

Chapter 2

Meeting the Challenge

Understanding the Causes of International Migration

Unexpected movements of people have created regional tensions, exacerbated economic problems in host countries, taxed international humanitarian support systems, and created what some refer to as “compassion fatigue” in many receiving countries

Migration is as old as human history and international migration as old as nation-states. Documented and undocumented migration often have essentially the same causes. Many provocative hypotheses have been advanced to explain why some people emigrate while others do not. A consistent finding is that those most prone to emigrate are neither the poorest nor least educated but are among the most aspiring and energetic members of their communities. They generally have jobs at home when they decide to leave, although these jobs are often low-paying and with little potential for advancement. They choose to go abroad to improve their economic well-being. Most who come from a nearby place like Mexico do not at first intend to emigrate permanently. Many migrants hope to accumulate savings abroad to improve personal or family consumption, invest in housing improvements, purchase land, or finance a small business at home. (See Box 2.1, p. 10.)

The 1980s witnessed unprecedented levels of global migration—much of it unauthorized—from developing to developed countries. Unexpected movements of people have created regional tensions, exacerbated economic problems in host countries, taxed international humanitarian support systems, and created what some refer to as “compassion fatigue” in many receiving countries.

Box 2.1 - Theories of Migration

There is a rich academic literature discussing factors that propel international migration. The best known conceptual construct is the “push-pull” or neo-classical model. This asserts that individual migrants respond to wage and living standard differentials between poorer migrant-sending and richer migrant-receiving countries. This model does not by itself explain why some individuals migrate while others do not, and why there are migratory flows from some poor countries or areas therein and not from others.

Macro-structural models seek to explain migration using overall international relationships between dominant and dependent countries. These models approach migration from a historical perspective, holding that flows between particular countries follow earlier political or colonial relationships.

Micro-structural models seek to explain why individuals or households respond differently to social, economic and political forces. Individuals may migrate in order to contribute to a household’s welfare. An important offshoot of this school is the concept of social networks based on kinship, friendship and community origins. They ease the cost of migration when existing ethnic diasporas underwrite transportation expenses, help newcomers find jobs, and provide a friendly and familiar cultural environment for the migrants at their destination. That migratory flows persist even after the causes originally leading to them weaken is attributed to the resilience of social networks.

These models are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The Commission’s mandate gives priority to economic push-pull explanations. From a policy perspective, these factors are more amenable than others to policy interventions.

The reach of international migration has both broadened and deepened from the beginning of the century, when the principal destination countries were the United States, Canada, Australia, several European countries and, in Latin America, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Uruguay. Emigration is now a much more widespread global phenomenon.

Virtually all the countries surrounding the Mediterranean have sent large numbers of workers abroad, responding to labor recruitment in Western Europe or what appeared to be the insatiable labor demands of oil-rich Arab countries. People from Southeast Asia supply not only the labor markets of Malaysia, Singapore and Australia, but also Europe, the Middle East and North America. Africa is a continent in flux where the movement of people predates the formation of current independent states. People from Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean are found in large numbers in the United States and Canada.

Events in Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and other countries experiencing political crises have fueled significant migratory movements. Most people emigrate to seek improved economic opportunity. But many whose lives or freedoms are threatened go abroad in search of the security that is denied them at home. Others leave because of social discrimination. Still others seek to escape the effect of natural disasters or attempt to survive outside their own countries because of famine at home.

The easing of emigration restrictions that has accompanied the dramatic political changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe since 1989 has produced the largest wave of migration in Europe since the end of World War II. Some took advantage of long-denied freedom to travel to satisfy their curiosity about the West or Western consumer goods. Others seek to resettle in Western countries because they are refugees in the traditional sense or to improve their economic circumstances.

Most of the forces that have recently influenced the magnitude and character of global migration are not likely to abate soon. Developing the international machinery to respond to migration poses a major challenge for the world's migrant-receiving countries. The United States, with its proud immigrant heritage and whose very personality has evolved from the influx of immigrants, has a special responsibility to meet this challenge.

