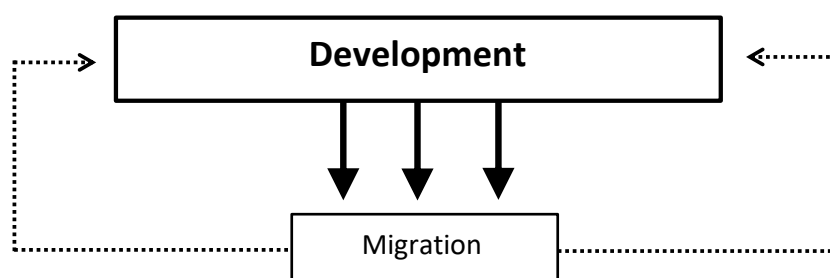




# Working Papers

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## Paradoxes of Migration and Development



Hein de Haas

MADE project paper 9

## The IMI Working Papers Series

The IMI working paper series presents current research in the field of international migration. The series was initiated by the International Migration Institute (IMI) since its founding at the University of Oxford in 2006. The papers in this series (1) analyse migration as part of broader global change, (2) contribute to new theoretical approaches, and (3) advance understanding of the multilevel forces driving migration and experiences of migration.

### Abstract

This paper argues why and how migration should be conceptualised as an intrinsic part of broader processes of development and social change instead of as the antithesis of development, as dominant discourses hold. When societies go through the various economic, cultural, technological, political and demographic transitions associated with ‘development’, this leads to increasing levels of internal and international out-migration. Low-income societies generally have lower emigration levels because poverty tends to constrain people’s movements. Development leads to more instead of less migration because it increases people’s capabilities and aspirations to move. The paradox of development-driven emigration hikes shows the inability of conventional push–pull and neoclassical models to explain migration as well as the need for a new vision of migration as part of broader development. Migration is shaped by development in both origin and destination societies and also contributes to further change in its own right. However, the embeddedness of migration in broader processes of social transformation and development also means that its potential to affect structural change is fundamentally limited. This shows the logical fallacy of narratives that cast development as a ‘solution’ for perceived migration problems or that cast migration and remittances as panaceas with which to solve fundamental development problems.

**Keywords:** Migration, development, social transformation, migration theory

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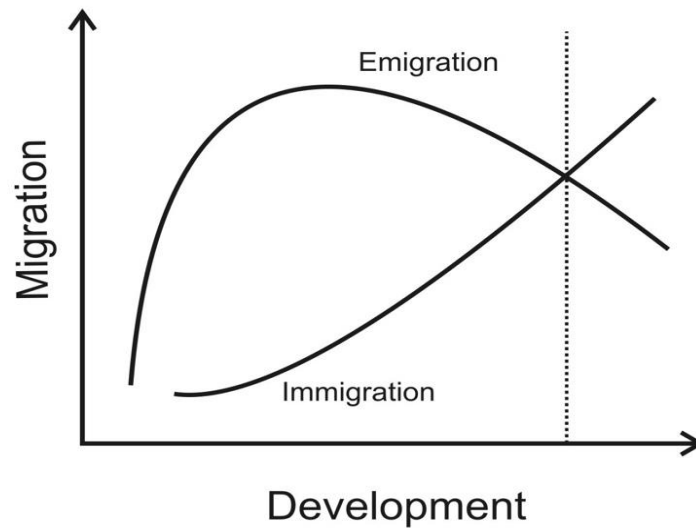
# 1 Introduction

Migration is an intrinsic part of broader processes of development and social change. Yet political discourse, the media and various researchers continue to represent migration, implicitly or explicitly, as the antithesis of development. This is evident in many policy proposals to use aid, trade and remittances as fast-track means to accelerate development in origin countries in order to remove the need to migrate. This is grounded in the tenacious idea that poverty, violence and other forms of human misery are the main causes of migration. Development is thus presented as a ‘solution’ to perceived migration problems. However, as this paper argues, this ignores mounting evidence pointing to the fact that development initially tends to *increase* internal and international migration.

Studies of historical and contemporary migration have found overwhelming evidence that processes of state formation, infrastructure development, demographic transitions, increasing education and transformations from agrarian to industrial societies typically coincide with accelerating migration, particularly in the early phases of development (see Skeldon 1997; Hatton and Williamson 1998; Zelinsky 1971). This typically coincides with accelerating rural-to-urban migration, part of which tends to spill over into increasing international migration. Migration requires significant social, cultural and economic resources in the form of connections, knowledge (‘human capital’) and money. Extreme impoverishment, illiteracy, low levels of education and inadequate infrastructures often deprive people of the resources required for migrating. Populations which are the most vulnerable to violence, oppression, economic shocks and environmental stress are the *involuntarily immobile* (see Carling 2002), those who are unable to move in order to save their lives or build new and possibly better lives elsewhere

