Migration and Development

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Glossary

Brain drain The skills and knowledge lost through the emigration of skilled migrants.
Development The process of economic, political, and social improvement of a given country or community, through either purposeful intervention through development policies or an immanent process of social change.
Diaspora A group of people living outside the country of their birth, who continue to identify with each other on the basis of their shared (usually national) identity.
Internal migration The movement of people from one area to another within national borders, e.g., rural to urban migration.
International migration The movement of people across national borders.
Remittances The financial transfers sent across national borders, by conational as well as other people.
Social remittances The cultural, social, and political practices and ideas transferred by migrants across countries, through communication or the physical movement of people across borders (e.g., when migrants return to their countries of origin).
Skilled migration The movement of people with recognizable skills from one country to another to take up skilled employment or follow further education.
Transnational communities Communities of people that stretch across national borders.

Migration and development have been linked from the beginnings of modern migration studies. Already in the late 19th Century, the geographer Ravenstein argued in the ninth law of his "Laws of Migration" to the extent that migration increases in volume as industries and commerce develop and transport improves. Thus, Ravenstein understood migration essentially as a consequence of development. Intuitive though this statement seems, subsequent research has encountered difficulties with definitions of both "migration" and "development." Just how various forms of population movement are affected by changes in education, by employment characteristics, or by levels of inequality are difficult to unpick. Clearly, too, any linkage between the two processes is not simply one way with migration as a consequence of development: migration itself impacts upon development as migrants move money and ideas between origins and destinations. This relationship will also change according to which definition of development we adopt. Most policy interest lies in development as purposive action, while research also covers development as a process of social change that is not directly linked to specific policies. Our understanding of this relationship will also depend on whether it is examined at the macro, country level, or at the micro, household level. In essence, the two terms are so intertwined that shifting patterns of population movement are themselves indicative of development. It is difficult to envisage development without migration or migration without some kind of development. Most simply, migration is an integral part of development.

Recent interest in the relationship between migration and development can be dated to the late 1990s, when the term entered the development discourse at the highest level of policy. Migration was not a Millennium Development Goal (2000–15) although it has been included under various guises in the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015–30). The overarching target to facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies in the SDGs, implies a central role for policy that can work toward the benefit of migration for origin and destination countries, as well as for the migrants themselves, often called a "win-win-win strategy." Such a general target may be more illusory than real and one which might obscure the more concrete areas where migration can be managed to achieve specific developmental goals. These more specific goals can be seen within the migration and development "nexus" and consist of three pillars which have been central to the debate: remittances, skilled migration/brain drain, and diasporas.

Remittances

Remittances are the financial transfers or monies sent by migrants to their families back home; their sheer volume gives remittances particular traction as a policy issue. In 2016, remittances worldwide were estimated to have been $575 billion, of which some $429 billion went to the developing world. They have been attracting the attention of policymakers since they started outstripping official development assistance (foreign aid) in the late 1990s, a trend that has continued to today, when remittances to developing countries are three times greater than official development assistance. It is tempting to think that if this amount could be productively invested, much could be achieved in terms of development, however defined. Yet, several factors need to be considered before any conclusions about the possible developmental impacts of remittances can be made. In terms of absolute amounts of remittances

received, India and China account for almost one-third of the total amount sent to the developing world but these vast amounts represent only very small proportions of GDP and, at the macrolevel, are not significant contributors to the respective development paths of these two economic and demographic giants. However, for smaller countries with relatively weak economies, remittances are a significant contributor to national economies. For example, they represented some 34.5% of the annual GDP of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2016 and 29.7 and 26.9%, respectively, in Nepal and Tajikistan.

It is at the local levels of the village and the individual household that remittances should make the greatest impact, irrespective of the size of the country. The evidence suggests that remittances can make an impact in improving well-being in terms of allowing children to continue in school for longer and to attend clinics and to have better health in those households that receive them but the improvements are not as great as might have been expected. One of the reasons may be that only households with existing resources can afford to send migrants to international destinations in the first place and they already have higher education and health levels than households without migrants. Also, remittances from international sources may be sent to more accessible parts of a country, to cities rather than isolated villages, for example, which are relatively better off. Hence, these remittances may not reach either the poorest people or the poorest parts of a country. Internal migration in any country usually involves a larger number of people than international migration and is usually more accessible. Consequently, remittances from internal sources, despite being of lesser value and not impacting on foreign exchange, may have the potential to reach a greater range of poorer parts of the country to help to alleviate poverty there.

