

## **The migration–development nexus: a historical overview**

The link between migration and development has long been discussed among scholars and policymakers. To discuss how this links translates into policymaking, this section reviews how its understanding has evolved throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, along with the development, migration, and geopolitical dynamics and ideological paradigms underlying its analysis. De Haas (2010a) provides a good account of this evolution by showing how the Migration and Development nexus has been analysed through alternating optimistic (until the early 1970s) and pessimistic approaches (between 1970s and the 1990s), although optimistic views seem to prevail since the 1990s. This account is summarised in what follows.

### **Optimistic views and modernisation theory**

Broadly speaking, optimistic views depict migration as a factor that promotes development. More precisely, de Haas (2010) explains how optimistic views are often ideologically associated to neoclassical economic development paradigms.<sup>1</sup>

According to optimistic views, migrants act as rational market actors who optimise utility through migration. As such, migration flows are generally represented as originating in countries characterised by low levels of development, towards more developed destination countries. Similarly, the decision to migrate, as well as the choice of the destination, are explained as the result of utility calculations. Within the framework, migration is expected to enable closing income gaps between origin and destination countries. Moreover, while the direction of migration is generally perceived as South–North, migration’s economic impacts (such as capital transfer) are assumed to flow in the opposite direction thanks to migrants.

As a result, such dynamics would allow closing development gaps between countries, and eventually lead to less migration. In other words, neoclassical optimistic views stipulate that migration, understood as a perfectly rational and cyclic phenomenon, necessarily leads to development and that more development necessarily translates into less migration.

Also, migration is seen as a cycle comprising departure and return, allowing thus the circulation of capital and skills. As pointed out by de Haas (2010a): ‘It was expected that migrants not only bring back

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<sup>1</sup> Neoclassical economics is an orthodox school of thought focusing on supply and demand as factors determining market regulation. According to E. Roy Weintraub, it is based on the following three assumptions: i) People have rational preferences between outcomes that can be identified and associated with values; ii) individuals maximise utility and firms maximise profits; and iii) people act independently on the basis of full and relevant information.

money, but also new ideas, knowledge, and entrepreneurial attitudes. In this way, migrants were expected to play a positive role in development and contribute to the accelerated spatial diffusion of modernisation in developing countries.'

These views were largely based on the observation of rural to urban migration, as well as on the historical migration patterns between Europe and the Americas.

Within this view, social, political and cultural dynamics underlying migration are disregarded or, at best, considered as externalities disrupting a market functioning perceived otherwise as optimal. Moreover, post-war neoclassical development models conceive of the latter as an inevitable and linear path from tradition to modernity, in which countries pass through distinct universal development stages (Rostow, 1960).<sup>2</sup> Underdevelopment is explained in terms of Southern countries' lack of capital and knowledge and thus migrants are depicted as agents that can facilitate the circulation of both types of assets.

## **Pessimistic views and dependency theory**

Optimistic views and the modernisation theory of development were widely accepted until the 1960s–1970s. However, the perceived natural and unavoidable occurrence of development came under criticism, as both Eastern and Western development policies failed to deliver. A sort of 'development fatigue', as described by Rist (2007) was being felt in the intellectual spheres, exacerbated by the failure of the so-called 'white elephants' as well as by the oil crisis in 1973.

Pessimistic views of migration emerged in this historical moment, rooted in the dependency theory of development,<sup>3</sup> which portrayed migration as a means to escape from structural poverty rather than a strategy to maximise income and drive development. Pessimistic approaches put forward the notion of

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<sup>2</sup> Rostow's (1960) model exemplifies the 'modernisation' view of development, on which neoclassical approaches to the link between migration and development are based. The 'modernisation' development paradigm emerged in a particular geopolitical period, marked by the end of World War II, the Cold War and decolonisation. It is a critical period in international relations, as the equilibrium between countries needed to be restored to respond to the needs of newly independent countries, as well as to the tensions between the East and the West. The modern notions of development and underdevelopment were widely spread following the historical inaugural speech of the United States' president Harry. S. Truman in 1949: '[...] we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. [...] The United States is pre-eminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques. The material resources which we can afford to use for the assistance of other peoples are limited. But our imponderable resources in technical knowledge are constantly growing and are inexhaustible. [...] Our aim should be to help the free peoples of the world, through their own efforts, to produce more food, more clothing, more materials for housing, and more mechanical power to lighten their burdens. [...] The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair-dealing. [...] Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge. Only by helping the least fortunate of its members to help themselves can the human family achieve the decent, satisfying life that is the right of all people. [...]']

<sup>3</sup> Dependency theory is a reaction to modernisation theory, which stipulates that inequalities are structural to the world system, and that resources flow from the periphery (underdeveloped countries) to the centre (rich countries). Therefore, according to this view, the system is intrinsically unequal, and underdevelopment is a condition for the enrichment of the centre.

‘brain drain’ implying that only those better off are able to migrate, thus depriving origin countries from their most skilled population to the benefit of rich countries. Pessimistic views also assumed that when people leave home they cut ties with the country origin indefinitely and, therefore, a vicious circle whereby underdeveloped countries are constantly deprived and impoverished to the benefit of richer countries is perpetually reproduced.

## Pluralistic views

Both optimistic and pessimistic approaches based on modernisation and dependency theories, respectively, are highly deterministic as they conceive of the relationship between migration and development as direct and causal. Both views explain migration as driven by the developmental differential between countries leading, however, to opposite outcomes depending on the theory adopted. Both approaches ignore social and cultural factors underlying migration and consider migrants as subjected to broader global economic considerations. In short, both views promote highly ideological perspectives considered universal and, therefore, fail to describe the reality in a more accurate and balanced manner. Since the emergence of developmentalism in the 1950s there has neither been a re-equilibration between ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries, nor the perpetual vicious circles of underdevelopment and increased emigration described by pessimists have been verified.