Development typically leads to increasing levels of migration because it simultaneously endows people with (1) the capabilities and (2) the aspirations to move (de Haas 2007, 2009). Increasing levels of education, access to modern media and exposure to the relative wealth of migrants typically coincide with changing ideas of the ‘good life’ away from agrarian or pastoral lifestyles as well as increasing material aspirations. Rising educational levels also tend to increase mobility levels because people are more likely to have to move in order to obtain degrees or just to finish secondary school as well as to find jobs that match their qualifications in labour markets that grow in structural complexity. While farm or construction workers are likely to find employment in close geographical proximity, the geographical extent of labour markets typically increases with specialisation levels. Such factors help to explain the paradox that economic and human development in low-income societies typically accelerates emigration. Only when countries achieve high-income status and rural-to-urban transitions have been largely completed do emigration levels tend to go down. This typically yields a non-linear, inverted-U-shaped relationship between development and emigration levels (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The non-linear relation between development and migration**



## **2 Development as a driver of migration**

The popular idea that much ‘South–North’ migration is essentially driven by poverty, warfare and environmental degradation (in recent years, climate change has frequently been added to the mix of alleged causes of South–North migration) or that such migrants would constitute a growing mass of destitute victims desperate to leave, ignores growing evidence that most long-distance migration occurs neither from the poorest countries nor from the poorest segments of the population in those countries. In fact, middle-income countries tend to be the most migratory and international migrants predominantly come from relatively better-off sections of origin populations (Czaika and de Haas 2012).

It should therefore come as no surprise that countries such as Mexico, Morocco, Turkey and the Philippines figure prominently among the origin countries of international labour migrants. In Africa, for instance, extra-continental migration (mainly towards Europe but also to the Gulf and the Americas) is dominated by middle-income countries in both North and South Africa, while migration from most low-income sub-Saharan countries is lower on average and predominantly intra-regional. Citizens of sub-Saharan countries who are migrating to Europe or North America tend to be from among the relatively well-off and educated groups, as the relatively poor struggle to qualify for visas and generally do not have the means to assume the risks and costs involved in migrating.

According to migration transition theory (de Haas 2010a; Skeldon 1997; Zelinsky 1971), demographic shifts, economic development and state formation initially increase internal (rural-to-urban) and international emigration. Only when countries achieve higher development levels does

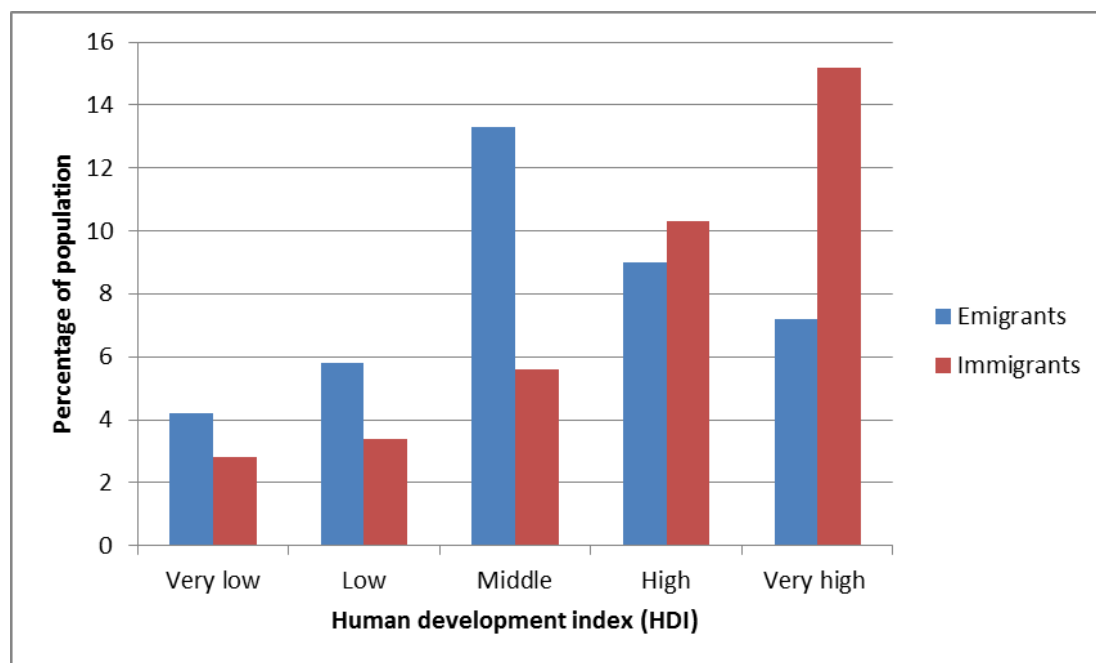
emigration tend to decrease alongside increasing immigration, leading to their transformation from net emigration to net immigration countries. The most comprehensive quantitative historical analysis of migration transitions is the study by Hatton and Williamson (1998) on large-scale European migration to North America between 1850 and 1913. Their analysis showed that European migration to the Americas was initially dominated by citizens of the most developed, fastest-industrialising nations in North-Western Europe as they went through fast rural–urban and demographic transitions. When the emigration potential of these countries decreased, economic, demographic and infrastructural transitions in more peripheral European countries in Southern and Eastern Europe started to gain ground. The authors’ study revealed that emigration increased while wage rates in origin and destination countries actually *converged*. They explain this paradox by arguing that the hypothetical migration-decreasing effects of declining wage gaps were outweighed by the mass arrival of cohorts of young workers in the labour market, increasing incomes (which enabled people to migrate) and a structural shift of labour out of agriculture. Furthermore, expanding networks partially gave migration its own momentum by reducing its risks and costs (Hatton and Williamson 1998; see also Massey 2000).

