

Prospects for International Migration in the 21st century

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[For verbal presentation only]

The future is always foggy. So are demographic futures.

What do PAA members do when they seek illumination on what fate has on storage for us in the coming evolution of the size and composition of national populations?

The world is divided into about 200 supposedly independent political units—too many for a good grasp by any single person’s expertise.

Fortunately we have the help of an eminent team of demographers at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York City.

If you want to know about international migration, past and future, for some 200 countries, help is readily available.

Every other year, the UN Population Division gifts us with a newly revised compendium of a detailed account, state-by-state and region-by region, of population status and dynamics, quantified in terms of an array of key indicators.

And it complements these factual and by-and- large firmly observation-based estimates with a look into the future.

Last year, the Population Division published its prestigious and widely cited World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision.

The retrospective material now covers six full decades—from 1950 to 2010.

The indicators tell us the basic facts about population numbers, detailed, or as we used to say, broken down, by age and sex, and describe what happened to fertility, mortality, and international migration over time.

And, starting from its firm ground of actually measured or at least fairly reliably estimated data, it ventures into that foggy future, outlining plausible evolutions of population trends for the coming decades.

In the earlier practice of these presentations, projections of fertility, mortality, and international migration were elaborated up to 2050. The 2010 Revision stretches that already brave time span all the way to the end of the present century.

As in the earlier projection sets, multiple variants are elaborated: in particular those labeled as “high,” “medium,” and “low.” The differences between these sets are essentially governed by alternative assumptions as to the future course of fertility.

For mortality and international net migration future trends are specified by a single set of assumptions. Yet, arguably, uncertainties concerning both mortality and international migration may be as wide and as consequential as those relating to future fertility trends.

My necessarily brief comments will focus on the issue of future international migration.

The unequal treatment of the three drivers of country population futures has been of course well justified by practical considerations.

The UN projections used to be communicated to the world in the old-fashioned way: through the printed page.

Given the multitude of political units and their regional groupings, three sets of projections incorporating alternative fertility futures already yielded hefty tomes.

For example, the summary results of the 2008 Revision, published as the first of three volumes in which the results of the projection exercise were presented, required a book of 801 pages.

Roughly speaking, introducing alternative assumption triplets for the projections, bracketing the single assumption for future mortality and international migration trends also with a “high” and “low” variant, could have required up to nine such hefty volumes.

High cost of printing/publishing and the sheer physical awkwardness of handling such output were sufficient reasons to resist the added complexity that would have resulted from equal treatment of the three demographic drivers.

Yet this explanation or excuse for the second-class treatment of mortality and international migration is no longer valid.

The 2010 Revision has abandoned Gutenberg-style printing, and did so probably for good. Estimates and projections are now stored only in the bowels of computers, ready to be retrieved at your desk by means of a few key-strokes.

Yet the curiosity of those interested in exploring the possible impact of alternative assumptions for international migration (or else of variations in mortality trends) could well be satisfied. The computer would be indifferent to the added bulk and complexity of the projection set.

Alternative assumptions on mortality and international migration trends could be easily stated at least along the same stylized pattern in which assumptions for future fertility are cast.

On fertility, although using a sophisticated technique of probabilistic projections, the UN 2010 set imposes on its medium projection the constraining device of assuming a near-uniform convergence of fertility to the simple replacement level by the end of the century. Around this anchor, “high” and “low” fertilities, expressed in terms of TFR values, differ, *grosso modo*, by plus or minus 20 percent.

Alternative mortality trends could be analogously articulated, with an even better foundation of past observed trends. Apart from possible low-probability future catastrophes, the likely variance around a most plausible course of mortality levels and patterns over the course of the rest of the 21st century can be drawn with reasonable confidence.

The reliability of guidance provided by demographic projections for describing future fertility and mortality developments through extrapolation of historical trends, complemented by adjustments based on social, economic, environmental, and biological considerations, is of course not to be overstated.

Back in 1955, John Hajnal, in a characteristically insightful article considered the prospects for population forecasts.

Apart from discussing matters having to do with practical procedures and techniques, he set out the proposition that population projections in the future, as in the past, will often be fairly wide of the mark—as often as simple guesses would be.

But he also persuasively argued that a projection can be useful as a piece of analysis even if its accuracy is low.

Well, predicting international migratory balances, and in the instance of the Revision 2010 set, predicting them over a time span covering nearly a full century, would seem to be vastly more difficult than is the case in trying to predict either fertility or mortality.

