13 myths about international migration

Myth	Why?
1. Push and Pull factors	Push factor logic ought to show that extreme poverty in the least developed parts of Sub-Saharan Africa drives the largest movements. In fact, when the poorest communities develop migration tends to increase because most migration has costs and having increased personal/ family resources makes migration more feasible. Furthermore, a push and pull model suggests that people are puppets, acting passively in response to outside factors. But a desire for mobility is part of what makes us human.
2. Increasing migration	Whilst it is true that migrant numbers have increased in absolute terms, this is only because global population has increased exponentially. There has been a consistent pattern throughout human history that around 3% of the world's population are migrants. Rapid climate change is unprecedented in the modern era, and this could yet disprove the 3% rule.
3. There are more refugees now	The number of refugees fluctuates with major conflicts and environmental pressures, but there is no evidence of an increasing trend.
4. Most refugees travel to the richest countries	Most refugees are internal (within their own countries, like Sudan) and of international refugees, most flee to neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon and Turkey from Syria.
5. South to North migration	Whilst some migration is from the global South to global North, the pattern is far more complex. The clearest way to understand recent trends is as globalisation – international migration tends to follow the spreading, global web of goods and services production. Furthermore history must be considered, in terms of empire and colonialism, and reversals to places associated with immigration and emigration.
6. There are Immigrant countries and Emigrant countries	This can be true taken at a moment in history, but it can change dramatically. Here, a historical lens helps, as does thinking in terms of development. Western European countries were associated with net emigration to 'the New World' of the Americas, and to colonies in Africa and Asia before the mid- 20th century. Then Western Europe became a recipient of migration following the 2nd world war labour shortages. Rapid development can change patterns. For example the Gulf states in the Middle East drawing in labour (skilled and unskilled) as economic development followed the oil price shocks of 1973 and 1979.
7. Building walls stops migration	No. It just interferes with who moves, how and when. Migration tends to be circular – so most international migrants move and return following work and demand for their labour and skills. When movement is restricted by closing borders, there is more irregular (undocumented) migration and migrants can be less inclined to return, and so settle in the host country. Restrictions make is harder for states to make sure the migration they do want & need, can take place.

8.	Border controls have always been there and always will be.	No. Only in the last 100 years have passports and border controls been common, even in Europe. They have been driven by population growth, rising inequality and fear that poorer people will move en masse into richer countries. Population growth is likely to slow and to flatten off by the late 21st century. If this is accompanied by widespread development and a more equitable distribution of wealth/life quality between nation states, then a world without borders is conceivable.
9.	Most migrants are men	This is still true in absolute totals across the world, BUT the pattern is changing. Women are increasing as a proportion of the global migrant labour force (skilled and unskilled) and also as students migrating for higher education. As poorer parts of the world develop the gap between men and women (as who is more likely to migrate) tends to close.
10.	Cheap, migrant labour will always be available	As population peaks toward the end of the 21st century, countries with ageing populations cannot depend on an endless supply of migrant labour to do low paid, heavy or less desirable work. This may help to change the way some jobs (such as in care work and cleaning) are valued and paid.
11.	Development can take place without migration	Migration is a part of the development of places and always has been. Labour has to move as the production pattern of goods and services is always changing. Today, development is increasingly linked to globalisation.
12.	Governments act rationally on migration policies	Some policy decisions are more based on instinctive feeling or fears than on realities. Globalisation means that cities, countries and regions need migration to function and develop. There may be some posturing, with a tacit recognition that irregular migration (undocumented or against official measures to regulate migration) actually serves to supply labour and fuel economies. Racism, inequality and colonial legacies remain woven into debates and prejudices about migration and migrants. There has also been an increasing securitisation of migration with a perception of migration as a threat to national and global security (such as terrorism and pandemics).
13.	Go home or assimilate into 'our' culture is an option	Repatriation and/ or assimilation is generally discredited as a way to handle migration. All major international migration movements have lead to some permanent settlement, and the idea of temporary 'guest workers' is problematic, as is the notion that another culture can or should assimilate into the 'host' culture. More realistic is to accept that the world is becoming more interconnected and places more culturally diverse as they develop and migration follows globalisation.

Find out more

Key source: Castles, S. de Haas, H. and Miller, M.J. (2020) *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World (sixth edition).* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This book is a comprehensive and up to date source which pulls together academic research on migration geography in a thorough, but clear and accessible way. It is accompanied by a website,

including short case studies which illustrate some of the current geographical processes and policy tensions around migration.

http://www.age-of-migration.com/

http://www.age-of-migration.com/additional-case-studies

Some additional useful links and sources (more sources available on the Challenging Geographies section of the GeoCapabilities 3 website - https://www.geocapabilities.org/migration-resources/)

https://www.iom.int/ The international organisation of migration includes https://www.iom.int/search/stories - human stories of migration in text and short video form and https://migrationdataportal.org – the data portal of the international organisation of migration with a range of interactive maps

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5TczgCTABII – in 10 minutes Danny Dorling explains clearly why border controls are not inevitable, that a world without borders existed in the past and is possible in the future.

https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/migration - migration related articles, mainly about refugees and asylum seekers.

https://www.oecd.org/migration/migration-development/ - exploring the link between international migration and development

https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/publication/why-do-people-migrate-infographic_en - an infographic (can be downloaded as a PDF in higher resolution) showing some theories to explain migration – good for going beyond the over-simple 'push-pull' model.

https://www.unhcr.org/ UN refugee agency – the 'emergencies' area is very good for finding up to date case studies with a range of data, but an emphasis on the harsh, lived experiences of refugees.

https://www.rgs.org/schools/teaching-resources/migrants-on-the-margins-(1)/ - Project focusing on migration into cities, mainly in the developing world. Open access material with more available for RGS members.

https://www.geography.org.uk/teaching-resources/refugees-migration - Some practical ideas for geography classroom teaching about migration and refugees