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Immigration

by Anup Shah | This Page Last Updated Monday, May 26, 2008

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Immigration seems to be making more headlines in recent years. As the world globalizes in terms of nations' economies, trade and investment, borders are opened up more easily for "freer" flow of goods and products. People are supposedly freer to move around the world, too.

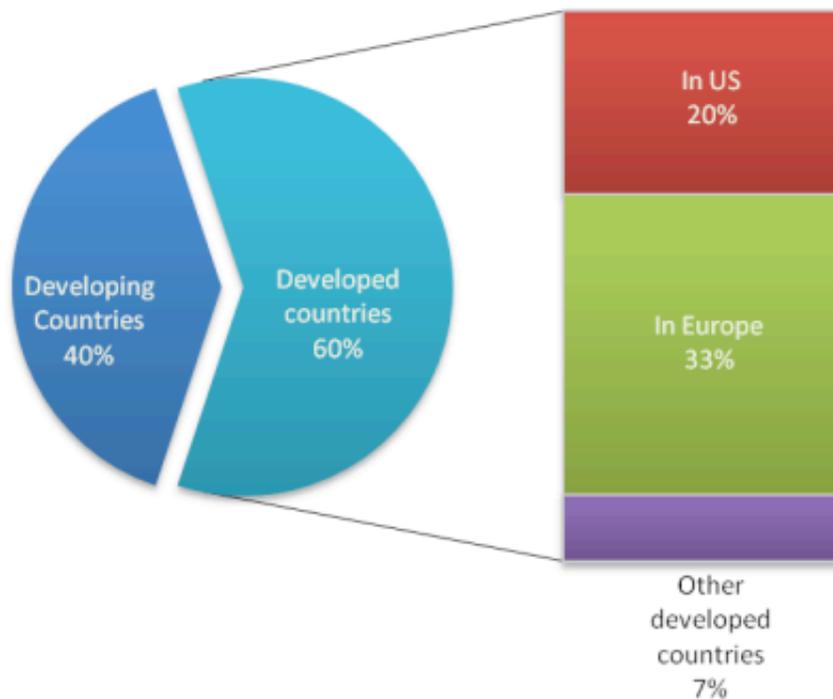
This web page has the following sub-sections:

1. [Introduction—Worldwide Immigrants Statistics](#)
2. [Why do people emigrate?](#)
3. [Effects of Immigration](#)
4. [United States](#)
5. [United Kingdom](#)
 1. [Media Coverage](#)
 2. [Opinions reflect hype — especially during election time](#)
6. [United Europe](#)
7. [Economics, Poverty and Immigrant Scapegoats](#)

Introduction—Worldwide Immigrants Statistics

Consider the following:

Approximate spread of immigrants in past 50 years (total 191 million)



- Worldwide, there is an estimated 191 million immigrants;
- The last 50 years has seen an almost doubling of immigration;
- 115 million immigrants live in developed countries;
- 20% (approximately 38 million) live in the US alone, making up 13% of its population;
- 33% of all immigrants live in Europe;
- 75% live in just 28 countries;
- Women constitute approximately half of all migrants at around 95 million;
- Between 1990 and 2005
 - There were 36 million migrations (an average of approximately 2.4 million per year);
 - 33 million wound up in industrialized countries;
 - 75% of the increases occurred in just 17 countries;
 - Immigration decreased in 72 countries in the same period;

Sources

- A Passage to Hope; Women and International Migration¹; *UNFPA State of the World Population 2006*, September 2006, Introduction and Chapter 1 in particular
- Pros and Cons of International Migration², by Thalif Deen, *Inter Press Service (IPS)*, September 15, 2006

Why do people emigrate?

People emigrate from one country to another for a variety of complex reasons. Some are forced to move, due to conflict or to escape persecution and prejudices, while others may voluntarily emigrate. Although such a move may be necessary, it can be quite traumatic on top of the challenges experienced so far.

From another perspective, immigration can also represent an act of courage. For example,

- Moving to a different country with different culture and norms can be quite daunting;
- The potential loneliness to be suffered is not always easy to overcome;
- There may be the additional pressure to earn enough to live (in a more expensive-to-live-in country) *and* send back meager savings.