In recent years, the validity of migration transition theory for contemporary global migration has been assessed using new data sources. In 2010, drawing on new data from the University of Sussex/World Bank Global Bilateral Migration Database (GBMD), I provided a first global assessment of the relation between various origin- and destination-country migration determinants and levels of immigration and emigration (de Haas 2010a). As shown in Figure 2, the relation between levels of development immigration is robustly positive and largely linear, indicating that societies inevitably attract increasing numbers of immigrants as they become more prosperous. While this finding is largely intuitive, the paradox (and the inconvenient truth for policy-makers and bureaucrats arguing that development can somehow be a medicine against migration) lies in the non-linear relation between development and general levels of emigration. This finding was also confirmed in multivariate regression analyses that tested the effect of other relevant variables (de Haas 2010a).

This analysis provided clear evidence of migration transition theory, finding an inverted-U-shaped association between development and emigration. Higher levels of economic and human development, whether measured by GDP *per capita* or by the Human Development Index (HDI), are initially associated with higher levels of emigration. However, that emigration decreases with growing prosperity and development. These findings, using 2000 census data, were confirmed by more-recent studies that estimated the relationship between income *per capita* and the relative emigrant levels of the census rounds of 1960, 1970, 1980 and 1990 (Clemens 2014; de Haas and Fransen 2018). Only

when countries shift into upper-middle- and higher-income categories does further development tend to decrease emigration levels.

**Figure 2. The association between development and levels of immigration and emigration**



*Source:* de Haas 2010a.

Of course, these data only provide national averages; depending upon the specific context, we find considerable variation between countries even though some regularities can be detected. For instance, large and populous countries tend to have lower emigration levels (relative to their population) mainly because more migration is contained within their borders. The approximately ten million China-born people living abroad may appear like a high number but it represents only about 0.7 per cent of the total Chinese population. Likewise, the 16.6 million India-born international migrants only represent 1.2 per cent of the total Indian population (de Haas, Castles and Miller 2019a). By contrast, small states without large urban centres such as Lesotho or Cape Verde have high emigration rates as it is less likely that aspiring youth will find work and lifestyle opportunities that match their aspirations within their own countries.

Some countries have much lower emigration rates than one would expect based on migration transition theory. Thailand, for example, seems to have experienced lower emigration levels compared to other countries with similar development levels and did not experience as significant a migration transition as did, for instance, South Korea or Malaysia. The reasons for this are not entirely clear but are likely to be related to cultural factors and the fact that Thailand has never been colonised and hence has no extensive historical links with a metropole. Small countries with long histories of

colonisation and transnational connectivity – such as the Caribbean nations of Guyana and Suriname, where about half of the population currently lives abroad – often have extraordinarily high emigration rates (Vezzoli 2015). Such extremely high emigration levels are generally also linked to the introduction of immigration restrictions by former colonising nations (such as Britain and the Netherlands) and other destination countries, which created significant levels of ‘now or never’ migration and pushed migrants into permanent settlement by discouraging return (Vezzoli 2015).

Finally, immigration levels in industrialised, high-income countries vary significantly, depending on factors such as labour-market structure, immigration policies and cultural factors. While, in most high-income countries such as the US, France and the UK, immigrants constitute about 10 to 15 per cent of the population, these percentages are much higher in Arab Gulf states and in small countries or city states that lack a rural hinterland and have high levels of international connectedness, reaching levels of 88.4 per cent in the United Arab Emirates, 75.5 per cent in Kuwait, 46 per cent in Singapore, 37 per cent in Singapore and 29.6 per cent in Switzerland. In contrast, the 2.3 million officially registered immigrants in Japan represented only 1.8 per cent of the total population, while the 1.2 million migrants in South Korea represented but 2.3 per cent of the Korean population (calculations based on data from UNDESA 2017).

These observations show the importance of understanding particular regional contexts and the dangers of a blind application of transition models. On the other, hand, the overall pattern is clear, as set out below.

- Low-income countries with low levels of global integration have low levels of internal migration as well as international emigration.
- Rural–urban and demographic transitions accompanying the transformation from agrarian to industrialised societies tend to boost migration of all kinds.
- When countries transition to higher-income societies, they tend to become net immigration countries although emigration and overall levels of mobility remain higher than in low-income societies.

