

Migrant crisis or poverty crisis?

Why free movement is vital in the battle for global justice

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Photo: © Jess Hurd/Global Justice Now

31 March 2016: Global Justice Now, with the help of guerrilla projectionists Feral X, project “Refugees welcome” across the iconic white cliffs of Dover, just before an alliance of far-right groups were due to hold anti-migration protests in the town

There is no migrant crisis. It is true that thousands of people die every year attempting to cross the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. According to the International Organisation for Migration, over 25,000 migrants have died in their attempt to reach or stay in Europe since 2000.

But this is not a crisis caused by migrants. It is a crisis caused by war, poverty and inequality. Rich countries, with the help of the highly profitable security industry, have tried their best to use cruel migration controls, fences, walls and even guns to force people to accept lives of violence and destitution. This is not the solution. No matter how high the walls of Fortress Europe become, the only way to solve this problem is to deal with its root causes.

Freedom of movement can help us defeat poverty and inequality. It can help us to develop knowledge, skills and understanding, as well as generate large flows of remittances from the global north to the global south. What’s more, most people in Europe and North America believe that they have

“(Ecuador) advocates the principle of universal citizenship, the free movement of all inhabitants of the planet, and the progressive extinction of the status of alien or foreigner as an element to transform the unequal relations between countries, especially those between North and South.”

Constitution of Ecuador, 2008

a right to free movement. Given that our economy depends upon an unjust economic system that extracts resources from the global south, shutting these people out of our societies is little better than perpetuating apartheid on a global scale.

We need to argue for a better system. We must work towards free movement for everyone.

The migrant crisis – why it is happening

Framing the increased flow of people fleeing war and poverty as a 'migrant crisis' misses the point. It assumes that it is the arrival of these people, rather than the situations they are trying to escape, that is the problem. This is why it is necessary to see the migrant crisis for what it is – just one symptom of a number of global crises taking place now.

Poverty and economic inequality is, over the long term, the most important driver of migration. We live in a world in which 62 people have more wealth than the poorest half of the world's population put together.¹ Someone with the same skills doing the same job can earn many times more just by virtue of living in a rich country rather than a poorer country. How can we demonise those 'economic migrants' who are willing to go to extreme lengths to right this wrong? Some of the tabloid newspapers have convinced many that fleeing poverty is less legitimate than fleeing conflict. But the migrant crisis is a symptom of an economic system that concentrates economic wealth in the hands of a tiny elite. Until we change this system, people will do whatever is necessary to fight their poverty.

War and conflict is now raging all along Europe's borders. In North Africa, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Ukraine, people are dying and are being forced to leave their homes. Contrary to tabloid headlines, the vast majority of these people are not "coming to" Western Europe. Lebanon, a country half the size of Wales, has taken in over a million Syrian refugees² while 1.3 million are internally displaced in Ukraine.³ Compare this to the UK, which has pledged to take in just 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years.⁴ While it would be simplistic to blame 'the West' for all of this conflict, there is a pressing need to face up to the role of powerful countries and their arms trades in exacerbating the situation. UK arms companies continue to sell weapons that are being used by the Saudi armed forces to tear Yemen apart. Meanwhile, Russia has bombed civilians to bolster the rule of Bashar Assad while Turkey brutally attacks Kurdish attempts to defend their homeland. ISIS would not be controlling large swathes of Iraq and Syria had it not been for the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The unwillingness of European countries to welcome the victims of conflicts which they have fuelled is nothing short of hypocrisy.

Climate change is an important long-term driver of migration and it is a problem overwhelmingly caused by the rich. The poorer countries that will see the worst effects tend to have far lower emissions than rich countries like the UK. While it is hard to say exactly how much forced migration is 'caused' by climate change, the impact over the long term is clear: increased drought, famine, flooding and natural disasters will disproportionately affect poorer countries. This exacerbates the pressures that already exist in these countries. A recent study has argued that climate change might have played a role in sparking the conflict in Syria.⁵

Unfair trade deals. Unequal economic relations between countries like the UK and those in the global south have long perpetuated the poverty that fuels economic migration. Trade deals like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), forced Mexico to open its market to highly subsidised US food products, putting hundreds of thousands of (often indigenous) Mexican farmers out of business. Mexican wages dropped an average of 23% and extreme poverty rose. This directly led to an exodus of people, who often worked illegally on farms in the US.⁶ The next generation of trade and investment deals including the Trade-in-Services Agreement (TISA) and TTIP, the EU-US trade deal being promoted as a 'gold standard' for all future deals, could intensify inequality and, therefore, movement of people.

