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Immigration and the challenge of sustainable development

Abstract

The rise of immigration and the large influx of immigrants coming into Europe and North America are trends that have given political clout to right-wing groups, especially after Brexit. The issue of immigration, however, is hardly restricted to the developed world. A serious analysis, dispassionate and sober, is necessary in order to understand the benefits and impacts of large scale immigration on sustainable development in regions all over the world. By identifying patterns and solutions, we will intertwine different areas of knowledge and prove that immigration is a vital issue for the West and its survival as a plurality of democracies.

Keywords: culture, democracy, immigration, sustainability, xenophobia

Introduction

The issues of immigration facing countries nowadays have been extensively discussed in the media and in the public arena, both by left-wing and right-wing parties. The human aspects of immigration are often politicized in order to attract voters and shift public debate to get votes: we have seen this happen in the United States with the election of Donald Trump, in France with the success of Marine le Pen, in the United Kingdom with Brexit (Hope 2018), as well as in Central European countries that are staunch opponents of mass immigration. But this issue is hardly exclusive to the developed

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.31570/Prosp_2018_04_4.

world. Immigration puts financial strains on countries as diverse as Iran, Lebanon, Brazil, Mexico and Nigeria.

How are these issues framed by the political parties across the ideological spectrum? The very notion of nation states is tied to interpretations of immigration, to its definition and to the implications of a large influx of migrants entering a territory. This paper will focus on the political, as well as the social and economic dimensions of the issue, on how immigration affects sustainable development. In order for us to channel the discussion as presented in this paper, it is necessary to investigate its different aspects so as to arrive at a logical conclusion. The result will hopefully inform the reader about the implications that immigration has for sustainable development.

It is necessary, at this point, to define immigration. The term refers to the movement of humans into the territory of a country by crossing its borders. This paper will not focus on the refugee crisis: a person becomes a refugee when their government refuses or is unwilling to protect them from harm. Under special circumstances in international law, other countries become legally obligated to take them in as refugees and offer them protection. This obviously impacts sustainable development as well, but the status of refugees is a much more specific subject, one that can be challenged by countries who do not wish to host them.

Sustainable development is also a concept that must be clearly understood. It refers to the maximization of productivity or human development without causing a situation of imbalance in the economy, in the environment or in other areas of human life. It is not limited only to a society's impact on nature, it can also be applied when talking about purely social aspects. It is the responsibility of all governments to monitor the use of water, land, food, fuel, electricity and money, for example. What we often see in agriculture these days illustrates a challenge for sustainable development, especially but not exclusively, when agricultural companies use immense quantities of water for their business, disregarding the global call for being economical with freshwater supplies running out. Unfortunately, this irresponsible attitude seems to characterize several permissive governmental institutions in agricultural powerhouses along the Equator.

Even in more developed democracies (the ones with more robust and transparent institutions), it is always a challenge to promote sustainable development. The government's role is to regulate business and to create rules that guide life in a society, promoting people's safety and welfare. The population, on the other hand, is expected to fund

these social projects with a part of their income that the government receives by means of taxation. In this manner, people keep the government functioning. In exchange, they should be able to choose which social projects they wish to fund by participating in a democracy, directly or through representatives (Haider-Markel 2016). This very simple structure is at the core of the modern nation-state. Besides its population and structure, a state is also defined by its territory. The imaginary line we call border really determines people's fate and safety, but it can complicate matters further when we think of immigration, especially of large waves of immigrants.

The impacts of immigration on society

As to what a large influx of immigrants does to a country depends, primarily, on the size of the group, on how educated the immigrants are and on what country they choose to enter.

Let us take a look at Finnish immigrants in Sweden, for example, to understand how immigration works. Finland and Sweden are two countries with plenty of cultural similarities and with virtually no ideological differences, albeit with two very distinct languages. What we see in Sweden is that Finnish immigrants (a small group) cause practically no disruption to the institutions or social life of the host country. This can be explained by the fact that immigration from one developed country to another is hardly about survival or personal safety. Often the decision of a person to change countries is motivated by the desire of getting a higher salary, or, indeed, by the need to have access to better conditions or facilities at work for realizing his full potentials. In Europe, it is not uncommon either that people set up residence in a different country because of the tax benefits it offers.

There are other scenarios, however, where the arrival of immigrants might, and often does create difficulties for the host country. The first and most obvious element of these "difficulties", at least when dealing with immigration to countries with extensive social benefits, is that immigrants have not made any contributions to the system before arriving in the country. Yet, for a long period of time before they are able to find work and start paying taxes, immigrants will have to be provided for by a social security network financed by the taxpayers of the target country. This situation has become fairly common in Europe, a continent with the principle of freedom of movement rec-

ognized in most regions and, in theory, in all the member countries of the European Union, as well as in some very prosperous economies outside the EU. Europe attracts millions of immigrants; the largest economy in the continent, Germany, is the second biggest destination for immigrants from all over the world.

A closer look at the three key factors mentioned above, i.e. the number of people entering a given territory, their education level and the target country itself, can reveal further problem areas where failure can be expected.