Although governments can influence the actual levels and patterns of migration to a certain extent, it would be an illusion to think that they can change the overall meta-trends, let alone reverse them. This insight applies to both international and internal migration and explains why various attempts to stem the ‘rural exodus’ through keeping people ‘down on the farm’ (Rhoda 1983) and stimulating rural development have typically failed. Sometimes, such policies even produced the opposite results. For instance, the construction of rural roads, the expansion of the electricity grid into rural areas and the establishment of schools can actually *accelerate* out-migration through making travel and communication easier and cheaper and through the exposure of rural populations to new ideas and



lifestyles, which often also increase their aspirations to migrate. In the same vein, the modernization of agriculture generally implies increased scales of production and mechanization, which typically reduces the demand for farm workers while increasing productivity.

### 3 Practical implications

Due to the significant costs and risks involved in migration, the poorest of the poor tend to remain either stuck in involuntary immobility or, if they manage to move out, are likely to move over relatively short distances and under unfavourable conditions, as is the case with Central American migrants trying to cross Mexico on foot (Olayo-Méndez 2018). The evidence presented here also exposes the unrealistic nature of the oft-mentioned spectre of mass long-distance migration supposedly in response to environmental degradation, whether or not affected by climate change (Christian Aid 2007; Myers and Kent 1995).

In my contributions to the Migration and Global Environmental Change project conducted by the UK Government Office for Science (de Haas 2011; Foresight 2011), I argued that extreme deprivation is likely to deprive the most vulnerable groups of the means to migrate as a strategy to secure their livelihoods. If climate change will, for instance, increase the incidence of droughts in particular areas of sub-Saharan Africa, the populations the most severely affected – mainly small-scale agriculturalists and pastoralists – would be unlikely to appear on the borders of wealthy countries in Europe. They would most probably remain trapped in immobility or be forced to move or settle in nearby agrarian areas or small towns. Even moving to larger cities requires significant resources, knowledge and connections. This idea is substantiated by evidence from various sub-Saharan African countries that long-distance migration from rural areas is often *lower* in years of drought and scarcity (Henry, Schoumaker and Beauchemin 2004; Jónsson 2010; Lewin, Fisher and Weber 2012). Paradoxically, sharp rises in long-distance rural out-migration often occur when harvests are abundant and people have the resources to move.

The relatively better-off middle-income groups or even small-scale entrepreneurs or peasants in possession of some land or livestock can sell assets in order to raise the funds to migrate and are generally in a better position to move over longer distances to access jobs and other opportunities in destination areas. Likewise, those in possession of higher-education degrees are more likely to find jobs in the destination areas and to obtain visas and other migration permits should they aspire to migrate abroad. This partly explains why long-distance emigration from low-income countries tends to be such a selective affair. For instance, it is no coincidence that sub-Saharan Africans are amongst the highest-skilled immigrant groups in the United States (Capps, McCabe and Fix 2012). The greater the distance and the more stringent immigration rules, the more selective migration tends to be.

The important lesson for policy-makers is that any form of development in the poorest countries is likely to lead to accelerating emigration over the coming decades. This is the exact opposite of what ‘development instead of migration’ policies aim to achieve.

For instance, if we apply migration transition theory to sub-Saharan African countries – which are the target of much international aid and ‘development instead of migration’ programmes – it seems safe to assume that migration from sub-Saharan Africa will increase *as a consequence of* development. Higher levels of education, income and connectivity are likely to fuel emigration to increasingly distant lands. Rather than curbing migration, development in sub-Saharan Africa will enable and inspire more people to move. In fact, high levels of poverty and illiteracy and a weak infrastructure have often prevented previous generations of Africans from migrating over longer distances.

It is also no coincidence that extra-continental emigration levels have generally been highest from African countries such as Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt as well as South Africa, Senegal, Nigeria and Ghana, which have *relatively* higher levels of economic development and global integration through economic ties and infrastructure. In the future, emigration from sub-Saharan Africa is likely to increase *as a result of African development*. While many Asian countries began to massively participate in global migration from the 1960s, largely reflecting the fast rates of economic development and demographic transitions in those countries, it is likely that Africans will form an increasingly large share of future global migrant populations.

## 4 The rationality of migration

The occurrence of development-driven emigration hikes shows the inability of push–pull and neoclassical models to explain real-world migration patterns. In fact, such models are misleading, as they predict that development in low-income societies (such as sub-Saharan Africa) will decrease emigration. From a conceptual point of view, push–pull models are also misguided because of the assumption that people are ‘pushed out’ of origin areas. This ignores the fact that migration requires considerable ‘agency’. In concrete terms this means that, in order for migration to happen, people need to possess the willpower (or aspirations) as well as the considerable resources (or capabilities) that are required to move. This is particularly the case if this movement involves crossing borders and the considerable costs involved in travel – such as the procurement of immigration papers or the payment of smugglers to facilitate the crossing of borders.

