

How does development shape human migration? Insights from the Migration as Development (MADE) project

Research suggests that rising levels of ‘development’ lead to rising levels of migration. However, little is known about large variations in the way development has shaped human mobility across different societies and periods. To improve understanding on the drivers of migration, the MADE project explored:

How do processes of development and social transformation shape human migration? More specifically, how does fundamental societal change affect the direction, timing, selection, and volumes of internal and international migration?

To answer these questions, MADE elaborated new theoretical and empirical approaches for migration research. While prior analyses focused on how a limited number of economic and demographic factors affect short-term fluctuations in international migration, we examined how political, economic, technological, demographic and cultural change shape long-term trends and patterns of internal and international mobility.

Methodology

- Theory-building to reconceptualize migration as an intrinsic part of broader development processes: i) **‘social transformation framework’** to study macro-level change and ii) **‘aspiration-capability framework’** to study micro-level migration decision-making.
- **Quantitative tests** drawing on new, innovative databases on international and internal migration flows and stocks.
- Mixed method case-studies in Brazil, Ethiopia, Italy, Morocco, the Netherlands, and French Guiana, each representing different development-migration trajectories over the last century.

What is social transformation?

We define social transformation as a fundamental change in the way societies are organised and resources are distributed. This framework moves beyond the conventional concept of development to understand big societal changes. We identify five interconnected dimensions of social transformation:

- Political (e.g. democratization)
- Economic (e.g. globalization)
- Technological (e.g. industrialization)
- Demographic (e.g. urbanization)
- Cultural (e.g. changing aspirations)

Core Findings

Processes of development and social transformation reshape human migration in regular, patterned ways.

- Seasonal and circular forms of mobility tied to local, subsistence-based economic systems tend to decrease with the emergence of new forms of rural-urban and international migration.
- Short-distance rural-urban movements are generally more common than long-distance internal or international migration.
- As migration systems diversify, so does the profile of migrants in terms of their education, skills and class background. Growing diversity in migration reflects a variety of social changes including rising levels of education, economic diversification, and changing gender norms.
- The expansion of geographical mobility is often tied to an expansion in social and economic mobility that people can achieve through migrating.

Different development trajectories affect the volume, timing and direction of migration.

- In lower income societies, rising levels of education, income, and infrastructure encourage out-migration from rural areas as people seek further education, jobs and lifestyles matching newly acquired aspirations.
- In higher income societies, volumes of out-migration decrease when life aspirations can be fulfilled locally. In some of our case studies in the period under study, this happened within a relatively short time (e.g. the Netherlands).
- Such transitions to lower out-migration levels are not automatic or inevitable. If the growth in aspirations keeps on outpacing the growth in local opportunities this can result in emigration plateauing at high levels (e.g. Morocco).
- Whether life aspirations can be fulfilled locally largely depends on the different pace, sequence and interaction of change across different dimensions of social transformation. For example, while education levels can increase rapidly, economic growth takes longer to unfold, encouraging new graduates to migrate to fulfil their new life aspirations. However, to some extent state instruments such as public employment and social protection can decrease migration propensities.
- When an economic ‘take-off’ is accompanied by increasing education levels, rising opportunities in new economic sectors in certain areas of a country prompt a decrease in international migration but high levels of internal mobility because this simultaneously increases people’s aspirations and capabilities to migrate.
- Development-driven increases in international out-migration tend to be larger in unequal economies offering low social protection as well as from smaller countries. Conversely, in fast growing economies, rural to urban migration can partly be a substitute for international migration. This particularly occurs in large and populous countries, where metropolitan, industrializing areas absorb most rural-to-urban migration (e.g., China, India, US).
- In many case studies, the initial direction and composition of international migration was fundamentally shaped by state-led recruitment practices, with network and other feedback effects reproducing and amplifying such patterns over time.
- As periods of development alternate with periods of decline, abandoned patterns of mobility may be revitalized (e.g. Brazil) as new ones are established, leading to the growing complexity of mobility over time, including a return to short-distance movements.

Key insights for policy makers

Development and migration:

- **Significant societal change will inevitably lead to changes in migration patterns.** Seeing migration as an intrinsic part of development processes can move policy interventions beyond the idea that migration is a ‘problem to be solved’ but rather towards an analysis of how broader transformations are likely to reshape existing migration patterns, and how policies can play a role.
- **Migration is often a sign that ‘development’ is taking place and life aspirations have increased.** Rising levels of human and economic development are inevitably associated with rising volumes of internal and international migration, particularly in countries that go through rapid processes of nation-state formation, agricultural mechanization, increasing education, infrastructure expansion and economic diversification.

Role of states and policies:

- **While states play a significant role in shaping migration patterns, the impact of migration policies alone remains limited.** Migration trends are often more fundamentally shaped by the development strategies of states, through their effects on labor markets, infrastructure, urbanization, and access to education, health care and other forms of social security.
- **The state as a provider of social security can influence migration aspirations.** In some cases, better provision of social security may decrease aspirations to leave, yet internal migration may be essential to access social security services, including education and healthcare, which tend to concentrate in urban areas.
- **Rising educational attainment is a core driver of rising mobility.** Our research shows that widening access to education invariably increases migration aspirations. More thought needs to be given to the quality and content of formal education, and the degree to which it matches local livelihood opportunities. Nevertheless, rising education levels, greater specialization and personal career ambitions encourage migration.

Moving beyond common assumptions:

- **Small towns play an important role in larger migration systems,** as they can fulfill the burgeoning life aspirations of rural populations, and should be given more attention in migration and development research and policy. They can complement the predominantly large-scale and national analyses of migration and provide a closer view of how different mobility mechanisms interact with each other.
- **Fewer people migrate than conventional theories would predict.** In some cases, people aspire to migrate but lack the capability to do so; in other cases, people prefer to stay even when migration seems economically rational. People often have a strong home bias and prefer to build a future within their own country. Aspirations to stay tend to be higher among rural populations with less education and material resources.
- **Places never stop ‘developing’ and humanity never stops migrating.** Migration patterns continue to evolve in advanced industrial economies. Migratory and non-migratory mobility levels often remain high, particularly as infrastructure development enables greater commuting.
- **Migration is a normal process.** The findings of the MADE project have highlighted the need to view migration as a ‘normal process’ and as an integral part of fundamental social transformations. A better understanding of how social transformation shapes migration will also lead to more informed assessments of what policies can and cannot do, and avoid the design of migration policies that produce unintended, often counterproductive results.

This policy brief draws from tentative findings of the project (expected end date: August 2022).

For more information and links to key publications, visit our website: <https://migrationasdevelopment.org/>

Funded by:

