

# Migration and Global Justice: From Africa to the United States

By William Minter\*

## People on the Move in the Global Economy

People have been on the move throughout human history. The ancestors of all of us adapted to changing climate and diverse conditions within Africa, our common continent of origin.

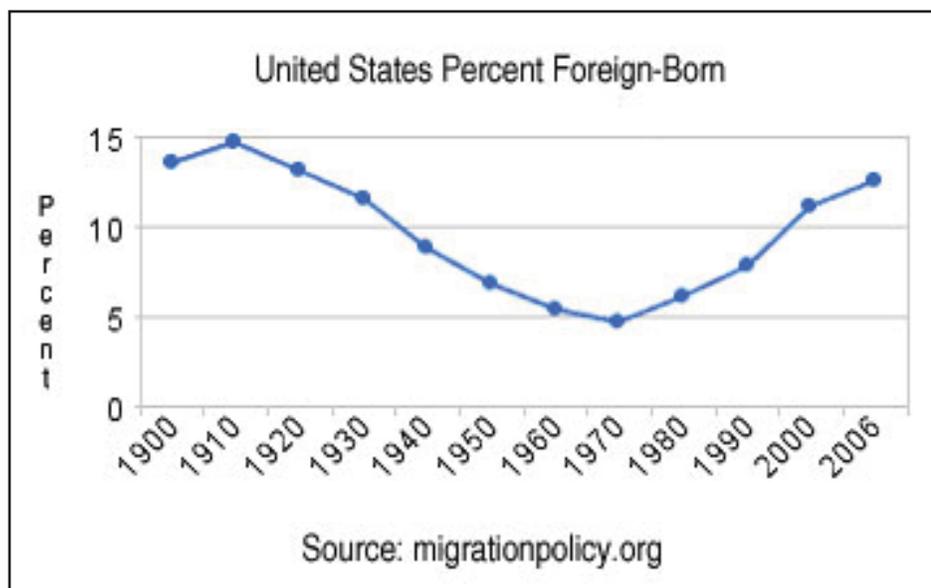
Wars, famine, and other hardships have impelled countless migrations over land and sea. From the 16th through the 19th century, the transatlantic slave trade marked the most brutal of displacements which took Africans to the United States and other countries of this hemisphere. In the current era of globalization, economic disparities are driving accelerated migration. Often the movement is forced by economic hardship; sometimes it is in response to new opportunities. Most often the reasons have been and are a mix of push and pull.

Migration has always been driven by powerful economic and political forces. Conditions have rarely been easy, as individuals adapted to change and communities clashed or learned to live together. As the global economy drives global inequality,

movement across borders inevitably increases. If legal ways are closed, people trying to survive and to support their families will cross fences or set sail on dangerous seas regardless of the risks.

In the United States, immigrants were 14.7 percent of the total population in 1910. This percentage dropped to 4.7 percent in 1970. It then began to rise again, reaching 12.5 percent in 2006.

Almost one third of immigrants now in the United States were born in Mexico; 20 percent more come from five Asian countries. Almost 10 percent of immigrants, some 3 million people, are from the Caribbean, while those born in Africa—a



group that is growing rapidly—add up to more than a million. Caribbean immigrants have played important roles in both the United States and their home countries, only a short distance away, for more than two centuries. The African immigrant community is only now moving into public life.

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## AFRICAN DIASPORA MIGRATION: The Story of New York and Florida

Among recent immigrant communities, people of African origin from the Caribbean and coming directly from the African continent are well represented in East Coast states. In total numbers of immigrants, New York ranks second, with 4.2 million compared to California's 10 million. Florida ranks fourth with 3.4 million, compared to 3.7 million in Texas. New York and Florida each have more than one million immigrants from the Caribbean. New York ranks first in African immigrants with more than 120,000, while there are some 35,000 in Florida.

One out of five New Yorkers was born outside the United States. In Florida, almost one out of six was born outside the United States. Such rapid change would require adjustments even in the best of times. When economic times are hard, and job losses and budget cuts put pressure on the working and middle class of all origins, it is easy for frustrations to result in competition among communities and blaming other groups instead of seeking common solutions.

of advancement depend on the accident of place of birth. History makes a difference; over generations richer parents give their children greater opportunities; and richer countries can invest in health, education, technology, and other infrastructure that creates opportunities.