Labor Force Growth

Most of the world's developing regions experienced a phenomenal acceleration in population growth rates following World War II. Immunizations through modern public health programs, large scale sanitation measures, and the introduction of chemical insecticides and antibiotics dramatically reduced mortality, particularly of infants and young children. In the absence of offsetting declines in births, the rate of natural increase soared. Population growth in the developing world increased dramatically

The experience of Mexico and Caribbean Basin countries illustrates the ensuing population growth that typified developing countries worldwide. Mexico's population more than tripled between 1940 and 1980, from 20 million to 67 million. An additional 21 million people added during the last decade bring the total to 88 million. This pattern, on a smaller scale, was much the same in Central America, whose population (including Panama) increased from about nine million in 1950 to 28 million in 1990. With minor variations, these trends were repeated elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere.

One important consequence of accelerated population growth has been unprecedented growth in the number of young children who reach working age some 15 years later, swelling the ranks of new jobseekers. These young adults concurrently reach the age of childbearing and family formation, repeating the cycle over the next generation. Since fertility declines only gradually, the absolute size of each new generation is greater than its predecessor. Population growth acquires its own momentum and its effects are felt over many years. The momentum is such that even after significant fertility declines get under way, it still takes decades for population growth to slow appreciably. (See Figure 2.1, p. 12.)

One million persons now enter Mexico's labor force each year, compared with two million new jobseekers in the United States, which has a population almost three times greater and an economy almost 30 times larger.

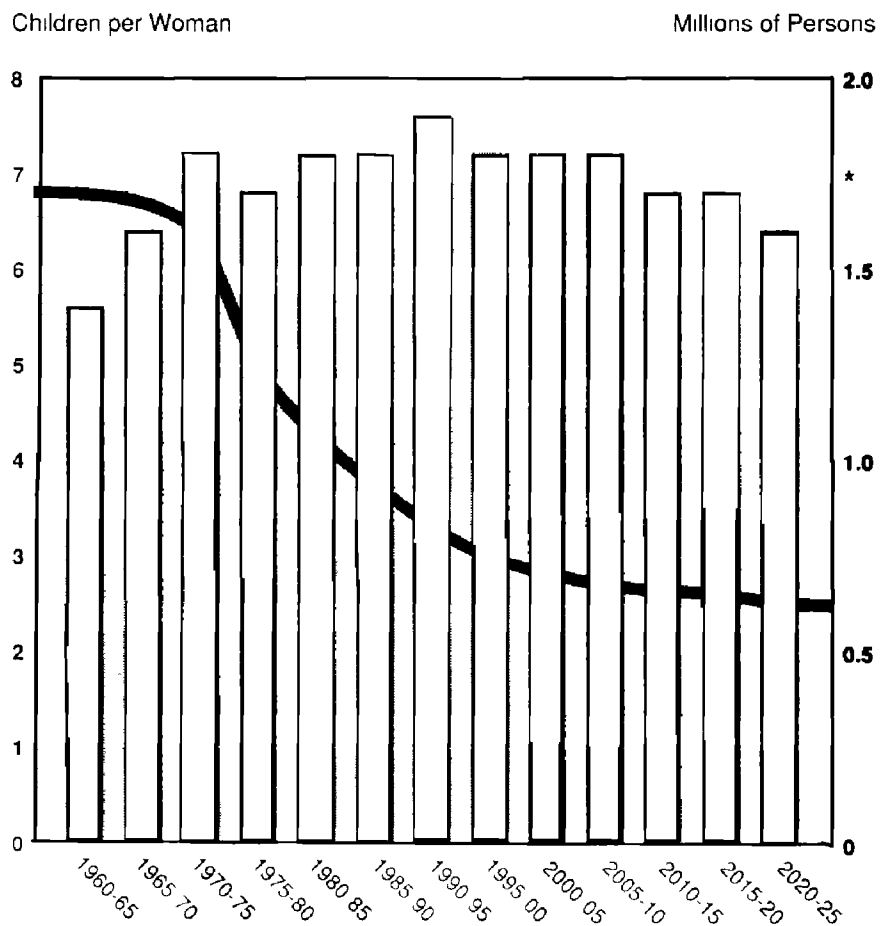
The number of persons in Mexico's labor force has increased by more than 3 percent a year since 1985, while overall population has grown at 2.2 percent a year. In the entire Caribbean Basin region and Mexico, the number of people in the labor force will have almost quadrupled from 24 million in 1950 to 92 million by the year 2000. Mexico will account for the bulk of this growth, with an increase from 9 million people to over 40 million. One million persons now enter Mexico's labor force each year, compared with two million new jobseekers in the United States, which has a population almost three times greater and an economy almost 30 times larger.

