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- Suzanne Moore, writer and Guardian columnist

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Open borders, global future

BRIAN K MURPHY 4 June 2008

At least 200 million of the world's people - between 3% and 5% of its total population - are currently [on the move](#) outside their country of origin. Many of these would have preferred to stay where they were if they could. Another untold number would move if they could, but can't. Many simply are looking for better opportunities, as human beings have done for millennia. The realities of globalisation - economic, environmental, familial - mean that these numbers are bound to increase.

Migration is perhaps the major issue of our times. It is an issue that dominates the daily lives of people around the world - those who are in transit, and those they leave behind - and preoccupies governments everywhere. At the same time, the measures that have been put in place to deal with migration, and those measures being contemplated, are woefully inadequate. Closing and militarising borders, [restricting](#) mobility, criminalising

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About the author

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movement, incarcerating and deporting those who somehow manage to arrive in the places closed to them, is not an effective response to the phenomenon of widespread "irregular" [global migration](#); it is merely one more tragic element of the phenomenon itself. It is not working, for migrants, or for the countries trying to control the influx of migrants they see as a "threat". And it is not going to work no matter how much more money, arms and surveillance equipment are invested in border control.

Strangely, everyone knows this. I have never met anyone, whether in a government policy meeting or in a casual conversation, who actually believes that present measures of control will work. These measures are being employed because of some sense that "we have to do something", not because anyone believes that ten or twenty years from now, the situation will have changed or improved as a result of these measures. The conviction that "there is no alternative" blocks the critical policy discussion required in

what is clearly a time of national and global crisis on every front. Meanwhile, migrants continue to leave and arrive; they continue to integrate in the economy - or not - and the number of irregular and undocumented residents in many countries continues to surge.

In the global south, where the largest burden of migration is experienced and felt, the majority of the world's migrants languish with remote prospects and even more remote hope, while national governments faced with this influx struggle to meet the challenges with scarce resources and little international support or sympathy. Indeed, if anything they are under constant pressure to contain the surge, and to accept without protest those deported back to their shores, regardless of their origin.

Beyond the border

In the face of this gridlock, the radical alternative of moving towards global open migration policies requires much more serious consideration within the conventional immigration discourse.

In essence, global open migration would mean a transition to a global order in which every person has the right and freedom to move if they wish. The corollary would be that each person has the right and freedom to stay where they are if that is their desire, a choice that most certainly would be the predominant one. This new order would be rooted in a basic level of universal human rights common to all, including the principle of "portability" of these rights no matter where a person may move, and regardless of their citizenship or documentation. The goal of a negotiated global open migration policy would be to make universal what is already the reality for the affluent everywhere, making what is now a privilege for some a universal right for all (see Saskia Sassen, "[Migration policy: from control to governance](#)", 13 July 2006).

This is not a new proposition. It has been the subject of serious discussion in academic and policy circles for years. Indeed, an ambitious [extended debate](#) within **openDemocracy**, focusing on the reform of European migration policy, included contributions from many policy analysts such as [Liza Schuster](#) and [Franck Düvell](#), [Nigel Harris](#) and [Saskia Sassen](#), arguing for variations on the proposition of open borders. Still, the issue is a hard sell, and in spite of the manifest failure of present policies and practices, serious consideration of the alternative at the political level has not been achieved.

One difficulty in getting a broad public discussion started is that "open borders" is often assumed to mean "[no borders](#)", which is difficult for people to imagine. But the open-borders discourse makes no such assumption. Borders will continue to exist as long as nations do, and the proposal for open borders is not a proposition to do away with nations.

What would change in an open migration policy is the meaning and function of the border - a transition from a closed fortress wall, to a modest well-maintained fence with an open well-administered gateway. It is a proposition that would prioritise administering borders rather than policing them. It would reallocate the tremendous financial, institutional, infrastructural and human resources presently devoted to population control, incarceration and prosecution, to migration administration, reception, and social and economic insertion (see Teresa Hayter, [The Case Against Immigration Controls](#), Pluto Press, 2nd edition, 2004).

The process of transition

Clearly this proposition raises many issues that would need to be

Among **openDemocracy's** many articles on transnational migration, its causes and effects:

Ulf Hedetoft, "['Cultural transformation': how Denmark faces immigration](#)" (30 October 2003)

Ivan Briscoe, "[Dreaming of Spain: migration and Morocco](#)" (27 May 2004)

KA Dilday, "[The labour of others](#)" (6 April 2006)

Hank Heifetz, "[Looking north: Mexicans in migration](#)" (11 April 2006)

Michelle Wucker, "[Don't get immigration wrong - again](#)" (20 June 2006)

Saskia Sassen, "[Migration policy: from control to governance](#)" (13 July 2006)

Patrice de Beer, "[France's immigration politics](#)" (12 February 2007)

Zygmunt Dzierżewski, "[Russia's immigration challenge](#)" (15 June 2007)

Hsiao-Hung Pai, "[Chinese migrant](#)"

[addressed](#) to gain serious momentum in the current environment, and ultimately would need to be resolved through national and international negotiation processes (see the essays in [Development](#), 50/4, December 2007; a special issue on migration and development). But the efficacy of a proposition toward global open migration policies as a goal in principle does not depend on the specific resolution of all of these issues *a priori*; rather the effective resolution of these issues depends first on making the choice that we seriously want to - indeed, need to - attempt to move in this direction.

True, it will not be very quick or very easy to negotiate the path to administering migration in a new and open way. It will entail, ultimately, a [transition](#) in how we conceive of borders, of "the other", of national and ethnic identity, of the privileges of "birth" versus the inalienable rights of all persons regarding where we were born and where we live. Achieving such a transition will require intense consultation, discussion and debate, unfolding in an iterative process over time. It will involve trial and error and a tremendous, even historical, degree of dialogue, reciprocity and social solidarity, north and south.

At the same time, this dialogue will need to be rooted in a frank analysis of the economic benefits that migrants bring to host countries, along with the costs incurred, both by the receiving country and the country of emigration. But there can no longer be any doubt that in general migrants are an economic and social boon, and that the exception is largely in those places where-and to the extent which-movement is forced or restricted, and rights curtailed. It is also clear that all countries in the global north (and many in the south) absolutely depend upon migrant workers and permanent immigrants, a dependency that will only increase; the viability of many of these countries will be determined by the extent to which they can effect radical changes in migration policy (and social attitudes). This is doubly so for those several nations that have already passed the threshold of negative population growth, a trend that cannot be reversed, and is not sustainable.

A transition to global open migration is not a modest proposition and making it happen will be an intricate political process. The policy is not a panacea for all issues of global justice and equality. However, any movement towards open migration policies and the decriminalisation and regularisation of migration will make conditions very much more [equitable](#) for those migrants already in place, and for those on the move, and will make it even more so for those who follow.

It will also mark an important step in beginning to reform the foundations of our societies in a way that anticipates the future and prepares for it, rather than fearing the future and trying stubbornly, and to our detriment, to delay or even prevent its inevitable arrival.

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[workers: lives in shadow](#)" (30 May 2008)

Also in **openDemocracy**, a major debate on "People Flow" in Europe, including arguments for and against free movement and open borders:

Nigel Harris, "[Open borders: a future for Europe, migrants, and the world economy](#)" (12 June 2003)

Franck Düvell, "[The globalisation of migration control](#)" (12 June 2003)

Ash Amin, "[From ethnicity to empathy: a new idea of Europe](#)" (24 July 2003)

Liza Schuster, "[An open debate on open borders](#)" (29 December 2003)