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Globalization, Economics, Immigration and Return Migration

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Globalization, Economics, Immigration and Return Migration

By Hemmat Safwat[*]

This paper reviews major international migration patterns between countries of origin and host countries from 1970 to 2025. Migration has generated substantial economic benefits for both groups: recent estimates place migrants' contribution to host-country GDP at approximately US$9–12 trillion, while annual remittances to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are estimated at US$650–700 billion. The analysis compares regional patterns across Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania, with particular attention to the concentration and diversification of migrants' countries of origin. It also examines remittances, migrants' contributions to host economies, migration categories, and the roles of the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Commission, and the European Union. A recurring limitation is the lack of sufficiently detailed and comparable historical data. Recent data from several major host countries indicate periods of declining net migration, as departures rise relative to arrivals. If sustained, this pattern could reduce migrant stocks in host countries and remittance flows to countries of origin. Both sides would face economic consequences, although countries of origin—especially LMICs—may be more vulnerable. The paper therefore asks: how might large-scale return migration reshape the economic future of host countries and countries of origin?

Keywords: *globalization, immigration, return migration, host countries, countries of origin, remittances, economic contributions, international migration frameworks*

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Introduction and Definitions

The final concept in the title—return migration—is the paper's principal concern. Because return migration cannot be understood independently of the migration that precedes it, Sections 2–5 first examine the geography, economics, and institutional framework of international migration. Together, these sections show how migration has become an important component of economic globalization over the past four decades.

Terminology depends on perspective. A person is an emigrant in relation to the country of origin and an immigrant in relation to the destination or host country. This paper uses "return migration" for the movement of migrants back to their country of origin and "reverse migration" when emphasizing the direction or scale of that movement.

Related terms used in the literature include:

- Return migration — the general phenomenon of emigrants returning to their country of origin.
- Mass return migration — return migration occurring at a substantial scale.
- Repatriation — a formal or organized return, often facilitated by governments or international organizations.
- Reverse migration — a directional term emphasizing movement opposite to the original migration flow.
- Although the terms have different emphases, all concern migrants returning to their homeland.

The initial intention was to analyze trends from 1980 to 2025. However, historical comparisons are constrained by inconsistent definitions and uneven data collection. The more detailed quantitative analysis therefore gives greater weight to data available from 2020 onward.

Figure 1 summarizes the relationship between countries of origin and host countries. Migrants contribute labor, skills, consumption, investment, and taxes to the host economy, while remittances transfer a portion of their earnings to households and communities in their countries of origin.

Figure 1. *Migration Flows, Host-Country GDP Contributions, and Remittances*

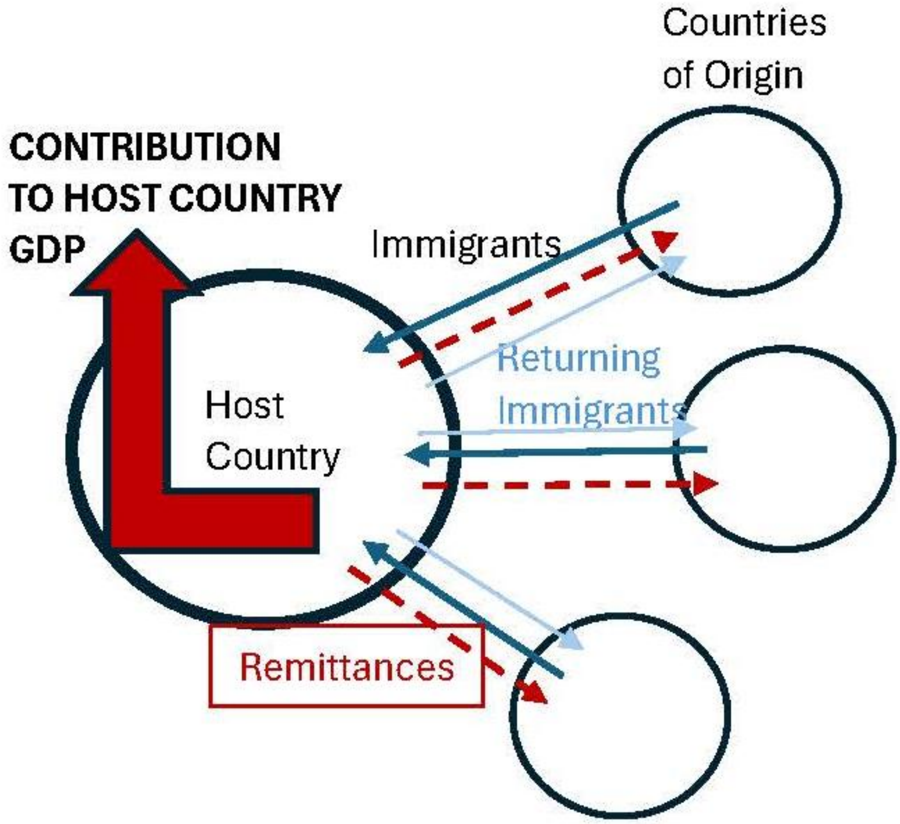

Table 1. *Overall Relation between Sending and Host Countries*

Dimension	Sending countries	Host countries
Main benefit	Income inflows (remittances)	Labor supply, growth
Main cost	Brain drain (in some cases)	Integration costs
Net effect	Poverty reduction, stability	Positive or neutral overall

Table 2. *Regions with Significant Immigration*

Region	Migration Type	Key Hosts	Remittance Pattern	Structural Feature
Europe	Intra-regional	Germany, UK	Moderate	Free labour mobility
Americas	South North	USA	Very high outflows	Permanent migration
Gulf /South Asia	Contract labor	GCC states	High outflows	Temporary migration
Philippines (global)	Diversified	Global	Stable inflows	State-managed migration

Table 3 provides an introductory chronology of labor migration and return migration.

