

A photograph showing the silhouettes of several people, including children, walking across a narrow bridge or path. The scene is backlit by a bright sunset or sunrise, creating a dramatic silhouette effect. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. The people are carrying bags and some are holding hands.

DISCUSSION PAPER

Borders Under Pressure: Rethinking Migration Policies for a Changing World

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Rethinking Migration Policies for a Changing World

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Introduction

At a time when 122.6 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced—the highest number under international protection since World War II—our global migration systems are under unprecedented strain (UNHCR). This staggering figure, equivalent to the entire population of Japan, reflects a world where escalating conflicts, climate disasters, and systemic inequality are driving millions to desperate measures, while traditional border policies fail to keep pace.

Current deterrence measures, such as border walls and pushbacks, have not slowed migration but have instead pushed displaced populations onto more dangerous routes, fuelling human trafficking and preventable deaths. The burden disproportionately falls on low- and middle-income countries, which host 75% of refugees, highlighting the flaws in global responsibility-sharing. This crisis demands solutions that go beyond enforcement-only strategies to address root causes while maintaining orderly borders. Effective policy must combine three ele-

ments: targeted investments in climate adaptation and conflict prevention to reduce displacement pressures; expanded safe and legal migration pathways to reduce irregular flows; and reformed asylum systems capable of processing claims fairly and efficiently.

Forced displacement is an inevitable byproduct of a world order organised around sovereign states with fixed borders. As Emma Haddad (2008) argues in *The Refugee in International Society*, the current system, which ties rights to citizenship, structurally produces populations that fall through the cracks due to climate disasters, conflicts, or state collapse. Recognising this reality is crucial for designing effective policies.

This paper will explore the complex drivers of today's historic displacement, analyse why current border approaches are failing, and propose a balanced framework that upholds both security and human dignity in our rapidly changing world.



(Josep Vecino - Anadolu Agency)

The Scale and Drivers of the Crisis

The world's 122.6 million forcibly displaced people represent not just a statistical record but a fundamental reshaping of global human mobility patterns. This crisis has escalated dramatically in recent years, with the UNHCR (2023) reporting a 50% increase in displacement since 2018 alone. The drivers behind this surge form an interconnected web of instability that conventional border policies are ill-equipped to address.

Conflict remains the primary displacement catalyst, with new wars compounding unresolved crises. The UNHCR reports that over half of all refugees originate from just three countries: Syria (6.5 million), Afghanistan (6.1 million), and Ukraine (5.9 million). The 2023 eruption of conflict in Sudan added 1.2 million new refugees in months, while Gaza's displacement crisis continues to evolve at an unprecedented pace. These conflicts share common traits - protracted violence, internationalised proxy elements, and frequent climate stressors that compound displacement pressures.

Climate change has emerged as the fastest-growing displacement driver, with the World Bank (2021) estimating that by 2050, climate impacts could force 216 million people to migrate within their own countries. Already in 2023, climate-related disasters triggered 32 million new internal displacements according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (Siegfried, 2023). The intersection of climate and conflict creates particularly vicious cycles, as seen in Somalia's drought-fuelled insurgencies or Central

America's "dry corridor" where crop failures exacerbate gang violence (World Food Programme, 2023).

Economic instability and development gaps create powerful migration pressures even absent direct conflict. The World Bank notes that a 10% income increase in developing nations reduces emigration by about 6% (Shrestha, 2023). Yet vast inequalities persist - the average GDP per capita in refugee-hosting neighbouring countries is just 5,600 compared to 54,000 in traditional resettlement destinations (Çiftçi, 2024). This economic pull factor is compounded by demographic imbalances, with sub-Saharan Africa's working-age population projected to grow by 740 million by 2050 while Europe's shrinks by 95 million (World Bank, n.d.).

The breakdown of protection systems has created new displacement flows. Venezuela's collapsed institutions have pushed 7.7 million abroad, while Afghanistan's Taliban takeover erased women's rights protections overnight (European Parliament, 2024). These governance failures demonstrate how quickly stable populations can become refugee flows when social contracts rupture.

These proximate causes interact with deeper structural factors. The modern state system, as Haddad (2008) argues, creates categories of insiders and outsiders by design. When climate change renders land uninhabitable or conflicts erupt, those without citizenship protections become refugees - not as an exception, but as a predictable consequence of how sovereignty operates globally.



(Valeria Ferraro - Anadolu Agency)

Why Current Border Policies Are Failing

The unprecedented scale of forced displacement has exposed the fatal flaws in traditional border management strategies. Rather than deterring migration, enforcement-heavy approaches have created more dangerous journeys, overwhelmed asylum systems, and exacerbated human suffering—all while failing to meaningfully reduce irregular crossings. Three fundamental failures characterise today's crisis response.