Colonialism, or at least the long term legacy of it, also plays a part in forced migration flows. The economies of colonies in the global south were designed around extractive industries and the export of low value-added commodities to Europe. Since independence, many of these countries have remained dependent on these activities, albeit with international 'investors' replacing colonial authorities as the main economic beneficiaries of extraction. But as multinational companies (the real 'economic migrants') cross borders to exploit resources abroad, local people who bear the brunt of extraction are forced to move from their land, often from rural areas to cities, but also across borders.



August 2015: Protesters hammer on the fence surrounding Yarl's Wood detention centre to show solidarity with the women held inside

Photo: © Dajphotography.com

Profiting from misery: How security and arms firms cause and benefit from forced migration

As well as multinational corporations fuelling migration, 'dealing with' migrants has also become big business. In the UK, seven of the 11 'immigration removal centres' set up by the Home Office are now run by private companies for profit. The people detained at these facilities can spend months or even years behind bars, despite not having committed a crime.

Serco runs the infamous Yarl's Wood detention centre for women in Bedfordshire. Serco staff have been accused of sexual abuse against women in detention there.⁷ Although Serco denies the claims, there is little sign that the problems have been satisfactorily resolved. A recent report found that "male officers came into women's rooms without knocking and whilst detainees were showering" and that medical staff at the centre "did not take medical conditions seriously".⁸

Serco is not the only company in the business. The other companies involved in running detention centres in the UK are G4S, Mitie and Geo Group. In other detention centres, there have also been reports of detainees being used as cheap labour and being paid as little as £1 an hour to do work like cleaning.⁹

While the UK is a world leader at privatising immigration detention, profiting from immigration detention is not limited to Britain. Serco also runs immigration detention centres in Australia (a contract worth AU\$3 billion).¹⁰ Private security

is also big business in the USA while in Britain investors are also getting into the game. UK-based private equity firm Equistone has invested in the burgeoning asylum 'industry' through OX Group¹¹ who rake in almost \$100 million in revenue through the ORS Services company which runs asylum reception centres in Germany and Austria.¹²

But there's more to profiting from migrants' misery than locking them up. There is also the extensive border infrastructure going up across Europe. Hungary, a country that only 25 years ago was the first to begin dismantling the iron curtain, is now busy constructing a new fence along its frontiers with Serbia and Croatia. A trip to Dover or Calais reveals massive new security infrastructure that would seem excessive in a prison. Firms that construct fences, alarm systems and similar products are cashing in on this fear-fuelled bonanza. They held a Perimeter Protection trade fair in January 2016, after which the managing director of one company said that they "could hardly cope with the number of interested parties on our stand".¹³

Migration expert Hein de Haas believes that "Europe's immigration policies have created a huge market for the private companies" but have done nothing to alleviate the situation:

"While the same politicians fan the flames of xenophobia by insinuating that refugees will be a huge drain on public funds and a threat to social cohesion, they waste billions of public funds on border controls, which have not stopped irregular migration, but created a market for smuggling and increased the suffering and death toll at Europe's borders."¹⁴

Migration: Why it's not a threat

We are constantly being told that migrants threaten our way of life. Some of the tabloid press depicts migrants as possible terrorists, as sitting on mountains of benefit payments or, contradictorily, as people who 'take our jobs'.

But there are also voices critical of migration from within progressive circles. These people, unlike the borderline racists and xenophobes of the tabloid press, genuinely believe that migration serves the interests of big business by creating a race to the bottom on wages and conditions.

Well-meaning though this latter group of people may be, they are largely wrong. The evidence overwhelmingly shows that key public services like the NHS would face a crisis without immigration¹⁵ and that free movement within the EU has not significantly increased unemployment in the UK.¹⁶

There is some disagreement within academic circles on the impact of migration upon wages, though it seems that if there is an effect, it is a minor one. One recent study by the London School of Economics found that immigration has no effect on wages or unemployment at all,¹⁷ while another by the Bank of England found that a 10% increase in immigration is associated with a less than 2% reduction in wages of people in certain low skilled services jobs.¹⁸ The impact upon higher skilled jobs and low skilled jobs in manufacturing was much smaller. So it is wrong to blame immigrants for wage stagnation.

Even in the specific industries where migrant labour may be undermining wage levels, the answer is not to close the borders but to boost and properly enforce laws like the minimum wage. It is true that over the last 40 years, global elites have devised ways of lowering wages and attacking trade unions. Giving preference to immigrants who are paid lower wages helps to divide and rule a workforce.

But the solution to this is not to pull up the drawbridge, but provide properly funded public services, lessen pressure on social housing, pay the living wage, and enforce decent employment laws. The British government has consistently watered down or opted out of EU employment rights,¹⁹ while tabloid newspapers blame poor conditions and low wages on workers from other countries. British workers shouldn't buy into this divide and rule strategy.