The bravery of the UN's demographers to specify at least a single set of migratory futures for the multitude of countries in the projection set is admirable. But their reluctance to introduce varying specifications of net international migratory balances is unfortunate: it greatly diminishes the analytical opportunities that Hajnal was talking about.

This is unfortunate, especially if one considers that the actually adopted assumptions underlying the single specified course of net migration affecting demographic change of individual countries tend to be less than plausible, especially as the time-scale stretches farther into the future.

The theory supporting these assumptions, while not spelled-out explicitly, seems to envisage a progressively evanescent influence of international migration on population numbers in all countries.

Almost uniformly, regardless of markedly different population sizes and rates of growth, large or small, positive or negative, the 2010 Revision assumes that countries' net migratory balances by the end of the 21st century will be zero or a very close approximation of that level.

A few examples, singling out some large countries that experienced important migratory flows in their recent past, illustrate this construction, however roughly.

For the United States, by 2100, the “low” and “high” projections of total population size (that bracket the “medium” one about evenly), range from 311 million to 706 million—a vast difference. None the less, in either case the migratory balance during the century’s last quinquennium is projected as zero.

This contrasts with an estimated net immigration exceeding 11 million persons for the US during the first decade of this century.

Germany’s current population is about 82 million and net immigration recorded during the most recent decade was some 1.3 million. By the end of the century the “high” and “low” variant projections yield a population of 109 and 43 million, respectively.

As in all instances of such comparisons, the age distributions of the two hypothetical populations (shaped primarily by the fairly cautiously calibrated contrast between “high” and “low” fertility trajectories) are of course markedly different, with the “low” projections yielding extremely aged populations and negative rates of growth. Nevertheless, in Germany, as was the case for the US, the projected migratory balance at century’s end is zero.

Logically, countries with current negative migratory balances—that is, countries of outmigration—display symmetrical results in the projections.

For instance, India has a 2010 estimated population of 1.22 billion. Net outmigration during the most recent decade was about 5 million. The “high” and “low” 2100 population numbers are projected as 2.57 billion and 880 million. Net out migration forecast for India at century’s end in either case: zero.

The reference to the end-of-century zero migration (which echoes the end-of-century medium fertility assumption that yields a zero intrinsic rate of growth) is of course insufficient to describe the general character of the migration trend incorporated in the UN 2010 projections.

The volume of international migration up to the end of the 20th century, and in many cases up to the present, has shown an increasing tendency. Indeed, some observers came to call our age the “age of migration.” This reflected an increasing impact of immigration on the size and composition of the populations of the main

immigrant-receiving countries—the US and Canada, Australia, and a number of Western European countries, such as the UK, Germany, France.

The symmetrical effect on the migrant-sending countries was proportionately much more moderate, reflecting the smaller population of immigration countries in comparison to sending countries.

Age of migration or not, the theoretical elaborations of the factors that govern international migration leave much to be desired.

There is no theory of “migration transition” echoing transition theory’s generalizations concerning mortality and fertility change.

At the individual level a dominant motivating factor for migration is calculation of potential material gain, reflecting large and probably enduring average income differentials between countries, and also differentials in terms of political freedoms. Persecution of some segments of national populations have prompted large-scale international refugee movements.

But the picture is complicated by national policies that can either block outmigration or, and especially, the willingness and receptivity of potential destination countries in accepting immigrants. And acceptance can range from a policy of open doors to policies highly restrictive in terms of numbers and qualifications of would-be immigrants.

Policies on immigration reflect compromises of differences in economic interests and in cultural-ideological attitudes and humanitarian impulses in the receiving countries.

In assessing the forces shaping international migration flows, the UN’s demographers, as do numerous other observers, tend to conclude that the age of migration is coming to an end.

The perceived peak would be either the end of the 20th century or the first decade of the 21st. Beyond those dates, the volume and rate of migration across international frontiers is seen as exhibiting a steadily declining trend. In terms of the UN 2010 projections this translates to an approximate halving by mid-century

and then continuing further diminishment until that assumed zero rate of movement by 2100.

Accepting the international migration scenario depicted in UN 2010, two polar interpretations could be suggested as seen from the point of view of immigration-receiving countries.

One is that the scenario describes an actual, spontaneously evolving trend. For whatever combination of reasons—posit, for instance, drastic decrease of international income differentials—the scenario highlights an anticipated fact. It announces that international migration cannot be counted on to solve economic and demographic problems, such as shrinking labor force, declining population, excessive population aging—problems for which immigration is often cited as a potential remedy. The scenario, then, is a salutary warning that such problems must have a domestic solution. Such solutions can be found if the crutch of immigrant inflows no longer offers an easy remedy.