Remittances should not be restricted to monetary transactions. Migrants send goods home but also ideas that can change values, particularly when they return on visits or more permanently. These "social remittances" can change attitudes toward schooling, family planning, and gender norms and be an important factor in bringing about development in its broadest sense. Return migrants from the city in the case of internal migration bring the latest urban styles in clothing and music that influence preferences of the youth in the villages but return migrants from international destinations bring a window on other cultures and ways of doing. Of particular interest might be what can be called "political remittances" where migrants spread ideas that might promote more democratic or even revolutionary forms of behavior that challenge traditional power and gender structures. The evidence appears mixed and whether change is implemented will depend upon the particular conditions in the areas of origin of migration. Just what these conditions might be requires further research into this most fundamental dimension of the migration and development debate.

Skilled Migration, Brain Drains and Brain Gains

While the impact of remittances is seen largely as a positive dimension of migration and development in both research and policy, the actual migration, particularly of the skilled, is much more contested. Skilled migration is generally considered a gain for destinations, but a loss for countries of origin: a "brain drain." Destination countries have been seen as "poaching" the best and the brightest from developing countries and this is thought likely to inhibit their development prospects. Certainly, few destination countries consider the developmental impact of their immigration policies on countries of origin. Nevertheless, simple conclusions that the exodus of the skilled prejudices the development prospects of countries of origin need to be treated with care, and studies of the movement of the skilled have become an important dimension in the migration and development debate.

Central to the argument is the definition of a "skilled migrant." Generally, these are defined as those who have completed a qualification at the tertiary level, although it can also include those who are currently engaged in study at this level. However, not all those who have a university degree can be considered to be skilled and many who have no tertiary qualification do indeed possess a skill. A central difficulty here is how "skills" are defined. Sportspersons and entrepreneurs would perhaps include the most obvious examples but so, too, would certain types of craftsmen. The term "skill" needs to be treated with a great deal of care, with room for the addition of those with "exceptional talents" as well as recognizing that the definition of skills is highly gendered. Skills associated with women and female roles are often not recognized as skills and, as a consequence, undervalued. Many migrants also go through a process of "deskilling" where they are unable to practice their own professions and end up in "unskilled" jobs.

The identification of a category of "skilled migrants" has particular relevance in the design and implementation of migration policy: skilled migrants tend to be wanted, with policies designed to attract them while those who find work in occupations deemed "unskilled" are less-desired, with policies designed to restrict their entry. Such attitudes are shortsighted. The skilled are not going to come unless the conditions they need are already in place. These conditions are legion but are found in the greatest concentrations in the global city. These include the workers who are required to build the offices to house high-flying IT and financial wizards to those who clean the windows and sweep the corridors, to those who deliver confidential documents and who drive the luxury cars to meetings, and to those who staff the restaurants and the many other services required by the skilled. If the local population, with its own aspirations, is not going to provide such activities, migrants will have to be allowed in in sufficient numbers to fill the gap. Hence, close linkages exist between migration for skilled and less-skilled occupations and policies should be adjusted accordingly.

The global flows of the highly skilled are dominated by migrants from within the developed world itself as well as from a relatively small number of middle-income developing countries such as India, China, Mexico, the Philippines, and Egypt. The United Kingdom and Germany, for example, have greater numbers of highly skilled migrants overseas than most other developed or developing countries. This pattern occurs because only the countries of the developed world and of these middle-income countries have the types of education and other institutions to produce the skilled. Poor countries such as Lao PDR, those in much of Central Asia, around the Sahel, or among small island countries do not have the facilities to produce a large number of potential migrants with

tertiary education. Certainly, internationally recognized institutions such as the University of the West Indies and the University of the South Pacific, each with three campuses, serve a large number of small populations but produce a tiny number of graduates compared with the Chinese, Indian, or even Philippine education systems. It can be argued that any issue of brain drain is not so much about absolute numbers but relative ones. The loss of a few nurses from a small economy might have a greater impact than the exodus of many from a large economy. The initial use of the term "brain drain" was applied to the loss of scientists from the United Kingdom to North America in the 1960s, which does not seem to have negatively impacted on that country's tertiary institutions or scientific standing in the world to date. Nevertheless, the trope that there are more doctors from Malawi in Manchester than in Malawi carries weight and needs assessment.

The data available for the examination of global flows of the skilled generally relate only to place of birth and place of present residence. They do not provide information on place of training, which has to be derived from smaller scale surveys. These surveys suggest that a considerable but highly variable number are trained in the developed world. This practice, in which the new wealthy of the developed world send their children overseas for training, does not take into account the issue of accreditation: degrees from developed-country institutions tend to be recognized globally whereas degrees from many provincial and national institutions are not. The remittances discussed in the previous section are used for the education of children at home; however, reverse remittances have also been observed from developing countries to the developed world that are used for the further education overseas of the children of the new middle-income groups.

