

Root Causes of Migration

By Archbishop John C. Wester, *People of God*, August 2017

“Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women and men who leave or who are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more.”

- Pope Francis, World Day of Migrants and Refugees

In a previous article, I addressed the legality or legal issues regarding immigration. Yet, to look only at these issues is like looking at an elephant but only seeing the trunk or the tail: you miss quite a bit if that's all you're seeing. To put the immigration debate into a wider context one must also look at the human face of immigration and at what is known as the push and pull factors that force people to immigrate in the first place. To that end, I continue our exploration of Catholic teaching on immigration so that we may fully understand global migration. I offer the following from the USCCB/Justice for Immigrants Campaign which examines root causes that drive people to migrate.

A *root cause* is the fundamental reason for the occurrence of an event, in this case, migration. Often, in the migration context, there are both push and pull factors with *push factors* being reasons why people would want to leave their home country and *pull factors* being reasons why people would want to come to a new country. In migration, push and pull factors can be economic, environmental, social and political. They include some of the following:

Safety Factors

Safety factors can cause danger to individuals, prompting them to migrate. **Persecution** and discrimination based on nationality, race, religion, political beliefs, or membership status in a particular social group will prompt people to move large distances in search of a safer living location where they can have freedom over their lives. Danger can be imposed upon individuals by something formal, like **war**, or informal, such as widespread **gang activity**. In 2016, the Northern Triangle, composed of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, was named one of the most violent regions in the world. All three Northern Triangle countries record thousands of crimes by local and international gangs and armed criminal groups, and most crimes are met with impunity. It is estimated that 10% of the Northern Triangle's population has already left, and it is likely that many more will flee in part due to extreme violence.

Economic Factors

Economic migration, whether permanent or seasonal, is a commonly cited reason for migration. In general, it is believed that in economic migration people move from poorer developing areas into richer areas where **wages** are higher and more **jobs** are available. It is also common for people from rural areas to move to more competitive urban areas in order to find more opportunities.

Mexican migration into the United States portrays the importance of both push and pull factors in economic migration. All throughout the 20th century, seasonal Mexican laborers have crossed the border in search of work in the American agricultural industry, since the economic state of Mexico did not match the level of economic prosperity found in the United States. In the 21st century however, Mexican migration has slowed down significantly, and after the American recession of 2009, economic migration from Mexico to the United States began to decline. Studies show that Mexican household economies have improved due to factors like increases in access to education. As Mexico's financial state improved and the United States temporarily struggled, both push and pull factors eroded, causing the dwindling of migration.

Environmental Factors

Migration caused by environmental factors is increasingly involuntary. Environmental factors cause *displacement*, or the forced movement of people by social or environmental factors. **Crop failure** for example, often results in both food scarcity and a drop in agricultural jobs, prompting people to move to a place with better job opportunities and climate. **Pollution** of water, air and soil in both urban and rural settings can also create a serious health risk to locals, forcing them to look for a better life for themselves and their children.

Devastating **natural disasters** such as tsunamis, hurricanes and earthquakes are environmental factors that the news most often cover. In January 2010 for example, a deadly earthquake hit Haiti, claiming the lives of over 90,000 people, and displacing over 1.5 million others. Despite humanitarian aid, many suffered from disease and a lack of proper shelter and basic supplies. Likewise, recent studies cite global warming as a cause for the increase in violent conflict around the world. The recent example of the Syrian drought from 2006 to 2011 was catastrophic, causing many families to lose their farms and move into big cities. The drought also increased food prices, facilitating poverty. Although global warming did not create the conflict we are witnessing today, environmental factors are important in human migration.

Social Factors

Social factors motivating migration grow from the human needs and desires to achieve a better quality of life. Migrants often move to ensure better **opportunities** for themselves or their family, like sending their child to a better, safer school or finding a job that would have not only a sufficient salary, but also important benefits and career growth prospects. In terms of education, the United States graduate programs have been a particularly strong attraction for young, talented individuals around the world. Individuals can also migrate in search of **services**, such as life-saving surgery and medical treatment that are inaccessible in their home area.

Understanding of these factors does not mean that we must forget about the laws. We still must abide by laws and as I have noted before in prior articles, we must fix our laws so that they are appropriate for the situation. Nonetheless, understanding the push and pull factors and putting a human face on immigration helps us to put the laws in a wider context and to see that we must work tirelessly to help our immigrants who are suffering so much in our world today.

I offer this illustration: if a person gets hurt in an auto accident because he or she was speeding, we tend to the person first. The person does not simply get a speeding ticket and then is left lying there on the ground! In other words, to borrow from author Stephen Covey, "the main thing is to make the main thing the main thing." When it comes to immigration, I believe that the main thing is to follow Christ's command to love one another as he has first loved us. The main thing is to welcome the stranger in our midst, a stranger fleeing serious threats. We continue to work for comprehensive immigration reform and a much needed reform of our immigration legal system but in the meantime we must tend to our neighbor, just as Jesus offers us in the Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan.

Faces of Migration

My family was forced out of our home country of Bhutan for having a different religion, language, and being different. My family fled the country for safety leaving behind their home and life that they had that was of peace. They found themselves refuge in Nepal, and my older brother, myself, and young sister were all born there. After eleven and half years in the camp, we were in the process of being resettled. We didn't know where we would be going, but we knew that we had something to look forward to and it had to be better than the life we were living. During the process, the small hut we had burned to ashes with thousands of others, so we lived under a plastic tent with the water rushing around us, and monsoon rains and wind pulling us. In hopes to have a life, our family set our foot forward blindly to the U.S., the country of hopes and dreams, to the land of freedom, and a land that promised a future that we never saw before. We were resettled in Georgia and so our life finally began and the hold button was uplifted.

Before coming here, I also wish I knew more of the culture, what I am expected to do, and how things flowed here in the U.S., especially with school and work. The hardest thing has been finding ways to be myself again. It has been difficult adjusting from the language to the simple motion of walking out of the house. But as hard as it is, it even harder to express who you are as an individual, your ideas, your thoughts, and your love to the ones around.

The friends and organizations that were loving and interested and did not seem to notice the differences have been the biggest help. They always motivated me and protected me with their care, love, and with their efforts. I will not forget, and I will probably fill countless pages, but they all know who they are. Everyone around me are the best thing that happened to me and made me feel like I belonged. They have made my experience, as well as my family's, feel easier and gave hope that I can be safe and can have a life here.