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More honesty seen as cure to fears about migration

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New beginning: Razan Azis (centre), from Syria, at a Berlin jobs fair for refugees

Europe is struggling to cope with refugees from Syria and economic migrants from Africa, while control of borders takes centre stage in the UK's Brexit referendum. In the US, Republican candidate Donald Trump has promised to build a wall to keep out Mexican immigrants and described as "insane" the decision by Angela Merkel, chancellor, to accept more than 1m migrants last year.

Tension can rise when immigration is rapid, as has been the case in high-income countries

for two decades. It may provoke fear and hostility despite arguments that migration brings economic benefits to receiving countries.

Incidents such as sexual assaults on women in Cologne at New Year, and fears that migration facilitates Islamist terrorism mingle with longstanding anxiety that migrants are competing for jobs and housing. In the UK, rules have been tightened to try to stem the inflow.

“I would be hesitant to say there is a general hostility to immigration, but there is obviously big concern about the extent to which high-income countries are able to control what’s going on,” says Martin Ruhs, associate professor of political economy at Oxford university.

In modern times, people mostly move in search of work and prosperity, though some do so to reunite with their families, study, escape persecution or war, retire or seek a better quality of life.

Migration is high in an interconnected world where transport, the internet and mobile communications make it easier to move. Meanwhile, conflict, poverty, inequality and lack of decent jobs drive many to seek a better future. Climate change may force even more to move.

People living outside their home country reached a record 244m in 2015, up from 173m in 2000, according to the UN. That is a modest increase from 2.8 per cent to 3.3 per cent of the world’s population, and growth slowed after the financial crisis.

Yet there has been a big impact in high-income countries, whose proportion of migrants as a share of the national population rose from 9 to 13 per cent over the same period. The US has the largest number of migrants, about a fifth of the world’s total (mainly from Mexico), followed by Germany, Russia and Saudi Arabia. Worldwide, most migrants are from middle-income countries, whose citizens can better afford to travel. India has the biggest diaspora, followed by Mexico, Russia and China.

Most migration is economic. Though refugees fleeing war or persecution are at a post-second world war high, they still account for only 8 per cent of the total. Migrants send at least \$600bn a year to their families, according to the World Bank. Yet they are vulnerable: often the first to lose jobs in a downturn, working for less, for longer hours and in worse conditions than national workers.

In host countries, migrants fill labour shortages, create jobs as entrepreneurs and contribute

in taxes. Indian graduates, for example, have played a large part in Silicon Valley's development. Economic studies tend to point to modest average gains for most people in the host country, because migrants are also consumers and lift demand, though the picture is mixed for low-income workers. There is also a demographic imperative: Europe's population would shrink without migrants, making it hard to support ageing societies.

John Skrentny, professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego, says reaction to migrants often "starts not from hatred, but from a positive seed of valuing communities". He adds: "Often working-class people will take great pride . . . that generations have lived in the same place for years. For them, immigration suggests a loss of something that's at the centre of their lives." He proposes measures to retrain indigenous workers who lose out, coupled with steps to protect migrants from exploitation. He cites the meat processing industry, which used to provide unionised jobs. "Employers have been desperate to bring in migrants and they pay them half what the American workers used to make. They have increased line speeds and injury rates."

I don't think resistance to migration in Britain is stronger than in most periods in the past

- Panikos Panayi

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Before immigration dominated the Brexit campaign, a 2014 Transatlantic Trends survey showed that 54 per cent of Britons felt they hosted too many immigrants. But when the actual share of migrants was pointed out, the figure fell to 31 per cent. "I don't think resistance to migration in Britain is stronger than in most periods in the past," says Panikos Panayi, professor of European history at De Montfort University, Leicester. While governments claim to be trying to control it, "in reality, the economy has been built on migration". He adds that despite a "political-journalistic" discourse of hostility, "there is interaction in all sorts of positive ways".

Bridget Anderson, professor of migration and citizenship at Oxford university, suggests more mixing is needed, for example at primary school, to overcome hostility. "These things can be turned round quite quickly but it needs political leadership and we haven't really seen any of that yet." Prof Ruhs adds: "In a number of countries, the government's rhetoric on immigration is much tougher than actual policies are. I think there needs to be more honesty about the power and limits of nation states in controlling national borders."

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