Irrespective of who pays, and where, for the education of the acquisition of skills from the developing world, their loss is still perceived by many to be prejudicial to their countries' development prospects. Despite the continued influence of the brain drain argument, particularly in political debates, certain questions can be raised about its efficacy. A minority of scholars have even argued that the exodus of skilled people can be positive for origin countries given that people going overseas with certain qualifications stimulates the next generation to follow in their footsteps by taking up training in those specific skills. However, not all will be able to migrate owing to the limited number of places overseas and, after a time, that country will have more people trained in these skills than it started off with at the outset. Quite apart from the matter of skilling where the destination country takes the best of the best, the available data to support this interpretation have proved elusive. The data to demonstrate clearly that the exodus of the skilled is prejudicial to the country of origin are also elusive. Basic development indicators on infant, child, and maternal mortality and on school enrollment and retention improve at the same time that health and education personnel are leaving. A number of key points need addressing as part of the argument:

(1) The exodus of the skilled from any developing country is usually from the principal urban areas and not from areas of greatest need, which are likely to be in marginal rural areas.
(2) If people are trained to global standards, they can be expected to move globally, which has two implications: their skills cannot be absorbed in national economies and training needs to be geared to local conditions. Recruit locally and train in basic skills and retention rates will be higher. These issues raise the question if the skilled had not migrated internationally, would they have migrated internally to those areas of greatest need?
(3) Poor pay, promotion, and living conditions, particularly in the public sector, mean that an exodus exists from the sector, but not from the country, and significant numbers of trained people are found outside the labor force or engaged in other activities.
(4) Key skills have been imported from elsewhere, often through international organizations and by civil society organizations to provide essential services in those areas least attractive to skilled nationals.

The complex topic of skilled migration from the developing world is perhaps best placed within a broad developmental transition, a consequence of change rather than a driver, neither negative nor positive for development but an integral part of broader patterns of change. Yet, the skilled can promote development through return, such as through engagement with diaspora groups or transnational communities.

Diasporas

"Diaspora" is a highly contested term. Originally it referred to a group of people expelled from their homeland such as the Jews or the Armenians who lived for long periods with the dream of return but today it also includes their descendants. In practice, therefore, the term "diaspora" covers many groups that have a community of migrants residing outside the borders of a country. Thus, diaspora takes us beyond the process of migration to introduce the idea of ethnicity and people with a common descent. No agreement exists on how many generations back that line of descent should go in order to qualify as a member of a diaspora, although self-identification is often deemed sufficient. Given the political implications and imprecision of the term "diaspora," the United Nations uses the term "transnational community" instead to imply communities from specific origins living outside the borders of the origin country. Many sending states and international organizations turn to the diaspora in order to further development projects. These may include second- and third-generation migrants. However, migrants (that is, first-generation migrants) are those most likely to maintain contact with their origins rather than those one or two generations separate from the birthplaces of their parents or grandparents. Importantly, migrants may ultimately return whereas their descendants may be less likely to "return" to their parents' or grandparents' countries of origin. Migrants create the interactive space that constitutes the transnational community in which they actively participate in the economic, social, and political life of both origins and destinations. This is where the term "diaspora" overlaps with research on "transnationalism."

Return is perhaps the most problematic of all the many aspects of migration because, using standard census measurement techniques, a return migrant is registered in his or her place of birth and is thus classified simply as a nonmigrant. Only the inclusion of questions in censuses and surveys that seek information on any prior place of residence or, ideally, the implementation of specialized surveys that seek to generate a biographical history can identify return movement. Return is an integral part of all migration systems and can consist of both relatively short-term visits back to the origin country or longer-term residence. As migration systems evolve over time, the incidence of return appears to increase.

Given the wealth and skill of many of the international migrants living overseas, the idea emerged, particularly in the World Bank, that the diaspora can be "leveraged" to the benefit of countries of origin by return migrants with capital to invest or with key skills to contribute to home development. Voluntary associations of migrants, often known as "hometown associations," serve as important institutions to facilitate contact among migrants themselves at destinations and between migrants and home areas. These provide a forum to discuss what migrants can do to help their communities of origin as well as other issues relating to integration into the destination society as well as recreational interaction such as sports' competitions and other social events. Governments have often tried to facilitate the participation of diasporas in home-country activities through the establishment of ambassadors for diaspora affairs.

The development impact of return migration need not depend on significant numbers of returnees. The return of small numbers of very wealthy or charismatic individuals can have a profound impact on the political and economic direction taken by countries of origin. Many of the political leaders of countries across the developing world have been trained in one way or the other in developed-country destinations, which could be seen as "political remittances" as referred to above. While migrant communities overseas may wish to assist in the development of home countries, diasporas are not homogeneous entities but can be highly factionalized. Cooperation among different groups to identify development projects that are not seen to favor the interests of any one group can often be difficult to attain. Equally, some in the diaspora may have left their country for specific political reasons and will choose not to collaborate with their home-country authorities.