In other words, most people have good reasons to move, despite the significant sacrifice and suffering this regularly involves. Migration is generally a deliberate and largely rational attempt to

gain access to better opportunities rather than a ‘desperate flight from misery’. Although migrants, like people in general, have various biases, discourses on ‘South–North’ migration tend to underplay or deny migrants’ rationality. This tendency filters through in policy and media narratives according to which prospective migrants should be informed about the dangers of the journey and the arduous conditions in destination countries (see Pécoud 2010). However, such narratives ignore the fact that even undocumented migrants can allow families in origin countries to significantly improve their income and livelihood security.

The emphasis put by current research and discourse on the subjectivity of migration comes at the risk of underplaying or denying the rational dimension of migration decision-making. Certainly, some migrants are misinformed about opportunities and may have an over-optimistic picture of life abroad; each year, a considerable number of migrants are deceived, extorted or physically abused by government officials and employers. Each year, thousands of migrants are injured or die while trying to cross borders. Such risks explain why migrants are often willing to pay recruiters, smugglers and other ‘fixers’ to seek some form of protection and to facilitate safer passage or the procurement of visas and other paperwork. The ‘migration industry’ exists by virtue of migrant controls. Certainly, smugglers and recruiters may also revert to dishonest and dangerous practices but they are essentially service-providers consciously paid for by migrants in the reasonable expectation that this will help their passage.

Given the evidence from countless surveys and field studies on the considerable long-term benefits of both internal and international migration for the income, education and welfare of migrants and their families (Clemens, Montenegro and Pritchett 2008; McKenzie, Stillman and Gibson 2010; UNDP 2009), it would be foolish to deny migrants a certain degree of rationality in their mobility decisions. Migration is often an entire family’s carefully planned investment in a better future. This is a crucial insight for policy-makers and governments, who still believe that people can be discouraged from migrating by running campaigns to highlight the dangers involved. Such campaigns seem to be based on the implicit idea that migrants do not know what they are doing and that it would be in their own best interest to stay. Although largely unwittingly, such assumptions seem to buy into rather paternalistic and colonial worldviews according to which the non-Western ‘other’ is seen as less rational and therefore needs to be informed and enlightened. The fact that the rationality of Western migrants is rarely ever questioned further exposes this bias.

Thus, although migration usually involves risks, for most people the investment pays off. Recent evidence shows that people are willing to take considerable risks in order to access better opportunities abroad (see Mbaye 2014) and to live through many years of hardship either to save enough money to return or to secure residency and settle permanently with their families. As argued by the ‘new economics of labor migration’ (Stark 1991), migration is often a family investment

because it allows them to reduce the risks, increase their income and potentially improve their long-term wellbeing (Taylor 1999). Migration needs to be conceptualised as a resource in its own right, an important means for upward socioeconomic mobility for relatively disadvantaged groups. Migration is therefore the exact opposite of a sign of development failure, as conventional wisdom would have it.

This logic explains why migrants often show so much perseverance in reaching their long-term goals of securing better livelihoods for their families. This, too, is why migrants often try to return – even in cases where they are deported – and show incredible tenacity and endurance in withstanding situations of long-term hardship, sacrifice and loneliness. Returning empty-handed is therefore an unbearable idea for many migrants and a return home is therefore a sign of successful rather than of failed migration. Only when migrants have obtained the money, experience or education which motivated their movement can they return or, alternatively, decide to settle permanently at the destination.

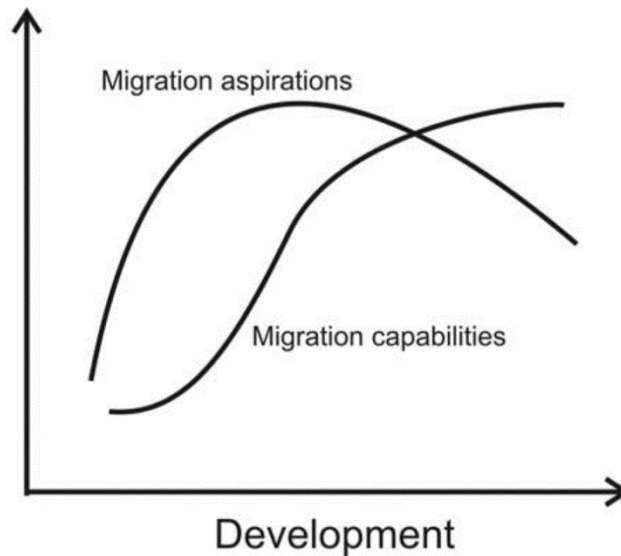
## 5 The aspirations-capabilities model

To explain why development is so often associated with more, rather than less, migration we must move beyond sterile views of migrants as predictable ‘respondents’ to geographical opportunity gaps. In order to achieve a richer understanding of migration behaviour, it may be useful to conceptualise migration as a function of people’s capabilities and aspirations to move (de Haas 2014). 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 or risky.