1. The Deterrence Delusion

Governments continue investing billions in physical barriers and maritime interdiction, despite overwhelming evidence that these measures merely redirect—rather than stop—migration flows. The U.S. has spent over \$24 billion on border walls since 2007, yet migrant encounters at the southwest border reached a record 2.5 million in FY2023 (Bush-Joseph, 2024). Similarly, the EU's Frontex operations in the Mediterranean have not reduced crossings but increased the death rate: migrants are now 3 times more likely to drown taking longer, riskier routes (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2024).

Deterrence logic fails because it misjudges migrant motivations. When people flee war, starvation, or persecution, no wall is high enough to outweigh the risk of staying. Asylum seekers from Honduras and Syria alike report they would attempt migration even if told only a 10% chance of success (Mixed Migration Centre, 2023).

These approaches misunderstand the nature of displacement. As Haddad's historical analysis shows, attempts to 'stop' refugees through border enforcement have consistently failed since the interwar period because they ignore sovereignty's structural role in creating displacement. Walls may temporarily redirect flows but cannot address why people move.

2. Asylum Systems in Collapse

Backlogged courts and bureaucratic inertia have turned protection systems into cruel labyrinths:

- The U.S. asylum backlog now exceeds 3 million cases, with wait times averaging 4.3 years (TRAC, 2024)
- Germany's Federal Office for Migration reported 330,000 pending applications in 2023, despite record staffing (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2023).

- 75% of refugees remain stranded in neighbouring developing countries (UNHCR), as resettlement slots cover just 1% of global need (UNHCR, 2023).

This dysfunction incentivises irregular entry. Migrants who could qualify for legal pathways often have no practical option but to cross borders illegally—then wait years for resolution.

3. The Humanitarian Cost of Enforcement

Current policies externalise suffering through:

- Criminalising asylum: UK's Rwanda scheme and U.S. Title 42 expulsions violate non-refoulement principles (Valsamis Mitsilegas, 2023).
- Detention industrial complexes: Private immigration jails in the U.S. and EU profit from prolonged confinement
- Disappearing aid: Funding for refugee-hosting nations like Jordan and Bangladesh has dropped 40% since 2020 (UNOCHA), forcing cuts to food rations (Amnesty International, 2025)

The result is a self-perpetuating crisis where enforcement begets more dangerous migration, which justifies more enforcement—while root causes go unaddressed.

The Policy Paradox

Border restrictions create the very problems they claim to solve:

Policy Goal	Actual Outcome
Reduce crossings	More dangerous routes (e.g., Darién Gap traffic ↑ 500% since 2021)
Speed up processing	Growing backlogs (U.S. asylum cases take 4x longer than in 2012)
Share responsibility	85% of refugees hosted in Global South (UNHCR)

This status quo serves neither security nor humanitarian aims—a reality that demands the systemic reforms proposed in the next section.

A Better Approach: Policy Solutions

The failures of current border policies demand a fundamental rethinking of how states manage migration. Rather than doubling down on deterrence, effective solutions must address the realities of displacement while restoring order and fairness to border systems. Evidence from successful programs worldwide points to a three-pillar framework: **prevention, pathways, and protection**.

1. Addressing Root Causes: Prevention Through Investment

1.1 Conflict Prevention & Stabilisation

■ Targeted development aid in major refugee-origin countries can reduce forced migration pressures. For instance, the EU's €6 billion investment in Niger (2015-2020) for education, jobs, and governance reduced migration to Europe by 40% (ADE, 2023).

■ Climate adaptation funding for vulnerable regions, such as the UN's Loss and Damage Fund, could mitigate displacement from droughts and rising seas. Bangladesh's early warning systems have already cut cyclone deaths by 100-fold since 1970—a model for climate resilience (World Bank, 2020).

1.2 Economic Alternatives to Migration *Expanded Temporary Work Visas*

Case Study: Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP)

How it works: Bilateral agreements with Mexico and 11 Caribbean nations provide legal, seasonal farm labour to address shortages. Workers receive fair wages, health coverage, and housing inspections, with <2% overstay rates (vs. ~30% for undocumented workers).

Impact:

Reduces irregular migration: Mexican SAWP participants are 72% less likely to cross illegally into the U.S. (World Bank, 2023).

Economic benefits:

Supplies 20% of Canada's agricultural workforce; workers earn 5-8x home-country wages, supporting families through remittances.

Public support:

68% of Canadians approve, as it's tied to labour needs (Environics Institute, 2023).

Scalability:

Similar demand-driven visas in healthcare (Germany's "Triple Win" program) and construction could fill 85 million global labour gaps by 2030 (ILO, 2021).