An economic migrant, a person searching for work, or better opportunities, will be stepping into the unknown—an exciting prospect if the person is already well-to-do, or daunting at least, if out of desperation.

As *Inter Press Service* (IPS) reported, the European Union has recently acknowledged a concern about immigration that has not received much media attention. That is, a large number of people are attempting to leave the devastation of their own country caused by the current form of globalization³ and other political and economic policies, which, as well as creating winners, is creating a large number of losers, and increasing inequality. Tackling poverty and addressing issues of development and opportunity are important aspects of tackling this type of immigration.

Effects of Immigration

Immigration can have positive and negative impacts on both the host (recipient) country, and the original country.

The recipient country is usually an industrialized country in Western Europe, or the United States. For these countries, immigrants offer various benefits such as the following:

- Immigrants will often do jobs that people in the host country will not, or cannot do;
- Migrant workers often work longer hours and for lower salaries, and while that is controversial, sometimes exploitive, it benefits the host country;
- Immigrants, when made to feel welcome in the host society, can contribute to the diversity of that society, which can help with tolerance and understanding;
- For the host country's economy, immigrants offer an increased talent pool, if they have been well educated in their original country.

But there are also numerous drawbacks:

- Immigrants can be exploited for their cheap labor;
- Developing countries may suffer “brain drain⁴” as the limited resources they spend in educating their students amount to very little if that talent is enticed to another country. (The UK for example is often accused of

actively hiring medical staff from developing countries. The previous link details this issue further.)

- Immigration can also attract criminal elements, from trafficking in drugs and people to other forms of crime and corruption;
- Immigration can become a social/political issue, where racism can be used to exploit feelings or as an excuse for current woes of local population;
- Where there is a perception that immigrants and refugees appear to get more benefits than local poor people, tensions and hostilities can also rise;
- Concerns about illegal immigration can spill over to ill-feelings towards the majority of immigrants who are law-abiding and contributing to the economy;
- Many die trying to flee their predicament, and this can often make sensational headlines giving the appearance that immigration is largely illegal and “out of control.”

Despite what appears to be large population movements, Gary Younge, from the *Guardian* noted some time ago that people still are not able to move as freely as commodities⁵. In some places around the world, there are additional restrictions being put up on people’s movements.

United States

New York-based *Human Rights Watch* reports on how the US Immigration and Naturalization Service treat immigration detainees as though they were criminals by putting these otherwise innocent people in jail, indefinitely⁶.

US immigration policies, (especially noticeable during the economic boom at the end of the 1990s) are interesting in that they are really designed to bring in immigrants with a certain level and type of education to help enhance the nation, economically. While at first thought this seems reasonable, there are a few ramifications:

- A disproportionate representation of that ethnic population becomes part of the American culture;
- As a result it affects the stereotypical image of such minorities seemingly in a positive way as always being hard-working but also as only interested in the pursuit of financial gains, for example.
- However, a strange twist occurs:
 - Some politicians use such stereotyped groups to show how other immigrant populations in the US who have been around longer should follow newer immigrant’s examples
 - Some even using that as a basis to argue for a further cut in social welfare subsidies for example, unfairly blaming such people solely for their economic problems.
 - So, as an unfortunate example, South Asian Americans are inadvertently looked upon negatively by many in the Black and Latino communities, and vice versa.

For more details on this aspect, see for example, Vijay Prashad’s books, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (University of Minesota Press, 2000) and *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*, (Beacon Press, 2001).

United Kingdom

In 1998, various human rights groups such as Amnesty International UK, expressed concerns^z at plans to improve the immigration process⁸.

Fears and concerns cited included the following:

- This plan would allow immigration officers more power than before to detain and increase the number of asylum seekers whose appeals have been refused.
- Having more checks by liaison officers at the ports and airports of the countries that the asylum seekers are leaving would prevent genuine asylum seekers being able to flee their country where human rights violations may be taking place.