Table 3. *Labor Migration and Return-Migration Timeline, 1980–2020*

Country	Period of active emigration / facilitation	Notes on policy / motivation	Start of return migration / reverse flows
Philippines	1980s–2020	Government actively promotes overseas employment via POEA, Migrant Workers Act; remittances >10% of GDP	Partial return flows exist, but circular migration dominates; no full reversal
Bangladesh	1980s–2020	Bilateral labor agreements, especially to Gulf; state-supported recruitment	Some return flows from Gulf after crises (2008, 2020), but many permanent
Nepal	1990s–2020	Labor export to Gulf & Malaysia; government-supported agencies	Return flows cyclical; circular migration common
India	1980s–2020	No explicit export policy, but government facilitates migration; diaspora networks	Return migration notable in 1990s–2000s, especially Gulf & US-trained professionals
Mexico	1980s–2000s	Structural emigration to U.S., partially facilitated; remittances encouraged	2010s: some return migration from U.S. post-recession
Turkey	1980s–1990s	"Gastarbeiter" programs with Germany ongoing; temporary labor migration	1990s: return flows begin as workers retire / settle permanently in host countries
South Korea	1980s	Exported labor to Middle East during industrialization	1990s onward: becomes net immigration country, reverse migration minimal but development-driven
Taiwan	1980s	Exported labor abroad during industrialization	1990s onward: net immigration rises, labor export declines
Egypt	1980s–2000s	Labor migration to Gulf states, facilitated by MOUs and agencies	2000s: partial return flows, some permanent settlement abroad
Morocco	1980s–2000s	Emigration to Europe encouraged through bilateral agreements; labor migration channels	2000s onward: return flows increase with economic stabilization at home
Ireland	1980s–1990s	High emigration during recession	1995–2007: strong return migration during "Celtic Tiger" boom
Spain	1980s–1990s	High emigration (mostly to Europe/Latin America)	2000s onward: shifts to net immigration country
Pakistan	1980s–2020	Labor migration to Gulf; facilitated via state and recruitment networks	Return migration cyclical; 2008 financial crisis prompted temporary returns

Table 4 summarizes recurring features of return migration after extended residence abroad.

Table 4. *Common Features of Return Migration after Long Stays Abroad*

Feature	Observed Trend
Duration abroad	Often 5–20+ years
Age at return	30–60 years old, frequently aligned with life milestones
Economic status	Accumulated savings; sometimes debt-financed migration first
Settlement	Urban for career returns; rural for retirement/family-driven
Skills & knowledge	High among professional migrants; lower for manual labor migrants
Policy role	Sometimes incentivized (e.g., India, China, South Korea); often spontaneous for others
Remittance continuation	Many continue sending money after return, especially family-focused returns

Regional Patterns of Immigration

Tables 5–9 compare selected host countries across the five inhabited continents. For each host country, the upper portion identifies five principal countries of origin. Where data are available, the lower portion shows how their combined share of the host country's migrant population changed from 1980 to 2020. This concentration measure helps distinguish migration systems dominated by a few neighboring countries from those drawing migrants from a broader range of origins.

Africa

Table 5. *Selected Host Countries and Migrant Origins in Africa*

	North Africa			**East Africa**		**Sub-Saharan (West Africa)**		**Sothern Africa**	
	Egypt	**Morocco**	**Tunisia**	**Kenya**	**Tanzania**	**Nigeria**	**Ghana**	**South Afric**	**Namibia**
	Top 5 origin countries								
1	Sudan	France	Libya	Uganda	Burundi	Benin	Nigeria	Zimbabwe	Angola
2	Libya	Algeria	France	Tanzania	Rwanda	Niger	Côte d'Ivoire	Mozambique	South Afric
3	Syria	Spain	Algeria	Somalia	Kenya	Ghana	Togo	Lesotho	Zambia
4	Palestine	Senegal	Italy	South Sudan	Uganda	Togo	Burkina Faso	Malawi	Zimbabwe
5	Iraq	Italy	Morocco	Ethiopia	Democratic F	Mali	Liberia	Namibia	Botswana
	Share of total immigrants								
	Share	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**
Year	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**
1980	~65–70%	~60–65%	~65–70%	~70–75%	~75–80%	~70–75%	~75–80%	~80–85%	~80–85%
1990	~65%	~60%	~65%	~70%	~75%	~70%	~75%	~80%	~80%
2000	~60–65%	~55–60%	~60%	~65–70%	~70–75%	~65–70%	~70%	~75%	~75%
2010	~60%	~55%	~55–60%	~65%	~65–70%	~65%	~65–70%	~70%	~70%
2020	~60–65%	~50–55%	~55–60%	~60–65%	~65%	~60–65%	~65%	~65–70%	~65–70%
	Strong **regional + political migration system**	**European return/expat migration**	Strong **Mediterranean + regional system**	Refugee + regional labour flows	Highly **refugee-driven system**	Strong **ECOWAS regional migration system**	Regional circulation within West Africa	One of the **most concentrated systems globally**	Post-conflict + regional labour flows
	Refugee-driven (Sudan, Syria, Palestine)	**Sub-Saharan transit migration**	Libya highly influential	Somalia is key driver post-1990	Great Lakes conflicts central	Labour mobility dominates	Political instability influences flows	Strong labour migration hub	Strong dependence on Angola

The Americas

Table 6. *Selected Host Countries and Migrant Origins in the Americas*

	North America		Central America		South America	
	1United States	**Canada**	**Mexico**	**Costa Rica**	**Brazil**	**Argentina**
	Top 5 origin countries (long-term dominant)					
1	Mexico	India	United States	Nicaragua	Portugal	Paraguay
2	China	China	Guatemala	Colombia	Bolivia	Bolivia
3	India	Philippines	Honduras	United States	Paraguay	Chile
4	Philippines	Pakistan	El Salvador	Panama	Japan	Peru
5	El Salvador	United Kingdom	Spain	El Salvador	Argentina	Italy / Spain (earlier period)
	Share of total immigrants					
Year	**Share**	**Share**	**Year**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**
1980	~55–60%	~50–55%	~70–75%	~75–80%	~65–70%	~70–75%
1990	~60–65%	~50–55%	~70%	~80%	~60–65%	~70%
2000	~60–65%	~50–55%	~65–70%	~75%	~55–60%	~65%
2010	~55–60%	~45–50%	~60–65%	~70%	~50–55%	~60%
2020	~50–55%	~45–50%	~60–65%	~65–70%	~50–55%	~60%
	Most concentrated system in the Americas	Highly **policy-driven migration system**	Extremely **high concentration**	One of the **most concentrated systems globally**	Historically European (Portugal, Japan legacy)	Shift from **European → regional dominance**
	Strong dominance of **Mexico (single largest origin)**	Early shift (1990s) toward **Asia**	Return migration (USA-born)	Heavy dependence on **Nicaragua alone**	Increasing **regional (South American) migration**	Strong intra–South American migration system
	Gradual diversification due to Asia	More diversified than the US	Regional migration (Central America			

