The inequality machine: how migration policy is designed to keep the world unequal

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Migration has become one of the clearest mirrors of global inequality. It reflects, often brutally, how opportunity, security, and dignity are distributed across the world: who can move freely and who cannot; who is welcomed and who is detained; who crosses borders with a passport and who with hope alone. The freedom to move, like the freedom to breathe clean air or earn a fair wage, has become one of the starkest inequalities of our time.

It is tempting to think of migration as a reaction, people moving because they must, fleeing war, poverty, or environmental disaster. But that framing conceals a harder truth. Migration is not an aberration in an otherwise stable world order, it is part of the system itself, one of the ways the global economy manages and reproduces inequality. The movement of people is structured by what might be called the *global inequality machine*: a set of political, economic, and legal systems that generate mobility for some while constraining it for others. These systems are not broken: they are functioning precisely as designed.

The paradox of our age is that capital, goods, and data move freely across borders, while most people cannot. This asymmetry is not a flaw of globalization, it is its foundation. The global economy depends on uneven development: low wages in one place, high consumption in another; cheap raw materials here, expensive finished goods there. Migration policy is one of the mechanisms that keeps this unevenness in place. Borders and visa regimes do not simply control who moves. They organise inequality by determining whose labour can circulate and whose must remain trapped.

In the twenty-first century, mobility itself has become a measure of privilege. Passports now rank alongside wealth and education as key determinants of opportunity. A German citizen can enter almost two hundred countries without a visa. An Afghan or Somali passport holder can enter fewer than thirty. These hierarchies of movement reproduce colonial geographies of power: the Global North remains mobile and sovereign, while the South remains constrained and surveilled.

The figures tell a story of vast imbalance. The richest ten percent of people take home more than half of all global income, while the poorest half share less than ten percent. For workers in much of the Global South, the only available wage increase lies across a border, yet that border is often the most dangerous and expensive thing they will ever cross. Migration is therefore not chaos at the margins of order, it is order itself, performing the function of distributing labour without redistributing wealth.

Migration governance - the web of policies, institutions, and agreements that claim to manage movement - is one of the most efficient instruments of this management. Temporary labour schemes across the Gulf, Southeast Asia, and increasingly in Europe and North America allow employers to import workers without granting them rights. Border externalisation deals, such as those between the European Union and Libya, Tunisia, or Turkey, outsource enforcement to poorer states, transforming migration control into a new form of dependency. These arrangements are presented as pragmatic partnerships, but they entrench a global hierarchy in which rich countries buy security and poor countries sell containment.

The idea that migration control protects national interests obscures a simpler truth: restriction itself has become a business. Around the world, a vast industry now profits from keeping people in motion, or from preventing them from moving at all. Private security and technology corporations supply the drones, biometric systems, and surveillance towers that line borders and seas. The European Union's border agency, Frontex, once a minor bureaucracy, now commands a budget of more than €750 million a year, much of it paid to arms and defence contractors such as Airbus, Thales, and Leonardo. In the United States, companies like CoreCivic and GEO Group earn billions from running immigration detention centres, while in Britain firms including Serco and Mitie manage asylum housing and transport contracts worth several billion pounds. Australia's offshore detention regime has cost more than A$10 billion since 2013, with private contractors earning huge profits from human containment. The border is no longer just a line of control, it is a market, a site of accumulation where fear, technology, and policy converge.

Capital also profits from the labour that restriction produces. When movement is criminalised or tightly regulated, migrants become more exploitable, legal enough to work but not to claim rights. Undocumented farmworkers in the United States, kafala-sponsored labourers in the Gulf, and irregular construction workers in Southern Europe all occupy this zone of managed vulnerability. Employers depend on their insecurity to suppress wages and organise a flexible, disposable workforce. Beyond the workplace, migration control itself has become a lucrative form of development cooperation. The European Union pays billions of euros to African states to stop migrants long before they reach Europe, funding border infrastructure, surveillance, and return programmes that enrich private consultancies and security firms. Even humanitarian responses feed into the same system. NGOs and international organisations receive contracts to manage camps, process asylum claims, and deliver "migration management" on behalf of governments. Restriction, in other words, is not merely ideological, it is profitable. The machinery of control generates value for corporations, for states, and for a global economy that depends on the unequal circulation of both people and power.

Even the seemingly neutral visa system encodes this logic. Wealth buys mobility: investors can purchase residency, students can acquire access through tuition, and tourists from the North are waved through. Poverty, by contrast, is treated as a threat. A

Congolese trader, a Haitian cleaner, or an Ethiopian domestic worker must navigate a maze of bureaucracy designed to make their journeys impossible. Migration policy thus serves as a filter through which inequality is managed, not to level it, but to stabilise it.

Humanitarianism operates as a softer arm of this same system. When people are displaced by war or climate change, international responses are framed in the language of compassion: aid, camps, and "temporary protection." These interventions save lives but often confine them. Refugees are cared for but immobilised, dependent on assistance and stripped of autonomy. The humanitarian apparatus treats movement as a problem to be managed rather than a symptom of deeper structural imbalance. It manages the visible consequences of inequality while leaving its roots untouched.