On the contrary, some scholars suggest that an increase in development indicators (for example the Human Development Index, HDI),<sup>4</sup> leads to an increase in migration until high to very high levels of human development are reached (de Haas, 2010b). Higher HDIs, for example, may mean that more people will aspire and be able to migrate. The *capability* to migrate is the possibility to do so: migration is costly, it requires money and networks that the poorest can hardly afford. Likewise, *aspirations* to migrate are shaped by a variety of factors, from higher levels of education, which could translate in the search for better professional prospects, to better access to information and other factors related to cultural dynamics, such as values. Withol de Wenden (2010) suggest that the reasons to migrate also encompass the notion of expectation, which responds, among others, to the representation of the destination. This representation is built through the information passed on by migrants, as well as through images diffused by TV and other media.

Understanding migration through the lens of **people’s capabilities and aspirations** implies overcoming reductive econometric explanations. It entails recognising migrants as human beings embedded in a social and cultural reality shaped by history, geography and policy (at local, national and international level) that affects societies and, in turn, migration’s determinants and outcomes.

A useful theoretical framework to illustrate this complexity is the notion of ‘social space’ (*espace social*) introduced by Condominas (1980): ‘the ensemble of the systems of relations that characterise a given

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<sup>4</sup> The HDI is a composite index used to measure development at the country level. It takes into account a set of economic and non-economic variables including the gross domestic product or GDP, life expectancy and education. The HDI is calculated as a function of life expectancy, income and education. Countries are ranked according to their HDI and subdivided into tiers: lowest 25 per cent, below median, above median, and highest 25 per cent.

group'.<sup>5</sup> The 'social space' is determined by the geographical setting, the relation to time and space, to the environment, the exchange of goods, communication, kinship and neighbourhood, as well as religious considerations. All these factors shape the way in which any given individual or group perceives its identity, its relation to others and to the world, as well as how different 'others' are identified and perceived. It constitutes the framework for decision-making and value setting.

In a globalised world, where IT, social media, movies and the like allow acquiring images and impressions of remote places and to communicate with people located far away, the notion of social space not only encompasses one's immediate locality, but goes well beyond, with a nearly global reach although with several degrees of insight. Today most people are exposed to partial visions of remote locations through images, movies, descriptions, discussions, and so on. Such partial visions, images or insights are interpreted with reference to one's social space and contribute to shaping one's aspirations.

As such, the **notion of social space allows understanding migration within the framework of a wide range of determinants and their interrelations**, which shape people's aspirations, decisions and reasons to migrate, rather than simply as a decision to maximise utility or flee poverty. In this sense, both migration aspirations and capabilities can be enhanced by factors related to higher development indicators such as the HDI, although the HDI alone cannot explain migration trends.

The recognition of the importance of overcoming simplistic econometric explanations led to the elaboration of more complex models to explain migrations and their links to development. As pointed out by de Haas (2010a, p.241), 'an improved theoretical perspective on migration and development has to be able to account for the role of structure – the constraining or enabling general political, institutional, economic, social, and cultural context in which migration takes place – as well as agency – the limited but real capacity of individuals to overcome constraints and potentially reshape structure.'

More pluralistic views emerged from the 1990s onwards. The *New Economics of Labour Migration* (NELM), for example, explain migrations as a household risk-sharing strategy, which combines different activities to secure, increase and preserve the household's livelihood. This approach departs from previous models focusing on individual migrants placing them within the social reality of the household. Migration is seen as part of a broader household strategy, which may include other activities, such as agriculture, entrepreneurship and so forth. Migrant remittances have an important role in such strategy, as they represent an additional income for receiving households.

Migrants' transnational ties were also increasingly recognised. Indeed, migrants who settle abroad do not necessarily cut their ties with their home communities. By moving, individuals extend their social space and create or maintain networks with other migrants and with people in their host and home societies. Therefore, migrants develop multiple loyalties and their social, cultural and economic ties spread across transnational networks. Migration and Development approaches that recognise such

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<sup>5</sup> « L'espace social est l'espace déterminé par l'ensemble des systèmes de relations, caractéristiques du groupe considéré. » (Condominas, 1980, p.14–15). See also Valerio Valeri, 1983, University of Chicago review here: <https://bit.ly/2NAAJhP>

transnationalism often depict 'diasporas' as development actors who bridge countries and facilitate the flow of remittances, knowledge and development initiatives in their home country.

Furthermore, the recognition of the importance of social dynamics embedded in the household, in home localities or in transnational networks, allowed overcoming migrants' representation as passive actors responding to the economic dynamics related to the flow or distribution of capital, simply reacting to factors that *push* them away from home and *pull* them into specific locations. The recognition of migrants' aspirations led to broader explanations of why people decide to move and to admit that not every culture shares the same values, and not every individual shares the same desires, nor the same expectations about how to fulfil them. Peoples' different 'social spaces' shape their aspirations, which require different capabilities to be fulfilled. It became increasingly accepted that the link between migration and development rests in the possibility to acquire the means to move and that people's aspirations and capabilities are closely related. This shed further light on how migrants contribute to the development of their home countries through their networks and connections.

Despite being more comprehensive than optimistic or pessimistic models, these approaches continued to implicitly consider migration as a South–North–South trend, where, ultimately, people's aspirations and capabilities lead them to wealthier places. Notably, these models emerged in parallel with the neoliberal approaches in developed countries. When it comes to migration, this neoliberal shift corresponds to the emergence of a discourse focused on remittances and on 'productive investments', which shaped the rise of Migration and Development in the international arena since the 1990s.