Asia

Table 7. *Selected Host Countries and Migrant Origins in Asia*

	Gulf / West Asia (High-income labour-importing systems		East Asia (Advanced economies		Asia (Regional hubs)	South Asia (Emerging host countries)		
	Saudi Arabia	**UAE**	**Japan**	**South Kore**	**Malaysia**	**Singapore**	**India**	**Pakistan**
	Top 5 origin countries							
1	India	India	China	China	Indonesia	Malaysia	Bangladesh	Afghanista
2	Pakistan	Pakistan	Korea (South &	Vietnam	Bangladesh	China	Nepal	India
3	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	Vietnam	Philippines	Philippines	India	Pakistan	Bangladesh
4	Philippines	Philippines	Philippines	Thailand	Myanmar	Bangladesh	Sri Lanka	Iran
5	Egypt	Egypt	Brazil	Uzbekistan	Nepal	Indonesia	Afghanista	Myanmar
	Share of total immigrants							
Year	**Share**	**Share**	Share	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**	**Share**
1980	~70–75%	~75–80%	~75–80%	—	~70–75%	~70–75%	~75–80%	~80–85%
1990	~75–80%	~80%	~75%	~70%	~75%	~75%	~75%	~85%
2000	~75%	~80%	~70%	~70–75%	~75–80%	~75–80%	~70–75%	~80%
2010	~70–75%	~75%	~65–70%	~65–70%	~70–75%	~70–75%	~70%	~75%
2020	~65–70%	~70–75%	~60–65%	~60–65%	~65–70%	~65–70%	~65–70%	~70–75%
	Classic **labou import system (Kafala-type)**	One of the **most concentrated migration systems globally**	Historically closed system	Rapid transition since 1990s	Strong **intra-ASEAN migration**	Highly managed migration system	Strong **border-based migration system**	One of the **most concentrated systems globally**
	Extremely concentrated in **South & Southeast Asia**	Foreign-born majority population	Gradual diversification (Vietnam rising)	Strong labour + marriage migration	Labour-intensive sectors dominate	Mix of high-skilled + low-skilled inflows	Refugee + informal migration	Dominated by Afghan refugees
		Foreign-born majority population		African-origin migrants significant (~28%)	Labour-intensive sectors dominate			

Europe

Table 8. *Selected Host Countries and Migrant Origins in Europe*

	Germany	France	Italy	Belgium	Sweden	United Kingdom
	Main origin countries (typical top 5)					
1	Turkey	Algeria	Romania	Morocco	Syria	India
2	Poland	Morocco	Albania	Italy	Iraq	Pakistan
3	Romania	Portugal	Morocco	France	Finland	Poland
4	Italy	Tunisia	China	Netherlands	Iran	Ireland
5	Syria (recent wave, post-2015)	Italy	Ukraine	Turkey	Poland	Bangladesh
	Share of total immigrants - (Top 5 countries)					
	≈ **45–55%**	≈ **55–65%**	**50–60%**	≈ **50–60%**	≈ **45–55%**	≈ **40–50%**
	Earlier period (1980–2000): dominated by **Turkey + Southern Europe (Italy)**	Highly concentrated due to **colonial ties (North Africa)**	Italy transitioned from emigration → immigration (post-1980s)	**Colonial/post-colonial (Morocco)**	1980s–90s: **Finland, Balkans, Iran**	Strong **Commonwealth legacy (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh)**
	After 2004 EU enlargement: rise of **Poland & Romania**	Over **50% of immigrants come from Africa**	Strong **Balkan & Eastern European flows** after 1990	**Guest workers (Italy, Turkey)**	2000s–2020: **Middle East refugees (Syria, Iraq)**	Post-2004 EU enlargement **→ Poland becomes major group**
	After 2015: **Syria** becomes major	Portugal is the main European-origin group (labour migration 1960s–80s)	Very high share of **non-EU immigrants (≈86%)**	**EU mobility (France, Netherlands)**	Large Asian/Middle Eastern share (30–44%)	More diversified than continental Europe
	Strong intra-European component due to EU mobility			African-origin migrants significant (~28%)		

Oceania

Table 9. *Selected Host Countries and Migrant Origins in Oceania*

	Oceanas	
	Australia	**New Zealand**
	Top 5 origin countries (long-term dominant)	
1	United Kingdom	United Kingdom
2	China	China
3	India	India
4	New Zealand	Australia
5	Vietnam	Samoa
	Share of total immigrants	
Year	**Share**	**Share**
1980	~60–65%	~65–70%
1990	~60%	~65%
2000	~55–60%	~60–65%
2010	~50–55%	~55–60%
2020	~45–50%	~50–55%
	Highly diversified, policy-driven global migration system	Strong **Pacific migration system**:
		Samoa and other island nations

Tables 5–9 reveal substantial differences in the concentration and persistence of migration corridors. Africa and the Americas generally show the highest concentration of migrants from a limited number of origin countries, often reflecting geographic proximity, conflict, or long-standing regional ties. Europe displays the most diversified pattern. In many host countries, concentration has declined over time, although migration from particular countries of origin may persist for decades because of proximity, language, colonial history, family networks, or established recruitment channels.