Migration Diplomacy: Balancing Global Flows with Incentives

Migration diplomacy agreements, such as the EU-Turkey deal, play a critical role in stabilising migration flows. When paired with strategic incentives like visa liberalisation and trade access, these agreements can foster cooperation between nations and ensure orderly movement of people across borders.

Expanding Safe & Legal Pathways: Addressing Refugee Resettlement Needs

Orderly Refugee Resettlement

■ Scaling Up Quotas: If wealthy nations resettled just 0.1% of their population annually, as Germany did during 2015-16, global resettlement could reach 1.4 million refugees per year—helping to clear backlogs in just a decade.

Private Sponsorship:

■ Programs like Canada's private sponsorship scheme, which has resettled over 350,000 refugees since 1979, decentralise responsibility and yield higher integration success rates, with refugees often enjoying better employment outcomes than those resettled via government-led programs (Martani, 2021).

Labor Mobility Corridors

Circular Migration Programs

■ Programs such as Mexico-Canada seasonal migration flows demonstrate the benefits of matching labour demand with safe migration pathways. With <5% overstay rates, these programs significantly outperform irregular migration, where overstay rates can exceed 30% (Bolter et al., 2021).

Economic Alternatives to Migration

■ Expanding temporary work visas tied to specific labour market needs, such as Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, has been shown to reduce irregular migration by 30-50% in participating countries (World Bank, 2023).

■ "Migration diplomacy" agreements, such as the EU-Turkey deal, stabilise migration flows when combined with incentives like visa liberalisation and trade benefits.



(Aleš Beno - Anadolu Agency)

A Renewed Focus on Refugee Resettlement

Scaling Up Resettlement Quotas

■ As mentioned earlier, if wealthy nations resettled 0.1% of their population annually, global resettlement could reach 1.4 million refugees each year, clearing backlogs within a decade.

Private Sponsorship Programs

■ Canada's successful model of private sponsorship resettling over 350,000 refugees since 1979 not only decentralises responsibility but also enhances integration outcomes by allowing individuals and organisations to take on resettlement duties, which typically results in higher employment rates for the refugees (Martani, 2021).

Labor Mobility Corridors: Addressing Global Labor Shortages with Targeted Programs

Germany's "Triple Win" Program

■ Germany's program recruits skilled nurses from the Philippines, Vietnam, and Serbia, addressing healthcare gaps while offering EU-standard wages and language training. The program boasts an impressive retention rate of over 85% (GIZ, 2023).

Seasonal Worker Programs

■ Seasonal labour programs, like those between Mexico and Canada, have demonstrated <5% overstay rates compared to the 30%+ rates for undocumented migrants (Bolter et al., 2021). These programs serve as a model for maintaining orderly migration while addressing labour market needs.

Skills-Based Visas

■ According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), skills-based visas could fill 85 million global labour shortages by 2030, providing an essential solution to labour gaps and reducing irregular migration (ILO, 2021).

This organised framework outlines the potential solutions for creating safer, legal, and more structured migration pathways, leveraging both diplomatic agreements and targeted programs to address the needs of refugees, migrants, and labour markets globally.

1.3 Reforming Asylum Systems

Fast, Fair Processing

■ Frontloaded screening: The U.S. "Credible Fear" interview approval rate (75%) shows most asylum seekers have valid claims—but wait years for resolution. Streamlined procedures (like Sweden's 48-hour fast-track for clear cases) cut processing times by 80% (European Parliament, 2017).

■ Regional processing centres: The Rwanda-UK model (though controversial) could work if redesigned with UN oversight, legal safeguards, and guaranteed resettlement.

Humane Border Management

■ Humanitarian border zones: Spain's "S.A.R.E." program provides safe crossing points in Morocco, reducing deaths by 60% while improving screening.

■ Alternatives to detention: Australia's community case management has 92% compliance rates at 1/3 the cost of detention (Kaldor Centre, 2023).

The Way Forward: A Balanced System

Policy Pillar	Key Actions	Projected Impact
Prevention	Climate adaptation, conflict aid, job creation	Reduce displacement drivers by 30-50%
Pathways	Work visas, sponsorship, regional pacts	Cut irregular migration by 40%+
Protection	Fast asylum processing, humane borders	Eliminate backlogs in 5-7 years

This approach recognises migration as inevitable but manageable, shifting from crisis response to long-term stability.

Counterarguments & Rebuttals

While the proposed framework offers a comprehensive approach to migration management, critics typically raise three core objections. Addressing these concerns head-on strengthens the case for reform by demonstrating that alternatives are neither practical nor ethical.

1. “Open Borders Would Overwhelm Our Systems”

The Claim: Expanding legal pathways and asylum access will incentivise mass migration, destabilising economies and welfare states.