Even though the number of people seeking asylum in UK is not as large as some other countries in Europe, Amnesty International, for example, raises the concern that **UK's current process means that the prison-like asylum centers house people who may be waiting up to seven years before their case can be heard.**

It would seem that some of these concerns have come true while the media plays to the hype that politicians raise of immigration being “out of control”:

Media Coverage

Media portrayal of immigration and asylum issues was quite mainstream in 2003, for example. However, a look at how three mainstream British papers, the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, respectively from the political right, left and center, reveals a common set of problems and similar levels of bias, as Matthew Randall summarizes:

As a rule, UK parliamentary debate on asylum and immigration is both selective and power serving. While the actual demographic and economic effects of immigration on the UK are rarely discussed, the causes of immigration — global inequality, conflict and human rights abuses — are ignored.

Irrespective of party, leading politicians repeatedly highlight issues of exclusion — fears of “invasion”, alleged “threats” and actual prejudices — ensuring a very negative image of immigrants despite their statistically small impact on society.... Concerns over crime, disease, terrorism, detention and surveillance are consistently pushed well to the fore.

This lack of balance can be attributed to a number of factors, including the existence of a covert racist ideology and the political expediency of “the race card” — factors that repeatedly compromise the welfare of refugees and immigrants.

Honest consideration of asylum and immigration issues should involve a far more diverse range of topics, reflecting the complexity of contemporary national and global relations. These include issues of nationalism, sovereignty, racism, demography, human rights, arms sales, war, refugee health, economic policy and moral responsibility.

— Matthew Randall, *Asylum and Immigration; Comparing the Daily Telegraph, The Guardian and The Independent*⁹, Media Lens, December 8, 2003

Often asked in England is why “everyone” wants to come to England. Yet, Randall, in the same article also notes that wider context is ignored leading to various skewed perceptions:

Is appropriate coverage given, for example, to the fact that in 2001 the UK had only 169,370 officially recognized refugees living within its borders compared to Germany’s 988,500, Iran’s 1.9 million or Pakistan’s 2.2 million? Are we made sufficiently aware that during the same year the UK received 71,365 applicants for asylum, granting this status to just 11,180 individuals — 0.02% of the UK population? Or that Pakistan received a single influx of 199,900 Afghan refugees? Or that the ten largest refugee movements in 2001 were, with the exception of Yugoslavia, all made between countries in the Third World?

How many of us learn from our press that UK population growth is slowing down to the extent that it has actually become a cause for concern? How many are aware that a 2002 UN report recommended “replacement immigration” as a solution to this problem, or that the recommendation was rejected by the European Commission on the grounds that the impact of immigration on population was insignificant?

What do the media have to say about the fact that the UK has recently sold arms to all five countries of origin topping the UK list of asylum applicants in 2001? This, despite the fact that, in each case, violent military conflict remains the dominant root cause of refugee flight. More generally, what emphasis is placed on adverse conditions in countries of origin — poverty, human rights abuses, global income disparity, conflict and torture — in articles concerned with asylum and immigration?

— *Matthew Randall, Asylum and Immigration; Comparing the Daily Telegraph, The Guardian and The Independent*¹⁰, *Media Lens, December 8, 2003*

Randall also notes that, “The issue of asylum and immigration is reported in terms of a ‘threat’ and ‘invasion’ *despite a lack of statistical evidence supporting such dramatic claims.*” (Emphasis added). For example, the huge number of crimes committed against immigrants — from torture, forced eviction and illegal detention in their countries of origin, to property abuse and physical violence in the UK — is given far less attention than the much smaller proportion of crimes committed by immigrants themselves.

In terms of global context and wider coverage, the study noted:

- “Comparative analyses of immigration and asylum worldwide are barely referenced at all.”
 - When this does briefly emerge, the issue in all cases involves a positive commentary on the strict exclusion policies of other European countries, and not, as might be expected, any analysis of the UK’s comparatively low intake.
 - Discussion of the number of refugees and migrants entering and living in non-western countries is completely absent from all ninety articles studied.
- “Important root causes of immigration and refugee flight, such as war, torture, poverty and oppression, are referred to fleetingly, if at all.”
 - “The effects of poverty and inequality in sending countries are deemed unworthy of mention in any

newspaper despite extensive coverage detailing politicians' condemnations of 'bogus' and 'illegal' 'economic immigration'."