India as a Long-Term Migration Example

- Outward migration shifted from colonial and postcolonial settlement to temporary Gulf labor and, later, global skilled mobility.
- Return migration evolved from limited repatriation toward circular mobility and the "brain circulation" of skilled professionals.
- Remittances became an important component of India's balance of payments and a major source of household income.
- India developed an extensive diaspora-engagement framework, including Overseas Citizenship of India cards, Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, welfare funds, and evacuation programs.

Remittances to Countries of Origin

This section examines the principal direct financial benefit that migration provides to countries of origin: remittances sent by migrants to households and communities at home.

Historical remittance estimates for 1980–2019 are uneven and should be interpreted as indicative. The World Bank series for 2020–2024 is more systematic and is therefore given greater weight in the comparisons below.

Table 10. *Leading Countries of Origin and Estimated Remittance Receipts*

Remittance Leaders + Migration Structure (1980–2020)

1900	**Country**	**Est. remittances rank**	**Workers abroad**	**Main host countries**	**Return migration**
Approximate Leaders	Italy	High	~4–5M	Germany, Switzerland	High (post-war return)
	Germany	High	~3–4M	Western Europe	Moderate
	France	High	~2–3M	Europe, Africa	Moderate
	Portugal	High	~2M	France, Germany	High
	Egypt	Rising	~2–3M	Gulf states	High (temporary contracts)
1990	**Country**	**Remittances (approx.)**	**Workers abroad**	**Main hosts**	**Return migration**
	Italy	~$5B	~4M	EU	High
	Germany	~$5B	~3M	EU	Moderate
	Portugal	~$4.5B	~2M	France, Germany	High
	Egypt	~$4.3B	~3M	Saudi Arabia, Iraq	High
2000	**Country**	**Rank**	**Workers abroad**	**Main hosts**	**Return migration**
Transition Phase	India	Top	~8–9M	Gulf, USA	High (Gulf circular)
	Mexico	Top	~9–10M	USA	Declining return
	Philippines	Top	~7M	Gulf, Asia	High (contract-based)
	France	Top	~2–3M	EU	Moderate
	Turkey	Top	~3–4M	Germany	Moderate–High
2010	**Country**	**Remittances**	**Workers abroad**	**Main hosts**	**Return migration**
	India	~$53B	~15M	UAE, Saudi, USA	High (temporary + some permanent)
	China	~$52B	~10M	USA, SE Asia	Increasing skilled return
	Mexico	~$22B	~11M	USA	Low (more permanent settlement)
	Philippines	~$21B	~9M	Gulf, Asia	High
	Nigeria	~$19B	~2–3M	USA, UK	Low
	Egypt	~$12B	~5–6M	Gulf	High
2020	**Country**	**Remittances**	**Workers abroad**	**Main hosts**	**Return migration**

India	~$83B	~17–18M	Gulf, USA	High circular (Gulf)
China	~$59B	~10–11M	USA, Canada	Moderate–High (skilled return)
Mexico	~$43B	~12M	USA	Low
Philippines	~$35B	~10M	Gulf, Asia	High
Egypt	~$30B	~6–8M	Saudi, UAE	High
Pakistan	~$26B	~6–7M	Gulf, UK	High
Bangladesh	~$22B	~7–8M	Gulf, Malaysia	High
Nigeria	~$17B	~2–3M	USA, UK	Low

Table 11 traces the persistence of major migrant-origin countries from 1980 to 2020 and provides a qualitative assessment of each trend.

Table 11. *Countries with Sustained High Levels of Outward Migration*

Remittance Inflows by Country (Selected Years: 2000, 2010, 2020, 2023/24)

Country	2000 (approx.)	2010 (approx.)	2020 (approx.)	2023/24 (latest est.)
India	*~12–13 bn USD* [1]	*~55–60 bn USD* [1]	*~83 bn USD* [1]	**~125 bn USD (2024e)**
Philippines	*~8–10 bn USD* [2]	*~15–18 bn USD* [2]	*~35–38 bn USD* [2]	**~40 bn USD (2024e)**
Egypt	*~3–4 bn USD* [3]	*~8–10 bn USD* [3]	*~30–32 bn USD* [3]	**~24 bn USD (2023)**
Turkey	*~1–2 bn USD* [4]	*~1.5–2 bn USD* [4]	*~1.4–1.5 bn USD* [4]	**~1.53 bn USD (2024)**
Greece	*<1 bn USD* [5]	*~1 bn USD* [5]	*~1.2–1.5 bn USD* [5]	*~1.2–1.6 bn USD* [5]
Spain	*~2–3 bn USD* [6]	*~4–5 bn USD* [6]	*~7–9 bn USD* [6]	*~8–9 bn USD* [6]
Portugal	*~1 bn USD* [7]	*~1.5–2 bn USD* [7]	*~2–3 bn USD* [7]	*~2–3 bn USD* [7]

Notes on the figures above:

1. *India's remittances* have grown strongly from the early 2000s to become the **largest recipient in the world**, with ~US$125 bn in 2024 (estimated).

2. *Philippines* remittances are among the top global recipients, driven by a large overseas workforce.

3. *Egypt* saw major growth by the mid-2020s, though recent flows were weaker due to regional and economic factors.

4–7. *Turkey, Greece, Spain, Portugal* have **much smaller remittance receipts** by volume compared to Asian and MENA countries; they are not typically in global top-recipient lists, and many of their migrants remit relatively modest totals. These approximate figures are based on national totals from the World Bank remittance flows and supplementary estimates from public summaries (e.g., *List of countries by remittances received*).

Tables 10 and 11 show that countries of origin benefit directly from the remittances sent by their citizens abroad. These transfers are economically important, but they represent only a portion of migrants' earnings. The available indicators suggest that less than 20 percent of earnings is typically remitted; the remainder is spent, invested, saved, or taxed in the host economy.

Economic Contributions to Host Countries

This section considers the scale of migrants' participation in host-country economies through employment, production, consumption, investment, and taxation.

The following global values are compiled from different sources and are not fully harmonized. They should therefore be treated as broad indicators rather than precise, directly comparable estimates.