Other issues can emerge in relation to diasporas and return. Do returnees come back as returning nationals or as carriers of foreign passports with consular protection of another government? Are they essentially expatriates on favored salaries compared with their previous compatriots or do they work under local conditions? Where do they pay their taxes? Tensions can emerge between the return of long-term absentees and those who remained through what may have been difficult conditions. The latter do not appreciate being advised by those who may be seen as having enjoyed a favorable exile in a very different society and economy. Nevertheless, despite all these issues, returned migrants have made important contributions to development in their home countries as, for example, returned Chinese and Vietnamese migrants, who have invested in both production and in infrastructure to take advantage of post-reform liberalization of their respective economies. Returned migrants rarely drive development, although they may contribute significantly to it. The critical decisions are made by resident nationals and the migrants will only return once something exists for them to return to.

Future Challenges

There are five future conceptual and policy challenges for the relationship between migration and development. First, the migration and development debate is moving beyond the three pillars identified above. Circular migration, which is an integral part of the diaspora and the creation of a transnational space through return, as discussed in the previous section, has emerged as a specific area in such policies as the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM) of the EU, for example. Under the migration and development "pillar" of the GAMM, policies to promote circular migration are included, together with policies of diaspora engagement, policies to promote remittance flows, policies to mitigate brain drain, and policies to bring about better coherence between migration and development policies in general. Most destination countries in recent years have been moving toward more restrictive migration policies, however, which limit circular movements and, rather counterintuitively, tend to encourage migrants to settle in their countries of destination. Only a small minority of countries, such as Argentina, have moved in the opposite direction of making it easier for migrants there to settle; while other regional initiatives also facilitate movement between country members. These initiatives are aimed at counteracting irregular migration by encouraging migrants to register and regularize their stay, given that undocumented migration is seen as having detrimental consequences for countries of destination. Significant questions regarding the protection of migrants' human rights are also raised around undocumented and irregular migration.

Second, key questions must revolve around whether specific policies on diaspora engagement, remittances, and circular migration can promote development in countries of origin or destination. Policies to reduce the transaction costs of remittances are highly desirable but will not fundamentally alter the qualifications outlined on the impact of remittances earlier in the relevant section above. That is, remittances from international sources are focused upon specific origins and on wealthier groups within those specific origins. Direct policies to attract or retain skills are unlikely to succeed without a broader vision of how a city or country can successful establish and grow different industries, for example. Given the nature of skilled migration, governments need to plan for a high turnover rather than planning to retain the migrants that they have. Policies to prevent or restrict the exodus of skilled nationals are likely to be counterproductive: if people are prevented or discouraged from leaving legally, they are likely to turn to irregular migration, which may result in them not being able to practice their skill on arrival.

Third, while most of the literature and policy interest in migration and development focuses on the development of countries of origin, enough evidence exists to suggest that migrants have to date made a significant contribution to the development of countries

of destination. Whether through work deemed skilled or unskilled, migrants fill gaps in labor markets of destination countries that cannot be filled with local labor, as doctors, IT engineers, carers for the elderly, or office cleaners among many other occupations. As such, migrants provide essential knowledge and services that have contributed to the development of those countries that are already better off. The challenge in the future is to recognize their contribution and make sure that the sectors in which they work are properly regulated so that migrants' labor and human rights can be protected.

Fourth, development is more than just economic development. While a more traditional understanding of development will inevitably focus on economic development, social aspects of development need to be given greater recognition. Whether migration promotes more democratic practices or greater recognition of gender equality is just as important as whether it contributes to growth in GDP. These less-easily quantified aspects of development need to be brought into the mainstream and given greater prominence in migration and development debates.

Fifth, equally important is to pay attention to different levels of analysis. The relationship between migration and development has traditionally been examined at the national level, which is an understandable side-effect of development itself being historically evaluated at the country level. Nevertheless, in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of this relationship it is also necessary to examine how social change as a result of migration takes places at the more microlevel of households and communities. Research around this area is less generalizable but is equally important if we want to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how migration promotes processes of development.

Finally, climate change poses significant challenges to the attainment of development as previously thought as well as to the safe, orderly, and managed migration sought by national governments and the international community. Migration plays a key role in adaptation to climate change. However, this is not recognized by destination countries, which are reluctant to relax and broaden their migration entry criteria. Those most likely to suffer the consequences of these tensions are those least likely to have the means to deal with the consequences of climate change.

Further Reading

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