- "War and violent conflict are mentioned in just eight of ninety articles in all three newspapers, a very low figure when compared with the thirty-seven articles discussing the relatively minor issue of asylum seeker accommodation."
- 6% of the articles studied from these papers covered the situation in sending countries, reflecting a "general failure" to discuss such aspects.
- "The fundamental macro issue of demography — indicating both the insignificant effects of immigration on population growth and its potentially positive effects on the UK's aging population — is not mentioned throughout the case study."
- "Macro issues that might embarrass powerful state-corporate interests are also ignored or neglected. Two major examples include the impacts of the arms trade and economic trade liberalisation. The former receives no mention at all, while the latter is hinted at (indirectly) in one piece in the Guardian."
- The majority of articles that discussed human rights as a theme covered the same issue, about UK considering withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights in order to justify the exclusion of certain asylum seekers. Yet, while a human rights issue, "it is placed in the context of exclusion policies and 'bogus' asylum applicants. This limits to just three articles any mention of human rights abuses in the country of origin — abuses that might have caused the original application to be made, and which cast a far less negative light on the subject of asylum and immigration."

In looking at the media coverage, an interesting observation was made:

An interesting, perhaps ironic, footnote to the thematic results involves the eight references made to media coverage. Both the Guardian and the Independent provide a number of articles denouncing what they describe as the essentially racist coverage of tabloid and right-wing newspapers, including the third news outlet in this case study, the Daily Telegraph. The latter does not follow this theme and has no articles mentioning media coverage.

However, as this case study shows, although opinions expressed on immigration themes certainly illustrate ideological differences between "right-wing" newspapers such as the Telegraph and the more "liberal" Independent/Guardian, there is clear conformity when it comes to deciding +which+ themes to discuss — a fundamental conformity.... Comment on this aspect of coverage does not feature in the Guardian/Independent articles criticising media performance.

— *Matthew Randall, Asylum and Immigration; Comparing the Daily Telegraph, The Guardian and The Independent*¹¹, *Media Lens, December 8, 2003*

While a full third of the case studies afforded view points from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (politicians being afforded the most coverage) giving the sense of balance, Randall notes that, "a closer analysis shows that politicians remain overwhelmingly the agenda-setters in these articles with NGO representatives very seldom initiating the subject of the news item. Their role is very much confined to reaction and comment."

This general trend reveals how view points representing those who have influence are the ones that typically make it

into mainstream discourse. “Analysis of media sourcing demonstrates that UK newsgathering has a strong symbiotic relationship with political elites ensuring that a substantial number of articles are formed around government press releases and statements of policy. Groups without recourse to large public relations resources — such as asylum seekers, refugees and the predominantly small NGOs that represent them — tend not to set the agenda for issues under discussion.”

We therefore get a strange situation whereby ideologically distinct newspapers “focus on aspects of immigration and asylum that concur with the priorities of the political elite.... [representing] an extremely narrow range of information and opinion”. The “significant avoidance and omission of important themes and issues that should form regular and central points of reference” leads to a support of an agenda of the political elite, even if that is not the intention.

Opinions reflect hype — especially during election time

Almost a year and a half since the above was written, the hype has remained. And as the British 2005 elections have drawn closer, the issue of immigration and asylum has been one of the issues discussed (out of an extremely small number of issues, it has to be added).

In a poll on immigration conducted for ITV News¹² in the UK (April 2005), some interesting observations were made:

- 73% of people thought too many immigrants were allowed into the UK – and just 3% believed that not enough were allowed;
- 75% believe immigrants put a strain on public services;
- 39% of people believed immigrants bring disease to the UK;
- 25% felt migrants make Britain a thriving multicultural society;

In testing some of these views, ITV noted the following:

- In the 2002/3 tax year, 272,000 people came to the UK from across the world and were given a national insurance number. Just 8% went on to claim benefits;
- Between May and December 2004, 133,000 from the new EU countries registered to work in the UK. Just 21 of them were allowed to claim benefits (0.016%!)
- On HIV, the Health Protection Agency does estimate that 75% of new heterosexual infections in 2003 were probably acquired in Africa. On Tuberculosis (TB), public health figures said 67% of TB infections were born abroad in 2002. But targeted screening at Heathrow airport found just 100 cases in 175,000 tests in 2004 (0.057%!). The British Medical Association said it has seen no evidence of a health tourism phenomenon.