Processes of economic and human development generally increase people’s capabilities to migrate over greater distances but do not *automatically* lead to migration. Migration aspirations depend on people’s more general life aspirations as well as on their perceptions of life ‘here’ and ‘there’. Both are subjective and likely to change under the influence of broader processes of structural change. These include improved access to information, images and lifestyles conveyed through education and the media, which tend to broaden people’s mental horizons, change perceptions of the ‘good life’ and increase material aspirations. Development processes initially tend to increase both people’s capabilities and aspirations to move, which explains why development often boosts migration (see Figure 3). Once sizeable migrant communities have settled in destination areas, social networks tend to reduce the costs and risks of migrating, with settled migrants frequently functioning as ‘bridgeheads’ (Böcker 1994). This can further accelerate migration in established migration

corridors, even if wage and other opportunity gaps actually decrease because of development in origin areas (Hatton and Williamson 1998).

**Figure 3. Hypothetical effects of development on migration capabilities and aspirations**



However, as societies become wealthier, beyond a certain tipping point overall emigration aspirations are likely to decrease – because more people can imagine a future within their own country – while, at the same time, 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 (see also Zelinsky 1971). In fact, from a long-term historical perspective, technology has facilitated the settlement of humankind. 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 (residential) migration is somewhat ambiguous. This may be one explanation for the fact that, over recent decades, the number of international migrants as a share of the world’s population has remained remarkably stable, at levels of around 3 per cent. While development tends to boost migration from low-income countries, overall levels of international migration are actually quite low.

## 6 Redefining human mobility

Thus far, I have argued that:

- migration is an *intrinsic* part of broader development processes;
- development in low-income countries generally increases overall levels of migration;
- for most people involved, migration is a vital resource rather than a desperate response to destitution; and
- the most deprived people are more likely to find themselves trapped in involuntary immobility and exposed to the greatest dangers in case of economic crisis, violence of environmental calamity.

At the micro-level, for most people, migration represents opportunity and the hope of a better future. At the macro-level, the profound economic, demographic and social transformations that accompany processes of development and modernisation will inevitably lead to increased migration, particularly from rural-to-urban areas both within and across international borders. In many ways, migration *is* development, as Skeldon (1997) already argued, instead of the antithesis of development.

This insight shows the need to reconceptualise migration and human mobility. Redefining migration as a resource, as an investment in a better future and as an important avenue for progress for non-elite groups in societies around the world also requires rethinking the underlying concept of human mobility. This latter is usually seen in terms of people moving, but it can only be a freedom- and life-enhancing resource or ‘capability’ if people can make the actual choice to move. Thus, people only enjoy real mobility freedom if they have the option to stay – if they are not forced to move. In earlier papers, I therefore proposed to define human mobility as people’s capability (freedom) to choose where to live, with residential human movement (migration) as the associated outcome (de Haas 2009, 2014). Thus, human mobility also includes the freedom to stay, which we can classify as ‘voluntary immobility’.

The resulting view on migration does not presume either moving or staying as the norm but acknowledges that they are two sides of the same freedom-of-mobility coin (de Haas 2014). This allows us to move beyond the rather futile debate over whether migration or sedentary behaviour is the norm. Both are ‘normal’ in sedentary societies, as staying and moving occur in different phases of people’s lives and because the livelihoods of those staying and moving are intimately connected. Although only 3 per cent of the world’s population are international migrants, many more people (family members, communities – indeed, entire societies) are deeply affected by migration.

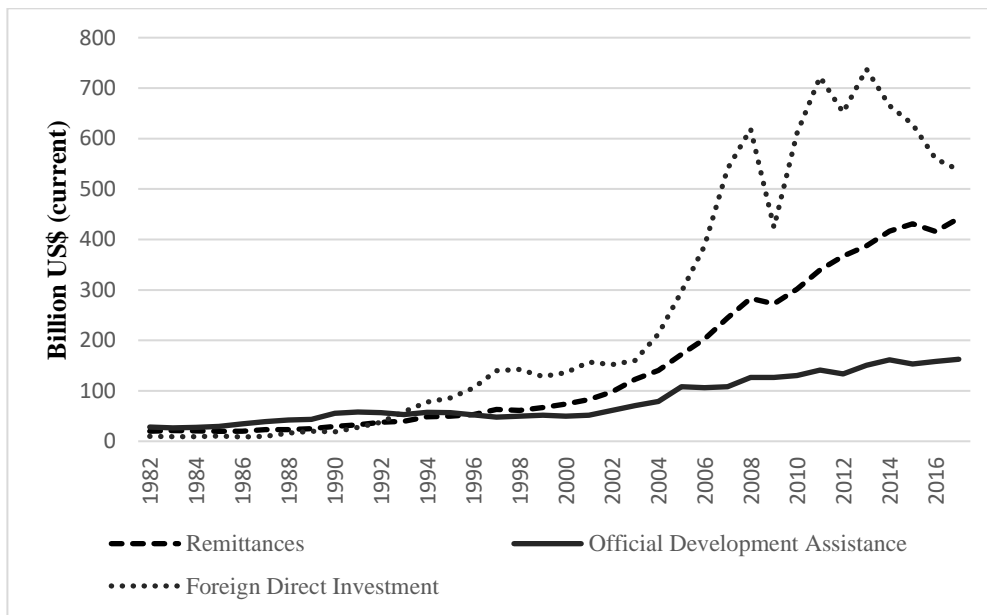
From this perspective, people can still enjoy mobility capabilities without ever using them, because they add to their sense of freedom, in the same way that people do not necessarily have to actively use certain freedoms – for instance, political rights or social benefits – in order to enjoy them: the reassuring knowledge of their existence as an ‘option’ or fallback position is sufficient. Awareness of the possibility of migrating can therefore function as a form of insurance, an option that is always available. This may be one of the reasons why ‘open borders’ regimes (such as those in the EU) are often associated with much-lower-than-expected (permanent) emigration levels (de Haas, Vezzoli and Villares-Varela 2019b), because people who gain the liberty to move around freely are no longer obsessed with moving out at the first opportunity, as is more typical of the ‘involuntarily’ immobile who are deprived of mobility options and feel blocked from opportunities to explore foreign lands.