Indicative Global Values

- International migrants: approximately 281 million
- World population: approximately 8.3 billion
- International migrants as a share of world population: approximately 3.4 percent
- Estimated annual GDP generated by migrants: approximately US$9–12 trillion
- World GDP: approximately US$110 trillion
- Migrant-generated GDP as a share of world GDP: approximately 10 percent
- Additional indicative comparisons include:
- Migrants' annual earned income: approximately US$4–6 trillion
- Global annual remittances: approximately US$850–900 billion
- Annual remittances to LMICs: approximately US$650–700 billion

Table 12 compares selected high-immigration countries. Columns 2–4 report estimated migrant populations in 2020, 2022, and 2024. The remaining columns compare total population, GDP, the migrant share of population, and the estimated value of migrants' economic contribution in 2024.

Table 12. *Migrant Populations, Remittances, and Estimated Economic Contributions, 2020–2024*

Host country	Immigrants 2020 m	Immigrants 2022 m	Immigrants 2024 m	Pop. 2024 m	GDP 2024 USD tn	Immigrant share 2024	Proxy GDP contribution 2024 USD bn
US	50.6	51.5	52.4	340	28.75	15%	4,430
Canada	8	8.5	9	41	2.24	22%	488
Germany	15.8	16.4	16.9	85	4.66	20%	931
France	8.5	8.8	9	69	3.17	13%	417
UK	9.4	10.1	10.8	69	3.59	16%	564
Sweden	2	2.1	2.1	10.6	0.62	20%	123
Saudi Arabia	13.5	13.6	13.7	34	1.09	40%	439
UAE	8.7	8.9	9.2	11.3	0.54	81%	440
Egypt	0.54	0.55	0.56	116.5	0.38	0.50%	1.8
Morocco	0.1	0.11	0.12	38.1	0.157	0.30%	0.5
India	4.9	4.9	4.9	1,450	3.91	0.30%	13
Japan	2.8	3	3.4	124	4.03	2.70%	111
Australia	7.7	8	8.2	26.7	1.8	31%	553

Table 13. *Comparative Migration Indicators for Selected Host Countries, 2022 and 2024*

Country	Immigrant stock 2022 (m)	Immigrant stock 2024 (m)	Increase in stock (m)	Estimated annual new arrivals 2023–24 (m/yr)	Estimated annual returns/departures (m/yr)	Notes
US	51.5	52.4	0.9	1.1–1.3	0.6–0.8	High circular migration
Canada	8.5	9	0.5	0.45–0.55	0.20–0.30	Strong retention
Germany	16.4	16.9	0.5	1.5–1.8	1.2–1.4	Large Ukraine-related inflow
France	8.8	9	0.2	0.30–0.40	0.20–0.30	Moderate turnover
UK	10.1	10.8	0.7	0.9–1.1	0.5–0.7	Very high post-Brexit churn
Sweden	2.1	2.1	~0	0.12–0.15	0.10–0.14	Near equilibrium
Saudi Arabia	13.6	13.7	0.1	1.8–2.3	1.7–2.2	Extremely high worker rotation
UAE	8.9	9.2	0.3	1.2–1.6	1.0–1.4	Temporary labor model
Egypt	0.55	0.56	0.01	0.05–0.08	0.04–0.07	Mostly refugee flows
Morocco	0.11	0.12	0.01	0.02–0.03	0.01–0.02	Transit migration
India	4.9	4.9	~0	0.10–0.20	0.10–0.20	Low immigration country
Japan	3	3.4	0.4	0.50–0.70	0.30–0.45	Rising labor migration
Australia	8	8.2	0.2	0.60–0.75	0.45–0.60	Large student turnover

Table 13 focuses on 2022 and 2024 for countries with large migrant populations. It reports the estimated migrant stock in each year and the change between them; a positive value indicates an increase, while a negative value indicates a decrease. Table 3 also compares annual arrivals with departures from each host country. These flows are relevant to the later discussion of declining net migration and possible return migration.

International Frameworks and Migration Agreements

Large migration flows create long-term relationships between host countries and countries of origin. These relationships involve admission, employment, residence, family rights, social protection, departure, readmission, and reintegration. Because migrant contributions and remittance flows amount to hundreds of billions of dollars annually, governments and international organizations have developed increasingly detailed frameworks for managing these issues.

United Nations and World Bank Support

The United Nations does not operate a single global immigration system. Instead, agencies including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provide standards, coordination, technical assistance, and program support. The World Bank is not a UN agency, but its migration research and development programs are closely connected to this international framework (ILO, 2018; IOM, 2018; UNNM, 2022).

Support to Host Countries

Normal Migration Conditions

Under normal conditions, international organizations help host countries strengthen border and identity systems, visa and work-permit administration, labor-market matching, migrant integration, data collection, anti-trafficking measures, health screening, access to services, skills recognition, and language support.

Crisis and Displacement Conditions

During wars, natural disasters, state collapse, or sudden mass displacement, support may include emergency shelter, registration, humanitarian assistance, temporary relocation, refugee-camp management, health and education services, and international burden-sharing. Recent examples include displacement from Syria and Ukraine.

Support to Countries of Origin

Before Migration

Support may include job creation, skills development, vocational training, migration information centers, legal migration pathways, and youth-employment initiatives.

During Migration

Support may include protection of migrant rights, consular guidance, anti-trafficking measures, assistance for vulnerable migrants, and family-reunification programs.

Upon Return

Return and reintegration programs may provide voluntary-return assistance, travel documents, airfare, transit support, cash or business grants, vocational retraining, employment placement, housing assistance, psychological support, and community-development projects. A principal mechanism is IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration program.

Remittance Flows

World Bank estimates indicate the following approximate annual flows: official development assistance, US$220–250 billion; foreign direct investment to LMICs, US$400–500 billion; and remittances, US$650–700 billion. Remittances can represent a substantial share of GDP in some economies, including Tonga, Tajikistan, Nepal, Lebanon, Morocco, and Egypt.

Reducing remittance costs. Sustainable Development Goal target 10.c seeks to reduce migrant-remittance transaction costs to below 3 percent, compared with a recent global average of approximately 6–7 percent. Measures include digital transfers, mobile banking, financial technology, stronger competition, and financial inclusion.