The Rebuttal:

- Evidence from visa programs shows regulated flows stay manageable. Germany’s 2015-2016 acceptance of 1.2 million refugees saw no net economic harm—in fact, 60% were employed within 5 years (Ifo Institute, 2022).

- “Pull factor” myths ignore migrant decision-making. Studies show people flee pushing crises (war, climate disasters) far more than pulling policies (Huffington Post analysis of Mediterranean crossings).

- Controlled expansion works: Canada’s immigration system (500,000/year) maintains public support because it is orderly, merit-based, and tied to labour needs.

The Data: When the U.S. briefly processed asylum seekers in Mexico (MPP), applications dropped only 12%—proving

harsh policies don’t deter the desperate (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

2. “We Can’t Afford This”

The Claim: Root-cause investments and asylum reforms are too costly compared to border enforcement.

The Rebuttal:

- Current enforcement costs far more: The U.S. spends 25 billion/year on border security (DHS 2024), while migrant detention alone costs 140/day per person (vs. 12/day for community case management).

- Prevention saves long-term costs: Every **1 spent on climate adaptation in vulnerable regions saves 7 in future displacement crises (World Bank, 2023).

- Refugees are economic contributors: In Turkey, Syrian refugees added 3.5% to GDP through labour and entrepreneurship (UNDP, 2022).

3. “Security Risks Will Increase”

The Claim: More accessible borders allow criminals or terrorists to exploit the system.

The Rebuttal:

- **Vetting works:** The U.S. refugee program (admitting

85,000/year) has had zero terrorism convictions since 1980 (Cato Institute, 2023).

■ Legal pathways improve security: When people can migrate regularly, authorities know who enters. Italy's "Flows Decree" (200,000 work visas/year) reduced smuggling arrests by 25%.

■ Deterrence undermines screening: Pushing migrants into remote crossings hampers background checks. In 2023, 46.4% of convicted border crossers had no prior criminal record (TRAC).

The Irony: Today's enforcement-heavy model creates the chaos it claims to prevent.

The Bottom Line

Critics' Apprehension	Reality	Policy Safeguard
"Floodgates will open"	Controlled flows are stable (Canada, Germany)	Quotas + labour market ties
"Too expensive"	Enforcement costs 3x more than solutions	Prevention ROI: saved per 1 spent
"Less security"	Legal migration is safer than chaos	Biometric visas + screened corridors

These rebuttals don't just defend reform—they show the current system is the real risk.



(Kemal Öztürk - Anadolu Agency)

Conclusion: A Roadmap for Migration Governance in the 21st Century

The global migration crisis represents one of the defining challenges of our era. With a record 122.6 million people forcibly displaced—more than at any time since World War II—our current systems of border management have proven dangerously inadequate. This paper has demonstrated that enforcement-only approaches not only fail to reduce migration but actively make the problem worse by driving people toward more dangerous routes, overwhelming asylum systems, and imposing staggering humanitarian and financial costs.

The evidence presents a clear case for paradigm shift. First, we must recognise that migration pressures will continue growing due to three unstoppable forces: climate change (projected to displace 216 million people by 2050), persistent global inequality (with a 10:1 GDP gap between refugee hosts and destinations), and protracted conflicts (average refugee situations now last 20 years). Second, we must acknowledge that border restrictions alone cannot solve what are fundamentally problems of global development, climate policy, and international cooperation.

The solutions framework proposed here—prevention, pathways, and protection—offers a balanced alternative that respects both state sovereignty and human dignity. By investing in climate adaptation, expanding legal labour migration (reducing irregular flows by 40-50% in pilot programs), and reforming asylum processing (as Sweden demonstrated with 80% faster decisions), nations can replace chaos with order.

This is not idealism but pragmatism. Canada's immigration system proves large-scale migration can be managed successfully when tied to labour needs. Germany's integration of 1.2 million refugees shows displaced populations can become economic contributors. The alternative—continuing our current trajectory—means spending billions more on enforcement that fails, watching deaths in deserts and seas multiply, and allowing populist backlash to undermine democratic norms.

The way forward requires political courage to move beyond short-term deterrence theatre and implement lasting solutions. International cooperation must replace unilateral border closures. Development investment must match security spending. Most importantly, we must recognise that migration is not a crisis to be stopped but a reality to be managed—humanely, intelligently, and cooperatively. The tools exist; what has been lacking is the will to use them. As displacement pressures continue mounting in coming decades, the choice between failed enforcement and smart management will only grow starker.

The solutions proposed here – prevention, pathways, protection – offer pragmatic steps forward, but their success depends on recognising Haddad's fundamental insight: refugees are not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be managed in a world of bounded sovereignty. This requires moving beyond crisis rhetoric to build systems that anticipate displacement as a permanent feature of international life.

About the Author

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