What seems to impact jobs more than free movement of people is the free movement of capital. The ability of corporations to move around the world in



Photo: © Helen Sergent

March 2016: One of many banners hung at the Idomeni refugee camp on the Greek-Macedonian border

search of ever cheaper and less regulated labour means that trade unions have lost bargaining power, while workers have to compete with workers in much poorer countries. Economic causality can be difficult to prove, but there is plenty of evidence showing millions of jobs lost from western economies in the 1990s and 2000s as corporations relocated.²⁰

Already in 2007, the club of industrialised countries, the OECD, stated that there was a link between growing inequality and offshoring of jobs: "globalisation through increased offshoring has contributed to shifting labour demand away from less skilled workers and hence to rising earnings inequality".²¹

While freeing movement of people, countries need to be given the policy freedom to use controls on capital to reset the world economy in favour of the vast majority.

Building global apartheid or building global justice?

There is growing evidence that it might be impossible to truly stop migration.²² People will take desperate measures to escape poverty and violence. It has even been suggested that stricter rules actually *boost* net migration as they discourage people from leaving a country they had to struggle so hard to enter²³ and that people rush to migrate before rules get even tougher.²⁴

“Freedom of movement is a principle on which there can be no compromise because it does not seem acceptable to us that a mere piece of paper can determine the fate of individuals”

“To tolerate (a world with borders) means to tolerate apartheid on a world scale”

The French ‘sans papier’ movement

Even if we could stop migration, would that make for a just world? A world in which the rich enjoy a welfare state while locking out the majority of people who live in poverty is not a recipe for global justice. Post-war social democracy was too often built on the exploitation of the rest of the world. Given that our economy depends on the resources and labour of people from poorer countries, that is surely a system of apartheid on a global scale. A world in which people’s destiny is determined by where they are born is not a progressive vision. A system that relies on people not leaving their own countries and not being exposed to other cultures is a recipe for racism and xenophobia.

In Europe, we are witnessing ever more brutal approaches to immigration, and it is pushing the EU to disintegration. Schemes to pay Turkey to keep asylum seekers, prevent free movement from Greece or sealing off countries from one another, will not create a fairer and more equal Europe, but one that tears itself apart.

Academic migration expert Hein de Haas believes that “Unless the European Union turns into a closed police state by literally erecting a new Iron Curtain circumventing the entire Mediterranean coastline and Eastern land borders, ignoring all refugee and human rights conventions, and systematically deporting all people arriving at the borders – which is very unlikely – it is an illusion that refugees can be stopped from arriving.”²⁵

Does migration help fight poverty?

Freedom of movement is a right many of us take for granted. With a few exceptions, we can visit and even live in most countries in the world with only a minimum of effort. UK passport holders can visit 156 countries without having to apply for a visa in advance.²⁶ For most people from the global south, there is no such privilege. A holder of an Afghan passport, for example, can visit just a handful of

countries in Africa and some small islands. The people who rail against migration rarely argue that people from Europe or North America be stopped from travelling the world. Indeed, people who move abroad from countries like the UK are called ‘expats’ not immigrants.

This is unfair. A right that only applies to the rich is not a right at all.

But free movement is not just an end in itself. It also happens to be the most proven way of getting people out of poverty. The benefits of overseas aid, for example, are dwarfed by the benefits of migration for people in the global south. Four of every five Haitians who have come out of poverty (defined as earning over \$10 a day) have done so by migrating to the USA.²⁷

Contrary to those who claim that open borders lead to a brain drain in poorer countries, the evidence actually suggests that the opposite may often be true.²⁸ Free movement of people encourages education, and can encourage nurses, doctors, teachers and other professionals to return to their country of origin later in life. Even when a brain drain effect is present (which can be the case for very poor countries), the answer is increased public investment, not imprisoning people in their poverty.

Remittances, the money that people who migrate send back to their families at home, are also very important. This money was worth \$580 billion in 2014, well over four times the figure at the turn of the century.²⁹ This figure dwarfs combined aid budgets. Unlike aid and foreign investment, remittances tend to go directly into the pockets of people who would otherwise be poor. Recent studies have shown that remittances could be more important to economic growth than both aid *and* foreign direct investment.³⁰

Getting rid of the punitive charges placed on remittances would help this flow. While millionaires move money around the world with ease, migrants transferring money to relatives living in countries with less developed banking infrastructure pay huge fees to companies like Western Union. For example, to use Western Union to send £51 from the UK to Tajikistan, a country where remittances account for almost half of the country’s economy, it costs £9.90 in fees.³¹ That’s a fee of 16.5%. A 2014 report by the Overseas Development Institute found that people sending money to Africa through these services pay an average of 12% in fees.³² The money siphoned off by these companies each year would pay for clean water supplies to 21 million people.³³

Bridges not borders

Most of this evidence shows the benefits that come with current levels of migration. The more radical question to ask is: what if we got rid of borders completely?

