

## What Drives Human Migration?

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Why do people migrate? This is a simple and a difficult question. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to assume that most people migrate hoping to find better conditions or opportunities, such as jobs, higher wages, safety or freedom of expression. This is the implicit assumption underlying the ‘push-pull’ models taught at secondary school as well as neo-classical migration theories. Most migrants have good reasons to move. However, this does not really help us to understand the complexity and drivers of real life migration.

To say that most people migrate to find better opportunities is somehow stating the obvious. Push-pull models usually list factors in origin and destination areas, but fail to make clear how the various factors together lead to migration. They fail to explain why there should be a difference between push areas and pull areas in the first place, and are therefore ‘a platitude at best’ (see also Skeldon, 1990).

Neoclassical migration theories assume that people migrate to maximise their income or wellbeing. Migration is a (temporary) response to development ‘disequilibria’ between origin and destination countries, and will decline through a process of wage convergence. However, migration has been a constant factor in the history of humankind and is not a temporary by-product of capitalist development. Furthermore, the wage convergence assumption naively ignores how power asymmetries usually sustain economic inequalities (Castles et al., 2014).

Both push-pull and neoclassical models fail to provide insight into the social, economic and political *processes* that have generated the spatial wage and opportunity gaps to which migration is supposedly a response. It is therefore not surprising that the predictions of push-pull models and neoclassical theories are fundamentally at odds with what is seen in real life migration patterns. Most migrants do *not* move from the poorest to the wealthiest countries, and the poorest countries tend to have *lower* levels of emigration than middle-income and wealthier countries. It is often said that the only way to reduce migration from poor countries is to boost development. However, this ignores that the relation between development and levels of emigration is fundamentally *non-linear*. Important emigration countries such as Mexico, Morocco, Turkey and the Philippines are typically not among the poorest. Going against popular perceptions of a ‘continent on the move’, sub-Saharan Africa is the *least* migratory region of the world.

Analyses of historical and contemporary data show that human and economic development is initially

associated with increasing emigration (de Haas, 2010). Any form of development in the poorest countries of the world is therefore likely to lead to accelerating emigration. This suggests that we need explanations that do not confuse individual factors or *motivations* to move (which, indeed, often refer to better opportunities) with macro-structural explanations of migration *processes*.

Such rethinking can be achieved by conceptualising migration as a *constituent part of broader development and change*, rather than as a problem to be solved, or as the sum of individual responses to given (unexplained) geographical opportunity gaps. For instance, in the modern age, much migration within and across borders has been inextricably linked to broader urbanisation processes. It is difficult to imagine urbanisation without migration, and vice-versa. Rather than asking ‘why people migrate’ the more relevant question is therefore how processes such as imperialism, nation state formation, the industrial revolution, capitalist development, urbanisation and globalisation change migration patterns and migrants’ experiences.

For instance, how can we explain why development is often associated with more, instead of less, migration? To understand this, we must move beyond sterile views of migrants as predictable ‘respondents’ to geographical opportunity gaps. Conceptualising migration as a function of people’s *capabilities* and *aspirations* to move can help to achieve a richer understanding of migration behaviour. Processes of human and economic development typically expand people’s access to material resources, social networks and knowledge. At the same time, improvements in infrastructure and transportation, which usually accompany development, make travel less costly and risky.

Development generally increases people’s capabilities to migrate over larger distances, but it does not necessarily lead to migration. Migration aspirations depend on people’s more general life aspirations, as well as their perceptions of life ‘here’ and ‘there’. Both are subjective and likely to change under the influence of broader processes of structural change. Improved access to information, images and lifestyles conveyed through education and media tend to broaden people’s mental horizons, change their perceptions of the ‘good life’, and increase material aspirations. Development processes tend to initially increase both people’s capabilities and aspirations to move, explaining why development often boosts migration. Once sizeable migrant communities have settled, social networks tend to reduce the costs

and risks of migrating, with settled migrants frequently functioning as ‘bridgeheads’.

However, as societies get wealthier, overall emigration aspirations are likely to decrease because more people can imagine a future within their own country, while immigration is likely to increase. Although it is often assumed that technological progress increases migration, easier transportation and communication may enable people to commute or work from home, while outsourcing and trade may also partly reduce the need to migrate. In fact, from a long-term historical perspective, technology has facilitated humankind to settle down. Ever since the agricultural (‘Neolithic’) revolution began some 12,000 years ago, technology has enabled people to shift from hunting and gathering to more sedentary lifestyles. In modern times, technological progress has certainly boosted non-migratory mobility – such as commuting, tourism and business travel – but its impact on migration is rather ambiguous. This may partly explain why the number of international migrants as a share of

the world population has remained remarkably stable at levels of around 3 per cent over recent decades.

It is illusionary to think that large-scale migration is a temporary phenomenon that will disappear once – an equally illusionary – equilibrium is achieved. Such ideas reflect a fundamentally flawed, ahistorical view on the history of humankind. Development itself drives migration. Migration has therefore always been – and will remain – an inevitable part of the human experience.

#### References

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