

This text is based on:

Jeffrey Sachs, “There’s no perfect answer to the migrant crisis – and we must face that”, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2015.

Writing at the height of Europe’s refugee migrant crisis in the autumn of 2015, Sachs starts clearly by noting that there are no easy answers to such challenges, which have led to bitter divisions across the continent.

Sachs argues that the welcome given to refugees by Germany’s chancellor Angela Merkel was an expression of human decency: any refusal of asylum while people were fleeing war would “violate the most basic standards of compassion”. He notes also, however, that international law very clearly prohibits forced returns of refugees.

Nevertheless, Sachs says that opponents of accepting massive inflows of refugees can correctly argue that such migrations are a result of repeated, failed policies by western governments, especially the use of military force by the United States and its allies to change governments in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, etc. This regime-change policy has been a substantial failure, leaving 10 million people displaced.

Sachs goes on to argue, however, that politicians have a responsibility to develop a longer term strategy because no high-income society can open its doors to anyone wishing to migrate to it. “Gradual migration is important and replenishes our societies; wide-open doors are unfeasible and unmanageable.”

In the 19th century, people migrated to the United States. Most came with nothing. But when they arrived they did not receive much state support either. Also, there was only a small difference in the income they could have earned at home and what they could earn in the US. When they arrived in the US, they did not therefore create a new underclass.

The situation today is very different, because income gaps between rich and poor countries are much greater: anything between five and tenfold. Host countries are therefore faced with a difficult choice. Either they extend some form of government benefits to migrants, but this can only be given to limited numbers of people. Or they can allow migrants to enter without social rights. But in this case they create significant social subgroups living in extreme poverty. “Withholding benefits would lead to a new underclass; paying benefits would lead to a fiscal crisis.”

So, according to Sachs, there is no good answer. As societies we need to accept this, and try to examine the least bad possibilities. It means moving to stop the war in Syria. The west should stop trying to overthrow President Assad and work with other countries involved (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia and Iran) to fight the Islamic State.

Secondly, Europe and the US need to finance investments in growth in fragile regions in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. If economic conditions are not improved, the pressure on migration will be relentless. Cutting aid budgets today for budgetary reasons will lead to greater costs in the future, as economic hardship and political instability (including war) will produce new surges of migration.

Addressing climate change is also essential to tackling mass migration over the long term. The disaster in Syria has partly been caused by mega-droughts in the preceding decade.

“The flood of refugees will abate to a manageable level only when people everywhere, including in poor and unstable regions, see a safe future for themselves and their children in their home countries.”