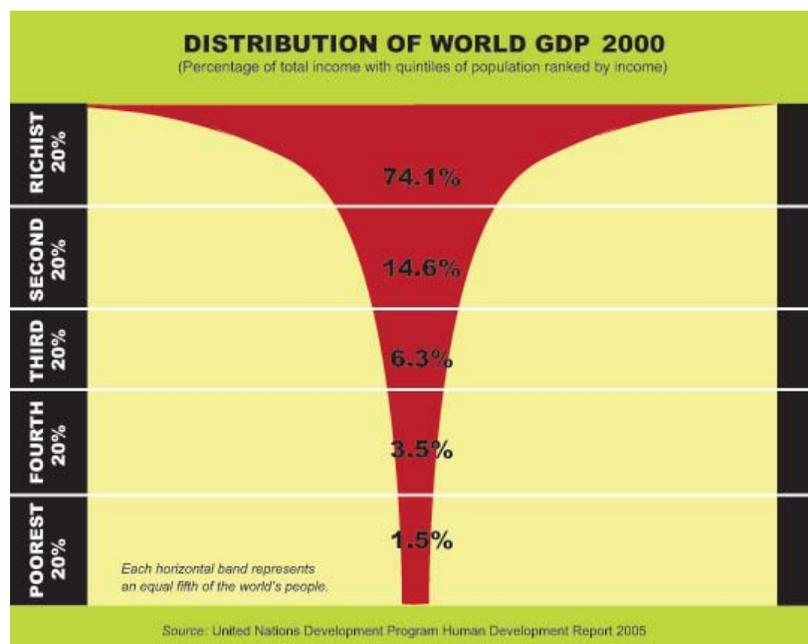
The division of wealth today is linked to centuries of conquest, slavery, colonialism, and racial discrimination. It is also driven by a global economy that rewards some and penalizes others, while powerful governments and special interests write the rules or apply them to their own advantage. In the year 2000, according to the first comprehensive study of global wealth, the richest 2 percent of the world's adults owned more than half of the world's total household wealth.

In such a world, it should be no surprise that people try to move to get a better deal, and that many are not deterred by laws, fences, or danger. The phenomenon is worldwide, wherever wealth and poverty coexist: Africans from around the continent find their way to South Africa, South Asians find work in the Middle East, Mexicans and Central Americans cross the border to the U.S. Southwest, people risk their lives on small boats from Africa to Europe, or from the Caribbean to Florida. Whatever governments do, people will continue to move as long as millions cannot find a way to make a living at home.

## The Vicious Circle of Global Inequality

### The role of economic inequality

People may move for many reasons, but there is no doubt that one of the most powerful forces driving international migration is economic inequality between nations. There are rich and poor in every country, but the world's wealth is overwhelmingly concentrated in a handful of countries. This means that a child's chances of survival and



This global inequality is reinforced by economic mechanisms that are often invisible and sometimes hard to understand, but that have powerful effects including migration trends. But discussions of migration, and of trade, debt, and aid, most commonly take place in isolation from each other. That is a mistake.

### Trade gaps

Proponents of free trade say reducing trade barriers will eventually benefit all countries. Some countries--such as rapidly developing China, India, and Brazil--have sectors that may indeed be able to compete with richer countries. But neither current practice nor proposed changes in rules for international trade offer a fair deal for countries heavily dependent on the export of raw commodities or lacking the industrial capacity to compete against international giants.

A couple of examples: The United States subsidizes large cotton farmers to the tune of more than \$3 billion a year. Those farmers can then sell their cotton on the global market often at prices below what it costs to produce. This undercuts the export chances of West African cotton producers where the average farmer already earns less than \$300 a year as they try to compete with world prices. Poultry farmers in Ghana have been devastated by competition from frozen chickens imported from Europe and the United States. In today's world, trade is essential for every country. But unfair trade only puts vulnerable countries farther behind.

Although the elite in many countries can benefit, free trade has not proven to be an effective way to reduce poverty. When borders are forced open through free trade, many farmers cannot compete even in their own markets. This happened, for example, to some 1.7 million Mexican farmers estimated to be displaced since the North



American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The result is that many are forced to migrate to cities, the borders, and then abroad in search of a livelihood. The same happens with West African cotton farmers, or with poultry producers in the Caribbean driven out of business by large multinational food companies.

### Debt traps

Africa's foreign debt (principal and interest on loans owed to Western countries, commercial banks, and multinational institutions like the World Bank), is now draining more money out of the continent than aid coming in. These debts, many originally the result of deals between undemocratic governments and unscrupulous lenders, have grown because of rising interest rates and penalties over time as well as a continued dependence on loans. Moreover, conditions imposed on countries seeking loans or debt relief, such as insisting that governments charge school and health care fees for service, actually harm a nation's ability to reduce poverty and break the chains of debt.

Sub-Saharan Africa borrowed \$294 billion between 1970 and 2002. Africa has already paid back 90 percent of this. But, with high interest rates, the debt still stands at more than \$200 billion. For

some countries, debt cancellation campaigns have freed up money for health and education. But Africa is still paying \$2.30 in debt for every dollar received in new “aid.” The debt burden adds yet another barrier to providing health, education, and jobs at home, and thus leads both ordinary workers and professionals to seek other options outside their countries.