Funding for host countries. UN-managed or supported mechanisms may finance housing, education, healthcare, water and sanitation, employment support, and registration systems. Funding ranges from millions to billions of dollars, depending on the scale and duration of displacement.

Funding for countries of origin. International support may include reintegration grants, small-business finance, agricultural assistance, training, community infrastructure, employment creation, rural development, climate adaptation, and governance programs.

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is the principal international cooperation framework. Its objectives include safer migration, lawful mobility, lower remittance costs, stronger protection, improved data, more effective return and reintegration, and cooperation during migration crises. The Compact is non-binding.

Migration Agreements

Migration agreements can be grouped into four broad categories.

Bilateral Labor-Migration Agreements

Germany–India. The 2022 Comprehensive Migration and Mobility Partnership covers skilled-worker recruitment, student mobility, recognition of qualifications, visa processing, and the readmission of nationals who no longer have legal status. Germany gains access to engineers, information-technology specialists, and healthcare workers; India gains legal employment channels, remittances, and skills transfer.

Spain–Morocco. This long-standing seasonal-worker program combines agricultural employment, circular migration, and priority selection for repeat workers. Spain gains a dependable seasonal labor supply, while Morocco benefits from employment, remittances, and skills development.

Philippines–Saudi Arabia. The framework includes worker protections, standard contracts, wage provisions, dispute-resolution mechanisms, and recruitment regulation. Saudi Arabia gains access to nurses, domestic workers, engineers, and construction workers; the Philippines benefits from employment and substantial remittance and foreign-exchange inflows.

United Arab Emirates–India. Cooperation includes recruitment, skills certification, digital labor contracts, and worker-welfare mechanisms. The Indian diaspora in the UAE exceeds 3 million people.

Canada–Mexico. The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, operating since 1974, provides temporary work permits, return transportation, employer obligations, and health coverage. It is one of the world's longest-running temporary-worker programs.

European Union Migration Partnerships

EU Talent Partnerships and Mobility Partnerships with countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Moldova, and Georgia combine legal pathways, skills training, student mobility, border management, readmission, and development assistance. They generally exchange mobility opportunities for cooperation on migration management and return (EU, 2024).

Regional Free-Movement Frameworks

European Union. EU citizens may live, work, and establish businesses in other member states, supported by qualification recognition and social-security coordination. Approximately 17 million EU citizens live or work in another EU country, helping to address labor shortages and improve labor-market matching (EU, 2024; EC, 2025).

Schengen Area. The Schengen Area complements EU mobility through the removal of most internal border controls and the closer integration of participating economies (EU, 2024).

Gulf Cooperation Council. The GCC comprises Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Although it does not provide free movement for foreign workers, members coordinate aspects of work permits, recruitment, and labor policy. Together they host approximately 30–35 million migrant workers.

MERCOSUR. Citizens of member states may reside and obtain work authorization in other participating countries through simplified procedures, with access to defined social protections (MERCOSUR, 2002).

East African Community. The EAC Common Market framework provides for movement of labor, establishment, and residence among participating states (EAC, 2010).

Economic Community of West African States. ECOWAS arrangements provide visa-free travel and progressive rights of residence and establishment across participating West African states (ECOWAS, 1979).

Eurasian Economic Union. Workers from member states may work in other participating countries without separate labor permits and may receive defined social protections and recognition of qualifications.

Return and Readmission Agreements

Many modern agreements include procedures for verifying nationality, issuing travel documents, returning people without legal status, and supporting reintegration. Examples include bilateral arrangements involving Germany and Morocco or Pakistan, and EU arrangements with Turkey, Georgia, and Albania.

Table 14 summarizes the principal topics commonly covered by return and readmission agreements.

Table 14. *Principal Provisions in Return and Readmission Agreements*

Host Country Receives	Origin Country Receives
Return cooperation	Development aid
Reduced irregular migration	Legal migration quotas
Labor recruitment channels	Skills programs
Border cooperation	Remittance flows

Return Migration in a Globalized Economy

The preceding sections provide the basis for classifying migration by duration, purpose, legal status, and expected pattern of return. The categories below help explain the circumstances in which migration remains permanent, becomes circular, or reverses.

Economic demand in the host country is a central driver of many migration flows. A high-income country that cannot meet growth or labor-force requirements domestically may recruit workers from abroad, as illustrated by the host-country examples in Tables 5–9. The principal categories are as follows.

Permanent and Long-Term Immigration

Permanent settlement. Migrants intend to remain for an extended period and may later acquire citizenship. Host countries may also facilitate family reunification. Canada, Australia, and the United States provide prominent examples.

Long-term residence. Migrants receive residence and employment authorization for several years without necessarily intending to settle permanently. Germany and the United Kingdom provide examples.

Specialized recruitment. Host countries recruit talent that is scarce domestically, including highly skilled workers from both high- and lower-income countries.

Investment-linked residence. Some countries offer long-term residence to individuals who invest in property, businesses, or other qualifying assets.

Across these categories, host-country economic objectives are often combined with shortages of labor, capital, or specialized skills.

Circular Migration

Circular migration involves workers entering a host country for a defined assignment and returning to their country of origin when it ends, sometimes followed by additional assignments. The Gulf states provide prominent examples, with workers arriving from India, Pakistan, Egypt, and many other countries.

Short-Term Mobility

Short-term visitors enter for purposes such as study, medical treatment, tourism, or professional assignments under conditions set by the host country. In some jurisdictions, eligible visitors may later change to a longer-term immigration status.

Refugees and Forced Migration

Countries may admit people displaced by conflict, persecution, natural disaster, or other severe conditions. Sweden and Germany have received substantial refugee populations, while India and Egypt both host displaced populations and send large numbers of workers abroad. The duration and eventual return of forced migrants depend heavily on political and security conditions.

Migration Corridors

Stable migration corridors develop when geography, economic ties, language, recruitment systems, or family networks repeatedly connect particular countries of origin and destination.