Social unrest in the Middle East has forced millions of people to leave their homes and find someplace else to live. People who left Syria after the beginning of the Civil War settled mostly in the Middle East, but those who could afford it made the journey to Europe. Hundreds of thousands chose to settle in Germany. It is still unclear what their legal future is going to be, since, according to the German Constitution, only 1% of people coming from Syria can be considered refugees and granted this status under the criterion of clear evidence of personal persecution suffered and of threat to life should the individual be repatriated. Although it is not the aim of this paper to analyze the situation in Germany only or to restrict the discussion to one country, Europe's largest economy lends itself as a fitting example on account of the sheer might of its GDP. The fourth largest economy in the world can hardly be expected to suffer negative consequences because of a large influx of migrants. And yet it has. The negative effects on Germany are so incredibly pronounced that one must wonder whether or not the government was actually interested in keeping the social welfare system intact or thought about how it could be maintained in the long run. In 2015 alone, Germany spent twenty-one billion euros on the population seeking asylum as a result of the Syrian Civil War. The financial impact is certainly not the most pressing concern for such a big economy, but in order to understand the full dimensions of this issue, we must not forget who pays the bill: the middle class.

This leads us to another problem of immigration and how it affects sustainable development: immigration hinders social progress in that immigrant workers accept lower wages, which leads to a precarious situation for workers of the host country. If immigrant workers accept a certain amount that is the same or slightly lower than the minimum wage, there is no incentive whatsoever for companies to increase their workers' salaries. In Germany, the wages of the middle class, adjusted for inflation, have not increased since the 1970s. This is so good for businesses that Bernie Sand-

ers, a democratic socialist who ran for President of the US, actually called the “open borders” idea a Koch brothers proposal (Eskow 2015), referring to the family that owns the second largest company in the United States, one that donated 880 million dollars to candidates of the 2016 presidential election. The same trends can be observed in countries like the United Kingdom and Australia, with the latter having seen its real wages decline since 2012. Sander’s concerns regarding the situation of American workers are not misplaced. By importing cheap labor, businesses “freeze” the situation workers find themselves in, and erode labor rights for domestic employees. The situation is very much the same in other regions that receive large influxes of immigrants, such as Europe. Immigrants are often accused of stealing jobs in the host country, but that is not quite the problem. By doing low-paid work that citizens of the host country do not desire to do, immigrants inadvertently hinder progress. Citizens who enjoy full rights are more likely and more able to fight for their rights and better working conditions (Alvarado–Creedy 1998) as, for them, there are no language barriers, they have a clearer understanding of how the government works and they have a stronger connection to the country itself. Immigrants, on the other hand, especially those that have entered the country illegally, are not very likely to go on strike or demand better wages. Even the ones who enjoy legal protection might find it harder than usual to change anything in their workplace, allowing for the employer in jobs requiring average skills to leave workers’ pay unchanged in an environment of a plentiful supply of immigrants ready to fill vacancies.

Another problem arises when immigrants get benefits from the government and are joined by their families later on. This might double or triple the number of people that have originally entered the country. A large population of immigrants dramatically impacts a country’s ability to fund sustainable development. It might fuel social friction, even unrest and create conflicts within the political arena. As suggested in the introduction of this paper, social unrest in Europe and North America in recent years has partly been the result of, or blamed on, immigration. Not the controlled, monitored, legal type of immigration that does bring benefits to the host country, but the open borders approach that some right-wing politicians see as an attempt to destroy nation-states. Proponents of this idea have argued that immigration in recent years has been more of an imposition on and less of a free initiative or choice on the part of the host countries. They see no economic benefits coming from receiving immigrants, and

they believe immigration has a negative impact on social cohesion and culture. Notable politicians that follow this school of thought are Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP in the United Kingdom, Donald Trump, President of the US, Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, among others. Political parties are also gaining momentum by building their stance around immigration, with alliances among them like the Five Star Movement in Italy and the Alternative for Germany, a party that is now the third biggest in the country, and is an unyielding opponent to Angela Merkel's policies.

Culture and immigration

In terms of social cohesion and culture, immigration will probably work better in countries where the individual is more important than the collective (Alvarado and Creedy, 1998), as the construction of “national identity” in collectivist countries is incompatible with individualism. Here, one is reminded of what was called “parasitic” behavior, a crime under the Criminal Code in the Soviet Union. This simply meant that the citizen did not work, which was considered a major offence, since the person guilty of this did not conform to the principle of “everybody being but a particle, non-existent in itself, in the nation's body”, hence no individual options were tolerated. Worse still, this was regarded as an attack on national identity or interests. Joblessness would certainly not be a crime in a country like the United Kingdom, for example, where the individual has the right to decide whether or not to work.