### “Aid” reality checks

Despite many new promises and some genuine successes, such as increasing U.S. and international support to fight AIDS and malaria, “aid” is still misleadingly portrayed as charity rather than a basic obligation of world citizenship. The United States is next to last among rich countries in the share of national income put into “development assistance”—only 18 cents out of each \$100 compared to the target of 70 cents out of \$100. As much as 90 percent of U.S. aid is what critics call “phantom aid,” much of the funds going to high-priced foreign consultants and tied to purchasing goods from the donor country. In short, Americans are nowhere close to paying our fair share to build a world that works for all of us.

As long as the money flows primarily from poor countries to rich countries, people too will move in large numbers in search of a better life for themselves and their families.

## A Framework for Action

No short-term solution, whether high-tech fences or changes in laws, will resolve the complex issues of immigration driven by accelerating global economic interaction. Steps to “fix the system” must include not only medium-term reforms in laws and procedures, but also long-term actions that can counter growing global inequality. In the meantime, it is essential to find ways to protect the human rights and immediate interests of both



newcomers and those who are threatened or feel threatened by the pace of change. Organized response from immigrant communities voicing their concern and contributing to policy reform is critical.

The immigration system clearly needs fixing. More than 14 million newcomers, documented and undocumented, arrived in the United States in the 1990s, and in this decade there will be even more. As many as one-third of immigrants now in the country do not have the proper legal documents. The U.S. border control budget has jumped from \$268 million in 1986 to some \$13 billion 20 years later, according to the Migration Policy Institute. States with large immigrant populations face unsustainable budget crunches for services. There is competition between immigrants and other groups for jobs and housing, increasing tensions among grassroots communities.

Even a well-designed and fair immigration system cannot work as long as the economy continues to increase the gap between rich and poor, both within and between countries.

## Principles for Comprehensive Immigration Reform in the U.S.

AFSC, May 2006

- Inclusive and coordinated measures that support immigration status adjustment for undocumented workers.
- Support for the distinctly important and valuable role of family ties by supporting the reunification of immigrant families in a way that equally respects heterosexual and same-sex relationships.
- Humane policies that protect workers and their labor and employment rights.
- Measures that reduce backlogs that delay the ability of immigrants to become U.S. permanent residents and full participants in the life of the nation and of their communities.
- The removal of quotas and other barriers that impede or prolong the process for the adjustment of immigration status.
- Guarantees that no federal programs, means-tested or otherwise, will be permitted to single out immigrants for exclusion.
- Demilitarization of the U.S. border and respect and protection of the region's quality of life.
- "Free trade" agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA have had a detrimental impact on sending countries from the global South, provoking significant increases in migration. Such international economic policies should be consistent with human rights, fair trade, and sustainable approaches to the environment and economic development.

## Fixing the system

Trying to stop the flow of immigrants, without solving economic problems both here and overseas, will not work. A redesigned system of immigration control, says the Independent Task Force on Immigration and America's Future, needs rules that are simplified, fair, practical, and enforceable. It should set realistic legal immigration levels, and provide a clear path for legality for those currently without documents. Any proposed reform must comply with certain basic principles, as laid out in AFSC's May 2006 statement of principles (see sidebar, left).

Even a well-designed and fair immigration system cannot work as long as the economy continues to increase the gap between rich and poor, both within and between countries. Bottom line, both immigrants and non-immigrants should mobilize for more jobs and more equality, rather than fighting over crumbs. Internationally, rich nations must pay their share to address the world's problems, from poverty and lack of education to disease and climate change. Countries that are closely linked by the flow of migrants must coordinate their efforts to promote development and decrease inequality. We must build a world in which the decision to move to another country is driven by free choice rather than the pressure to survive.

## Protecting human rights

Whatever the system, or whatever laws may have been violated, human beings are never "illegal." International human rights law increasingly recognizes that countries have the obligation to guarantee basic rights to immigrants as well as citizens. These include, at minimum, the rights of humane treatment and due process for all. Both countries of origin and countries receiving immigrants have the obligation to ensure that these rights are respected. Long-term security will not come from violating human rights, but from ensuring that they apply to all.

## About the Africa Program

The Africa Program of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in the Peacebuilding Unit (PBU) promotes the economic and political well-being of the African continent. The program's goals include:

- increasing U.S. citizen understanding of issues affecting the African continent;
- standing in solidarity with Africa's social movements; and
- promoting organized U.S. citizen action to pressure the U.S. government to develop a just policy toward Africa, which will remove dated approaches and structures that undermine economic and political development on the continent.

The Africa Program also works to end U.S. support for entrenched African governments that do not respond to the will of their populations and maintain unjust economic and political systems.



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*The American Friends Service Committee is a Quaker organization that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace and humanitarian service. Its work is based on the belief in the worth of every person and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice.*