The regional evidence suggests three broad patterns: diversified and multipolar systems, most evident in Europe; regional corridor systems, prominent in the Americas; and highly concentrated regional systems, common in parts of Africa where proximity and conflict are especially influential. Tables 5–9 illustrate how these patterns have evolved over several decades.

Migration can produce gains on both sides. Host countries obtain labor, skills, consumption, investment, and tax revenue. Countries of origin receive remittances and may later benefit from the experience and human capital acquired by returning migrants. These complementary gains have supported durable migration relationships during the expansion of the global economy over the past three decades.

The same relationships, however, can change when economic, technological, demographic, or political conditions shift. A reduction in new arrivals, combined with higher departures, can lower net migration and eventually produce a substantial return flow. Automation and artificial intelligence may reduce demand in some occupations, while political change, public attitudes, or improved opportunities in countries of origin may also influence migrants' decisions.

Return migration may be voluntary, encouraged, or compelled. Long-term migrants may return because prospects at home have improved, because conditions in the host country have deteriorated, or because legal and political rules have changed. When such decisions occur at scale, they can affect labor markets, public finances, remittances, investment, and demographic trends in both countries.

Settlement-oriented countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States provide pathways through which qualifying migrants may obtain permanent residence and citizenship. Eligibility rules change over time and may extend rights to accompanying or second-generation family members.

Other host countries admit migrants primarily for employment and link residence to an active work permit. This model is common in Gulf Cooperation Council states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The scale of return migration depends on conditions in both host and origin countries and may affect low-skilled workers, highly skilled professionals, or both. Mass displacement caused by armed conflict is a distinct and complex international issue; the conditions governing refugee return fall outside the main scope of this paper.

Table 13 provides recent examples of arrivals and departures across 13 countries with different migration systems.

Europe provides a useful recent comparison because its migrant populations are more diversified than those of many other regions. Table 15 reports long-term immigrant arrivals between 2017 and 2024. Table 16 expresses departures as a percentage of arrivals for the same years. A value above 100 percent indicates that departures exceeded arrivals in that year; however, this aggregate measure does not establish that every departing migrant returned to the country of origin.

Table 15. *Annual Long-Term Immigrant Arrivals in Selected European Countries, 2017–2024*

	TIME	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
	European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	3,766,413	3,936,055	4,206,293	3,279,673	4,132,213	6,997,284	6,011,360	5,684,984
1	Belgium	126,703	137,860	150,006	118,683	139,743	208,356	169,609	162,926
2	Bulgaria	25,597	29,559	37,929	37,364	39,461	40,619	56,807	52,189
3	Czechia	51,847	65,910	105,888	63,095	69,360	347,429	142,149	123,910
4	Denmark	68,579	64,669	61,384	57,230	63,489	121,183	98,344	101,724
5	Germany	900,291	855,708	834,338	666,639	801,361	1,977,121	1,303,251	1,078,504
6	Estonia	17,616	17,547	18,259	16,209	19,524	49,414	26,399	18,634
7	Ireland	84,743	105,699	96,321	81,918	83,770	157,537	135,617	127,664
8	Greece	112,247	119,489	129,459	84,221	57,120	95,374	116,591	132,149
9	Spain	532,132	643,684	750,480	467,918	887,960	1,258,894	1,250,991	1,288,562
10	France	369,621	387,160	385,596	331,137	388,513	490,655	467,548	438,626
11	Croatia	15,553	26,029	37,726	33,414	35,912	57,972	69,396	70,391
12	Italy	343,440	332,324	332,778	247,526	318,366	410,985	439,658	451,583
13	Cyprus	22,458	25,740	27,553	22,850	25,473	37,558	40,761	40,471
14	Latvia	9,916	10,909	11,223	8,840	12,689	38,708	15,629	14,701
15	Lithuania	33,305	37,420	46,526	46,020	44,858	87,367	66,682	51,845
16	Luxembourg	24,379	24,644	26,668	22,490	25,335	31,433	26,964	25,725
17	Hungary	68,070	82,937	88,581	75,470	80,471	94,148	96,192	88,418
18	Malta	22,750	27,394	29,304	14,751	16,963	34,964	42,239	34,033
19	Netherlands	189,646	194,306	215,756	182,244	214,105	326,798	274,597	257,714
20	Austria	111,801	105,633	109,167	103,565	118,511	201,622	147,591	128,805
21	Poland	209,353	214,083	226,649	210,615	241,116	275,515	303,275	300,496
22	Portugal	46,649	55,357	95,382	83,654	97,119	167,098	189,367	
23	Romania	177,435	172,578	202,422	145,519	194,642	293,024	324,091	286,538
24	Slovenia	18,808	28,455	31,319	36,110	23,624	35,613	33,939	33,023
25	Slovakia	7,188	7,253	7,016	6,775	5,733	5,463	5,923	6,824
26	Finland	31,797	31,106	32,758	32,898	36,364	49,998	73,236	63,965
27	Sweden	144,489	132,602	115,805	82,518	90,631	102,436	94,514	116,197
28	Iceland	12,116	11,830	9,872	8,544	8,996	14,878	11,235	9,946
29	Liechtenstein	645	649	727	713	669	770	716	1,300
30	Norway	53,351	47,864	48,680	36,287	53,947	90,475	86,589	66,077
31	Switzerland	143,377	144,857	145,129	138,778	144,907	167,079	263,081	212,578
32	United King	644,209	603,953	680,906					
33	Montenegro	6,684	8,643	10,737	6,008		15,989	18,316	20,016
34	North Mace	2,064	2,053	2,118	2,555	1,570	2,452		7,458

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Observation flags: colors indicate some uncertainties in the reported estimate.