To understand migration as an expression of global inequality rather than its disruption, we need to look beyond the narrow story of South-North movement. For decades, public and policy attention has fixated on the Mediterranean, the US-Mexico border, and the English Channel. Yet these are only the visible edges of a far larger and more complex system. The Migration for Development and Equality (MIDEQ) Hub, a global research collaboration led primarily from the Global South, has shown that most migration actually occurs within the South: more than 80 percent of African migrants, for example, remain on the continent. Movements from Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire, Nepal to Malaysia, and Haiti to Brazil are among the world's largest yet they barely register in international debates.

MIDEQ's research across twelve countries and five continents shows that South-South migration now accounts for more than a third of all international movement. These flows are shaped by inequality at every turn, by disparities in wages, access to education, gender norms, and historical ties of colonisation and trade. They remind us that the story of migration is not only one of arrival in Europe or North America but of movement within the geographies of postcolonial dependence.

What emerges from MIDEQ's work is a picture of how inequality travels. In Nepal, men who migrate to Malaysia for construction or manufacturing work send remittances that transform their families' prospects, yet the benefits are uneven: families that cannot afford to send a migrant fall further behind. In Brazil, language barriers, racism, and precarious legal status mean that Haitian migrants are often confined to the most insecure jobs. In West Africa, migration sustains regional economies but exposes women traders and domestic workers to exploitation at borders and in households. Migration, in short, both reflects and reproduces inequality.

This dual character - as both a symptom and a structure - is at the heart of the global inequality machine. Migration can bring opportunity, but only within systems that decide whose mobility counts. For many, movement is freedom only on paper; in practice, it means circular journeys between precarity and exclusion. The migrants who build skyscrapers, clean homes, and care for children in richer countries are integral to those economies but excluded from their protections. Their mobility is permitted only because their rights are not.

MIDEQ also exposes an often-overlooked dimension: inequality in the production of knowledge about migration. For decades, the study of migration has been dominated by institutions in the Global North: their priorities, their funding, their languages. The very categories through which migration is understood - "crisis," "regular," "illegal," "integration" - emerge from a Northern worldview. As a result, the majority of global migration, particularly within the South, remains under-researched and misrepresented. MIDEQ's work challenges this epistemic imbalance, demonstrating how shifting who produces knowledge can change how migration itself is understood.

Seen through this lens, migration is a mirror of global capitalism. Between 1990 and 2015, the Global North extracted an estimated $242 trillion in resources and labour from the South, a continuation of colonialism by economic means. Migration management helps sustain this arrangement by ensuring that mobility serves the interests of capital rather than the rights of people. Borders do not block movement, they shape and profit from it. The global economy depends on a steady circulation of labour without citizenship, on the presence of workers whose bodies are mobile but whose rights are not.

Every declaration of a "migration crisis" misses this fundamental point. The system is not failing; it is performing exactly as intended. Crisis language legitimises ever tighter control: higher walls, greater surveillance, longer detention. Yet the real disorder lies not in movement but in the global structures that make movement necessary: the wage gaps, the debt regimes, the extractive industries that displace some communities while enriching others.

Mobility has become one of the world's most valuable and unequally distributed resources. A global elite of investors, executives, and dual citizens glide across borders with ease, accumulating advantage through their freedom to move. Billions of others are immobilised by poverty, policy, or passport. This divide between the hyper-mobile and the immobile defines the twenty-first century as sharply as the industrial divide defined the nineteenth.

Even the language of "safe, orderly, and regular migration," now common in global policy frameworks such as the UN's Global Compact, reveals the logic of control. Orderly for whom? Regular by whose standards? As long as the world economy depends on inequality, "orderly migration" will mean the orderly reproduction of injustice. Migration governance will continue to succeed in doing what it was built to do: not to equalise opportunity, but to regulate access.

Rethinking migration through the lens of inequality means asking different questions. Not about how to manage movement, but about why the world is structured so that some must move while others never need to. It means confronting an economic order

that treats human mobility as a problem to be contained rather than a right to be realised. And it means recognising that knowledge and policy must change together, that understanding migration differently is part of building a more equal world.

Justice in motion would require expanding rights rather than restricting them: building systems that protect people, not profits; creating opportunities for movement that are not bought with exploitation; ensuring that the freedom to move is not a luxury of birth. It would mean treating migration not as a symptom to be managed but as a signpost pointing to deeper structural injustices, and responding at their roots rather than their borders.

Migration is not chaos at the edges of a stable world. It is the pattern that reveals how the world is ordered: who gains, who loses, and who pays the price for global prosperity. The inequality machine is not hidden; it operates in plain sight: in every visa line, every recruitment office, every remittance corridor, every offshore detention centre. To confront it, we must move beyond the politics of control and ask a more difficult question: what kind of world requires such control in the first place?

The answer is unsettling but clear. Migration is not the failure of global capitalism, it is its lifeblood. The real crisis is not movement itself, but a global economy that depends on restricting it. Until we recognise that, our efforts to "manage migration" will continue to manage inequality instead: efficiently, invisibly, and by design.

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