Diasporas form in two main ways, the common ground being dispersal of a population across several destinations. They may form gradually by accretion, emerging as a result of ‘voluntary’ or routine migration, or alternatively, be brought about by crisis, involving coercion, catastrophe, expulsion or other forcible movement resulting from conflict or persecution. Dispersal may also result from a combination of compulsion and choice, and diasporas emerge as a result of cumulative processes and crises (Van Hear, 1998). The classical diasporas – Jews, Africans, Armenians, Irish, and later the Palestinians – were scattered following a catastrophic event or series of events that forced them into exile (Cohen, 2008). Subsequently, a much greater number of dispersed peoples have come to term themselves diasporas or have been designated as such: these were often formed as a result of less catastrophic events, or by a combination of migration crises and more routine migration.

The literature on labour migration points to some of the ways in which diasporas form by accretion. In their book *Worlds in Motion*, Massey et al. (1998) traced ways of accounting for the inception and perpetuation of migration. Their synthesis of migration theories pointed to how explanations of the initiation of migration could be found in a number of approaches: in neoclassical economics, which located the drivers of migration in differences in income levels between countries; in the new economics of (labour) migration; in segmented labour market theory, which held that migration stemmed from labour demand in industrialised societies; and in variants of historical-structural and world-systems theories, which sought explanations of migration in the unequal distribution of power worldwide through a political economy approach. Explanations of the perpetuation of migration could be found in theories about social capital, networks and ‘cumulative causation’. All of these approaches could be applied in different ways to help explain the inception, formation and consolidation of diasporas, but some are particularly relevant. The new economics of (labour) migration approach points to decision-making not just by individuals, but by households and communities, with the object not just of maximising income, but also of spreading risk; this chimes with the behaviour of diasporas in formation, particularly in circumstances of stress. Ideas about social capital and networks are likewise helpful in explaining the formation and reproduction of diasporas, by pointing to ways in which social connections can be drawn upon in the migration context. Likewise, the notion of cumulative causation strikes a chord with diaspora behaviour, by highlighting how each act of migration alters the social context in which subsequent migration decisions are made, often making additional movement more likely (Massey et al., 1998).

While insights from analysis of so-called ‘voluntary’ migration in the 1980s and 1990s helped account for the formation and perpetuation of diasporas, other sources of diaspora formation were found in the increased numbers of asylum seekers moving from the global south to the global north, and also as a result of major forced migration crises associated with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar world from the early 1990s onwards – among them the break-up of the Soviet bloc in 1989-91; the 1990-91 Gulf crisis; the genocide, wars and mass refugee movements in Central Africa from 1994; protracted conflict and displacement in Palestine, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, Sri Lanka, Colombia and elsewhere; and more recently the refugee and migratory movements associated with the wars in Afghanistan (from 2001), Iraq (from 2003), and the upheavals in the Arab world from 2011, especially the war in Syria.

Among people fleeing these and other conflicts, a common pattern has been for most to seek safety in other parts of their country, for a substantial number to look for refuge in neighbouring countries, and for a smaller number to seek asylum further afield. Some of those in neighbouring countries of first asylum may later be resettled in other continents, or migrate onward to new destinations, joining those who have gone there directly. If exile persists, complex transnational relations will develop among the different locations of the developing diaspora: that is, among those at home, those in neighbouring territories (what might be called the near diaspora), and those spread further afield (what might be termed the wider diaspora) (Van Hear, 2006). With their dispersal comes the establishment of transnational relations and networks among the dispersed groups, and it is through these networks and relationships that diasporas can exert influence on their countries of origin.

Quite often, diasporas are formed from mixes of refugees and people who move for economic betterment, study, marriage or other reasons – sometimes called ‘mixed migration’. As the international migration and refugee ‘regime’ has become more stringent and access to affluent destinations more limited, class or socio-economic standing, access to resources, and associated elaboration of networks shape the capacity to migrate. Access to more
prosperous and desirable destinations are increasingly limited to the better resourced. Put simply, there tends to be a hierarchy of destinations that can be reached by migrants and asylum seekers, according to the resources – financial and network-based – that they can call upon.

Major new diasporas have formed from or been augmented by both economic migration and conflict-induced population movements – or mixes of the two – over the past two decades. These new or resurgent transnational social formations have consolidated, are enduring, have undertaken new or extended existing forms of transnational activity, and are becoming integrated into the global order, particularly in respect of relations between affluent countries and emerging powers in the global south (Van Hear, 2009).

References