Another country that ranks high on Hofstede's dimensions of culture when it comes to the collective mentality is Japan. During the height of the refugee crisis when European nations took in more than a million people seeking refugee status, Japan admitted 28 individuals. Japan works as a collective society, where individuality does have its place but it is certainly not the most important value a person can have. People are part of the social organism called Japan, and the government indeed tries to leave no citizen behind. This means that culture and tradition are of extreme importance. The country, after all, still has an Emperor and maintains many aspects of its culture that date back hundreds of years. Germany is a more complicated case. Patriotism is extremely frowned upon in Germany, because of its shameful history of militarism and genocide (much like in Japan, but Germany is a more individualistic society). German flags are rarely waved by its citizens outside of sport competitions. But when immigrants from

different cultural and religious backgrounds entered the country, it only exacerbated social tensions and it almost destroyed the alliance between the Social Democratic Party of Martin Schultz and the Christian Democratic Union of Angela Merkel. Germany has had incidents of sexual abuse perpetrated by immigrants of Muslim backgrounds, who were brought up in paternalistic societies where women are not expected to display their will, nor are they permitted to confront male leadership or dominance. This, of course, is not only a characteristic feature of the Muslim world. Women in the Christian tradition are little more than man's property and they certainly do not play a central role in the Bible. In Orthodox communities, women still have their freedoms restricted. Greece only accepted the European Union's freedom of movement on condition the EU recognized some of Greece's own rules: no women are allowed to enter the Mount Athos peninsula, home to Orthodox monks who believe that women would be a distraction from more spiritual endeavors. Ironically, even eggs must be imported because female animals are also banned.

The main difference between the Muslim world and the European countries when it comes to the role of religion is that it has only a marginal function in most European countries (Esposito 2000). The Czech Republic and Estonia, for example, are among the least religious countries on Earth. Even in a more conservative country like Hungary, the government is by no means required to follow the instructions of the Church. The same is true for Ireland, England, Italy, Denmark, Poland. Across Europe, religion does not play a central role in the government anymore. Europeans had to fight for the separation of political and ecclesiastical powers and, indeed, secularism is a "sacred" value in France. This means that the State is independent of the Church, and there is nothing but the Constitution that the state is subject to when shaping its policies. (Incidentally, Europe's only absolute monarchy happens to be the Vatican.)

In societies where religion plays a central role, the Constitution is merely a law made by Man, fleeting and feeble in the eyes of God. Who are we to decide what is best for us if God always has a plan? One can clearly see how this is incompatible with democracy. In a democracy, there should be nothing above the Constitution and the free representation of the will of the people; religion and faith are private matters. These are the values that citizens hold dear. A large group of people who do not agree will certainly cause disruption by trying to challenge the idea that the Nation is indeed above their God. Apart from adherence to democratic values and social cohesion, there are also

the aspects of culture, already touched upon above, which are particularly important for countries whose histories date back hundreds of years and who have successfully built a national myth. These include Russia, Hungary, Japan, China, Iran and other societies that consider culture as an element of cohesion since time immemorial. These are not countries that were built by immigrants, and they have shown militaristic behavior in the past. For centuries, people in Iran have identified themselves as Persian, preserving their language and traditions (Frye 2018). This goes beyond any political incarnations of Iran, and the bond between members of the Persian ethnic group is certainly stronger than the allegiance of many Iranians to the Islamic Republic.

The same can be observed in Hungary (Pearson 2015), a country that has been invaded, defeated, betrayed, occupied and crushed by foreign powers but has managed to keep its culture and language alive. It is imperative for these countries to keep their social ties intact, because it serves as a glue of social cohesion (Alvarado–Creedy 1998).

Final considerations

The values of sustainable development can be upheld by any society in any continent following any political ideology. One can certainly applaud Morocco's decision to invest in solar panels that guarantee cheaper energy, or Brazil's policy of using sugarcane to produce ethanol and keep millions of cars running without relying only on oil. Sustainable development can be seen in Estonia, where access to the Internet is a basic right of people, or China's decisions regarding the reduction of pollution. Human communities from all over the world agree that human life must be preserved and prosperity is an important driving force for development, but they also see the beauty of equilibrium in our natural environment and the necessity to preserve it. The human aspect, as presented in this paper, can definitely be understood through the phenomenon of immigration. When guided by the ideals of sustainable development, immigration should be rational, humane and proportional to a society's resources. If people's welfare comes first, how can we allow new individuals to enter a society if that means they will eventually sleep on the streets or be deprived of decent wages and food? Governments cannot and should not be allowed to make up excuses for accepting thousands of new immigrants while neglecting their own citizens and their well-being. Immigrants should be able to provide for themselves and for their families and should exhibit some level of

understanding of the legal framework they find themselves in, as well as improve the welfare of the society that welcomes them. Australia follows a similar system in which immigrants are chosen based on their talents. Other concerns, including health, are also taken into account. This allows citizens to put pressure on their governments in terms of labor rights, as well as to discourage decisions by the executive or legislative powers that are nefarious for the middle class, which also requires societies to come up with sustainable solutions to a multitude of problems. A bright future is not built by importing people who are more desperate than we are, but by understanding deprivation in our own societies and what we can do to solve fundamental issues related to our communities.

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