Table 16. *Departures as a Percentage of Arrivals in Selected European Countries, 2017–2024*

	TIME	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
	European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	69%	61%	61%	65%	65%	39%	50%	56%
1	**Belgium**	173%	135%	97%	121%	126%	24%	68%	81%
2	**Bulgaria**	46%	51%	65%	12%	42%	11%	15%	13%
3	**Czechia**	3%	3%	9%	5%	2%	2%	4%	8%
4	**Denmark**	320%	344%	364%	332%	225%	127%	258%	373%
5	**Germany**	609%	450%	516%	493%	547%	287%	428%	458%
6	**Estonia**	11%	9%	10%	15%	22%	10%	11%	13%
7	**Ireland**	11%	8%	7%	11%	6%	5%	6%	5%
8	**Greece**	28%	27%	25%	29%	24%	19%	19%	18%
9	**Spain**	2372%	1189%	785%	744%	1940%	917%	877%	941%
10	**France**	63%	57%	78%	78%	46%	68%	61%	58%
11	**Croatia**	211%	154%	146%	149%	159%	123%	96%	96%
12	**Italy**	1564%	1439%	1599%	1809%	1248%	388%	1014%	1285%
13	**Cyprus**	51%	47%	40%	31%	30%	24%	40%	52%
14	**Latvia**	73%	64%	55%	53%	51%	53%	70%	74%
15	**Lithuania**	79%	47%	40%	33%	31%	16%	23%	32%
16	**Luxembourg**	61%	51%	53%	101%	94%	49%	39%	48%
17	**Hungary**	21%	25%	23%	37%	32%	18%	26%	33%
18	**Malta**	7%	9%	7%	13%	11%	7%	14%	18%
19	**Netherlands**	52%	51%	48%	49%	46%	40%	41%	47%
20	**Austria**	142%	121%	72%	75%	69%	44%	39%	
21	**Poland**	123%	110%	89%	111%	104%	78%	60%	72%
22	**Portugal**	169%	111%	90%	72%	106%	87%	99%	103%
23	**Romania**	3369%	3194%	3331%	2757%	3783%	3703%	4039%	3153%
24	**Slovenia**	55%	43%	46%	54%	58%	42%	31%	34%
25	**Slovakia**	2%	2%	3%	3%	4%	4%	5%	4%
26	**Finland**	140%	162%	175%	177%	150%	105%	136%	170%
27	**Sweden**	7073%	7239%	6564%	6864%	7217%	6570%	10256%	6650%
28	**Iceland**	7%	9%	9%	17%	9%	6%	6%	9%
29	**Liechtenstein**								
30	**Norway**	5%	4%	3%					
31	**Switzerland**	1870%	1507%	1176%	1821%		764%	677%	648%
32	**United Kingd**	17426%	16773%	17393%					
33	**Montenegro**								
34	**North Macedonia**								

Data extracted on 04/04/2026 09:32:09 from [ESTAT]

Highlighted values in the source data identify years in which departures exceeded arrivals. Several countries show intermittent or increasing negative net flows. The exceptional regional pattern in 2022 and the results for Romania require further investigation before firm conclusions can be drawn.

To place these observations in context, the following selected literature is organized around return-migration theory, economic effects, skilled migration, reintegration, institutional policy, demographic change, and labor markets.

Selected Literature on Return Migration

Four recurring themes structure the literature:

- the theory and determinants of return migration;
- economic effects in host countries and countries of origin;
- labor-market, skills, and demographic consequences; and
- policy, reintegration, and future migration trends.

Foundational studies explain the motives, timing, and economic logic of return migration (Cerase, 1974; Stark, 1991; Ghosh, 2000; King, 2000; Dustmann, 2003; Cassarino, 2004; Dustmann and Weiss, 2007). Later work examines skilled migration, brain circulation, reintegration, demographic change, automation, and labor-market effects. Reports from IOM, OECD, the United Nations, the World Bank, and ILO provide the institutional and statistical context. Full citations are consolidated in the References section.

Research Opportunity

Existing research focuses strongly on individual decisions to return and on reintegration after return. Comparatively less attention has been given to the possibility of large-scale future return migration driven by interacting structural changes, including:

- economic convergence between countries of origin and destination;
- population aging and changing labor shortages;
- automation and artificial intelligence reshaping labor demand;
- climate adaptation and regional resilience;
- remote work reducing the need for permanent physical migration;
- geopolitical shifts and changing immigration policies; and
- the macroeconomic consequences of sustained return migration for both host countries and countries of origin.

A coherent framework combining these drivers could extend the traditional literature and make large-scale return migration a more useful analytical concept.

Proposed Case Studies

A companion analytical workbook is proposed to examine country-pair cases in which emigration declines or return migration increases. Each case would use observed migration and economic data to estimate possible effects on the host country, the country of origin, remittances, labor supply, and returning human capital. The quantitative model is not evaluated in this paper.

Globalization and Social Integration

Globalization has reshaped national economies through trade, tourism, mobility, migration, and cross-border financial transfers. Digital communication gives prospective migrants greater exposure to destination countries before arrival, but adjustment to a new society may still be difficult and uneven. Experiences vary by occupation, legal status, family circumstances, generation, and the degree of social acceptance in the host country. Some migrants integrate rapidly; others retain strong social and cultural ties within communities from the same country of origin. Effective language, education, employment, and social-protection policies can support integration while maintaining productive links with countries of origin. International cooperation, cultural exchange, travel, and sport can further strengthen the interpersonal connections on which a more constructive form of globalization depends.

Conclusions

Migration has become a structural component of the global economy. Host countries gain labor, skills, production, consumption, investment, and tax revenue; countries of origin gain remittances and may later recover valuable human and intellectual capital. These benefits are not automatic or permanent. Countries of origin—particularly LMICs—should prepare for possible return flows by creating employment, recognizing overseas experience, supporting entrepreneurship, and helping returning families reintegrate. Host and origin countries, with support from international organizations, could also develop portable pensions, savings, insurance, and investment arrangements for migrant workers.

Host countries face a different but related challenge. Aging populations may sustain demand for migrant labor, while automation, sectoral decline, or political change may reduce demand in particular occupations. Workforce retraining and careful migration planning will be necessary to prevent abrupt adjustments that harm citizens and migrants alike.

The central question is therefore not simply whether migrants will return, but how a sustained return flow would redistribute labor, skills, savings, investment, and demographic pressures between host countries and countries of origin. Answering that question requires better longitudinal data, transparent definitions, and country-pair analysis.

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