



Fair Comment- August 2009

***Hope and Hopelessness: The Roots of Immigration***  
***by Don Sawyer***

In a recent film I saw, a poor young farmer from Cameroon struggles northward in a desperate attempt to escape the poverty and hopelessness of his village and join his uncle in Europe. After weeks of dusty buses, paying off police, and miles of trekking, he reaches Morocco and prepares for a dangerous boat trip to Spain. As happens with so many of these ventures, a storm blows up and the crowded boat almost sinks. But the captain manages to return to shore and the migrants are left wet and desolate on the shore.

The young man from Cameroon stares out at the sea. "My God," he says. "Is it all worth it?" An older man turns to him and puts his hand on his shoulder. "Unfortunately, my brother, it is."

This was one of the most poignant and astute commentaries on the immigration issue I have seen or heard.

The exact extent of global immigration is hard to come by. While the UN suggests that there are 190 to 200 million people (3.3 percent of the world's population) living outside their country of birth for a minimum of one year, this figure does not include many who have entered other countries illegally. For example, while officials estimate there are between 35,000 and 120,000 illegal immigrants in Canada, Demetrios G. Papademetriou of the respected Migration Policy Institute says, "Canada uses a 'working guesstimate' of about half-a-million unauthorized immigrants."

Despite the militarization of borders, tightened refugee and immigration standards, and increased deportation of undocumented aliens, the numbers of immigrants is increasing dramatically. Over the last 10 years, globally there were 36 million documented migrations.

There are undoubtedly legal and policy changes that can help address the growing problem of irregular immigration, including creating more channels for migrants to work legally in developed countries, regularization of contributing illegal immigrants already in a country, and closer monitoring of workplaces that employ irregular immigrants

But these are short-term solutions to a problem that is rooted in poverty, desperation and hopelessness. As Papademetriou writes, "People fleeing circumstances they consider

intolerable will enter the illegal migration stream and test various receiving states' defenses repeatedly. They will in fact do so regardless of whether they must risk their own lives, pay exorbitant fees, or subvert the asylum system or any other available means of entry. Once they arrive, they insert themselves deeply into the underground economy."

Ultimately the problem of irregular immigration and other migration issues is rooted in the monstrous inequities that plague our global society. In a shrinking world, even the poorest are aware that in a country not too far away, people live without fear of hunger, losing one out of four children, dying of preventable causes or suffering with disease and parasites because of a lack of sanitation and money to buy medications.

A few statistics help us better understand the extent of the privation and hopelessness driving so many people into desperate attempts to relocate to a place where they see hope for a better life. The world's 225 richest people have a combined wealth of \$1 trillion, equal to the combined annual income of the world's 2.5 billion poorest people. The wealth of the three most well-to-do individuals now exceeds the combined GDP of the 48 least developed countries. In 1968, people in the 20 wealthiest countries were 30 times better off than those in the poorest 20. By 1998, this gap had widened to 82 times. Three billion people live on less than \$2 per day while 1.3 billion get by on less than \$1 per day.

These figures have led the UNDP to conclude that we are living in a world full of "grotesque inequalities" and that "Development that perpetuates today's inequalities is neither sustainable nor worth sustaining." Yet that is precisely what we are doing. While the developed world resumes its reckless consumption patterns, the economic downturn has dried up what little private investment there was in poor countries. Exacerbating an already bad situation, climate change is making widening swaths of Africa uninhabitable, and unpredictable rainfall is causing widespread hunger and aid dependency. Conflict in the developing world, often fueled by a scramble for scarce wealth and resources, has displaced millions of people.

The long-term answer to migration pressures is not to be found at the borders of the developed countries. To solve this problem, we have to examine instead the conditions that lead so many to conclude that their only hope is to crash the party, regardless of the consequences. In so doing, we will understand that only through the strengthening of developing economies and societies through a massive transfer of wealth from the First to the Third World, both in the form of investment and responsible aid, can we hope to eliminate the desperate conditions that underlie the problem.

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