Evidence is hard to come by, though one study claims that abolishing borders would add an additional \$39 trillion to the global economy over 25 years (a figure equivalent to 15 times the GDP of the UK).³⁴ Another study estimated that an open borders world would, on average, make each worker living in the global south \$10,000 a year richer (including those who do not migrate).³⁵ Such figures should be treated cautiously, but there's no reason to believe that free movement would destroy our economy or society – it's used as a bogey man to inhibit proper discussion and study. Some countries, such as Ecuador, have even committed themselves to promoting the eventual elimination of borders, as the extract from their constitution in the introduction shows.

It would be simplistic to argue that migration is the answer to the world's problems. Most people do not want to migrate unless they really have to. And the poorest do not even have the money to migrate.³⁶ The key to solving the migrant 'crisis' is solving the underlying problems of war, poverty inequality and climate change. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that migration is used by millions of people in the global south as a way out of the poverty caused by the current exploitative economic system.

Ultimately, a move towards full open borders would have to go hand in hand with a move towards a more equal world. In this case, open borders might even lead to less migration. Once you get rid of the extreme inequality that characterises the world at the moment, people will stop migrating because they have to, and only move because they want to – in the way that many Europeans treat movement today.

What needs to happen next

A world without borders and economic inequality sounds like a pipedream. But other struggles, like those for greater gender equality, gay rights and an end to slavery once also seemed hopelessly utopian. We need to move beyond merely arguing for a greater acceptance of refugees as a humanitarian impulse and argue for a universal right to free movement. Migration must become an issue of social justice.

Much of what needs to be done is what Global Justice Now has campaigned on for years: fighting global inequality, climate change, unfair trade and poverty. These are the root causes of forced migration. But there are also specific measures that we can fight for on migration specifically.

- **End the arms trade.** The arms trade is exacerbating the crisis. We must campaign for an end to the sale of weapons to countries like Saudi Arabia who use them to repress their own people and bomb others.
- **End immigration detention.** We must call time on indefinitely locking up people who have committed no crime. This is unacceptable unless there is genuine evidence of danger to society.

The cruel world of UK immigration rules

The UK's immigration rules are amongst the strictest in Europe. Since the Conservatives pledged to reduce net immigration to the 'tens of thousands' a number of cruel measures have been taken to convince the tabloid press that the government is being 'tough' on immigration.

This has led to absurd examples like the Zimbabwean family of a 5-year-old girl who died after being hit by a car being denied permission to attend the funeral, even after the family offered to be electronically tagged to ensure they would return home.³⁷ The culture of disbelief in the Home Office has led to gay asylum seekers

being told to 'prove' their sexuality by providing photo and video evidence of "highly personal sexual activity".³⁸ The rules around bringing in elderly relatives who need care have been made so tough that they have been described as effectively "a ban masquerading as a rule".

Cruel immigration rules do not just affect foreigners, they impact upon UK citizens too. The Home Office has also been busy splitting up families of UK citizens who have partners from outside the EU. If the UK citizen does not earn £18,600 a year (more if children are involved) they are not allowed to bring their partner into the country. This has meant thousands of children who are UK citizens being split apart from their parents. Family life is becoming a privilege of the rich.



November 2015: The day after the Paris attacks, around 9,000 refugees and supporters took to the streets of Hamburg for a demonstration proclaiming refugees welcome, equal rights for all and freedom of movement as a human right

- **End the culture of disbelief over asylum.** People fleeing countries like Syria must be assumed to be genuine refugees unless proven otherwise. At the moment, the opposite is the case. Asylum seekers are assumed to be 'bogus' until proven otherwise. We cannot contract out our responsibility for human rights by paying for Turkey to take refugees for us.
- **Join the Schengen border-free area and campaign to expand it.** The Schengen area is the world's most significant border-free area. We should join it and campaign to expand it, first to encompass the whole of Europe and then, in the long term, to include countries in neighbouring regions as a stepping stone to global open borders.
- **Give all workers labour rights.** Enforce minimum wage and labour rights and take away the threat of deportation from undocumented migrants who report exploitation. Trade unions must be allowed to defend the interests of all workers regardless of their legal status.
- **Amnesty on undocumented migrants.** Declaring an amnesty on so-called 'illegal' immigrants will allow these people to demand rights like the minimum wage and unionisation.

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Take action

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Global Justice Now campaigns for a world where resources are controlled by the many, not the few. With thousands of members around the UK, we work in solidarity with global social movements to fight inequality and injustice.

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