removing, walls between nations. This trend has created a disconnect between popular images of a seamless global economy and the struggle of millions of economic migrants to find a livelihood in the industrialized North.

In order for the speeches about ending poverty to ring true, U.S. and European immigration policies should adapt the reality of the 21st century: rich and poor countries are highly integrated through formal and informal channels of immigration. This integration is irreversible due to the enormous gap between rich countries and the Global South. As immigration grows in the coming years, building walls and conducting spot passport checks will do nothing to prevent terrorism but poses serious risks for immigrants simply seeking a better life for their families.

Citizens and governments worldwide should instead seek to reform immigration policy within a framework of basic human rights. This would pro-

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duce numerous benefits: First, by legitimizing economic immigration, it would disempower human trafficking networks, which are prospering within the current framework of domestic security. Second, a human rights framework would facilitate and even vulgarize the expanding flows of financial remittances.

Finally, and most importantly, a human rights framework for immigration would help the international community heal the divisions that currently represent the most clear and present danger to people worldwide.

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