The global flow of people

What is the geography of migration? This Centrepiece uses a diagram based on United Nations data about migrants to explain global patterns, and dispel some myths.

1 Visualising migration flows
Movements of people are often shown as lines or arrows on a world map, but circular diagrams can be a more effective way of visualising global migration flows. This diagram shows migration between 196 countries between 2005 and 2010, broken down into 15 world regions. The colour tells the region each flow came from. The width of a flow shows its size, and numbers indicate the total migration in and out of a region, in millions.

2 Key migration facts
We tend to think that a greater proportion of people migrate than ever before. But new data (see Box 7) debunk this myth, showing that since 1995 only 0.6% of the world population has switched country of residence over each 5-year period. The data show that, even today, most migrants move over short distances within the same region or between neighbouring regions, and relatively few move between continents. The figures also give some new insights into the geography of contemporary migration.

3 Western nations are key destinations
North America, Europe and the oil-rich Gulf countries in western Asia attract migrants from furthest afield. Most flows that go through the centre of the circular diagram go to these destination regions. People make such long-distance moves to improve their education or career prospects.

4 It’s not the poorest who migrate the most
People living in the poorest countries in Asia and Africa do not have enough qualifications or money to move between continents. Asian and Latin American countries in transition — still poor, but with some education and financial means — send more people to Western countries.

5 The largest regional flow in the world is within Asia
Between 2005 and 2010, 4.9 million people moved from south Asia to west Asia. This massive movement was largely driven by the construction boom on the Arabian Peninsula. To put this figure into perspective, the much-discussed flow of migrants from Central to North America contained ‘only’ 3.2 million people.

6 Asia’s role in the global migration system
Over the period 1990–2010 a growing number of people migrated from Asia to North America and Europe, as their education levels and economic prosperity rose. At the same time Asian countries, especially the Gulf and ‘Tiger’ states, have become increasingly attractive destinations for overseas migrants.

7 Measuring international migration flows
Creating a comprehensive picture of global migration flows is difficult, because the sizes of flows between countries cannot be directly compared using existing data sets. Most countries collect information on the size of their immigrant population (the migrant stock), but fewer than 50 countries provide data on incoming and outgoing migrants over a specific time interval (the migrant flow). Stock data include all immigrants, irrespective of how long ago they moved to the destination country, and do not capture recent trends in migrant flows. A study published in March 2014 used a United Nations data set on migrant stocks in 1990, 2000 and 2010 to estimate the flow of people over 5-year periods based on changes over time in the migrant stocks. The study produced the diagram you see here.

Classification of regions
The composition of world regions shown in the diagram follows the United Nations’ classification. Sub-Saharan Africa includes Sudan, Chad, Niger and Mali. Western Asia includes the Arabian peninsula, Israel, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Central Asia includes Russia. East Asia includes China, Hong Kong, Korea and Japan.

Further reading
For an interactive version of the diagram go to: www.global-migration.info


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