For a long time, but increasingly during election times, spear-headed by right-wing parties such as the Conservatives and tabloid media, scares of immigration being “out of control” are returning.

For sure, there have been isolated incidents that cause much concern, such as the recent case of a failed asylum seeker killing a police officer and conspiring to create the deadly poison ricin¹³ (though it seems police foiled that in time).

However, using terrorism to add to the asylum and immigration hysteria just creates more fear and animosity. In

effect, it also suggests that almost all (especially brown-skinned) asylum seekers and immigrants are potential terrorists.

(It has even got to the point where I know some fellow Asians in UK who also say that immigration is out of control, though they talk not of people from their own ethnicities and backgrounds of course, but of “others”.)

Furthermore, the impact on public services, like health, of obesity, excessive sugar/beef-based diets, tobacco and other unhealthy items far outweighs the impacts immigrants have on such services. (For more details on these impacts, see this site's section on behind consumption and consumerism¹⁴, and on causes of hunger¹⁵.) These other problems not only affect British people, but also have a significant impact on other parts of the world. Notably, there has almost been *nothing* discussed on these other issues during the same election campaign, in either a national or international context. Instead, immigration has been publicized as a more important issue.

United Europe

The European Union has had policies to control immigration from non-member countries. Spain for example seems to be facing a larger number of immigrants from Morocco and other North African countries where people want to escape their politically conflict-torn countries and seek a better standard of living in Europe. However, many people are dying¹⁶ trying to achieve this.

The preceding paragraph was written some 8 years ago, in 1998. In September 2006, similar issues still exist. *Inter Press Service* reports on many issues continuing today¹⁷. For example, Spain recently “threatened to deport illegal immigrants residing within its borders.” In addition, “The British government says it is considering restricting access to nationals of Bulgaria and Romania—if and when the two countries gain admission to the EU.”

As the European Union has grown, it is common to hear concerns in UK for example, at the rising number of people from East Europe. The fear is the threat to job security and downward pressure on wages, which are understandable concerns. The underlying context of what makes this possible—the corporate drive for a more open, free market system within the EU, that will see winners and losers, and that also tends towards the lowest common denominators—is hardly discussed.

Interestingly, *IPS* also adds that “Since 2004, when most Eastern Europe countries joined the EU, over 427,000 East Europeans, about two-thirds from Poland, have registered for employment in Britain. At the same time, Western Europe is now more inclined to hire Eastern Europeans both for skilled and unskilled jobs than Asians and Africans.”

Some human rights activists say that the European restrictions need to be modified or African nations need to overcome their under-development in order to alleviate some of these problems. However, the current form of globalization¹⁸ doesn't look like it will immediately help the developing nations.

Economics, Poverty and Immigrant Scapegoats

It is generally believed that those immigrants who have had the courage to leave one country and move to another are often enterprising and entrepreneurial, even if poor. As such, in many countries, immigrants often set up small

businesses. They however, become easy targets when the general economic conditions in that host country worsen.

In other cases, people become immigrants because they have fled worsening conditions or persecution. In that situation, although they may live in another country, it may initially be quite difficult to adapt and change practices and customs. In such situations immigrants are clearly seen as different and in worsening economic times can be seen as sapping away resources that could otherwise have been used for local populations.

In the 1970s and 80s, Indian and Pakistani immigrants in the UK for example faced constant racist harassment and jokes about their small businesses. Many Indian and Pakistani communities escaping turmoil in East Africa were technically allowed to come to the UK but very quickly local populations became concerned and held numerous protests. While these communities have managed to weather this and many are now quite successful, the new wave of immigrants, Polish in particular it seems, face a new wave of hostility.

During the global financial crisis at the end of the 1990s, East Asia was particularly affected. This resulted in a wave of anti immigrant sentiments, for example in Indonesia there was a wave of violence against Chinese immigrants.

In May 2008, South Africa saw a wave of anti immigrant violence¹⁹, as extremely poor South Africans turned against thousands of immigrants from other parts of Africa, killing some 50, and forcing thousands to leave.

In these and many other situations not mentioned here, anti-immigrant sentiment typically comes to the fore when economic conditions deteriorate. They are an easy target and either lies or exaggerations can contribute to fear, anxiety and ultimately hatred.