The above argument is intrinsically related to capabilities and aspirations in two different ways. First, people need access to social (other people), economic (material) and cultural or ‘human’ (ideas, knowledge and skills) resources in order to exert migratory agency. Under highly constrained conditions, people often lack the resources to leave, which partly explains why the poorest people are generally under-represented in long-distance international migration. Second, if people have no real option to stay, because of war, persecution or environmental hazards, for example, or are pressured by their families to work abroad, they are deprived of an essential part of their human mobility freedom – that is, the option or ‘capability’ to stay. On the other hand, if people feel deprived of their freedom of movement the concomitant feeling of being ‘trapped’ may further fuel their migration aspirations and can lead to an obsession with ‘getting out’ and the concomitant reinforcement of a ‘culture of emigration’.

## **7 Migration and development: a reciprocal, but asymmetric relationship**

Last, but not least, migration also has an impact on development processes in destination and origin societies. Overall, migration researchers have paid much more attention to the implications of migration for destination countries than to the causes and consequences of migration from an origin-country perspective. This is part of the more general ‘receiving-country bias’ of the research literature. Fortunately, however, since 2000, increasing attention has been paid to the impacts of migration on origin countries. This was partly prompted by a fast increase in remittances sent by migrants to their origin countries. As Figure 4 shows, remittance flows have far outstripped Official Development Assistance (ODA) and have approached the value of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

**Figure 4. Remittances, Official Development Aid and Foreign Direct Investment to lower- and middle-income countries**



Source: World Development Indicators database, accessed 26 January 2019.

While migration tends to stimulate overall growth and innovation in destination countries (Boubtane, Coulibaly and Rault 2013; Ortega and Peri 2013; UNDP 2009), a much more contested question is *whether migration encourages the development of the countries of origin or, conversely, hinders such development*. Over the past few decades, this issue has sparked heated debate in policy and research, opposing ‘migration optimists’, who argue that migration brings growth and prosperity to origin countries, to ‘migration pessimists’, who argue that migration undermines development through draining origin countries of their scarce human and financial resources. While the pessimists predict a ‘brain drain’, the optimists predict a ‘brain gain’. This division reflects the more general division between historical–structural (neo-Marxist) and functionalist (neoclassical) theories that view migration as an exploitation and optimisation mechanism, respectively (de Haas 2010b). The debate about migration and development has swung back and forth, from optimism in the post-1945 period, to pessimism since the 1970s, to renewed optimism since the 2000s (de Haas 2012). This debate reflects a broader opposition not only between development paradigms and economic philosophies but also ideologies.



**Table 1. Opposing views on migration and development**

Migration optimists		Migration pessimists
Functionalist	↔	Historical-structuralist
Neo-classical	↔	Neo-Marxist
Optimization	↔	Exploitation
Brain gain	↔	Brain drain
Modernization	↔	Dependency
Net North-South transfer	↔	Net South-North transfer
More equality	↔	More inequality
Remittance investment	↔	Conspicuous consumption
Development	↔	Disintegration
Less migration	↔	More migration

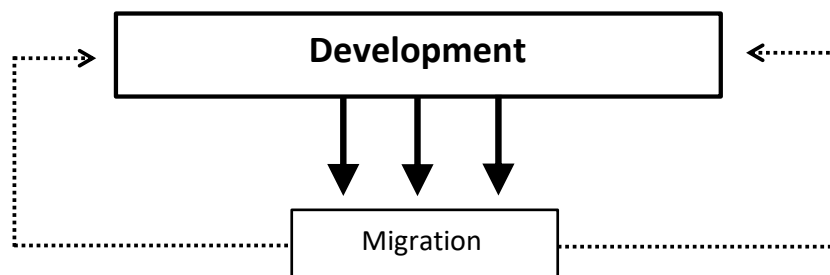
The reality, as is so often the case, lies in the middle because the specific ‘developmental’ impact of migration is dependent on more-general development conditions. In evaluating the impacts of development, it is particularly crucial to distinguish between levels of analysis. While the evidence suggests that there is much room for optimism when we look at the considerable potential of migration in improving the welfare and wellbeing of migrants and the communities involved (de Haas 2010b), much more scepticism is warranted with regards to expectations that migration can somehow magically ‘trigger’ national-level development or solve structural development problems such as corruption, a lack of trust in governments and macro-economic instability. It is therefore not surprising that empirical studies have generally failed to identify a clear causal link between migration and origin-country development trends at the macro-level – such as economic growth and investment (see Clemens and McKenzie 2018).