The rapid growth of the labor force will continue to strain the region's ability to provide enough employment opportunities for both young workers and increasing numbers of women joining the workforce. While male labor force participation rates are projected to remain relatively stable, female participation is expected to rise sharply in most countries. For example, the proportion of economically active working-age women in Mexico grew from 10 percent in 1970 to 20 percent in 1990, with further increases expected. (See Figure 2.2, p. 13.)

FIGURE 2.1
Mexico: Average Annual Population Increase and Total Fertility Rate By Five-Year Intervals, 1960 to 2025

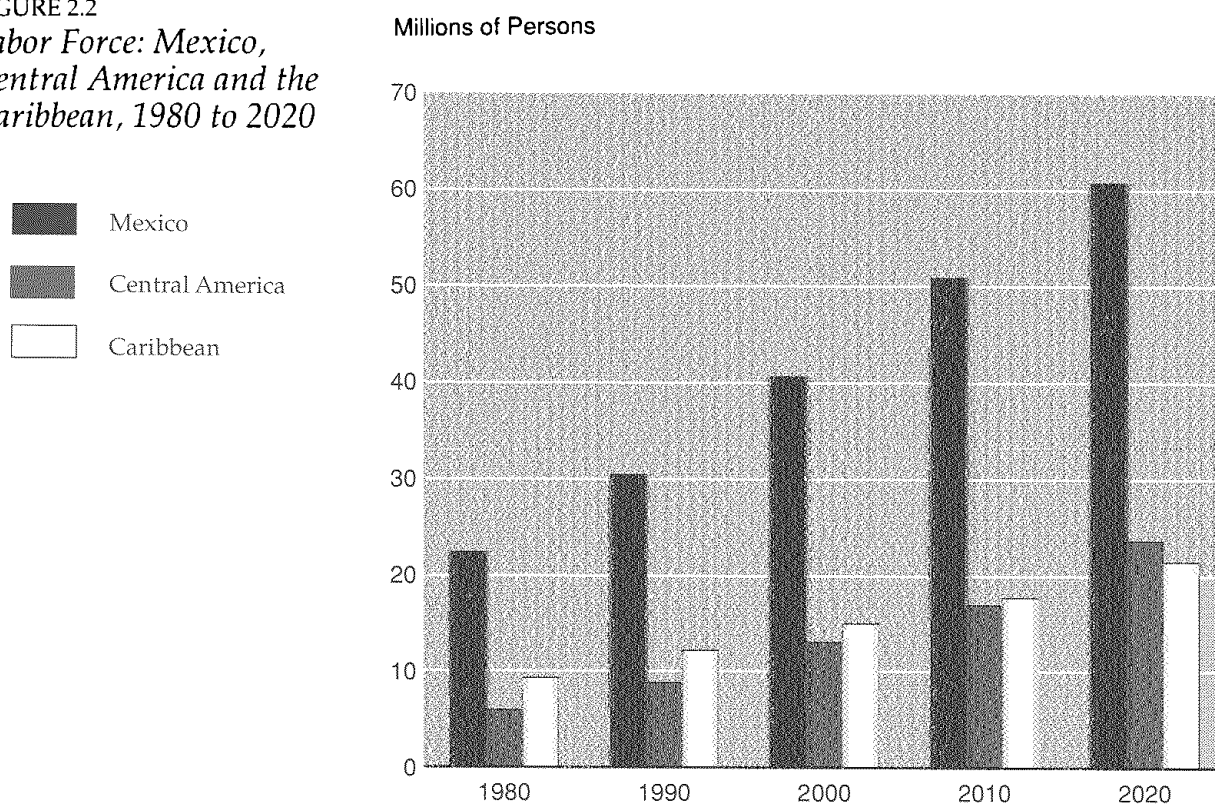
□ Average annual population increases
■ Total Fertility Rate
(Average number of children born to a woman over her reproductive life)

*Despite a 40 percent fertility decline between 1970 and 1989, Mexico's population will grow in 1990 by as many people as it did in 1970. Even by 2025, when the annual population growth rate is projected to decline to about one percent (down from a high of 3.3 percent annually in the 1965-70 period), Mexico's population will still be increasing by about 1.5 million yearly.



Source: United Nations

FIGURE 2.2
*Labor Force: Mexico,
 Central America and the
 Caribbean, 1980 to 2020*



Source: International Labor Office.