The second interpretation is that the scenario is not a prediction but a prescription: immigrant-receiving countries should shape their policies to generate increasing restrictions on immigration, eventually reducing it to a balance of zero or very near to it.

It is evident, however that international migration's real future is far more uncertain than the simple UN scenario might suggest. In particular, there are strong voices that advocate much greater freedom of permanent international movement—a real “age of migration” facilitated by removal of barriers to movement through a policy of open borders.

The attitude may be illustrated by a much noted speech about immigration policy given a few years ago by the then UN Secretary General Kofi Anan. It was addressed to Europe, more precisely the European Union, but its intended message was clearly broader.

“There can be no doubt,” said Anan, “ that European societies need immigrants...In this twenty-first century, migrants need Europe. But Europe also need migrants. A closed Europe would be meaner, poorer, weaker, older Europe.

An open Europe will be a fairer, richer, stronger, younger Europe—provided Europe manages immigration well.”

These sentiments reflect views prevalent among European political and economic elites. But the assertion that “there can be no doubt” is unwarranted. There are counterarguments that weaken those claims or even contradict them outright. Issues of international migration are complicated because the benefits and costs—economic, social, and political—that immigration imparts on the receiving population are multifarious and unevenly distributed.

Immigration clearly cannot be a remedy for Europe’s (and other currently immigrant receiving countries’) continuing and inevitable demographic marginalization. Europe cannot, and arguably ought not, engage in a demographic race with India, China, or Sub-Saharan Africa.

Given the large differences in average income levels (and in other social and political amenities inadequately measured by income) between the European Union on the one hand, and much of the world, on the other, a potential massive inflow of migrants into the EU is a theoretical possibility.

Indeed, it is virtually certain that in the absence of the current barriers to immigration maintained by the EU, future inflows would greatly exceed the numbers now envisaged in the UN 2010 projections.

But as a year 2000 UN study *Replacement Migration: Is It a Solution to Declining and Ageing Populations?* clearly demonstrated, preventing population decline and especially counteracting population aging through immigration, would require a volume of migratory flow that would radically change the social and economic characteristics of the population in the receiving countries.

From a demographic point of view whether an “open Europe” would indeed be a “fairer, richer, stronger, younger Europe” is, at the very least, highly questionable.

“Younger” may seem a straightforward proposition, but it is not. The rejuvenating effect is temporary, as immigrants also age and become dependent. To sustain such an effect would require a continuously maintained influx of youthful immigrants, a pattern that, in combination with below-replacement fertility of the native

population, would eventually fully replace the original natives with immigrants and their descendants.

“Fairer, richer, stronger” are outcomes that can be linked only tenuously with mass immigration. Fairness in a polity first and foremost should be evaluated by criteria that measure fairness with reference to the native population. To formulate immigration policy in response to the demographic behavior of other countries on the ground that “migrants need Eurpe” is unlikely to meet that standard. As deductive reasoning as well as much empirical evidence suggests, the kind of immigration that is demographically significant is likely to be detrimental to the material welfare and social well-being of the poorer segments of the receiving population by depressing wage levels at the lower end of the scale and creating friction in schools, housing markets, and claims for environmental amenities.

Mass immigration into an already populous country is likely to make that country “richer” only as measured by aggregate income rather than on a per capita basis. For a population that is already sizeable, only the latter criterion is of real interest.

And even if per capita gains are achieved through admitting large numbers of immigrants, the distribution of gains is likely to be lopsided, leaving many less well-off. Compensation for losses, even if theoretically possible, is in fact never effected.

As to the menace of being “weaker and older,” there should be no attempt to unload the costs of solving Europe’s aging problem to the stronger and younger rest of the world.

A domestic solution to the aging problem is eminently feasible in rich industrial societies as long as fertility is at, or not far below, replacement level.

In any case, solution through mass immigration is only a temporary remedy that would leave bigger problems in its wake.

Most importantly, recourse to such a solution—substitution of immigrants for home-grown births—would provide a continuing excuse not to confront the problem of chronic domestic fertility deficit.

Societies that want to survive must learn how to reproduce themselves by age-old methods, not by immigration.

A corollary lesson seems equally evident. Migrant-sending high-fertility countries have an inevitable demographic agenda of their own: to speed-up and complete their demographic transition without compromising the longer term economic viability of their societies. This problem cannot be solved by exporting people. The solution for unsustainable demographic expansion is not out-migration: it has to be domestic adjustment to social and economic realities.