As discussed earlier mainstream media coverage in some countries, even places like Britain, makes it easy to stir up hysterical stories about immigration which helps direct the conversation and policies towards who can be “toughest” on immigration.

When economic conditions get harder, these views are easier to digest and adopt and deeper causes, of why people immigrate in the first place, are less discussed. As a result, empathy and understanding for the situation and conditions immigrants face is easily lost.

There are indeed cases where some immigrant groups may come to countries like Britain under the mistaken and exaggerated understanding that if you cannot find work the government will pay for you to live (I remember on various vacations in developing countries being asked if this is true!). This may be tempting for some groups that face much hardship, but it will be understandable in that case that local populations will not look too kindly on this attempt to get a “free ride.” Where this happens, it is unfortunately too easy for populist anti-immigrant sentiment to exaggerate that “all” immigrants want this.

Other times, policy does indeed seem to favor struggling immigrants over struggling local populations; it could be argued that local populations have had more opportunity than immigrant populations, and so the latter may benefit from some temporary assistance, but local populations are not going to accept that easily leaving policy makers feel they have little choice but to appear tough on immigration.

Related articles and sections

There are a number of articles and related sections from other parts of this web site, including:

- [Brain Drain²⁰](#)
- [Causes of Poverty²¹](#)
- [Free Trade and Globalization²²](#)

Where next?

This article is part of the following collection:

- [Racism](#)
 1. Immigration
 2. [Racism Links for More Information](#)

Online Sources:

(Note that listed here are only those hyperlinks to other articles from other web sites or elsewhere on this web site. Other sources such as journal, books and magazines, are mentioned above in the original text. Please also note that links to external sites are beyond my control. They might become unavailable temporarily or permanently since you read this, depending on the policies of those sites, which I cannot unfortunately do anything about.)

1. <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2006/english/introduction.html>
2. <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=34748>
3. Thalif Deen, 'Pros and Cons of International Migration', Inter Press Service, September 15, 2006, <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=34748>
4. <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Development/braindrain/>
5. Gary Younge, 'Penalising the poor', The Guardian, March 19, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4154388,00.html>
6. 'Human Rights Watch Condemns Detention Practices of INS', Human Rights Watch Press Release, September 9, 1998, <http://www.hrw.org/hrw/press98/sept/ins0909.htm>

Note, if the above link has expired, please try the following alternative

Actual Report, 'Locked Away: Immigration Detainees in Local Jails in the United States'

<http://www.hrw.org/reports98/us-immig>

7. http://www.amnesty.org.uk/news/press/releases/28_july_1998-o.shtml
8. Dipankar De Sarkar, 'Mixed Response To Asylum Rights Shake-Up', Inter Press Service, July 27, 1998, http://www.oneworld.org/ips2/jul98/19_01_056.html
9. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/03/031208_Asylum_Immigration.HTM
10. http://www.medialens.org/alerts/03/031208_Asylum_Immigration.HTM

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12. 'The state we're in: immigration', ITV, April 7, 2005,
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13. Ricin case 'shows asylum chaos', BBC, April 14, 2005,
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14. <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Consumption.asp>
15. <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Poverty/Hunger.asp>
16. Tito Drago, 'Not Even 1,000 Deaths Have Stemmed the Flow', Inter Press Service, August 11, 1998,
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17. Thalif Deen, 'Pros and Cons of International Migration', Inter Press Service, September 15, 2006,
<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=34748>
18. Trade Related Issues,
<http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/>
19. 'Ethnic cleansing: South Africa's shame', The Independent, May 25, 2008,
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/ethnic-cleansing-south-africas-shame-833897.html>
20. <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Development/braindrain/>
21. <http://www.globalissues.org/issue/2/causes-of-poverty>
22. <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/FreeTrade.asp>

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“Bad ideas flourish because they are in the interest of powerful groups” — *Paul Krugman*

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Document Revision History

| Date | Reason |
|--------------------|---|
| May 26, 2008 | Added a short section on the link between economics, poverty and immigration |
| September 17, 2006 | Added immigration statistics and explained some more reasons and context behind immigration |
| April 20, 2005 | More added about the immigration and asylum opinion versus reality in the UK |
| January 24, 2004 | Details on the almost entirely negative media coverage of immigration issues in UK added |

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