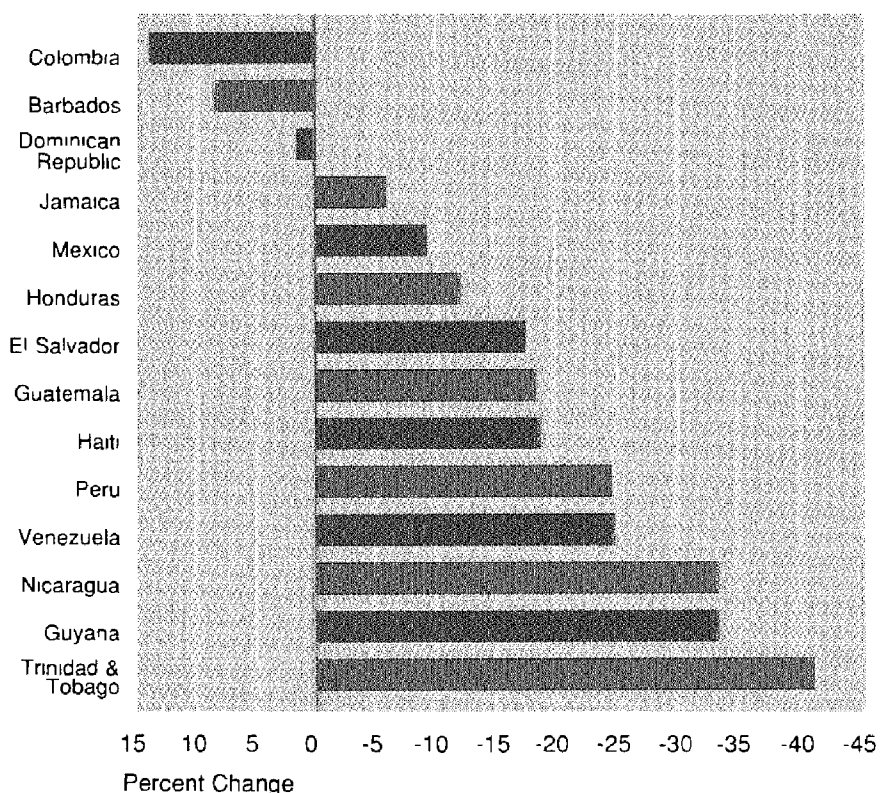
The accumulated demand inherent in high underemployment adds to the pressures. While official unemployment rates hover between 5 and 10 percent, underemployment is much higher. Many workers hold low productivity occupations. People seeking to place food on the table or pay the rent make their own work if jobs are not available. Some resort to shining shoes or hawking goods on the streets. It is hardly surprising that there are pressures to emigrate for the promise of steady wages.

While migration is a social phenomenon played out by individuals, they tend to respond in a similar manner to generalized stimuli, such as wage rate differentials. Economic conditions are a crucial factor in determining the level and timing of migratory flows. Macroeconomic trends that affect people's ability to find jobs and provide for their families have resulted in the movement of groups throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Before 1980, when the economies of Mexico and Caribbean Basin countries were still growing, they absorbed labor force increments relatively well. In Mexico, annual economic growth rates exceeding six percent between 1940 and 1980 facilitated the absorption of most new workers. The rapid expansion of Central American and Caribbean economies also helped to ease labor market pressures. Central

FIGURE 2.3

*Change in Per Capita
Gross Domestic Product:
Principal Western
Hemisphere
Migrant-Sending
Countries, 1981 to 1989*



Source: United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

American economies grew at more than 5 percent annually between 1950 and 1978, but the decline of the past decade virtually erased those gains

The crushing economic environment and foreign policy interventions by third countries that contributed to civil conflict encouraged migratory flows to the United States from Central America throughout the 1980s. Similarly, emigration to the United States from Mexico intensified during its prolonged economic crisis since 1982. The full cost of this lost decade has yet to be calculated. (See Figure 2.3, p. 14.)

Social Change and Migration

An appreciation of social changes as well as economic trends is necessary to understand increases in global migration. Socioeconomic development is destabilizing. As countries begin the development process, modernizing influences contribute to the movement of people. The changes associated with development are perceptual as well as technological. As traditional agrarian economies are transformed, many people leave the countryside, lured by the industrial development of the cities. There, large concentrations of people are introduced to conditions beyond their