

To reduce irregular migration, destination countries should commit to creating more regular migration opportunities

Global Compact on Migration

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PANEL 1: Irregular migration and regular pathways

Written submission by

Dr. Matthias Luecke
(matthias.luecke@ifw-kiel.de)

Academic Co-Director, Mercator Dialogue on Asylum and Migration in Europe
(www.medam-migration.eu)

Senior Researcher, Kiel Institute for the World Economy (www.ifw-kiel.de)
Adjunct Professor of Economics, Kiel University

In discussing the proposed Global Compact on Migration, much emphasis is rightly placed on promoting migration that is safe, orderly, and regular (Issue Brief #6). It is well known that irregular migrants often use the services of people smugglers and are at risk of being trafficked. As a result, organized crime may be strengthened in countries of origin and destination and social and labor standards may be undermined.

Most legitimate stakeholders therefore prefer regular to irregular migration. Nevertheless, they will often prefer irregular migration to no migration at all. When legal migration is impossible because immigration policies are too restrictive, irregular migrants and their employers, along with other stakeholders, may still capture many of the benefits of migration.

Much irregular migration takes place along well-established migration corridors, for example from Mexico to the United States, from Eastern to Southern Europe, or from South America to Spain before the global financial crisis. Travel to the destination country may not always be irregular (for example, migrants may overstay legitimate visa); even when travel is in fact irregular, migrants will use the services of people smugglers only if borders are fortified or otherwise difficult to cross. Most irregular migrants are probably aware of the significant risks that they run and still find migration worthwhile, given their alternative options. Arguably, we should look upon irregular migrants, first and foremost, as individuals who take risky decisions under difficult circumstances, rather than as helpless victims of people smugglers.

On the demand side, attitudes toward irregular immigrants among destination country residents are typically ambiguous. While it is obvious that irregular immigrants must technically have entered the country illegally, many employers are still happy to hire them, often quite formally (with taxes and social security contributions, etc.). In many locations, irregular immigrants have access to public

services, including health care and schooling for their children. In several countries, irregular immigrants have been legalized on multiple occasions in recent years. All this suggests that in many destination countries, demand for immigrant labor (often legitimate) is higher than immigration policies allow to be realized. Furthermore, many irregular immigrants not only support themselves economically, rather than being a burden to their host societies; they also provide crucial services for destination-country residents that would otherwise not be available, such as care for the elderly and infirm.

These observations suggest that the best way to promote regular migration through the proposed Compact is to shift migrants' incentives away from irregular migration towards legal pathways: First, UN member states should commit to offering current, well-integrated irregular immigrants an opportunity to regularize their status. Second, UN member states should ensure that their immigration policies accommodate all legitimate demand for immigrant workers on a regular basis.