Notwithstanding the considerable benefits for individuals, households and communities, a large body of empirical evidence has shown that migration and remittances can neither be blamed for a lack of development (‘brain drain’) nor be expected to boost sustainable development (‘brain gain’) in generally unattractive investment environments (de Haas 2010b). Despite the benefits for families and communities at the micro- and meso-level, migration and remittances alone cannot remove structural development obstacles at the macro-level, such as corruption, nepotism and failing institutions. Migration is unlikely to *remove* such obstacles or to *reverse* structural trends at the macro-level. Migration is therefore no panacea for development (see also Papademetriou and Martin 1991; Taylor 1999).

If states fail to implement reform, migration is unlikely to fuel national development and can actually sustain situations of dependency, underdevelopment and authoritarianism. Such a vicious cycle can be identified in countries such as the Philippines, Morocco and Egypt, which have experienced large-scale emigration for decades without clear macro-level benefits, while preserving the political *status quo*. In these cases, migrants are also more likely to settle permanently and to

reunite with their families if the destination countries so permit. However, if development in origin countries takes a positive turn and governments implement real reform, migrants often reinforce these positive trends through investing and returning because they are often the first to recognise these improved opportunities. Such a virtuous cycle has been identified in various countries, including South Korea, China and India (DeWind, Kim, Skeldon and Yoon 2012; Saxenian 2004).

**Figure 5. The reciprocal but asymmetric relationship between development and migration**



Both migration optimists and pessimists tend to ascribe too much transformational potential to migration. This applies not only to debates on the impacts of migration for origin societies but also to debates on the destination-country impacts of migration, which also tend to be rather polarised, pitting those arguing that migration undermines welfare, wages and the security of destination countries against proponents of migration who argue that migration is a solution to structural problems such as economic stagnation and population ageing. Despite these opposing views, what both migration opponents and proponents ‘camps’ have in common is an overestimation of the transformative potential of migration. For instance, empirical evidence suggests that the impacts of migration on the wages of native workers vary depending on the context and the groups under scrutiny. This has generated heated discussions in the research literature. However, what has been ignored is that the common denominator of virtually all studies is how small the actual magnitude of such wage effects is, whether positive or negative (Dustmann, Schönberg and Stuhler 2016; Ottaviano and Peri 2012; UNDP 2009).

Thus, the relation between development and migration is reciprocal but strongly asymmetrical. The conceptualisation of migration as an intrinsic part of processes of development and social transformation implies that migration is a subprocess of larger development processes (see Figure 5). While processes of social transformation drive migration, migration is generally less likely to fundamentally alter the deeper political and economic structures of origin and destination societies (Portes 2010). Although the short-term and local impacts of migration can be significant, in the longer term most migrant groups largely adapt to the culture and economic systems of destination countries

within a few generations and the impacts of migrants and minorities on mainstream institutions and power structures remain negligible. The main exceptions to this rule are cases in which migrants come in the shape of colonisers who subjugate native populations through military force and occupation.

## 8 Conclusion

This paper has argued that migration is an integral – and therefore inevitable – part of broader processes of economic development and social transformation that characterise societies going through ‘modernisation’ processes. Although specific patterns and levels of migration vary across societies, the combination of profound economic, cultural, technological, political and demographic transitions typically generate major increases in overall levels of internal and international mobility. Emigration levels tend to be highest in middle-income societies where profound social transformation and rural–urban transitions may simultaneously increase people’s aspirations and capabilities to migrate. Low-income societies generally have lower emigration levels because poverty tends to constrain people’s movement. Economic development typically increases people’s ability to use migration as a (family) resource to increase their long-term wellbeing, while education and cultural change typically increase people’s aspirations to migrate as a way of achieving ‘modern’ lifestyles. The paradox of development-driven emigration hikes shows the inability of conventional push–pull models to explain migration and exemplifies the need to reconceptualise migration as an intrinsic part of development rather than as a ‘problem to be solved’. Migration is shaped by development in origin and destination societies and contributes to further change in its own right. However, the embeddedness of migration in broader development processes also means that its potential to affect structural change is fundamentally limited. This shows the logical fallacy of narratives that cast development as a ‘solution’ for perceived migration problems or migration and remittances as a panacea with which to solve fundamental development problems.

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